

## “Pushing away paper” exercise

This exercise is predominantly a metaphor for acceptance and experiential avoidance, although it references all 6 core ACT processes. It’s evolved from my earlier “pushing the clipboard” exercise (*described in “ACT Made Simple”*), and the instructions overlap a lot with the “hands as thoughts and feelings exercise”.

“Pushing away paper” is a very useful metaphor to help clients understand the rationale for and benefits of developing acceptance skills, and to explicitly link this to the client’s therapy goals.

However, it’s only a metaphor; it won’t give clients the ability to accept. We need to follow it up with active training of acceptance skills, in session.

The script that follows is a generic version, suitable for just about anyone. It’s much more powerful if we can make it specific to each unique client; so that instead of saying things like “all the people you care about” we’d say “your husband, Michael, and your teenage daughter Sarah”, etc.

When I do this, I usually carry my chair over to the client, and we both sit side by side, each with a sheet of paper. Our chairs back onto the wall, and we both face towards the room, and we both do all the actions simultaneously. You don’t have to do it this way, of course; like any exercise in ACT, you can modify and adapt it freely to suit yourself. The exercise is more powerful if we first write down on the paper the specific thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, urges, cravings, sensations that the client is trying to avoid or escape.

A word of warning: this exercise is quite strenuous for most people, so don’t ever do this with clients who have painful neck, spine and shoulder conditions!

Therapist (*sitting side-by-side with the client, both facing the room, both holding sheets of paper*):

Imagine that out there in front of you (*gesturing to the contents of the room and the far wall*) is everything that really matters to you, deep in your heart; everything that makes your life meaningful (or used to, in the past); all the people, places, and activities you love; all your favorite foods and drinks and music and books and movies; all the things you like to do; and all the people you care about and want to spend time with.

But that’s not all. Also over there are all the problems and challenges you need to deal with in your life today, such as ...

(*therapist gives some examples based on the client’s history, e.g. “your conflict with your son”, “your financial issues”, “your health problems”, “your court case”, “your search for a job”, “your chemotherapy for your cancer”*)

And also over there are all the tasks you need to do on a regular basis to make your life work: shopping, cooking, cleaning, driving, doing your tax return, and so on.

Now please copy me as we do this exercise. Let's imagine that this sheet of paper is all those difficult thoughts, feelings, emotions and memories that you'd like to get rid of. Now hold it tightly at the edges like this, and push it as far away from you as you possibly can. (*Therapist holds the paper tightly at the edges with both hands, and stretches his arms out, pushing the paper as far away as possible. The client copies him*). This is what your culture tells you to do – get these thoughts and feelings away from you. Friends tell you to do this, doctors, therapists, counsellors, women's magazines;

everyone. Right? But hey (*therapist says this next part humorously*) it looks like we aren't really trying very hard here; let's push harder. Push as hard as you possibly can. Straighten those elbows, dislocate those shoulders; let's get these thoughts and feelings as far away as possible (*The therapist and client maintain this posture for the next section of the exercise: holding the paper tightly by the edges, arms straight, holding it as far from the chest as possible.*)

Now notice three things. First, how tiring is this? We've only been going for less than a minute, and already it's tiring. Imagine doing this all day; how much energy it would consume?

Second, notice how distracting it is. If the person you love were right there in front of you, how hard would it be to give her your full attention? If your favorite movie were playing on a screen over there, how much would you miss out on? If there's an important task in front of you right now or a problem you need to address or a challenge you need to tackle, how hard to focus on it?

Third: notice while all your effort and energy is going into doing this, how hard is it to take action, to do the things that make your life work, such as (*therapist gives gives some examples based on the client's history, such as "to cook dinner", "to drive your car", "to cuddle your baby", "to type on your computer", "to hug the person you love"*). So notice how difficult life is when we're struggling with our thoughts and feelings like this. We're distracted, we're missing out on life, it's hard to focus, we're exhausted, and it's so hard to do the things that make life work.

Now, let's see what happens when we drop the struggle with our thoughts & feelings. (*Therapist now relaxes his arms, drops the paper into his lap. The client copies him. Typically the client will express a sigh of relief "Ahh – that's better".*) Big difference, huh? How much less tiring is this? How much more energy do you have now? How much easier is it to engage with and focus on what's in front of you? If your favorite person were in front of you right now, how much more connected would you be? If your favorite movie were playing, how much more would you enjoy it? If there's a task you need to do or a problem you need to address, how much easier to focus on it?

Now move your arms and hands about – *(therapist gently shakes his arms and hands around; client copies)* How much easier is it now to take action: to drive a car, cuddle a baby, cook dinner, type on a computer, hug the person you love? *(Therapist mimes these activities as he says them; the client usually will not copy this part, but that doesn't matter.)*

Now notice these things *(therapist indicate the paper in his lap)* haven't disappeared. We haven't gotten rid of them. They're still here. But we've got a new way of responding to them. We're handling them differently. They're no longer holding us back, or bringing us down, or jerking us around. And if there's something useful we can do with them, we can use them. You see, even really painful thoughts and feelings often have useful information that can help us, even if it's just pointing us towards problems we need to address or things we need to do differently, or simply reminding us to be kinder to ourselves. And if there's nothing useful we can do with them, we just let them sit there.