

# Making Self-as-context Relevant, Clear & Practical

“Self-as-context” (SAC) has two meanings in ACT:

- 1) Easily the most common meaning of SAC in ACT is the “observing self”: that aspect of a human being that does all the noticing/observing of one’s inner and outer world. You could call this “meta-awareness” or “pure awareness” if you prefer: it’s the awareness of one’s awareness, or the noticing of one’s noticing, or the consciousness of one’s consciousness. (NB: To call it a ‘self’ or a ‘part’ is to speak metaphorically; technically, it’s a repertoire of behaviour.)
- 2) The less common meaning of SAC is “flexible perspective-taking”. When used with this meaning, SAC refers to any and all type(s) of flexible perspective-taking (which are all classed as “deictic framing” in relational frame theory). Flexible perspective-taking underlies defusion, acceptance, contacting the present moment, self-awareness, empathy, compassion, theory of mind, mental projection into the future or past, etc.

In this document, when we talk of SAC, we refer to the most common meaning, the first one above.



# Why Bother To Make SAC Explicit?

What's the purpose of making SAC explicit in therapy? After all, SAC is already implicit in all of the other 3 core mindfulness skills of ACT: defusion, acceptance, and contacting the present moment. How so? Well, if you're noticing thoughts, feelings, actions, your body, the world around you, then it's implicit that there's a part of you, or an aspect of you, doing the noticing; and that part or aspect of you is what we call SAC or observing self.

Sometimes I explain this to clients like this: "It's a bit like this: if you're eating chocolate, you're using a part of you that we call the mouth; and if you're smelling roses, you're using a part of you that we call the nose. But when you're doing all this noticing stuff – well we don't have a word in everyday language for the part of you that does that. Are you okay if we call it *...(therapist picks an appropriate term)?*"

So if it's already implicit in defusion, acceptance, and contacting the present moment – why would we bother to make SAC explicit? Indeed, do we really need to? (Good questions. I'm so glad you asked!)



We DON'T HAVE TO make SAC explicit to do ACT effectively.  
Here are the 5 main indications for making SAC explicit:

- a) To facilitate defusion – especially from the conceptualised self
- b) To facilitate acceptance
- c) To facilitate flexible contact with the present moment
- d) To access a stable sense of self
- e) To access a transcendent sense of self

Explicit work with SAC can enhance the other three mindfulness skills: defusion, acceptance, contacting the present moment – points a), b), and c). But it's certainly not necessary to do SAC work for those purposes. We can help clients develop really good skills in defusion, acceptance, contacting the present moment, and readily defuse from the conceptualised self without ever making SAC explicit. So for the purposes of a), b) and c), we can consider explicit SAC work as an optional extra.



# A Stable Sense of Self

In the previous slide, point d) says: *To access a stable sense of self*

A client may have an unstable sense of self, for a variety of reasons including: change in employment (new job, promotion, unemployment, retirement), change in role (becoming a parent, or grown up kids leaving home), change in health (illness, sickness, ageing, disability), change in financial status (major increase or decrease in wealth), dissociative states (with the extreme of dissociative identity disorder), and fusion with rapidly changing self-judgments (with the extreme being the moment-to-moment changes common in BPD; one moment “I’m a good Mum” and the next, “I’m a terrible Mum”).

Explicit SAC work can help the client to access a stable sense of self – a “calm centre” from which she can notice her changing thoughts and feelings, her changing roles and circumstances, her changing self-judgments and self-narratives, her changing body and health etc. Again, this “calm centre” can be developed without SAC, but SAC does seem to build a more stable sense of self in many people.



# A Transcendent Sense of Self

Two slides back, you saw point e): *To access a transcendent sense of self*

Some explicit SAC exercises are specifically designed to develop a transcendent sense of self: They highlight that there is more to you than your body, thoughts, feelings and memories; more to you than the roles you play and the actions you take; that all these things are continually changing throughout your life, but the aspect of you that notices them is unchanging and always available.

Unlike a), b), c), and d), experiencing this transcendent self is only likely to happen through explicit SAC work. Is it essential that clients experience a transcendent sense of self? No!! Is it useful? Often, yes. But it's not essential. It's arguably most useful for survivors of trauma: a part of you transcended the trauma, came through unharmed (even if your body was physically harmed).

Can clients ever develop a transcendent sense of self without explicit SAC work? For sure. It will take a lot longer, but, for example, many formal mindfulness meditation practices facilitate this over time.



## So First Things First: What's Your Intention?

So if you're going to make SAC explicit, first be clear in your own mind, for what purpose?

You need to be clear on this, so if the client asks, "Why are we talking about this/doing this?", "What's the point?", "How's this relevant?", "How will this help?", "What's this got to do with my depression/anxiety?" – you can answer effectively. If you don't think you could answer these questions clearly, I recommend you practice doing so with imaginary clients, until you've got a good spiel ready.

So check: Are you clear as to the purpose of introducing SAC explicitly? What do you hope to achieve by making it explicit? Is it really necessary? Is it the best or easiest way to achieve what you are hoping for? Especially consider these last 2 questions, if your main intention is a), b), c) or d) on page 3.

You can "hedge your bets" on these questions, by planting the seeds for explicit SAC work early on, without making a big deal out of it. You can then water these seeds in later sessions, if and when you want them to sprout.



# Planting Seeds for SAC

I like to plant the seeds for SAC early on in therapy mentioning it as a passing comment, as part of some other intervention. For example, as I'm doing the first dropping anchor/grounding/centering exercise with a client, after I've asked her to "notice A, notice B, notice C", I'll casually mention, "So there's a part of you that can notice everything."

I'll often then add, "And we're going to be using that part of you throughout our work together ... to help you in various ways."

The client will usually nod, or say "uh-huh" - but I don't mind if she looks blank or confused; at this point, I'm not wanting to explore it, I'm just planting seeds for later work. So unless the client protests, "I don't know what you mean!" or something like that, I won't try to clarify; I'll just carry on with whatever exercise we are in the midst of doing.



## Other Ways to Plant Seeds

We can plant SAC seeds while doing any type of mindfulness exercise, whether it's defusion, acceptance, or contacting the present moment, by using phrases like:

- “As you notice X, be aware you're noticing.”
- “There's X and there's a part of you noticing X”

For example, during mindful breathing, we may say: “There's your breath, coming and going – and there's a part of you noticing the breath”.

Or during “leaves on a stream”, we may say, “So there's a part of you that's creating thoughts and putting them on leaves – and another part of you that's noticing them come and go.”

Or if you want to go into a bit more detail: “Notice there are two parts of you involved in this. There's your thinking self (*or “your mind”*), that's doing a few different things: creating imagery of the stream and the leaves, creating thoughts, putting those thoughts onto the leaves, and probably creating



## Other Ways to Plant Seeds ... contd.

judgments or other thoughts about the exercise itself and how you're going with it. And there's another part of you that's noticing all of that."

Or you may say, debriefing an exercise: "So were there times you got hooked – pulled into your thoughts, lost track of the exercise? And then you noticed that had happened? And then you kind of unhooked yourself, and got back into the exercise – started noticing XYZ again? See, I find that really interesting. There's this part of you that's able to notice when you are hooked - and not only that, but also help you get unhooked, and refocus on what you're doing."



## Link SAC to everyday experiences, like “attention-wandering”

Rather than making SAC out to be some weird or mystical experience, we want to link it to everyday experiences the client can readily relate to – especially those that involve “attention-wandering”.

Therapist: “Have you ever been watching TV/ reading a book/chatting to someone/listening to your teacher ... and suddenly you realised you were so caught up in your thoughts that you have no idea what just happened on the TV show/ haven’t taken in a word you’ve been reading/no idea what the other person has been talking about/ no idea what the teacher just said? So there’s a part of you that’s able to notice when you’re caught up in your thoughts (*or distracted, or lost etc.*) and bring you back again: help you to refocus on where you are, what’s going on, what you need to do.”

If you decide the time is right to go further, (and you’re clear about the purpose of doing so), then you can readily segue into SAC from comments like those in pages 8 & 9 by saying “And you know what?

There is no word in everyday language for this part of you. We just don’t have one. I like to call it ...” The therapist now introduces her preferred term: “part that notices”, “noticing self”, “observing self” etc.



# What's this part of you that's been doing all the noticing?

With many clients, I usually focus on SAC explicitly (as distinct from those brief, casual passing comments I make while “seed-planting” in earlier sessions) only after doing a fair bit of practice in session of defusion, acceptance, and contacting the present moment skills.

As these skills all involve noticing, we can then easily segue into explicit SAC work at this point by asking: “So I’ve been encouraging you to a whole heap of noticing. Noticing your body, your breathing, your actions, your thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, the raisin/jelly snake/piece of chocolate you’re eating, etc. So what is this aspect of you that’s been doing all the noticing? Can we take a few moments to explore it? Did you know that there is no word in everyday language for this part of you. We just don’t have one. I like to call it ....”



# Making SAC Explicit with Choice Point 2.0

If and when we choose to make SAC explicit with the CP2, we can point to it and say: “So there’s a lot of noticing going on here. Noticing your thoughts and feelings; noticing the situations you find difficult; noticing when and where you get hooked; noticing your towards and away moves; noticing what you care about, and who matters to you, and so on. So what is this part of you that does all the noticing?”



# “Attention-Wandering” Metaphors

There are many ways of highlighting SAC through the concept of “attention-wandering” (introduced on page 10). You can use these with any sport, hobby or activity the client is interested in. If your client isn’t into anything specific, I often use a generic version based on tennis.

## The Tennis Metaphor

“You’re playing tennis, and the ball is coming towards you .... Where does your attention need to be? That’s right, on the ball! But hey, at the side of the tennis court, there’s someone wearing really bizarre clothes; and someone else, playing their radio annoyingly loud; and there’s your Mum/Dad/ friend, watching you and OMG, they’re filming you on their phone! And now your attention is no longer on the ball. And what happens? That’s right. You miss the shot. But if you’re very lucky, you can notice this with enough time to correct it; you notice your attention has wandered away from the ball, and you bring it back again, in time to hit it.



# Include Thoughts As Sources Of Distraction

It's great to flesh out such metaphors by adding in various thoughts as sources of distraction. E.g.

*“Your mind starts whirring: ‘Will I hit the ball? Will I miss it? Why’s Mum filming me? Do I look silly? Am I holding my racket correctly? Where should my feet be? Who’s that person with the radio?’ And the more attention you give to all those thoughts, the less attention you’re giving to the tennis ball!”*

Hopefully you can see how to modify this metaphor to any activity your client enjoys – from painting and drawing to football to dancing to playing the saxophone. Start off by clarifying: “In order to do this well, where does your attention need to be?” Then introduce sources of distraction – which may be external (e.g. people watching, annoying sounds) or internal (e.g. the mind’s commentary, feelings in the body).

Finally, ask something like: “So what is this part of you that notices your attention has wandered, and helps you to bring it back again?”



# Other Metaphors

There are many metaphors available to you in ACT, to convey different aspects of SAC. (Technical note: even when referring to SAC as “observing self” or “noticing self” or “a part of you” or “aspect of you” we are speaking metaphorically. It’s not a “self” or a “part” an “aspect”; it’s a repertoire of psychological behaviour). Two classics that go back to the earliest days of ACT are the chessboard metaphor (this part of you is like the chessboard; thoughts and feelings are like the pieces) and the sky and the weather (this part of you is like the sky; thoughts and feelings are like the weather). To highlight the transcendent self or stable self, you’d emphasise the chess pieces/weather constantly change – but the board/sky doesn’t.

In other documents, books, videos I have written/spoken/demonstrated my number one preferred metaphor for SAC: the Stage Show. I’m also keen on the “flashlight in the dark” metaphor; see this old video of mine on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRyUhh0EjdM> It’s fun to draw the blinds, give your client a flashlight and have them do this; first decide what thoughts and feelings your furniture and ornaments represent, then ask the client to shine the flashlight around, illuminating them.



# Metaphors Galore

One class of metaphors illustrates SAC in terms of flexible attention. For example, Sheri Turrell, co-author of *ACT For Adolescents* uses the metaphor of a sports commentator watching a match, keeping a curious eye on all the players and action. Other options include a teacher on yard duty, or a general watching his troops on a battlefield, or a security guard watching a bank of TV monitors, etc.

Another class of SAC metaphors are about shifting your viewpoint to gain more information or see things from a new perspective: e.g. standing in the middle of a busy playground versus watching from a second story window; or view from ground versus view from balcony; or standing in the middle of the football pitch versus watching from the sides. SAC is the part of you that enables these shifts in viewpoint.

A third class of metaphors compare SAC to a “safe place” inside you where you can open up and make room for difficult thoughts and feelings, or watch them flowing by without getting swept away. This aspect of SAC is often highlighted in the metaphors of sky and weather, chessboard and pieces, etc.



# Metaphors Ain't Enough! You Gotta Get Experiential!

If and when you decide to make SAC explicit, watch out for the common therapy trap of staying too intellectual/metaphorical. If you just want SAC to accentuate other defusion, acceptance, present moment skills, it's okay to stick to a metaphor or two. But if you want clients to actually experience a stable sense of self or transcendent sense of self, you are unlikely to achieve this purely through SAC metaphors. So you gotta get experiential. After you've introduced the metaphors, do experiential exercises where people get to actually experience the "psychological space" of SAC

For example, do the classic "Continuous you" or "Observing Self" mindfulness meditation exercises – or shorter variants thereof. Or do any of the brief SAC experiential exercises, or the "Watching Your Selves", or "Notice your noticing" exercises that I've described elsewhere. Or you can do any other mindfulness exercise (breathing, body scan, raising, walking, leaves on a stream. Etc.) but modify them to include lots and lots of instructions such as ...



## 4 Instructions That Make SAC Explicit in Any Mindfulness Exercise

Add these in to any other mindfulness exercise (breathing, body scan, eating a raisin, walking, leaves on a stream, physicalizing, mindfulness of the hand, etc.). Use them liberally; the more the merrier.

- 1) “As you notice X, be aware you’re noticing.”
- 2) “There’s X and there’s a part of you noticing X”

To highlight the continuous unchanging aspects of SAC:

- 3) “X changes all the time, coming and going – but the part of you that notices X is always there”

And with private experiences - thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, urges:

- 4) “X is a part of you; but it’s nowhere near the whole of you; there’s so much more to you than X”

Instruction 4 is very powerful for defusion from self-concept: All these thoughts about who you are, all these judgments, all these stories – all these thoughts are a part of you, but there’s so much more to you than these thoughts.



## What's the point? Why are you telling me this? So what?

Do you have an answer ready if clients ask these questions? My first point is generally, “I’m highlighting this because it’s a powerful resource inside you, and it can help you do all sorts of things but most people don’t know about it.” Then I refer back to whatever defusion, acceptance, present moment we’ve done prior: “This is the part of you that does all that noticing, makes room for your feelings, drops that anchor, bring up the lights on the stage show, notices what your mind is telling you etc” I then make my underlying intention clear (which is why you need to know what it is). “So I want to now help you explore this aspect of yourself further so that....”

Then I specify my intention, e.g:

- discover a safe place/calm centre inside you (a bit like the eye in the centre of the storm)
- to unhook from all those labels your mind sticks on you/judgments it makes about who you are
- to experience a more powerful/higher/different sense of yourself
- to build on all those other skills I just mentioned, make them stronger.



# Three Common Pitfalls in Making SAC Explicit

1. Making SAC explicit in session purely because it's "part of ACT"; throwing it into sessions without a clear intention/purpose underlying the intervention.
2. Making SAC too abstract/mystical/weird through failing to link it to everyday experiences
3. Covering SAC purely at the level of metaphor and skipping the essential experiential work

