

## 40 Tips For Getting “Unstuck” In Acceptance & Commitment Therapy

1. Stop, breathe, notice what’s happening!
2. Slow down!!! (Catch yourself speeding up, or trying frantically to think of what to do next, or pulling out metaphor after metaphor, etc – and deliberately slow down.)
3. Be aware of your own reactions, and make room for them rather than getting caught up in them. Bring your attention back to your client. Focus on the **WHOLE CLIENT** – not just on the attention-grabbing bit of language that came out of their mouth.
4. If feeling overwhelmed, suggest a bit of mindfulness: “Let’s just take a few moments to notice what’s happening here; to sit with our thoughts and feelings.”
5. If you screwed up, admit it and apologise: “I’m really sorry. I can see I’ve made a mistake here. I’ve been doing X,Y, Z, and I don’t think that’s been helpful.”
6. Admit if you’re lost: “I’m feeling a bit lost here. I’m not sure where we’re going.” Then come back to basics. Make sure you know what the client wants: “Can we just come back to the basics for a moment. I want to just get clear about why you’re here, and how you want your life to be different – so that we can make sure we’re both working on the same project.”
7. Admit if you’re overwhelmed: “I have to confess, I’m a feeling a bit stunned by what you’ve just told me. Can we just take a couple of moments, here. Let’s just notice our breathing for a while, and let the dust settle a little.”
8. Admit if you’re confused. “I’m sorry, I’m feeling a bit confused. Can I have a couple of minutes to reflect on what’s happening here?”
9. Come back to values: “What’s important to you? Deep in your heart, what matters? What do you want your life to be about?”
10. Come back to workability: “How’s this working for you? If you keep doing this, where does it take your life? If you buy that thought, how does that work in terms of creating the life you want?”
11. If you’re not sure where therapy is going, ask client to rate quality of life now on a scale of 0 to 10. Then ask what needs to happen to take it up one level. This leads you directly to goals, values and barriers.
12. Make sure your client has not enrolled you in a control agenda, eg trying to feel less anxious, or trying to get rid of depression.
13. Make sure you haven’t fused with your own unhelpful thoughts like “This client is too far gone; there’s no hope for them.” Or “This client will never change.”
14. Make sure you haven’t bought into the client’s unhelpful stories (I’m damaged goods; I’ll always be like this; No one will ever want me; etc)
15. Accept there will be times that clients are unwilling, or they’ll fall back into self-defeating control strategies. Bring their attention to what they’re doing with compassion, not with frustration or irritation or lecturing/warning/cajoling. (If you catch yourself doing the latter, admit it and apologise.)
16. Position: try changing your position in the room: e.g. move your chair so that you’re sitting by the client’s side, and act as if “the problem” is sitting right there in front of both of you. “Now, let’s take a look at this thing. I want to see it how you see it.”
17. Self-Disclosure: “I know you don’t think this will work & the truth is, I don’t know if it will work for you. I hope it will, and I think it will, but I can never know for certain.”
18. State your intention: “I’m committed to you. I want you to lead a whole life.”
19. Present Moment/ Breath: “Could we just breath together for a moment. We need to breathe and connect with why we’re doing this work”
20. Clarify hidden barriers to change: “If you made positive changes in your life, who would be made wrong by that? Who would be made right by that? What negative consequences might follow, if you did make some good progress?”

- 21 Run through F.E.A.R acronym, to identify barriers to change.
22. Ask: “What matters? What’s important to you? What matters even a little?”
23. Ask: “As a kid/ teenager what did you dream about what did you hope for? I know this may be painful, so just tell me a little if you want to.”
24. Ask: Who cares about what matters to you? Go home to them, and talk about it.
25. If client says “nothing matters”, ask them “Where does that lead to? How does that work for you?” (i.e. functional analysis of the language, rather than believing it)
26. Ask: “What do you want your life to be like? What are you afraid of? If you could have all these important, meaningful things in your life, would you be willing to make room for some uncomfortable thoughts and feelings? Are you willing to have some discomfort, if it gives your life back?”
27. Lower your expectations: “I think I’ve been pushing you too hard. I didn’t realize what I was asking of you would be so challenging. Let’s scale it down a bit.”
28. Validate all efforts, no matter how miniscule! For Homework: set a small change in a positive direction – and make sure **THE CLIENT OWNS IT!**
29. If client persistently refuses to make changes: “Maybe you’re not ready for this, yet. Maybe you need to keep doing what you’re doing, until you really experience for yourself that it’s not working.” Or, more bluntly: “Maybe you haven’t suffered enough. Maybe you need to suffer more, before you’re willing to try something different.” Or “Maybe I’m not the right therapist for you. Maybe you’d do better with someone who works in a different way.” (And be willing to refer them on, if necessary. Not everyone responds well to ACT)
30. For mandated clients: “How’s this working for you, being forced to come and see someone like me each week? Is this how you want your life to be?”
31. For mandated clients: “I want you to know that my agenda here is to help you. I’m not here to serve the purposes of your wife/husband/parents/lawyer/doctor/prison service/parole officer/legal system .... I’m here to help you create the best possible life you can. I don’t expect you to believe that. I’m just telling you how it is.”
32. Come back to realistic expectations from clients and yourself. Complex skills happen from multiple attempts. (Most ex-smokers quit 8 times before they have the skills to remain off cigarettes for good.) Develop compassion for setbacks. Remind them: commitment does not mean achieving all your goals and never screwing up!
33. If client insists they can’t add anything new into their life, then find something they’re already doing (that they genuinely value) and ask them to keep going with that.
34. If client gets stuck on refusing to choose between different alternatives, point out that “not choosing” is a choice. Which means there’s no way not to choose. The only choice is this: choose in line with your values, or choose in line with avoidance (ie what’s going to give you the least discomfort in the short term). Which choice is most likely to give you a full, rich and vital life? (In this situation, whatever you choose will give rise to discomfort – so you can make a valued choice, move in a meaningful life direction, and make room for the discomfort that goes with it – or you can make an avoidant choice, stay away from what you truly value, and struggle with the discomfort that goes with it. There’s no choice without discomfort. Which do you prefer?)
35. When setting goals with clients, ask: “Is there anything that will create a barrier, apart from your mind telling you unhelpful stories?” Address any barriers. Then ask: “How sure are you, on a scale of 1 to 10, that you’re going to follow through on this?” If they score low, then backtrack – make the goal smaller.

36. Watch out for “therapist bait”. Respond: “This all sounds important ....(validate what they’ve said) ... and yet it seems to me that if we focus on that, it’s pulling us away from the work that needs to be done here.”

37. Connect clients with the fact they’re making choices by pointing out: when this situation occurs you have options. You can do A, B, C, D, E. Up until now, you’ve been choosing to do A. How is that working for you?” If client says, “But I have no choice in the matter. I have to do A.” Response: “So your mind says you have no choice. If you allow that thought to rule your life, what are the consequences? Where does that lead you? Does it take you closer to the life you want? What’s really happening here is that you’re choosing to do A, instead of B and C, and your mind is saying, ‘But I have no choice’ and you’re buying it - hook, line and sinker.’ If client insists, “I have no choice” – you can point out, “Right now you have a choice, as to whether you buy into that thought literally, as the absolute truth – or whether you step back and see it as it is – a bunch of words.” Then do some defusion work around the phrase ‘I have no choice’ – eg sing it, say it in a silly voice.

38. If a client wants to go over and over the story of “how they got broken”, you can respond (compassionately): “We can spend hours, days, weeks going over this – how will that take you closer to the life you want?” (Also: “How many hours have you already spent going over this, before you ever started working with me? And what did that get you?) (Also: give the metaphor of actually fixing the gearbox on the car, as opposed to spending hours analyzing every journey the car has ever been on in an attempt to figure out why the gearbox started malfunctioning. )

39. Client continually throws up objections: “I don’t have time” “It’s too hard” “It won’t work” “I can’t do it”. Response: “I guarantee you that as we keep working together, your mind will throw up all sorts of objections. The ones you’ve just mentioned, and many others. Your mind’s not going to suddenly become a cheerleader. It’s not going to be shouting ‘Ra! Ra! You can do it!’ It will keep on objecting and objecting. So can we let your mind keep objecting, and carry on doing the work that’s important here?”

Also, when setting valued goals, you could say: “I guarantee your mind will object to this. And the more you persist, the stronger it will object. It’s like a little kid, trying to get its own way. So let’s see if you can really piss it off. See if you can provoke it into having a full-on temper tantrum. And show it that no matter how much it screams and cries and yells and threatens, you’re going to do what you want to do – not what your mind wants you to do!”

40. Clarify whether there are important skills your client is lacking – such as problem solving, assertiveness, time management, communication, conflict management, social skills, crisis-coping skills etc. You may need to spend a number of sessions developing these skills, (or refer your clients elsewhere to learn them) before much progress can be made in a particular valued direction.