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The Complete Set of Client Handouts and Worksheets from ACT books by Russ Harris 2018

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YOUR VALUES: *What really matters to you, deep in your heart? What do you want to do with your time on this planet? What sort of person do you want to be? What personal strengths or qualities do you want to develop?*

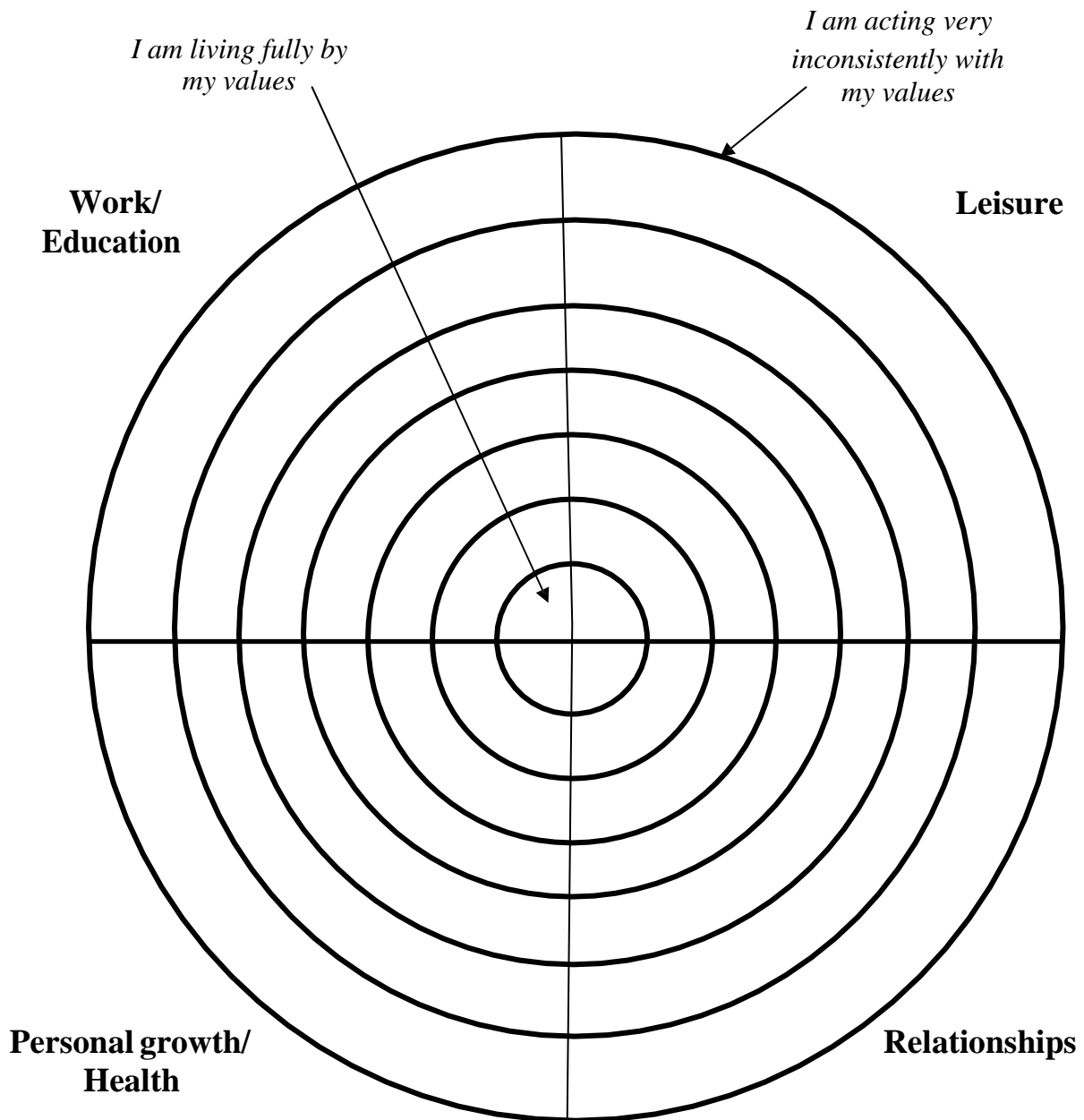
1. Work/Education: includes workplace, career, education, skills development, etc.

2. Relationships: includes your partner, children, parents, relatives, friends, co-workers, and other social contacts.

3. Personal Growth/Health: may include religion, spirituality, creativity, life skills, meditation, yoga, nature; exercise, nutrition, and/or addressing health risk factors like smoking, alcohol, drugs or overeating etc

4. Leisure: how you play, relax, stimulate, or enjoy yourself; activities for rest, recreation, fun and creativity.

THE BULL'S EYE: make an X in each area of the dart board, to represent where you stand today.



Dissecting The Problem

This form is to help gather information about the nature of the main challenge, issue, or problem facing you. First, please summarize, in 1 or 2 sentences, what the main issue or problem is:

Second, please describe, in 1 or 2 sentences, how it affects your life, and what it stops you from doing or being:

Regardless of what your problem is – whether it is a physical illness, a difficult relationship, a work situation, a financial crisis, a performance issue, the loss of a loved one, a severe injury, or a clinical disorder such as depression - when we dissect the problem, we usually find four major elements that contribute significantly to the issue. These are represented in the boxes below. Please write as much as you can in each box, about the thoughts, feelings and actions that contribute to or worsen the challenge, problem or issue facing you.

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Entanglement With Thoughts What memories, worries, fears, self-criticisms, or other unhelpful thoughts do you dwell on, or get “caught up” in, related to this issue? What thoughts do you allow to hold you back or push you around or bring you down?</p> | <p>Life-draining Actions: What are you currently doing that makes your life worse in the long term: keeps you stuck; wastes your time or money; drains your energy; restricts your life, impacts negatively on your health, work or relationships; maintains or worsens the problems you are dealing with?</p> |
| <p>Struggle With Feelings What emotions, feelings, urges, impulses, or sensations (associated with this issue) do you fight with, avoid, suppress, try to get rid of, or otherwise struggle with?</p> | <p>Avoiding Challenging Situations: What situations, activities, people or places are you avoiding or staying away from? What have you quit, withdrawn from, dropped out of? What do you keep “putting off” until later?</p> |

The Life Compass

In the main part of each large box, write a few key words about what is important or meaningful to you in this domain of life: What sort of person do you want to be? What sort of personal strengths and qualities do you want to cultivate? What you want to stand for? What do you want to do? How do you ideally want to behave? (If a box seems irrelevant to you, that's okay: just leave it blank. If you get stuck on a box, then skip it, and come back to it later. And it's okay if the same words appear in several or all boxes: this helps you identify core values that cut through many domains of life.)

Once you've done that for all boxes, go through them and in the upper small square inside each box, mark on a scale of 0-10 how important these values are to you, at this point in your life: 0= no importance, 10= extremely important. (It's okay if several squares all have the same score.)

Finally, in the lower small square inside each box, mark on a scale of 0-10 how effectively you are living by these values right now. 0= not at all 10= living by them fully (Again, it's okay if several squares all have the same score.)

Finally have a good look at what you've written. What does this tell you about: a) What is important in your life? b) What you are currently neglecting?

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Parenting | Personal Growth | Leisure | Spirituality |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| Health | Work | Community & Environment | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
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| | | | |
| Family Relationships | Intimate Relationships | Social Relationships | |
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The Problems and Values Worksheet

Acceptance & Commitment Therapy aims to reduce suffering and enrich life, as shown in the diagram below. To help in this process, there are four lots of information that are particularly important. These are represented in the four columns below. Between now and the next session, see what you can write in or add to each column.

| STRUGGLE & SUFFERING | | RICH & MEANINGFUL LIFE | |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>Problematic Thoughts And Feelings: What memories, worries, fears, self-criticisms, or other thoughts do you get “caught up” in? What emotions, feelings, urges, or sensations do you struggle with?</p> | <p>Problematic Actions: What are you doing that makes your life worse in the long run: that keeps you stuck; wastes your time or money; drains your energy; impacts negatively on your health or your relationships; or leads to you “missing out” on life?</p> | <p>Values: What matters to you in the “big picture”? What do you want to stand for? What personal qualities and strengths do you want to develop? How do you want to enrich or improve your relationships? How would you like to “grow” or develop, through addressing your issue(s) or problem(s)?</p> | <p>Goals & Actions: What are you currently doing that improves your life in the long run? What do you want to start or do more of? What life-enriching goals do you want to achieve? What life-enhancing actions do you want to take? What life-improving skills would you like to develop?</p> |
| | | | |

VITALITY VS. SUFFERING DIARY

Between now and next session, keep a record of what you do when painful thoughts and feelings arise, and notice if these actions lead to increased vitality or increased suffering

| Painful Thoughts/ Feelings/ Urges/ Sensations/ Memories that showed up today | Things I did - when those thoughts and feelings showed up - that lead to <u>VITALITY</u> (i.e. enriched my life, or improved my health, wellbeing, or relationships in the long term) | Things I did - when those thoughts and feelings showed up - that lead to <u>SUFFERING</u> (i.e. restricted or worsened my life, drained my health and wellbeing, or hurt my relationships in the long term) |
|--|--|--|
| | | |

Join the D.O.T.S.

We all naturally try to avoid or get rid of painful or unpleasant thoughts and feelings. The aim of this exercise is a) to find out which methods you use, and b) what effects those methods may have *in the long term*. NB: Please **do this non-judgmentally** - with *genuine curiosity!* Please **do not** start judging these methods as 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong', 'positive' or 'negative'. The aim is simply to find out if these methods are **workable** - i.e. do these methods work *in the long term* to give you a rich and meaningful life? Obviously, if any of these methods *do* actually improve your life *in the long term*, keep doing them!

D - Distraction: what do you do to distract yourself from, or 'take your mind off' painful thoughts & feelings? (e.g. movies, TV, internet, books, computer games, exercise, gardening, gambling, food, drugs, alcohol)

O - Opting out: what *important, meaningful or life-enhancing* activities, events, tasks, challenges, or people, do you avoid, quit, escape, procrastinate, or withdraw from? (If they're not *important, meaningful or life-enhancing*, then opting out is no problem!)

T- Thinking strategies: how do you try (consciously or not) to think your way out of pain? Tick any of the following that you have done, and write in any others:

Worrying; Dwelling on the past; Fantasizing about the future; Imagining escape scenarios (eg leaving your job or your partner) or revenge scenarios; Thinking 'It's not fair ...' or 'If only ...'; Blaming yourself, others, or the world; Talking logically and rationally to yourself. Positive thinking; Positive affirmations; Judging or criticizing yourself; Giving yourself a hard time; Analyzing yourself (trying to figure out why you are like this); Analyzing the situation (trying to figure out why this happened); Analyzing others (trying to figure out why they are like this); Planning; Strategizing; Constructive problem-solving; Making To Do Lists; Repeating inspirational sayings or proverbs; Challenging negative thoughts; Telling yourself 'This too shall pass' or 'It may never happen'.

Other thinking strategies:

S - Substances & other Strategies: what substances do you use put into your body to avoid or get rid of pain, (include foods, drinks, cigarettes, recreational drugs, naturopathic and herbal remedies, and prescription medication)? Any other Strategies you use to avoid pain (e.g. yoga, meditation, having affairs, aggressiveness, Tai Chi, massage, exercise, picking fights, dancing, music, suicide attempts, self-harming, prayer, smashing things, staying in bed, self-help books, seeing a therapist)?

Now consider this: do these methods get rid of your unwanted thoughts and feelings, so they *never come back*?

How many of these methods give you some relief from pain *in the short term*, but keep you stuck or make your life worse *in the long term*: 'none' 'a few' 'about half' 'most' 'all'?

Clearly, some of these methods are helpful, *if you use them **flexibly, moderately, sensibly*** - in which case, keep using them! However, when you have **over-relied** on these methods - used them **excessively, rigidly, or inappropriately** - what have they cost you in terms of health, money, wasted time, relationships, missed opportunities, or increased emotional pain?

Given that a) no matter what you do, painful thoughts and feelings *keep coming back*, and b) trying very hard to avoid or get rid of them often makes life worse *in the long term* - would you be open to learning a 'new way' of responding to them; a method that is radically different to everything else you've tried?

Getting Hooked

In ACT, we talk colloquially of being “hooked by your mind” or “hooked by thoughts” – by which we mean you get all caught up in your thoughts and they exert a strong influence over your actions. In what situations does your mind manage to hook you? What sort of things does it say in order to hook you? How do you manage to unhook yourself?

| Date/Time Triggering Events or Situation | What did your mind say or do to hook you? | How did your behavior change when you got hooked? What did those actions cost you? | Did you manage to unhook yourself? If so, how? |
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EXPANSION PRACTICE SHEET

Expansion means opening up and making room for difficult feelings, urges and sensations – thereby allowing them to ‘flow through’ you without a struggle. You don’t have to like or want these feelings – you just make room for them and allow them to be there even though they are unpleasant. Once this skill is learned, if these feelings should resurface, you can rapidly make room for them and let them ‘flow on by’ – so you can invest your time and energy in doing meaningful life-enhancing activities, instead of struggling. Aim to practice at least once a day breathing into and making room for difficult feelings and sensations

Struggling vs. Opening Up

Fill in this worksheet once a day to help keep track of what happens when you struggle with your emotions and what happens when you open up and make room for them.

| Struggling vs. Opening Up Worksheet | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| Day/Date/Time Feelings/Sensations What events triggered this? | How much did you struggle with these feelings? 0 = no struggle, 10 = maximum struggle. What did you actually do during the struggle? | Did you open up and make room for these feelings, allowing them to be there even though they were unpleasant? If so, how did you do that? | What was the long-term effect of the way you responded to your feelings? Did it enhance life or worsen it? |
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Simple Ways to Get Present

Take Ten Breaths

This is a simple exercise to center yourself and connect with your environment. Practice it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.

1. Take ten slow, deep breaths. Focus on breathing out as slowly as possible until the lungs are completely empty—and then allow them to refill by themselves.
2. Notice the sensations of your lungs emptying. Notice them refilling. Notice your rib cage rising and falling. Notice the gentle rise and fall of your shoulders.
3. See if you can let your thoughts come and go as if they're just passing cars, driving past outside your house.
4. Expand your awareness: simultaneously notice your breathing and your body. Then look around the room and notice what you can see, hear, smell, touch, and feel.

Drop Anchor

This is another simple exercise to center yourself and connect with the world around you. Practice it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.

1. Plant your feet into the floor.
2. Push them down—notice the floor beneath you, supporting you.
3. Notice the muscle tension in your legs as you push your feet down.
4. Notice your entire body—and the feeling of gravity flowing down through your head, spine, and legs into your feet.
5. Now look around and notice what you can see and hear around you. Notice where you are and what you're doing.

Notice Five Things

This is yet another simple exercise to center yourself and engage with your environment. Practice it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.

1. Pause for a moment
2. Look around and notice five things that you can see.
3. Listen carefully and notice five things that you can hear.
4. Notice five things that you can feel in contact with your body (for example, your watch against your wrist, your trousers against your legs, the air on your face, your feet upon the floor, your back against the chair).
5. Finally, do all of the above simultaneously

Informal Mindfulness Practice

1. Mindfulness in Your Morning Routine

Pick an activity that constitutes part of your daily morning routine, such as brushing your teeth, shaving, making the bed, or taking a shower. When you do it, totally focus attention on what you're doing: the body movements, the taste, the touch, the smell, the sight, the sound, and so on. Notice what's happening with an attitude of openness and curiosity.

For example, when you're in the shower, notice the sounds of the water as it sprays out of the nozzle, as it hits your body, and as it gurgles down the drain. Notice the temperature of the water, and the feel of it in your hair, and on your shoulders, and running down your legs. Notice the smell of the soap and shampoo, and the feel of them against your skin. Notice the sight of the water droplets on the walls or shower curtain, the water dripping down your body and the steam rising upward. Notice the movements of your arms as you wash or scrub or shampoo.

When thoughts arise, acknowledge them, and let them come and go like passing cars. Again and again, you'll get caught up in your thoughts. As soon as you realize this has happened, gently acknowledge it, note what the thought was that distracted you, and bring your attention back to the shower.

2. Mindfulness of Domestic Chores

Pick an activity such as ironing clothes, washing dishes, vacuuming floors—something mundane that you have to do to make your life work—and do it mindfully. For example, when ironing clothes, notice the color and shape of the clothing, and the pattern made by the creases, and the new pattern as the creases disappear. Notice the hiss of the steam, the creak of the ironing board, the faint sound of the iron moving over the material. Notice the grip of your hand on the iron, and the movement of your arm and your shoulder.

If boredom or frustration arises, simply acknowledge it, and bring your attention back to the task at hand. When thoughts arise, acknowledge them, let them be, and bring your attention back to what you're doing. Again and again, your attention will wander. As soon as you realize this has happened, gently acknowledge it, note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to your current activity.

3. Mindfulness of Pleasant Activities

Pick an activity you enjoy such as cuddling with a loved one, eating lunch, stroking the cat, playing with the dog, walking in the park, listening to music, having a soothing hot bath, and so on. Do this activity mindfully: engage in it fully, using all five of your senses, and savor every moment. If and when your attention wanders, as soon as you realize it, note what distracted you, and re-engage in whatever you're doing.

The Mindful Breathing Practice Sheet

Mindful breathing practice enables you to develop several skills: the ability to focus and engage in what you are doing; the ability to let thoughts come and go without getting caught up in them; the ability to refocus when you realize you're distracted; and the ability to let your feelings be as they are without trying to control them. Even five minutes of practice a day can make a difference over time. Ten minutes twice a day or twenty minutes once a day is even better.

| Mindful Breathing Practice Sheet | | | |
|---|---|--------------------|------------------------------|
| Day/Date/Time(s) & how long I practiced for | Difficult thoughts and feelings that showed up | Used CD yes/ no | Benefits and/or difficulties |
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Overcoming F.E.A.R. - 1

Let's assume you have clarified your values, and set yourself a goal – but you haven't followed through on it. What stopped you? The F.E.A.R. acronym covers most of the common barriers:

F = Fusion (stuff your mind tells you that gets in the way when you get caught up in it)

E = Excessive goals (your goal is too big, or you lack the skills, time, money, health, or other resources)

A = Avoidance of discomfort (unwillingness to make room for the discomfort this challenge brings)

R = Remoteness from values (losing touch with - or forgetting - what is important or meaningful about this)

So now, in as few words as possible, write down everything that has stopped you following through:

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

6)

7)

8)

Now go back, and label each answer with one or two of the letters F, E, A, or R – whichever best describe this barrier. In other words, was it F = Fusion with a story (e.g. I'll fail; it's too hard; I'll do it later; I'm too weak; I can't do it); was it E = Excessive goal (you lacked the time, money, health, facilities, skills, or support necessary; or it was just too big and you got overwhelmed); was it A = Avoidance of discomfort (you were unwilling to make room for the anxiety, frustration, fear of failure, or other uncomfortable thoughts and feelings); or was it R = remoteness from your values (you forgot or lost touch with the values underlying this goal)?

The antidote to F.E.A.R. is D.A.R.E.

D = Defusion

A = Acceptance of discomfort

R = Realistic goals

E = Embracing values

Go through your barriers, one by one, and work out how you can deal with them, using D.A.R.E. Below, you'll find some suggestions to help you.

Overcoming F.E.A.R. – 2

Defusion strategies: name the story, thank your mind, acknowledge ‘Here’s reason-giving’ or ‘Here’s judging’, name the demon/monster/passenger, recognize this is Radio Doom & Gloom broadcasting, or simply let the thoughts come and go like passing cars.

Acceptance strategies: name the feeling, observe it like a curious scientist, rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, commit to allowing it, breathe into it, make room for it, give it a shape and color.

Realistic goal-setting: if you lack skills, set new goals around learning them; if your goal is too big, break it down into small chunks; if you lack resources, brainstorm how you can get them; if you lack time, what are you willing to give up in order to make time?; if the goal is truly impossible, e.g. due to health or financial issues, or external barriers over which you have no direct influence, then set a different one.

Embracing values: connect with what matters to you about this goal. Is it truly meaningful? Is it aligned with your values? Is it truly important? Is it moving your life forward in the direction you wish to go?

Using these ideas (and others of your own, or of your therapist/coach), write down how you can respond to the barriers you listed above.

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

6)

7)

8)

Finally, ask yourself this question: am I willing to make room for the difficult thoughts and feelings that show up, without getting caught up in them or struggling with them, and take effective action, in order to do what matters, deep in my heart?

If so: go ahead and give it a go.

If not, consider these three questions:

- a) Does this really and truly matter to you?
- b) If it does, then what is the cost to you of avoiding it or putting it off?
- c) Would you rather have the vitality-draining pain of staying stuck, or the life-enhancing pain of moving forward?

The Willingness and Action Plan

My goal is to (be specific):

The values underlying my goal are:

The actions I will take to achieve that goal are (be specific):

The thoughts/memories, feelings, sensations, urges I'm willing to make room for (in order to achieve this goal):-

- Thoughts/memories:

- Feelings:

- Sensations:

- Urges:

- It would be useful to remind myself that:

- If necessary, I can break this goal down into smaller steps, such as:

- The smallest, easiest step I can begin with is:

- The time, day and date that I will take that first step, is:

- Here are some personal qualities and character strengths I will develop and demonstrate to others:

- Here are some ways I will behave differently in close relationships with friends and family:

- Here are some ways I will behave differently in relationships involving work, education, sport or leisure:

- Here are some important things I will 'stand for':

- Here are some activities I will start or do more of:

- Here are some goals I will work towards:

- Here are some actions I will take to improve my life:

A Quick Look at Your Values – page 1

Values are your heart's deepest desires for how you want to behave as a human being. Values are not about what you want to get or achieve; they are about how you want to behave or act on an ongoing basis.

There are literally hundreds of different values, but below you'll find a list of the most common ones. Probably, not all of them will be relevant to you. Keep in mind there are no such things as 'right values' or 'wrong values'. It's a bit like our taste in pizzas. If you prefer ham and pineapple but I prefer salami and olives, that doesn't mean that my taste in pizzas is *right* and yours is *wrong*. It just means we have different tastes. And similarly, we may have different values. So read through the list below and write a letter next to each value: V = Very important, Q = Quite important, and N = Not so important; and make sure to score *at least ten* of them as Very important.

1. Acceptance: to be open to and accepting of myself, others, life etc
2. Adventure: to be adventurous; to actively seek, create, or explore novel or stimulating experiences
3. Assertiveness: to respectfully stand up for my rights and request what I want
4. Authenticity: to be authentic, genuine, real; to be true to myself
5. Beauty: to appreciate, create, nurture or cultivate beauty in myself, others, the environment etc
6. Caring: to be caring towards myself, others, the environment etc
7. Challenge: to keep challenging myself to grow, learn, improve
8. Compassion: to act with kindness towards those who are suffering
9. Connection: to engage fully in whatever I am doing, and be fully present with others
10. Contribution: to contribute, help, assist, or make a positive difference to myself or others
11. Conformity: to be respectful and obedient of rules and obligations
12. Cooperation: to be cooperative and collaborative with others
13. Courage: to be courageous or brave; to persist in the face of fear, threat, or difficulty
14. Creativity: to be creative or innovative
15. Curiosity: to be curious, open-minded and interested; to explore and discover
16. Encouragement: to encourage and reward behaviour that I value in myself or others
17. Equality: to treat others as equal to myself, and vice-versa
18. Excitement: to seek, create and engage in activities that are exciting, stimulating or thrilling
19. Fairness: to be fair to myself or others
20. Fitness: to maintain or improve my fitness; to look after my physical and mental health and wellbeing
21. Flexibility: to adjust and adapt readily to changing circumstances
22. Freedom: to live freely; to choose how I live and behave, or help others do likewise
23. Friendliness: to be friendly, companionable, or agreeable towards others
24. Forgiveness: to be forgiving towards myself or others
25. Fun: to be fun-loving; to seek, create, and engage in fun-filled activities
26. Generosity: to be generous, sharing and giving, to myself or others
27. Gratitude: to be grateful for and appreciative of the positive aspects of myself, others and life
28. Honesty: to be honest, truthful, and sincere with myself and others
29. Humour: to see and appreciate the humorous side of life
30. Humility: to be humble or modest; to let my achievements speak for themselves

A Quick Look at Your Values – page 2

31. Industry: to be industrious, hard-working, dedicated
32. Independence: to be self-supportive, and choose my own way of doing things
33. Intimacy: to open up, reveal, and share myself -- emotionally or physically – in my close personal relationships
34. Justice: to uphold justice and fairness
35. Kindness: to be kind, compassionate, considerate, nurturing or caring towards myself or others
36. Love: to act lovingly or affectionately towards myself or others
37. Mindfulness: to be conscious of, open to, and curious about my here-and-now experience
38. Order: to be orderly and organized
39. Open-mindedness: to think things through, see things from other's points of view, and weigh evidence fairly.
40. Patience: to wait calmly for what I want
41. Persistence: to continue resolutely, despite problems or difficulties.
42. Pleasure: to create and give pleasure to myself or others
43. Power: to strongly influence or wield authority over others, e.g. taking charge, leading, organizing
44. Reciprocity: to build relationships in which there is a fair balance of giving and taking
45. Respect: to be respectful towards myself or others; to be polite, considerate and show positive regard
46. Responsibility: to be responsible and accountable for my actions
47. Romance: to be romantic; to display and express love or strong affection
48. Safety: to secure, protect, or ensure safety of myself or others
49. Self-awareness: to be aware of my own thoughts, feelings and actions
50. Self-care: to look after my health and wellbeing, and get my needs met
51. Self-development: to keep growing, advancing or improving in knowledge, skills, character, or life experience.
52. Self-control: to act in accordance with my own ideals
53. Sensuality: to create, explore and enjoy experiences that stimulate the five senses
54. Sexuality: to explore or express my sexuality
55. Spirituality: to connect with things bigger than myself
56. Skilfulness: to continually practice and improve my skills, and apply myself fully when using them
57. Supportiveness: to be supportive, helpful, encouraging, and available to myself or others
58. Trust: to be trustworthy; to be loyal, faithful, sincere, and reliable
59. Insert your own unlisted value here:
60. Insert your own unlisted value here:

Once you've marked each value as V, Q, N (Very, Quite, or Not so important), go through all the Vs, and select out the top six that are most important to you. Mark each one with a 6, to show it's in your top six. Finally, write those six values out below, to remind yourself this is what you want to stand for as a human being.

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>LOVE (deepest, most meaningful relationships – including children, partner, parents, close friends and relatives)</p> <p>My Values:</p> <p>Short Term Goals:</p> <p>Medium Term Goals:</p> <p>Long Term Goals :</p> | <p>WORK (paid work, studying/ education/ apprenticeships, and unpaid work such as volunteering, or domestic duties)</p> <p>My Values:</p> <p>Short Term Goals:</p> <p>Medium Term Goals:</p> <p>Long Term Goals :</p> |
| <p>PLAY (rest and relaxation, hobbies, creativity, sport, and all forms of leisure, recreation and entertainment)</p> <p>My Values:</p> <p>Short Term Goals:</p> <p>Medium Term Goals:</p> <p>Long Term Goals :</p> | <p>HEALTH (physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual health and wellbeing.)</p> <p>My Values:</p> <p>Short Term Goals:</p> <p>Medium Term Goals:</p> <p>Long Term Goals :</p> |

Worksheets To Use With The Happiness Trap

The worksheets in this compilation are designed to be used in conjunction with The Happiness Trap. If you are working with a coach or therapist, they will probably want you to fill them in and bring them into your sessions.

As a general rule, read the chapter first, and then take a look at the worksheet; it should then be self-explanatory.

Many of these worksheets you will want to use repeatedly for different issues in different areas of your life. I hope you find them helpful.

*All the best,
Russ Harris*

Chapter 1: [Control of Thoughts and Feelings Questionnaire](#)

Chapter 2: a) [Costs of Avoidance Worksheet](#)

Chapter 2: b) [Avoidance and Suffering Diary](#)

Chapter 9: [Defusion Practice Worksheet](#)

Chapter 13: [Expansion Practice Worksheet](#)

Chapter 18: [Informal Mindfulness Practice](#)

Chapter 20: [Mindful Breathing Practice Worksheet](#)

Chapter 25: a) [The Life Values Questionnaire](#)

Chapter 25: b) [Detailed Bull's Eye Worksheet](#)

Chapter 25: c) [Brief Bull's Eye Worksheet](#)

Chapter 27: [Goal Setting Worksheet](#)

Chapter 30: [Overcoming F.E.A.R. Worksheet](#)

Chapter 31: [The Willingness and Action Plan](#)

Appendix: [What To Do In A Crisis](#)

How to Get the Most Out Of ‘The Happiness Trap’

Reading the Book

There are two ways to read the book. You can either work through it slowly and steadily, doing the exercises as you go. Or you can read it from cover to cover very rapidly, and then go back and work through it at your leisure. You can also enhance the exercises in the book by using the free online resources at http://www.thehappinesstrap.com/free_resources

Stuck or Confused?

If you ever get stuck or confused, I'd suggest you join the Yahoo list serve, entitled 'ACT for the Public': http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/ACT_for_the_Public/join

There's no cost involved. You can post emails to the group if ever you are confused, or concerned, or just bogged down – and you will quickly receive supportive responses from other members of the public and/or from the many therapists (including myself) who are also on the list.

Prioritize Your Health and Wellbeing

If you are a typical reader, then you are already a very busy person. You are juggling multiple demands and rarely have any time left over for yourself. Thus, if you want this book to make a real difference in your life, you will have to put your health and wellbeing above some of the other demands upon your time. Can you schedule in some time for reading? Can you schedule in some time for practicing the exercises? Even 30 minutes a day to read and/or practice can make a huge difference. Are you willing to give up 30 minutes of TV or other time-eating activities?

Practice

Whoever said "Practice makes perfect" was lying. But practice does lead to improvement. Like any new skills, the exercises and strategies in this book do require practice – they do not come naturally, or magically happen simply as a result of reading. And like any new skill, the more you practice it, the easier it becomes and the more naturalistic.

Be Patient

Be patient with yourself. As you work through the book, there are times when you will inevitably screw up, fail, and forget things. This is because you are a human being, not a saint or a guru or a superhero. So please, allow yourself permission to be human. And give yourself as much time as you need to get a good handle on your new skills.

Consider Using a CD or MP3 Recording

The CDs and MP3 recordings available from www.thehappinesstrap.com have been specifically designed for use with this book. They will substantially enhance the benefits of the book for you. Mindfulness skills are much easier to develop initially when you have a voice guiding you.

Repetition

I intended The Happiness Trap to be the sort of book that you read not just once, but again and again. My hope is that after you've been through it once, you repeatedly revisit it. The small chapters make it an ideal book for dipping into.

Working With a Coach or Therapist:

While The Happiness Trap is primarily written as a self-help book for use on your own, it is also a valuable adjunct to therapy and coaching. Indeed the book flows along, chapter by chapter, in much the same way as you might typically work with a coach or therapist. If your therapist or coach has done some training in ACT they will be familiar with many of the exercises and metaphors in the book, but probably not all of them, so it is a good idea if they read the book too.

You can use the book as an adjunct in two main ways:

1. You can read a chapter or two (or three) before each session, then discuss in session how the reading applies to you, and then practice the relevant exercises during the session.
2. You can read relevant chapters after a session, to build on what you have experienced or learned during the session.

Whichever way you do it, the worksheets from the free resources section can be very helpful; use them as you are reading the relevant chapter.

To Find an ACT Therapist

If you want to find an ACT therapist in Australia, [click here](#)

If you want to find an ACT therapist in USA, UK and other countries, [click here](#)

Control of Thoughts and Feelings Questionnaire

This questionnaire has been adapted from similar ones developed by Steven Hayes, Frank Bond, and others. For each pair of statements, please circle the one that most accurately fits how you feel. The answer you choose doesn't have to be absolutely 100 percent true for you all the time; just pick the answer which seems to be more representative of your general attitude.

- 1a. I must have good control of my feelings in order to be successful in life.
1b. It is unnecessary for me to control my feelings in order to be successful in life.
- 2a. Anxiety is bad.
2b. Anxiety is neither good nor bad. It is merely an uncomfortable feeling.
- 3a. Negative thoughts and feelings will harm you if you don't control or get rid of them.
3b. Negative thoughts and feelings won't harm you even if they feel unpleasant.
- 4a. I'm afraid of some of my strong feelings.
4b. I'm not afraid of any feelings, no matter how strong.
- 5a. In order for me to do something important, I have to get rid of all my doubts.
5b. I can do something important, even when doubts are present.
- 6a. When negative thoughts and feelings arise, it's important to reduce or get rid of them as quickly as possible.
6b. Trying to reduce or get rid of negative thoughts and feelings frequently causes problems. If I simply allow them to be, then they will change as a natural part of living.
- 7a. The best method of managing negative thoughts and feelings is to analyze them; then utilize that knowledge to get rid of them.
7b. The best method of managing negative thoughts and feelings is to acknowledge their presence and let them be, without having to analyze or judge them.
- 8a. I will become "happy" and "healthy" by improving my ability to avoid, reduce, or get rid of negative thoughts and feelings.
8b. I will become "happy" and "healthy" by allowing negative thoughts and feelings to come and go of their own accord and learning to live effectively when they are present.
- 9a. If I can't suppress or get rid of a negative emotional reaction, it's a sign of personal failure or weakness.
9b. The need to control or get rid of a negative emotional reaction is a problem in itself.
- 10a. Having negative thoughts and feelings is an indication that I'm psychologically unhealthy or I've got problems.
10b. Having negative thoughts and feelings means I'm a normal human being.
- 11a. People who are in control of their lives can generally control how they feel.
11b. People who are in control of their lives do not need to control their feelings.
- 12a. It is not okay to feel anxious and I try hard to avoid it.
12b. I don't like anxiety, but it's okay to feel it.
- 13a. Negative thoughts and feelings are a sign that there is something wrong with my life.
13b. Negative thoughts and feelings are an inevitable part of life for everyone.
- 14a. I have to feel good before I can do something that's important and challenging.
14b. I can do something that's important and challenging even if I'm feeling anxious or depressed.
- 15a. I try to suppress thoughts and feelings that I don't like by just not thinking about them.
15b. I don't try to suppress thoughts and feelings that I don't like. I just let them come and go of their own accord.

To score your test, count the number of times you selected option "a" or "b."

You may like to repeat this test and see how your ideas have changed, after you have finished reading *The Happiness Trap*, or completed several sessions of ACT.

The Costs of Avoidance Worksheet

Complete the following sentences:

The thoughts I'd most like to get rid of are:

The feelings I'd most like to get rid of are:

The sensations I'd most like to get rid of are:

The memories I'd most like to get rid of are:

Next, take a few minutes to write a list of every single thing you've tried in order to avoid or get rid of these unpleasant thoughts or feelings. Try to remember every strategy you have ever used (whether deliberately or by default). Below is a guide to help you:

Distraction: list everything you have ever done to distract yourself from, or 'zone out', or take your mind off these painful thoughts, feelings, sensations or memories.

Opting out: list all the activities, interests, events, people, or places that you have avoided or withdrawn from, and all the opportunities you have missed out on, because you did not feel good or wanted to avoid feeling bad:

Thinking strategies: list all the different ways of thinking you have tried (deliberately or unintentionally) when painful thoughts and feelings started showing up. Tick any of the following that you have done, and write in any others:

- Worrying
- Dwelling on the past
- Fantasizing about the future
- Imagining escape scenarios (eg leaving your job or your partner)
- Imagining revenge scenarios
- Imagining suicide scenarios
- Thinking ‘It’s not fair ...’
- Thinking ‘If only ...’
- Thinking of killing yourself
- Blaming yourself
- Blaming others
- Blaming the world
- Talking logically to yourself
- Talking positively to yourself
- Talking negatively to yourself
- Analyzing yourself (trying to figure out why you are like this)
- Analyzing the situation (trying to figure out why this happened)
- Analyzing others (trying to figure out why they are like this)

Substances: list all the substances you have ever used to try and feel better, including foods, drinks, cigarettes, recreational drugs, and prescription drugs

Anything else: write down anything else you can think of you have ever tried to make yourself feel a bit better, or not so bad, when these painful thoughts and feelings showed up.

Once you’ve done that, go through your list and for each item, ask yourself:

1. Did this get rid of my painful thoughts and feelings *in the long term*?
2. Did it bring me closer to a rich, full, and meaningful life?
3. If the answer to question 2 is “no”, then what did this cost me in terms of time, energy, money, health, relationships, and vitality?

AVOIDANCE & SUFFERING DIARY

Fill this in at least once a day, to increase awareness around the costs of trying to avoid or get rid of painful thoughts and feelings.

| Painful Thoughts/ Feelings/ Sensations/ Memories that showed up today | What I did to escape, avoid, get rid of them, or distract myself from them | What that cost me in terms of health, vitality, relationship issues, getting stuck, increasing pain, wasted time/money/energy etc. |
|---|--|---|
| | | |

Informal Mindfulness Exercises

We're all busy, and many of us don't have time (or are unwilling to make time) to formally practice mindfulness skills. However, we can practice informally throughout the day. Here are a couple of examples:

1) Mindfulness in Your Morning Routine

Pick an activity that constitutes part of your daily morning routine, such as brushing your teeth, shaving, or having a shower. When you do it, totally focus on what you are doing: the body movements, the taste, the touch, the smell, the sight, the sound etc.

For example, when you're in the shower, notice the sounds of the water as it sprays out of the nozzle, and as it hits your body as it gurgles down the hole. Notice the temperature of the water, and the feel of it in your hair, and on your shoulders, and running down our legs. Notice the smell of the soap and shampoo, and the feel of them against your skin. Notice the sight of the water droplets on the walls or shower screen, the water dripping down your body and the steam rising upwards. Notice the movements of your arms as you wash or scrub or shampoo.

When thoughts arise, acknowledge them, let them be, and bring your attention back to the shower.

Again and again, your attention will wander. As soon as you realize this has happened, gently acknowledge it, note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to the shower.

2) Mindfulness of Domestic Chores

Pick a chore that you normally try to rush through, or distract yourself from; or one for which you just 'grit your teeth' and try to 'get through it'. For example: ironing clothes, washing dishes, vacuuming floors, making the kids' lunches. Aim to do this chore as a mindfulness practice.

E.g., when ironing clothes: notice the color and shape of the clothing, and the pattern made by the creases, and the new pattern as the creases disappear. Notice the hiss of the steam, the creak of the ironing board, the faint sound of the iron moving over the material. Notice the grip of your hand on the iron, and the movement of your arm and your shoulder.

If boredom or frustration arises, simply acknowledge it, and bring your attention back to the task at hand.

When thoughts arise, acknowledge them, let them be, and bring your attention back to what you are doing.

Again and again, your attention will wander. As soon as you realize this has happened, gently acknowledge it, note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to your current activity.

Now write down some informal mindfulness exercises for yourself:

During my morning routine, I will practice mindfulness of

During my evening routine, I will practice mindfulness of

During the week, I will practice mindfulness of the following chore (s)

Now write down any other quick 'n' easy informal mindfulness exercises you can think of – e.g. while waiting in queues or at traffic lights you could practice mindfulness of your impatience; or when eating dinner, you could aim to eat the first two mouthfuls mindfully.

At the end of each week, pull this sheet out and see how well you have followed it.

VALUES WORKSHEET (Adapted from Kelly Wilson's Valued Living Questionnaire)

Deep down inside, what is important to you? What do you want your life to stand for? What sort of qualities do you want to cultivate as a person? How do you want to be in your relationships with others? Values are our heart's deepest desires for the way we want to interact with and relate to the world, other people, and ourselves. They are leading principles that can guide us and motivate us as we move through life.

Values are not the same as goals. Values are directions we keep moving in, whereas goals are what we want to achieve along the way. A value is like heading North; a goal is like the river or mountain or valley we aim to cross whilst traveling in that direction. Goals can be achieved or 'crossed off', whereas values are an ongoing process. For example, if you want to be a loving, caring, supportive partner, that is a value – an ongoing process. If you stop being loving, caring and supportive, then you are no longer a loving, caring, supportive partner; you are no longer living by that value. In contrast, if you want to get married, that's a goal - it can be 'crossed off' or achieved. Once you're married, you're married – even if you start treating your partner very badly. If you want a better job, that's a goal. Once you've got it - goal achieved. But if you want to fully apply yourself at work, that's a value – an ongoing process.

The following are areas of life that are valued by some people. Not everyone has the same values, and this is not a test to see whether you have the "correct" values. Think about each area in terms of general life directions, rather than in terms of specific goals. There may be certain areas that you don't value much; you may skip them if you wish. There may be areas that overlap – e.g. if you value hiking in the mountains, that may come under both physical health and recreation. It is also important that you write down what you would value if there were nothing in your way. What's important? What do you care about? And what you would like to work towards?

1. **Family relations.** What sort of brother/sister, son/daughter, uncle/auntie do you want to be? What personal qualities would you like to bring to those relationships? What sort of relationships would you like to build? How would you interact with others if you were the ideal you in these relationships?
2. **Marriage/couples/intimate relations.** What sort of partner would you like to be in an intimate relationship? What personal qualities would you like to develop? What sort of relationship would you like to build? How would you interact with your partner if you were the 'ideal you' in this relationship?
3. **Parenting.** What sort of parent would you like to be? What sort of qualities would you like to have? What sort of relationships would you like to build with your children? How would you behave if you were the 'ideal you'.
4. **Friendships/social life.** What sort of qualities would you like to bring to your friendships? If you could be the best friend possible, how would you behave towards your friends? What sort of friendships would you like to build?
5. **Career/employment.** What do you value in your work? What would make it more meaningful? What kind of worker would you like to be? If you were living up to your own ideal standards, what personal qualities would you like to bring to your work? What sort of work relations would you like to build?
6. **Education/personal growth and development.** What do you value about learning, education, training, or personal growth? What new skills would you like to learn? What knowledge would you like to gain? What further education appeals to you? What sort of student would you like to be? What personal qualities would you like to apply?
7. **Recreation/fun/leisure.** What sorts of hobbies, sports, or leisure activities do you enjoy? How do you relax and unwind? How do you have fun? What sorts of activities would you like to do?
8. **Spirituality.** Whatever spirituality means to you is fine. It may be as simple as communing with nature, or as formal as participation in an organised religious group. What is important to you in this area of life?
9. **Citizenship/ environment/ community life.** How would you like to contribute to your community or environment, e.g. through volunteering, or recycling, or supporting a group/ charity/ political party? What sort of environments would you like to create at home, and at work? What environments would you like to spend more time in?
10. **Health/physical well-being.** What are your values related to maintaining your physical well-being? How do you want to look after your health, with regard to sleep, diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol, etc? Why is this important?

Values Assessment Rating Form

Read through the accompanying values sheet. For each of the ten domains, write a few words to summarise your valued direction, Eg 'To be a loving, supportive, caring, partner.' Rate how important this value is to you on a scale of 0 (low importance) to 10 (high importance). It's okay to have several values scoring the same number. Rate how successfully you have lived this value during the past month on a scale of 0 (not at all successfully) to 10 (very successfully). Finally rank these valued directions in order of the importance you place on working on them right now, with 10 as the highest rank, and 9 the next highest, and so on.

| Domain | Valued direction (Write a <u>brief</u> summary, in one or two sentences, or a few key words.) | Importance | Success | Rank |
|---------------------------------|--|------------|---------|------|
| Couples/ intimate relationships | | | | |
| Parenting | | | | |
| Family relations | | | | |
| Social relations | | | | |
| Employment | | | | |
| Education and training | | | | |
| Recreation | | | | |
| Spirituality | | | | |
| Citizenship/ community | | | | |
| Health/ Physical well-being` | | | | |

CLARIFYING YOUR VALUES (Adapted From Tobias Lundgren's Bull's Eye Worksheet)

Deep down inside, what is important to you? What do you want your life to stand for? What sort of qualities do you want to cultivate as a person? How do you want to be in your relationships with others? Values are our heart's deepest desires for the way we want to interact with and relate to the world, other people, and ourselves. They are leading principles that can guide us and motivate us as we move through life. Values reflect *what* you want to do, and *how* you want to do it. They are about how you want to behave towards your friends, your family, yourself, your environment, your work, etc.

Values are not the same as goals. Values involve ongoing action; they are like directions we keep moving in, whereas goals are what we want to achieve along the way. A value is like heading West; a goal is like the river or mountain or valley we aim to cross whilst traveling in that direction. Goals can be achieved or 'crossed off', whereas values are ongoing. (No matter how far West you go, you never reach it!) For example, if you want to be a loving, caring, supportive partner, that is a value: it involves ongoing action. In contrast, if you want to get married, that's a goal - it can be 'crossed off' or achieved. If you want a better job, that's a goal. Once you've got it - goal achieved. But if you want to fully apply yourself at work, contribute your best, and engage fully in what you're doing, that's a value: it involves ongoing action.

THE BULL'S EYE

The 'Bull's Eye' is a values-clarification exercise designed by a Swedish ACT therapist called Tobias Lundgren. (I have rewritten it.) The dartboard on the next page is divided into four important domains of life: work/education, leisure, relationships and personal growth/health. To begin with, please write down your values in these 4 areas of life. Not everyone has the same values, and this is not a test to see whether you have the "correct" ones. Think in terms of general life directions, rather than in terms of specific goals. There may be values that overlap – e.g. if you value studying psychology, that may come under both Education and Personal Growth. Write down what you would value if there were nothing in your way, nothing stopping you. What's important? What do you care about? And what you would like to work towards? Your value should not be a specific goal but instead reflect a way you would like to live your life over time. For example, to accompany your son to a football game might be a goal; to be an involved and interested parent might be the underlying value. **Note!** Make sure they are *your* values, not anyone else's. It is *your* personal values that are important!

1. Work/Education: refers to your workplace & career, education and knowledge, skills development. (This may include volunteering and other forms of unpaid work). How do you want to be towards your clients, customers, colleagues, employees, fellow workers? What personal qualities do you want to bring to your work? What skills do you want to develop?

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2. Relationships: refers to intimacy, closeness, friendship and bonding in your life: it includes relationships with your partner, children, parents, relatives, friends, co-workers, and other social contacts. What sort of relationships do you want to build? How do you want to be in these relationships? What personal qualities do you want to develop?

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3. Personal Growth/Health: refers to your ongoing development as a human being. This may include include organized religion, personal expressions of spirituality, creativity, developing life skills, meditation, yoga, getting out into nature; exercise, nutrition, and addressing health risk factors like smoking.

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4. Leisure: refers to how you play, relax, stimulate, or enjoy yourself; your hobbies or other activities for rest, recreation, fun and creativity.

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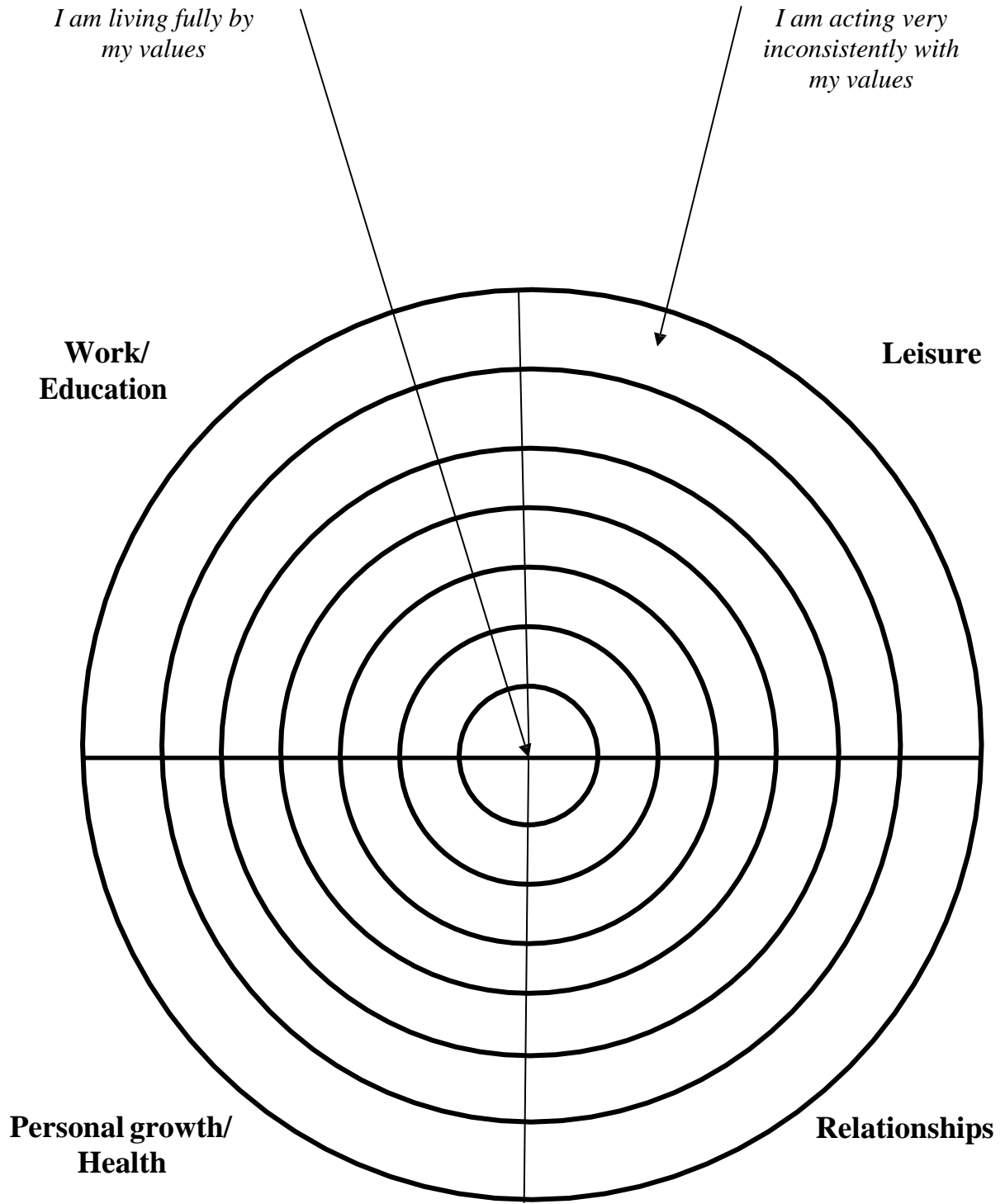
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THE BULL'S EYE: Read through your values, then make an X in each area of the dart board, to represent where you stand today. An X in the Bull's Eye (the centre of the board) means that you are living fully by your values in that area of life. An X far from Bull's Eye means that you are way off the mark in terms of living by your values.

Since there are four areas of valued living, you should mark **four Xs** on the dart board.



YOUR VALUES: *What really matters to you, deep in your heart? What do you want to do with your time on this planet? What sort of person do you want to be? What personal strengths or qualities do you want to develop?*

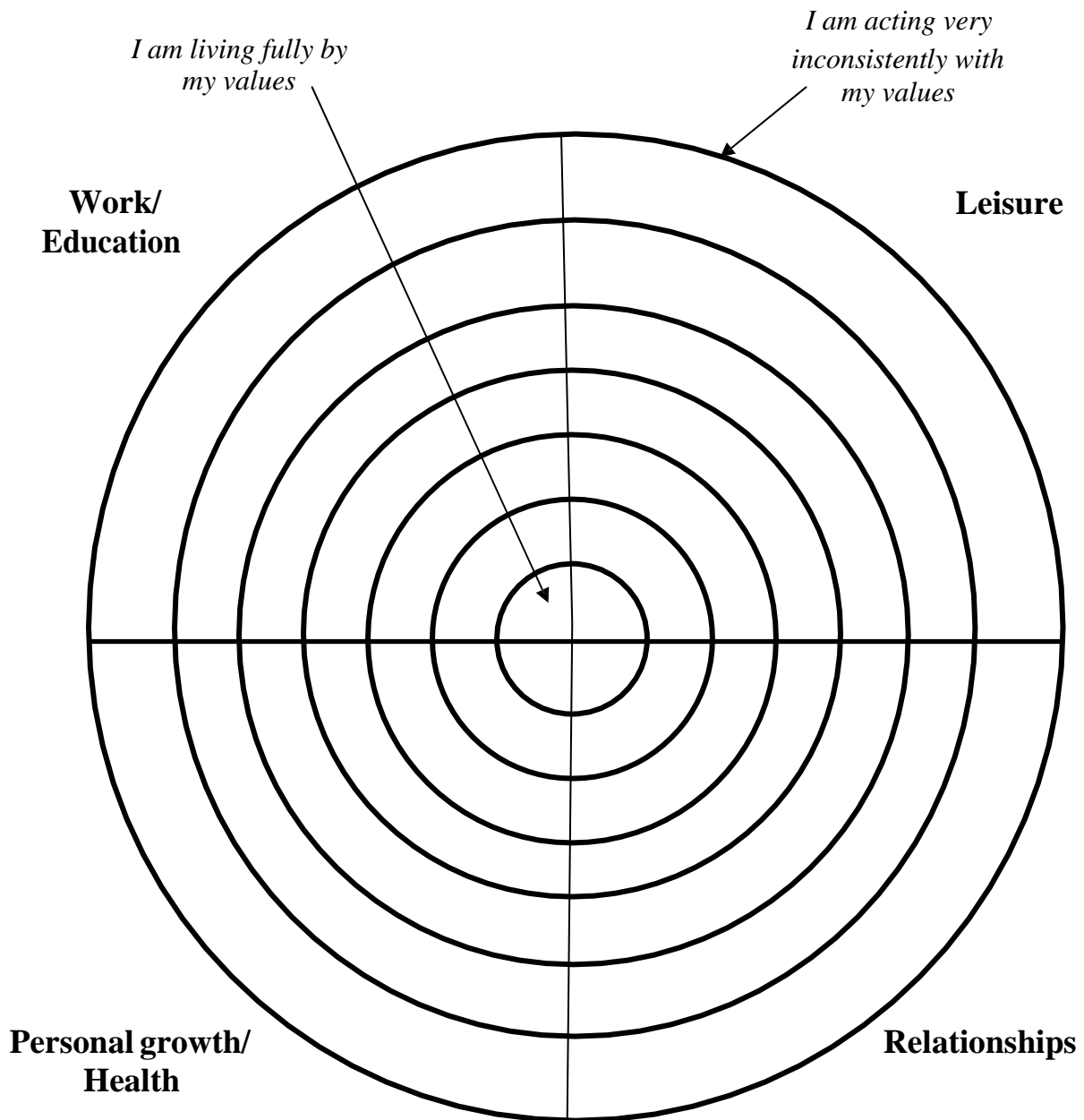
1. Work/Education: includes workplace, career, education, skills development, etc.

2. Relationships: includes your partner, children, parents, relatives, friends, co-workers, and other social contacts.

3. Personal Growth/Health: may include religion, spirituality, creativity, life skills, meditation, yoga, nature; exercise, nutrition, and/or addressing health risk factors like smoking, alcohol, drugs or overeating etc

4. Leisure: how you play, relax, stimulate, or enjoy yourself; activities for rest, recreation, fun and creativity.

THE BULL'S EYE: make an X in each area of the dart board, to represent where you stand today.



Goal Setting Worksheet

Step 1: A key focus in ACT is setting our goals guided by our values. Therefore, Step 1, before any goal setting, is to clarify what value(s) is (are) underlying your goals.

Step 1: My value(s) underlying these goals are:

When it comes to setting goals, make sure you set a SMART goal. There are different versions of this acronym. In my version, SMART stands for:

- **Specific:** specify the actions you will take, when and where you will do so, and who or what is involved. Example of a vague or non-specific goal: "I will spend more time with my kids." A specific goal: "I will take the kids to the park on Saturday to play baseball." A non-specific goal: "I will be more loving towards my wife." A specific goal: "I will ring my wife at lunchtime and tell her I love her."
- **Meaningful:** The goal should be personally meaningful to you. If it is genuinely guided by your values, as opposed to following a rigid rule, or trying to please others, or trying to avoid some pain, then it will be meaningful. If it lacks a sense of meaning or purpose, check in and see if it is really guided by your values.
- **Adaptive:** Does the goal help you to take your life forwards in a direction that, as far as you can predict, is likely to improve the quality of that life?
- **Realistic:** The goal should be realistically achievable. Take into account your health, competing demands on your time, financial status, and whether you have the skills to achieve it.
- **Time-bound:** to increase the specificity of your goal, set a day, date and time for it. If this is not possible, set as accurate a time limit as you can.

*Also, make sure it's a live person's goal, not a dead person's goal. (If you can't remember what that means, re-read Chapter 27 of *The Happiness Trap*.)*

Step 2: Write down a graduated series of goals, starting from tiny simple goals that can be achieved right away, to long term goals that may not be achieved for months or years.

Step 2: Some of My Goals Are:

- **An Immediate Goal** (something small, simple, easy, I can do in the next 24 hours)

- **Short Term Goals** (things I can do over the next few days and weeks)

- **Medium Term Goal(s)** (things I can do over the next few weeks and months)

- **Long Term Goal(s)** (things I can do over the next few months and years)

Overcoming F.E.A.R. - 1

This handout complements chapter 30 of *The Happiness Trap*, although its content differs somewhat from the book. Let's assume you have clarified your values, and set yourself a goal – but you haven't followed through on it. What stopped you? The F.E.A.R. acronym covers most of the common barriers:

- F = Fusion (stuff your mind tells you that gets in the way when you get caught up in it)
- E = Excessive goals (your goal is too big, or you lack the skills, or you lack the resources)
- A = Avoidance of discomfort (unwillingness to make room for the discomfort this challenge brings)
- R = Remoteness from values (losing touch with - or forgetting - what is important or meaningful about this)

So now, in as few words as possible, write down everything that has stopped you following through:

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

6)

7)

8)

Now go back, and label each answer with one or two of the letters F, E, A, or R – whichever best describe this barrier. In other words, was it F = Fusion with a story (e.g. I'll fail; it's too hard; I'll do it later; I'm too weak; I can't do it); was it E = Excessive goal (you lacked the time, money, health, facilities, skills, or support necessary; or it was just too big and you got overwhelmed); was it A = Avoidance of discomfort (you were unwilling to make room for the anxiety, frustration, fear of failure, or other uncomfortable thoughts and feelings); or was it R = remoteness from your values (you forgot or lost touch with the values underlying this goal)?

The antidote to F.E.A.R. is D.A.R.E.

D = Defusion

A = Acceptance of discomfort

R = Realistic goals

E = Embracing values

Go through your barriers, one by one, and work out how you can deal with them, using D.A.R.E. Below, you'll find some suggestions to help you.

Overcoming F.E.A.R. – 2

Defusion strategies: name the story, thank your mind, acknowledge ‘Here’s reason-giving’ or ‘Here’s judging’, name the demon/monster/passenger, recognize this is Radio Doom & Gloom broadcasting, or simply let the thoughts come and go like passing cars.

Acceptance strategies: name the feeling, observe it like a curious scientist, rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, commit to allowing it, breathe into it, make room for it, give it a shape and color,

Realistic goal-setting: if you lack skills, set goals around learning them; if your goal is too big, break it down into small chunks; if you lack resources, brainstorm how you can get them; if the goal is truly impossible, e.g. due to health or financial issues, or external barriers over which you have no direct influence, then set a different one.

Embracing values: connect with what matters to you about this goal. Is it truly meaningful? Is it aligned with your values? Is it truly important? Is it moving your life forward in the direction you wish to go?

Using these ideas (and others of your own, or of your therapist/coach), write down how you can respond to the barriers you listed above.

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

6)

7)

8)

Finally, ask yourself this question: am I willing to make room for the difficult thoughts and feelings that show up, without getting caught up in them or struggling with them, and take effective action, in order to do what matters, deep in my heart?

If so: go ahead and give it a go.

If not, consider these questions:

Does this really and truly matter to you?

If it does, then what is the cost to you of avoiding it or putting it off?

Would you rather have the vitality-draining pain of staying stuck, or the life-enhancing pain of moving forward?

The Willingness and Action Plan

My goal is to (be specific):

The values underlying my goal are:

The actions I will take to achieve that goal are (be specific):

The thoughts/memories, feelings, sensations, urges I'm willing to make room for (in order to achieve this goal):-

- Thoughts/memories:

- Feelings:

- Sensations:

- Urges:

- It would be useful to remind myself that:

- If necessary, I can break this goal down into smaller steps, such as:

- The smallest, easiest step I can begin with is:

- The time, day and date that I will take that first step, is:

What To Do In A Crisis

A crisis can present in many different forms, from the death of a loved one, to loss of a job, to collapse of a marriage, to financial disaster. When you are hit by a crisis, an emotional storm is likely to whip through your mind and body, tossing painful thoughts and feelings in all directions. Here's what you can do to survive and thrive: **S.T.O.P.**

Slow your breathing

- Take a few deep breaths, and mindfully observe the breath flowing in and flowing out. This will help to anchor you in the present.

Take note

- Take note of your experience in this moment. Notice what you are thinking. Notice what you are feeling. Notice what you are doing. Notice how your thoughts and feelings are swirling around, and can easily carry you away if you allow them.

Open up

- Open up around your feelings. Breathe into them and make room for them. Open up to your thoughts too: take a step back and give them some room to move, without holding onto them or trying to push them away. See them for what they are and give them space, rather than fusing with them.

Pursue your values

- Once you've done the above three steps, you will be in a mental state of mindfulness. The next step is to respond to the crisis by pursuing a valued course of action. Connect with your values: ask yourself, 'What do I want to be about, in the face of this crisis? What do I want to stand for? How would I like to act, so that I can look back years from now and feel proud of my response?'

Things to Consider

- 1) Do you need, or would you benefit from help/assistance/support/advice? If so, what friends, neighbors, or relatives can you contact? What professionals could you arrange to see? (If necessary, what helpline numbers could you call?)
- 2) Have you experienced anything similar before? If so, how did you respond that was useful and helpful in the long term? Is there anything you learned from that experience that you can usefully apply now?
- 3) Is there anything you can do to improve the situation in any way? Are there any TINY steps you could take immediately that could be helpful? What are the smallest, simplest, easiest, tiny steps you could take:
 - a) in the next few minutes
 - b) in the next few hours
 - c) in the next few days*Note: the first step might simply be to spend a few minutes practicing some mindful breathing – or to take out a pen and paper and write an action plan.*
- 4) If there is nothing you can do to improve the situation, then are you willing to practice acceptance, using expansion and defusion skills, while engaging fully in the present moment? And given that the situation is unchangeable, how can you spend your time and energy constructively, rather than worrying or blaming or dwelling? Again, reconnect with your values: what do you want to be about in response to this situation? What are some tiny values-driven steps you can take?
- 5) You don't get to choose the deck of cards you are dealt in life; you only get to choose how you play with them. So a useful question to ask is: 'Given this is the hand I've been dealt, what's the best way to play with it? What personal strengths can I develop or strengthen as I go through this ordeal? How can I learn and grow from this experience?' *Note: any painful experience is an opportunity to develop your mindfulness skills.*
- 6) Be compassionate to yourself. Ask yourself, 'If someone I loved was going through this experience, feeling what I am feeling – if I wanted to be kind and caring towards them, how would I treat them? How would I behave towards them? What might I say or do?' Then try treating yourself the same way.

What's Wrong With My Partner/ Our Relationship? And What Happens When I Dwell On It?

(From ACT With Love, Ch 1)

The purpose of this worksheet is to get clear about the most common judgments and criticisms you make about your partner – and the effect it has on you and your relationship when you get caught up in them, dwell on them, buy into them. Over the next few days, take note of all the thoughts you have about what is wrong with your relationship or your partner. Each day, take a few minutes to jot some of these thoughts down, and reflect on what happens to your mood, your attitude, and your relationship when you get all caught up in these thoughts?

| Thoughts about what's wrong with my partner/ our relationship | How does my mood change when I get caught up in/ dwell on these thoughts? | When I buy into or dwell on these thoughts, what effect does it have on my relationship? |
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Identify the DRAIN In Your Relationship (From ACT With Love, Ch 2)

D – Disconnection, **R** – Reactivity, **A** – Avoidance, **I** – Inside your mind, **N** – Neglecting values

Disconnection: How do I disconnect from my partner? (E.g. do I get bored, irritable, stop listening? Do I go cold and distant? Do I close off/shut down? Am I distracted rather than present?)

How does my partner disconnect from me?

Reactivity: How do I react impulsively or automatically, without stopping to consider what I am doing? (E.g. do I yell, snap, swear, storm off, say hurtful things, criticize, blame, accuse, sneer, jeer?)

How does my partner react impulsively or automatically?

Avoidance: How do I try to avoid or get rid of my painful feelings that are related to the issues in this relationship? (E.g. do I use drugs, alcohol, food, cigarettes? Do I withdraw or stay away from my partner? Do I try to distract myself with TV, computers, books, going out? Do I avoid talking to my partner about the issue?)

How does my partner seem to avoid or get rid of his painful feelings?

Inside Your Mind: How do I get trapped inside my mind? (E.g. do I worry about the future, dwell on the past, relive old hurts, rehash old arguments, stew over everything that's wrong with my partner? Do I get caught up in judgment, blame, criticism? Do I get caught up in thoughts of rejection, betrayal, abandonment, or being controlled?)

How does my partner seem to get trapped inside his mind?

Neglecting Values: What core values do I neglect, forget about, or act inconsistently with, when I am disconnected, reactive, avoidant, or inside my mind? (E.g. do I lose touch with values such as being loving, kind, caring, generous, compassionate, supportive, fun-loving, easygoing, sensual, affectionate?)

What core values does my partner seem to neglect, forget about, or act inconsistently with?

If you're unwilling to work at your relationship

If you're not willing to work on your relationship, then you're effectively choosing to prolong your difficulties or make them worse. If this is where you're at right now, then take a few days to keep a daily record. At the end of each day, fill in the chart.

Notice the effect of "giving up" on your health and vitality.

Notice what this choice to "give up" is costing you—in terms of emotional pain, wasted time, wasted money, wasted energy, and further damage to your relationship.

Notice any actions you take that seem to improve your relationship or enhance your own well-being and vitality.

If you're unwilling to work at your relationship

Many people don't feel like working on their relationship. You might think it all seems too hard or it's pointless, or you shouldn't have to, or the fault is all with your partner. The problem is, if you're not willing to work on your relationship, then you're effectively choosing to prolong your difficulties or make them even worse. So if this is where you're at right now, then take a few days to notice what this attitude is costing you. At the end of each day, fill in the chart.

| How did refusing to work on my relationship – thereby making it worse – affect my health and vitality today? | What did refusing to work on my relationship today cost me in terms of emotional pain, wasted time, wasted money, wasted energy, and further damage? | Did I do anything today that seemed to improve my relationship? What was it? |
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How Did You Meet Your Partner?

How did you first meet your partner?

Aside from looks, what did you find most attractive about him/her?

What personal qualities did you most admire about him/ her?

What did you enjoy doing together?

What did your partner do that made those times enjoyable?

Describe one of the most enjoyable days you've ever spent together. Where were you? What did you do? How did you interact? What sort of things did you say and do to each other? How was your body language?

What do you miss most about the early days of your relationship?

What do you see as your partner's greatest strengths, best personal qualities?

On Reflection:

Can you contact any sense of warmth or appreciation for your partner? Or do you merely see him as a burden, an obstacle, a hassle?

What happens when you take time to reflect on her strengths and positive qualities? Do you see her at all differently?

Do you find it hard to acknowledge his positive attributes because you are so focused on his flaws and weaknesses?

You're Both Hurting

Take a few minutes to write about the major issues in your relationship. Do this with nonjudgmental description rather than with harsh judgment and criticism. For example, write, "Greg does not often help out with the housework" instead of "Greg is a lazy bastard." If you notice a harsh judgment slipped past you, just make a mental note of it. Silently say to yourself, "Aha! There goes a judgment!" or "There's judging!" Then cross it out and write something nonjudgmental instead.

Write about the painful emotions you have experienced as a result of these issues. What painful thoughts and feelings have you struggled with? If the main feelings you notice are anger, fury, resentment, rage, or frustration, then see if you can "go deeper." These are typically surface emotions. Beneath the angry exterior, you will usually find something like hurt, sadness, guilt, shame, fear, rejection, loneliness,

Acknowledge, openly and honestly, that this relationship has been painful. You have suffered. It has not been easy. Given what you have been through, it's completely natural to feel the way you do.

Now this is the most challenging part: take a few minutes to reflect on how your partner has also suffered. He or she may never have spoken about this to you, so you may have to use your imagination here. Think about what it must be like for your partner to be on the receiving end of your complaints and criticisms. If she tends to cut off, go quiet, and withdraw, then what must that be like for her—hiding away and closing down in order to cope? If she tends to brood, dwell, and rehash the past, how painful must that be for her—suffering again and again by replaying old events that can never be undone? If he gets angry and yells, then how unpleasant must that feel for him to be eaten up with anger and resentment? Surely there is no joy or pleasure involved; how much must he suffer, lost in his rage?

How I try to control my partner

Spend some time reflecting on everything you have ever tried doing to control your partner—then assess how effective it was in the short run and what it cost you in the long run.

| What my partner says or does that I don't like | What I have said or done to stop or change my partner's behavior | Did my actions change my partner's behavior in the long term? | Did my actions enhance and enrich our relationship in the long term? If not, what has this cost in terms of health, vitality, pain, wasted time, bitterness, anger, regret etc. |
|--|--|---|---|
| | | | |

Who do I want to be in this relationship?

Imagine that it's ten years from now, and you have gathered together your closest friends and relatives to celebrate the last ten years of your relationship. This could be a small intimate affair in your family home or a plush affair in a fancy restaurant. It's your imagination, so make it look how you want.

Imagine that your partner stands up to make a speech about the last ten years of your life together—about what you stand for, what you mean to him/her, and the role that you have played in his/her life. Imagine your partner saying whatever it is, deep in your heart, you would most like to hear. (This is not about what they would realistically say—it's about what, in an ideal world, you would love to hear them say.) Imagine them describing your character, your strengths, and the ways in which you have contributed to the relationship.

Close your eyes now and take a couple of minutes to imagine this as vividly as possible, then write answers to the questions below.

What sort of personal qualities do you want to bring into play in your relationship?

What character strengths do you wish to employ or develop?

How do you want to behave or act on an ongoing basis?

What do you want to stand for as a partner?

Suppose we asked your partner to describe the ten things he or she most appreciates about your character or personality. In the ideal world, what would you most love your partner to say?

Values-Guided Actions

Write about little things you could do – simple, easy values-guided actions -- to enhance your relationship. Following are a few ideas to get you started. Although we're focusing here on the three core values of connecting, caring, and contribution, obviously these are not the only important values in a relationship, so please add others of your own.

Words: What can you say to your partner that promotes a deeper sense of connection or shows him that you care? How about "I love you," "I'm here for you," "Let me know how I can be of support," or "I appreciate having you in my life"? Even simple phrases such as "Thank you," "I'm sorry," or "Please forgive me" can go a long way if said genuinely. Consider text messages, cards, and e-mails as well as the spoken word.

Gestures: What actions can you take that contribute to your partner's health, well-being, and vitality? This might include anything from cooking dinner, fixing the car, or organizing a night out, to helping your partner with her chores or tasks, or giving small gifts such as flowers or CDs.

Physicality: How can you facilitate connection and caring physically? Consider hugging, kissing, holding hands, stroking hair, back rubs, sitting together on the couch, and so on.

How To Create Psychological Smog

This exercise shows you what happens when you hold on tightly to your thoughts, turning them into a thick “psychological smog”. Pull your journal or worksheet out once again, and using the examples in chapter 8 as a guide, write down as many “smoggy” thoughts as you can identify:

Shoulds

No Point Trying

If Only

Painful Past

Scary Future

Reason Giving

Judgments

I Know Why

Deep-Seated Fears

Okay, so now you’ve got a long list of “smoggy thoughts.” The next step is to read them through and buy into them as much as you can. Give them all your attention, dwell on them, believe them, get totally absorbed in them. The aim is to make the psychological smog as thick as it can possibly be, to get so absorbed in these thoughts that you basically lose touch with everything else. Do this for at least a minute, then answer the questions below.

When we get lost in the smog, we soon stumble into the quicksand of painful emotions; so what are you feeling right now?

How do you feel toward your partner right now?

Does dwelling on these thoughts help to improve your relationship – or make it worse?

Right now, do you feel like you want to act on your values—to care for and connect with your partner? Or do you feel more like giving up, running away, or lashing out?

The Values Gap

Suppose a miracle happened and your partner suddenly turned into your perfect “soul mate”: no faults at all, no annoying habits, always there for you, able to meet your every need, want, and desire If that happened, then how would *you* change? Please take your time to seriously consider this and write your answers below.

What would you stop, start, do more of and less of?

What sort of partner would you try to become? What sort of personal qualities would you develop?

What attitude would you cultivate toward your partner?

How would you speak to him/her when you wanted something?

How would you respond to him/her when they were in pain?

How would you treat him/her when they made a mistake or screwed up?

Is there a gap between the way you’d ideally like to behave as a partner – the values you’d like to live by -- and the way that you actually are behaving?

What is stopping you from living by your values right now?

What do you fear might happen if you did start to live more by your values?

What do you think needs to happen first before you can start living more by your values?

Do you believe your partner should change before you do? If so, what do you expect your partner to do?

The judgmental mind—part 1

So what does your mind say to you when it really wants to beat you up? When your mind turns into judge, jury, and executioner—when it lays out all the evidence about what’s wrong with you, judges you as not good enough, and sentences you to suffer—what does that sound like? If someone could listen in to your thoughts, what would they hear your mind saying?

Take a moment to jot down some of the things your mind says. Complete each sentence with as many words or phrases as you can think of.

When my mind wants to judge me as “not good enough,” this is what it says:

My mind tells me that I am a ...

My mind tells me that I am too ...

My mind tells me that I am not enough of a ...

My mind tells me that I do too much of the following:

My mind tells me that I don’t do enough of the following:

My mind tells me that I lack the following:

Once you’ve done that, read through the list, pick the self-judgment that bothers you the most, and shorten it to a simple phrase of no more than five or six words—for example, I’m a loser, I’m too selfish, or I’m not witty enough. Then either work through the exercises in chapter 9 of ACT With Love, or run through similar exercises with your coach/therapist

The judgmental mind—part 2

When my mind wants to hook me into the “bad partner” story, this is what it says:

It tells me that my partner is a ...

It tells me that my partner is too ...

It tells me that my partner is not enough of a ...

It tells me that my partner does too much of the following:

It tells me that my partner doesn't do enough of the following:

It tells me that my partner lacks the following:

When I get hooked by this story, here is how it affects me: (describe changes in your feelings and your attitude towards your partner, and the way you treat him/her)

When I get hooked by this story, here is how it affects our relationship:

Once you've done this, either work through the defusion exercises in chapter 9 of ACT With Love, or run through similar exercises with your coach/therapist

Fighting Tactics You Use

Write down the tactics you both use in fighting. Start by acknowledging your own tactics (both the fair and the dirty tactics):

“When I want to win a fight, this is what I do ...”

“When my partner wants to win a fight, this is what he/she does ...”

Preferred Tactics And Ground Rules

Complete the following sentences, and then share your answers with your partner.

When we're having a fight --

I'd like you to accept me doing this:

I want to stop myself from doing this:

I'm willing to accept you doing this:

I want you to stop doing this:

Chasing And Running

Discuss chasing and running (as described in chapter 15 of ACT With Love). Share your answers with your partner.

Runners: When do you run? How do you feel immediately before you run? Why do you run? How do you feel when your partner chases you?

Chasers: When do you chase? How do you feel if your partner runs away? Why do you pursue? How do you feel when you're chasing?

Now put yourself in your partner's shoes. Think hard about what that would feel like. Write down what you imagine it must be like for them when they're running away or chasing after you:

Appreciating Your Partner

Fill in this form each day. It's okay if there's overlap and repetition between columns. Notice (at least) three things you appreciate about your partner. They don't have to be big things; they can be tiny. It might be the way he smiles, or the sound of her laughter.

Contemplate what your partner adds to your life. If you're stuck for ideas, consider these questions: If my partner were on his deathbed, what would I tell him I appreciated most about him? If my partner died, what would I find hardest about living alone? Each day notice (at least) three ways in which your partner contributes to your life. Again, they don't have to be big things. It might be the simple fact that she goes to work to earn money to help pay for some of the things you enjoy having. Or the simple pleasure of having someone to talk to over dinner. Or the feeling of added security you have when you're not alone.

Think back to when you first met your partner: what personal qualities and strengths did she have? What did he say or do that made him attractive? In all likelihood, those strengths and qualities are still there today. Each day notice (at least) three things your partner says or does that are representative of her personal strengths and qualities.

| 3 Things I Noticed Today That I Appreciate About My Partner | 3 Ways My Partner Contributed To My Life Today | 3 Things My Partner Said or Did Today That Represent Their Best Strengths and Qualities |
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Creating A Forgiveness Ritual

Many couples find it is very healing to create their own forgiveness ritual. You can use your own creativity to adapt this worksheet into something more personal.

Step 1: Complete these three sentences:

The thoughts, feelings, and memories I've been holding on to are:

Holding on to all this has hurt our relationship in the following ways:

I want to build a better relationship, based on the following values:

Step 2: Write, in your own words, a commitment to let all these painful thoughts and feelings come and go, again and again and again, no matter how many times they come back, without holding on to them or getting caught up in them:

My commitment is to ...

Step 3: Choose a special place and read your answers aloud to each other. This could be anywhere from a special room in your house, to a park or a beach. As one partner reads, the other listens mindfully and compassionately. Discuss this in advance, and write down what you will do:

Step 4: Do something that symbolizes starting over—for example, burn the letters and scatter the ashes. Discuss this in advance, and write down what you will do:

Step 5: Do something to connect lovingly—for example, kiss, hug, go out to dinner, or have a bath together. Discuss this in advance, and write down what you will do:

Screwing Up

Human beings screw up so often, it's important to consider these three questions:

When your partner screws up, how would you ideally respond?

When you screw up, how would you ideally like your partner to respond?

When either one of you screws up, what would you ideally say or do to handle it effectively and make amends?

Before answering these questions, get in touch with your values; reflect on the sort of partner you want to be. If you could respond mindfully, acting on your deepest values, then what would you say and do when one of you screws up? Are you willing to forgive, let go, and move on? Are you willing to make room for your painful feelings, let go of unhelpful thoughts, and discuss the issue in a way that allows for repairs? Are you willing to apply the principles of positive reinforcement (as described in chapter 18 of ACT With Love) to catch your partner doing it right and thank them, rather than come down hard when they do it wrong? And if not, what will your lack of willingness cost you in the long run? Now write your answers, below.

When your partner screws up, how would you ideally respond? What would you ideally say and do, with what sort of attitude?

When you screw up, how would you ideally like your partner to respond? What would they ideally say and do, with what sort of attitude?

When either you or your partner screws up, what would you ideally say or do to handle it effectively and/or make amends?

When either you or your partner screws up, what would you ideally like your partner to say or do, to handle it effectively and/or make amends?

Your Relationship: Looking Backwards

You can do this exercise for the last day, week or month, whichever you prefer. Look back over the last 24 hours (or last week or month), and reflect a) on the values-guided actions have you taken and b) actions you have taken that were inconsistent with those values. Which actions enhanced and enriched your relationship? Which actions had the opposite effect? (Note: there is no such thing as a “right” or “wrong” value. The left hand column contains common values that many couples share, but these may not be your values, so rewrite them as you wish.)

| Relationship Values | Values- guided actions | Values-inconsistent actions |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Connection | | |
| Caring | | |
| Contribution | | |
| Respect | | |
| Fairness | | |
| Acceptance | | |
| Assertiveness | | |
| Sensuality | | |
| Sexuality | | |
| Having fun | | |
| Kindness | | |
| Teamwork | | |
| Support/encouragement | | |
| Trust | | |
| Honesty | | |

Your Relationship: Moving Forwards

You can do this exercise for the last day, week or month, whichever you prefer. Look ahead to the next 24 hours (or week or month), and reflect a) on the values-guided actions you could take and b) actions that you could take that would be inconsistent with those values. Which actions would be likely to enhance and enrich your relationship? Which actions would be likely to have the opposite effect? (Note: there is no such thing as a “right” or “wrong” value. The left hand column contains common values that many couples share, but if these are not your values, please rewrite them.)

| Relationship Values | Values- guided actions | Values-inconsistent actions |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Connection | | |
| Caring | | |
| Contribution | | |
| Respect | | |
| Fairness | | |
| Acceptance | | |
| Assertiveness | | |
| Sensuality | | |
| Sexuality | | |
| Having fun | | |
| Kindness | | |
| Teamwork | | |
| Support/encouragement | | |
| Trust | | |
| Honesty | | |

Appendix 4

GOAL SETTING

Effective goal setting is quite a skill and it does require a bit of practice to get the hang of it.

The method that follows is adapted with permission from 'The Weight Escape' workshops and e-course created by Ann Bailey, Joe Ciarrochi and Russ Harris, © 2010. (Their book, *The Weight Escape*, will also be published by Penguin Books (Australia) in June 2012.) You can download a free pdf of this worksheet from the Free Resources page on www.thehappinesstrap.com.

The Five-Step Plan for Goal Setting and Committed Action

Step 1. Identify Your Guiding Values

Identify the value or values that will underpin your course of action.

Step 2. Set a SMART goal

It's not effective to set any old goal that springs to mind. Ideally, you want to set a SMART goal. Here's what the acronym means:

S = specific (Do not set a vague, fuzzy, or poorly-defined goal like, 'I'll be more loving'. Instead, be specific: 'I'll give my partner a good, long hug when I get home from work'. In other words, *specify* what actions you will take.)

M = meaningful (Make sure this goal is aligned with important values.)

A = adaptive (Is this goal likely to improve your life in some way?)

R = realistic (Make sure the goal is realistic for the resources you have available. Resources you may need could include: time, money, physical health, social support, knowledge and skills. If these resources are necessary but unavailable, you will need to change your goal to a more realistic one. The new goal might actually be to find the missing resources: to save the money, or develop the skills, or build the social network, or improve health, etc.)

T = time-framed (Put a specific time frame on the goal: specify the day, date and time – as accurately as possible – that you will take the proposed actions.)

Write your SMART goal here:

Step 3. Identify Benefits

Clarify for yourself, what would be the most positive outcome(s) of achieving your goal? (However, *don't* start fantasising about how wonderful life will be after you achieve your goal; research shows that fantasising about the future actually reduces your chances of following through!) Write the benefits below:

Step 4. Identify Obstacles

Imagine the potential difficulties and obstacles that might stand in the way of you achieving your goals, and how you will deal with them if they arise. Consider:

- a) what are the possible *internal* difficulties (difficult thoughts and feelings, such as low motivation, self-doubt, distress, anger, hopelessness, insecurity, anxiety, etc.)?
- b) what are the possible *external* difficulties (things aside from thoughts and feelings that might stop you, e.g. lack of money, lack of time, lack of skills, personal conflicts with other people involved)?

If internal difficulties arise in the form of thoughts and feelings, such as:

- then I will use the following mindfulness skills to unhook, make room and get present:

If external difficulties arise, such as:

a)_

b)_

c)_

then I will take the following steps to deal with them:

a)_

b)_

c)_

Step 5. Make A Commitment

Research shows that if you make a public commitment to your goal (i.e. if you state your goal to at least one other person), then you are far more likely to follow through on it. If you're not willing to do this, then at the very least make a commitment to yourself. But if you really *do* want the best results, then be sure to make your commitment to somebody else.

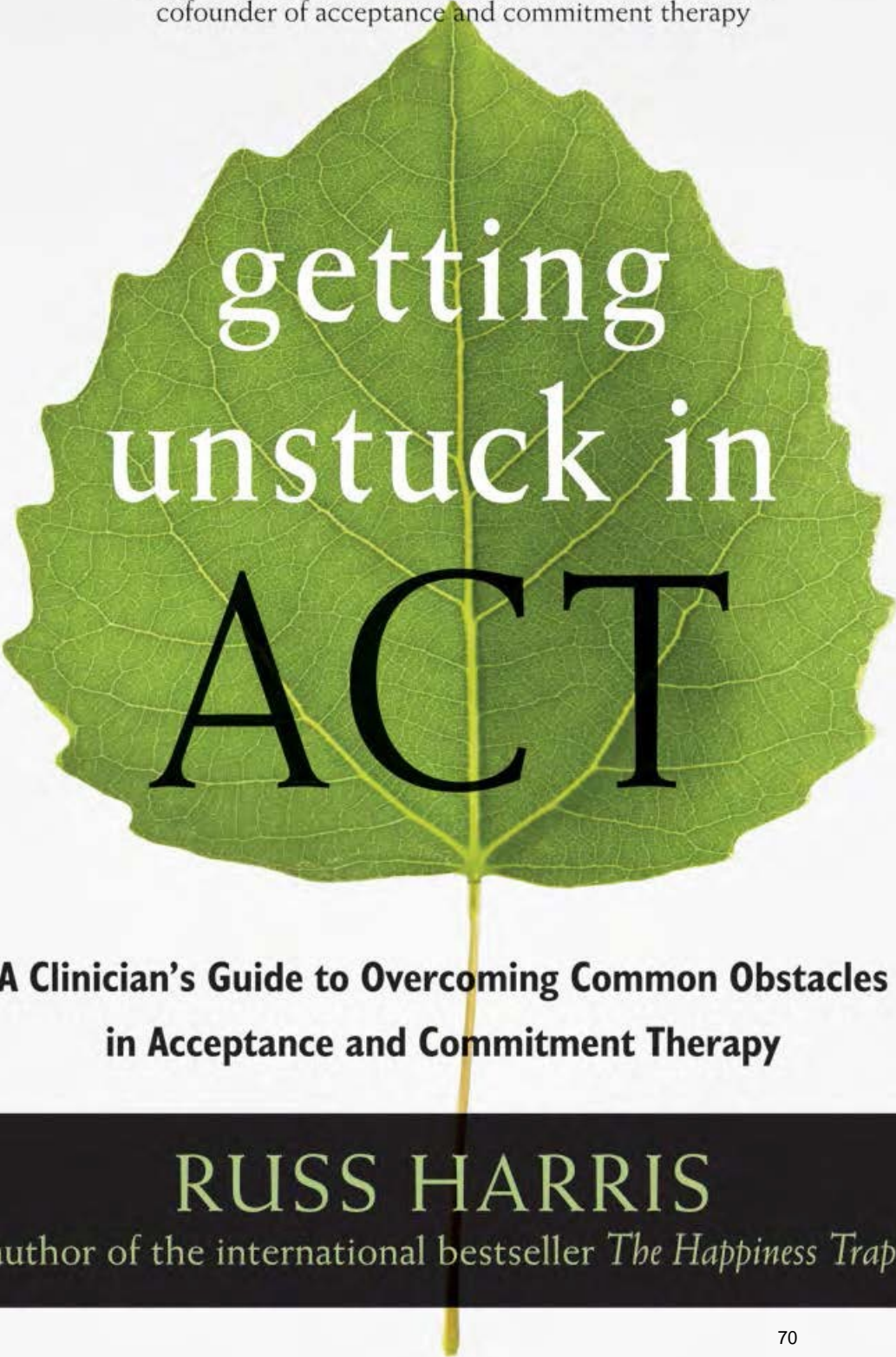
I commit to (*write your values-guided SMART goal here*):

Now say your commitment out loud – ideally to someone else, but if not, to yourself.

Other Helpful Tips For Goal Setting

- Make a step-by-step plan: break your goal down into concrete, measurable and time-based sub-goals.
- Tell other people about your goal and your ongoing progress: making a public declaration increases commitment.
- Reward yourself for making progress in your goal: small rewards help push you on to major success. (A reward might be as simple as saying to yourself, 'Well done! You made a start!')
- Record your progress: keep a journal, graph or drawing that plots your progress.

“I learned a lot reading [the book] and if you do ACT work, you will too. Highly recommended.” —STEVEN C. HAYES, PhD,
cofounder of acceptance and commitment therapy



getting
unstuck in
ACT

**A Clinician's Guide to Overcoming Common Obstacles
in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**

RUSS HARRIS

author of the international bestseller *The Happiness Trap*

The Brief Case Conceptualization Worksheet: Notes

I recently updated and improved The Brief Case Conceptualization Worksheet from chapter 2 of 'Getting Unstuck In ACT'. (Alas, it was too late to include those changes in the book.) So you'll find this worksheet is not as brief as the one in the book. However, I hope and expect you'll find it's far more useful. (And if you've been using my case conceptualization worksheet from ACT Made Simple, then make sure you switch over to this new one, pronto.)

In addition to what is described in the book, you'll find the following:

Under FUSION, I have spaced out the seven main categories, to help you identify them more clearly. Commonly, most if not all of these categories are interconnected and overlapping, so you may want to draw arrows between them, to show the connections.

Under UNWORKABLE ACTION, you'll find the sub-category of avoiding important people, places, situations, and activities. The more experientially avoidant your client, the more likely he is to be escaping, avoiding, withdrawing, quitting, or procrastinating in many important areas of life.

In the VALUES & COMMITTED ACTION section, I have asked you to identify important skills the client may be lacking, or not using effectively; and in particular to identify deficits in the capacity for 'task-focused attention'.

And in the MY BARRIERS section, you are asked to identify the difficult thoughts and feelings that show up for you, as you work with this client – so you can respond to them with defusion and acceptance.

The worksheet follows on the next two pages.

What does the client describe as the main problem(s)?

What does the client want from therapy/coaching?

Emotional Control Goals: How would the client like to feel differently? What thoughts, images, feelings, emotions, sensations, memories, urges, cravings, would he/she like to have more of or less of? (**NB: In therapy we aim to undermine these emotional control goals, and help clients defuse/accept their unwanted thoughts and feelings **)

Behavioural Goals: What would the client like to stop/start doing; to do more of or less of? How would he like to treat himself, others, life, the world, differently? What goals would she like to pursue? What activities would she like to start or resume? What people, places, events, activities, challenges, would he like to start approaching rather than avoiding? What personal relationships does she want to improve, in what ways?

EXTERNAL BARRIERS. Are there any external barriers (as opposed to psychological barriers) to a rich and full life - e.g. legal, social, medical, financial, occupational problems that require problem solving and/or skills training?

UNWORKABLE ACTION

What is the client doing that makes life worse, or keeps her stuck, worsens problems, inhibits growth, prevents healthy solutions, impairs health, damages relationships etc? (What would we see and/or hear on a video?)

What IMPORTANT people, places, events, activities, situations, goals, problems and challenges is the client avoiding or escaping (e.g. withdrawing from, quitting, procrastinating, giving up on, or staying away from)?

FUSION: (Include examples of specific thoughts, as well as of processes such as 'worrying', etc.)

PAST & FUTURE: (rumination, worrying, fantasizing, blaming, predicting the worst, reliving old hurts, idealizing the past or the future, flashbacks, 'if only ...', why did it happen?, catastrophizing, resentment, regrets etc.)

SELF-DESCRIPTION: (self-judgments, self-limiting ideas about 'who I am' or 'what I can and can't do', self-labels)

REASONS: (reasons the client gives for why she can't, won't or shouldn't change, or why his life can't be improved)

RULES: (about how myself, others, life should be: look for key words such as: 'should', 'have to', 'must', 'ought', 'right', 'wrong', 'always', 'never', 'can't because', 'won't until', 'shouldn't unless' etc.)

JUDGMENTS: (mostly these will be negative, but sometimes positive; may be about anyone or anything: other people, oneself, one's job, one's body, one's thoughts and feelings, the past, the future, or even life itself)

OTHER: (any other unhelpful cognitions: beliefs, ideas, attitudes, assumptions, schemas, narratives, etc.)

EXPERIENTIAL AVOIDANCE: (Private experiences the client is trying to avoid, get rid of, or is unwilling to have)
THOUGHTS, IMAGES, MEMORIES, EMOTIONS, FEELINGS, SENSATIONS, URGES, CRAVINGS, WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS:

LOSS OF CONTACTING THE PRESENT MOMENT:

The 4 Ds: Distractibility, Disengagement, Disconnection, Dissociation?
Deficits in ability to narrow focus, broaden focus, sustain focus, or shift focus?

VALUES & COMMITTED ACTION

IMPORTANT LIFE DOMAINS: (What domains of life seem most important to this client - e.g. work, study, health, parenting, intimate relationship, friends, family, spirituality, community, environment)?

VALUES: (What values seem important within those domains?)

GOALS & ACTIONS: (What values-congruent goals and activities does he: a) already have; and b) want to pursue?)

NEED FOR SKILLS-TRAINING: (What important skills does the client lack or fail to use e.g. problem solving, goal setting, self-soothing, assertiveness, communication, conflict resolution, relaxation, empathy?)

RESOURCES: (What strengths, skills and other personal resources does the client already have, that could be utilized? What external resources could be accessed?)

MY PERSONAL BARRIERS: (What difficult thoughts and feelings show up for me, regarding this client?)

BRAINSTORM: What questions, exercises, worksheets, metaphors, tools, techniques and strategies can I use in the next session? What skills-training may be required? Is values-based problem-solving required for external barriers?

Spot The Function

In chapter 4 of 'Getting Unstuck In ACT', I asked you to do an exercise in functional analysis: to see if you could come up with 'triggers' (antecedents) and 'payoffs' (reinforcing consequences) for three different types of behavior. Keep in mind, the triggers and payoffs will vary enormously from person to person; one person's triggers for alcohol or gambling or suicidal behavior may be totally different from another person's. So the examples I've given below may be extremely different to the ones you came up with.

| Triggers (antecedents) Situations, thoughts, and feelings that immediately precede the behavior | Behavior Something an organism does | Payoffs (reinforcing consequences) Immediate outcomes of the behavior that keep it going |
|--|---|---|
| At home, alone Feelings of loneliness, boredom, sadness 'I can't stand feeling this way' Urge to use drugs | An addictive behavior - e.g., drug use | Painful thoughts, feelings, urges disappear Feel good |
| Lunchtime at work Feelings of anxiety 'I've got nothing to say', 'I'm boring', 'They won't like me' Urge to go off alone | Social withdrawal – goes off to lunch alone | Anxiety disappears Get to avoid any possibility of rejection Get to avoid awkward social situation Feeling of relief |
| Intimate relationship has just ended Feelings of sadness, loss, hurt, anger, anxiety 'I'll never get over this', 'I can't live without her', 'Life is pointless' Urge to commit suicide | Suicidal behavior e.g., threatens to kill himself | Gains attention Gains help and support Gains some relief from his pain |

A Bit More about ‘Payoffs’

In chapter 4 of ‘Getting Unstuck In ACT’ I mentioned that the 4 major ‘payoffs’ (reinforcing consequences) for most types of unworkable behavior, are:

1. We get to feel good.
2. We get to avoid or get rid of uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.
3. We get to escape from an unpleasant situation.
4. We get attention.

However, in addition to these, it’s worth considering another 3 common payoffs:

5. We get our needs met
6. We feel like we are ‘problem solving’
7. We feel like we are ‘making sense’ of things

We get our needs met

Suppose I shout at the kids when they are fighting, squabbling, and not listening to me. And suppose they then listen up and obey me. This outcome may well be reinforcing: it meets my needs for obedience, cooperation, peace and quiet.

For another example, suppose my need is to motivate myself: to get myself to do something difficult that I have been avoiding. Sometimes beating myself up – i.e. being highly self-critical - can provide that motivation. This outcome could then reinforce self-criticism.

We feel like we are ‘problem solving’

Cognitive processes such as rumination, worrying, dwelling on problems, self-analysis (‘Why am I like this?’ ‘Why do I keep doing this?’), plotting revenge, planning suicide, fantasizing about leaving a relationship etc., all share something in common: they are all forms of ‘problem solving’. Therefore, they often convey the sense that ‘I am working hard to solve my problems’, which can, not surprisingly, be highly reinforcing.

We feel like we are ‘making sense’ of things

Cognitive processes such as harsh self-criticism, self-judgment, and self-blame can have a reinforcing consequence of helping us make sense of life. For example, if I judge myself as a ‘worthless loser’ that can help me make sense of why I get rejected, or why I fail, or why I am unemployed etc.

Intermittent Reinforcement

Note that a behavior doesn’t have to have reinforcing consequences every single time it happens, in order for that behavior to persist. Sometimes, the reinforcing consequences only happen intermittently. So for example, ‘beating myself up’ may only sometimes motivate me to take action on important issues; at other times, it may make me feel hopeless, and give up. However, those times where it does intermittently motivate me may be reinforcing enough to keep the behavior going over time, even if most of the time it just demotivates me.

Triggers, Behavior, Payoffs Worksheet

On the next page, you’ll find a simple triggers, behavior, payoffs worksheet which lists all seven of the most common ‘payoffs’ for unworkable behavior. You can use it as suggested in chapter 4.

| Triggers <i>(situation, thoughts, and feelings that immediately precede the behavior)</i> | Behavior <i>(what you do)</i> | Payoffs <i>(immediate outcomes of the behavior that keep it going)</i> 7 common payoffs to consider: <i>avoid/escape an unpleasant situation/event</i> <i>avoid/escape unpleasant thoughts/feelings</i> <i>feel good</i> <i>gain attention</i> <i>get my needs met</i> <i>feel like I am 'problem solving'</i> <i>feel like I am 'making sense' of things</i> |
|---|---|--|
| | | |

EXERCISE: Clarify Your Values

Below are some common values. (They are not ‘the right ones’; merely common ones.) Please read through the list and write a letter next to each value, based on how important it is to you: V = very important, Q = quite important, and N = not important.

1. Acceptance/self-acceptance: to be accepting of myself, others, life, etc.
2. Adventure: to be adventurous; to actively explore novel or stimulating experiences
3. Assertiveness: to respectfully stand up for my rights and request what I want
4. Authenticity: to be authentic, genuine, and real; to be true to myself
5. Caring/self-care: to be caring toward myself, others, the environment, etc.
6. Compassion/self-compassion: to act kindly toward myself and others in pain
7. Connection: to engage fully in whatever I'm doing and be fully present with others
8. Contribution and generosity: to contribute, give, help, assist, or share
9. Cooperation: to be cooperative and collaborative with others
10. Courage: to be courageous or brave; to persist in the face of fear, threat, or difficulty
11. Creativity: to be creative or innovative
12. Curiosity: to be curious, open-minded, and interested; to explore and discover
13. Encouragement: to encourage and reward behavior that I value in myself or others
14. Excitement: to seek, create, and engage in activities that are exciting or stimulating
15. Fairness and justice: to be fair and just to myself or others
16. Fitness: to maintain or improve or look after my physical and mental health
17. Flexibility: to adjust and adapt readily to changing circumstances
18. Freedom and independence: to choose how I live and help others do likewise
19. Friendliness: to be friendly, companionable, or agreeable toward others
20. Forgiveness/self-forgiveness: to be forgiving toward myself or others
21. Fun and humor: to be fun loving; to seek, create, and engage in fun-filled activities
22. Gratitude: to be grateful for and appreciative of myself, others, and life
23. Honesty: to be honest, truthful, and sincere with myself and others
24. Industry: to be industrious, hardworking, and dedicated
25. Intimacy: to open up, reveal, and share myself, emotionally or physically
26. Kindness: to be kind, considerate, nurturing, or caring toward myself or others
27. Love: to act lovingly or affectionately toward myself or others
28. Mindfulness: to be open to, engaged in and curious about the present moment
29. Order: to be orderly and organized
30. Persistence and commitment: to continue resolutely, despite problems or difficulties.
31. Respect/self-respect: to treat myself and others with care and consideration
32. Responsibility: to be responsible and accountable for my actions
33. Safety and protection: to secure, protect, or ensure my own safety or that of others
34. Sensuality and pleasure: to create or enjoy pleasurable and sensual experiences
35. Sexuality: to explore or express my sexuality
36. Skillfulness: to continually practice and improve my skills and apply myself fully
37. Supportiveness: to be supportive, helpful and available to myself or others
38. Trust: to be trustworthy; to be loyal, faithful, sincere, and reliable
39. Other: _____
40. Other: _____

YOUR VALUES: *What really matters to you, deep in your heart? What do you want to do with your time on this planet? What sort of person do you want to be? What personal strengths or qualities do you want to develop?*

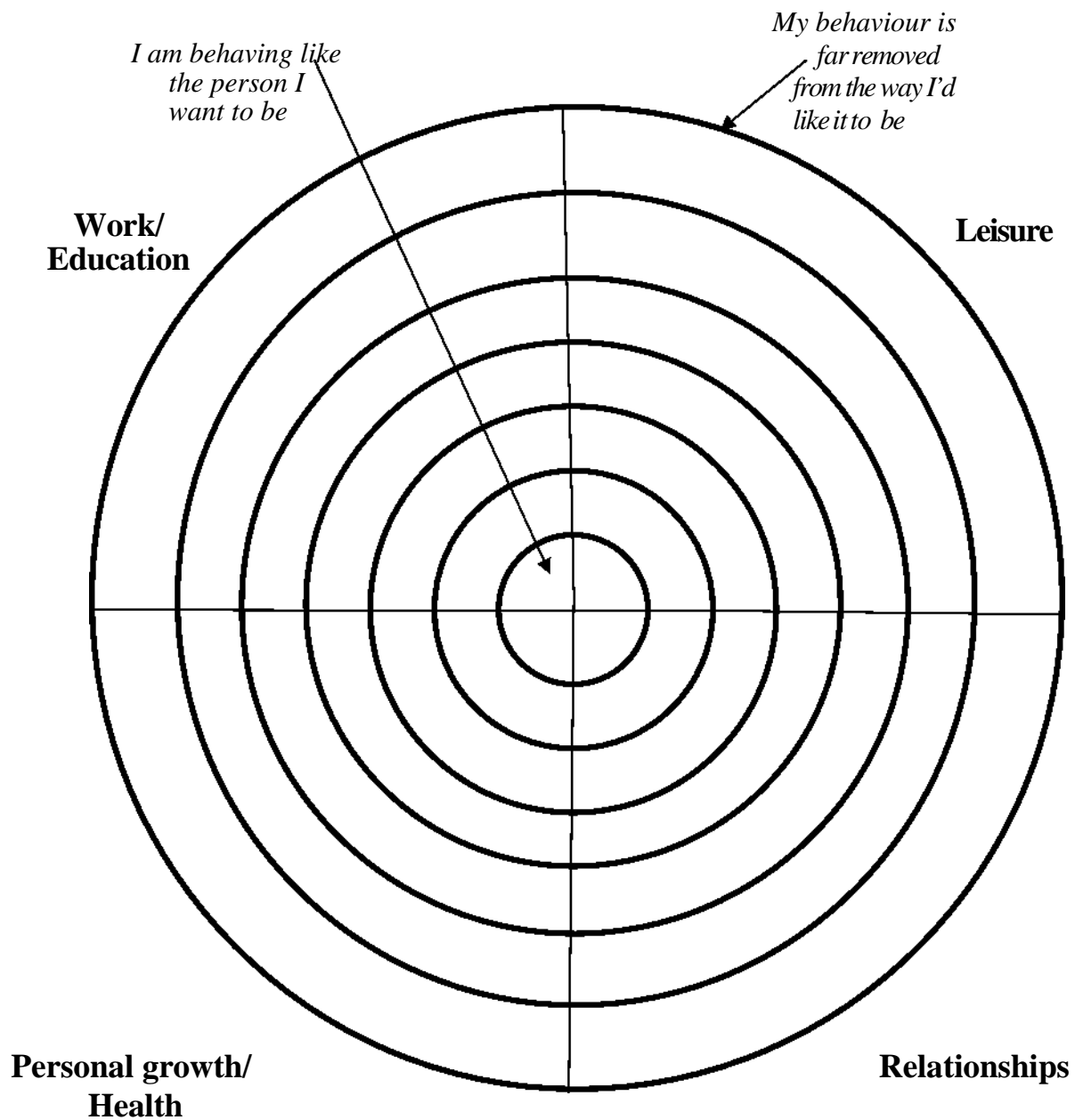
1. Work/Education: includes workplace, career, education, skills development, etc.

2. Relationships: includes your partner, children, parents, relatives, friends, co-workers, and other social contacts.

3. Personal Growth/Health: may include religion, spirituality, creativity, life skills, meditation, yoga, nature; exercise, nutrition, and/or addressing health risk factors like smoking, alcohol, drugs or overeating etc

4. Leisure: how you play, relax, stimulate, or enjoy yourself; activities for rest, recreation, fun and creativity.

THE BULL'S EYE: make an X in each area of the dart board, to represent where you stand today.



How To Cope With A Difficult Dilemma – by Russ Harris

At times we will all get caught up in difficult dilemmas: ‘Do I stay in this job/relationship/house/neighbourhood /marriage/country/career – or not?’, ‘Do I have this operation/ sign this contract/ have children – or not?’, ‘Do I do what *they* want me to do, or do I do what *I* want to do?’ This tip sheet is to help you cope with such stressful situations.

Step 1: Acknowledge There Is Probably No Quick Fix

If you’ve been grappling with a major dilemma it’s highly unlikely that you’ll reach a final decision today. It could possibly happen, but it’s not likely. For example, many people consider leaving their marriages or their careers for several years before they finally do it.

Step 2: Analyze the Costs and Benefits

Sometimes we can resolve a dilemma with a classic cost-benefit analysis: write a list of all the costs and benefits for each option. If you’ve already done this and it hasn’t helped, fair enough—at least you’ve tried. But if you haven’t yet done this, or you’ve done it only halfheartedly, or you’ve done it in your head but not on paper, then definitely give it a try. Mindfully write down all of the costs and benefits of each option, on paper or on a computer. Note: this is a very different experience than thinking it through mentally or talking it through with a friend – and sometimes it is enough to help finalize the decision. However, the inconvenient truth is that the greater the dilemma, the less likely this method is to be helpful. Why? Because if one option was obviously better than the other, there wouldn’t be a dilemma in the first place!

Step 3: Recognize That There Is No Perfect Solution

There’s no perfect solution to this dilemma. If there were, you wouldn’t have a dilemma in the first place. So whichever choice you make, you’re likely to feel anxious about it and your mind’s going to say, *That’s the wrong decision* and point out all the reasons why you shouldn’t do it. If you’re waiting until the day there are no feelings of anxiety and no thoughts about making the wrong decision, you’ll be waiting forever. Anxiety and self-doubt are guaranteed, whichever option you choose.

Step 4: There’s No Way Not to Choose

Whatever your dilemma, you’re *already* making a choice. There’s actually no way *not* to choose. Each day that you don’t quit your job, you’re choosing to stay. Until the day you hand in your resignation, you’re staying there. Until the day you start that course, you’re choosing not to take it. Until the day you stop using contraceptives, you’re choosing not to have children. Each day that you don’t leave your partner, you’re choosing to stay. Until the day you pack your bags and move out of the house, you’re staying. Each day that you don’t sign the consent form for the operation, you’re choosing not to have surgery. And in the career-versus-family dilemma, you’re already choosing how many hours you spend at work and how many with your family.

Step 5: Acknowledge Today’s Choice

Given you’re already making a choice, start off your day by consciously acknowledging it. For example, when you wake up in the morning, you could say to yourself, “Okay, for the next twenty-four hours, I choose to stay in this relationship.” Or “For the next twenty-four hours, I choose to keep using contraceptives.” Or “For the next seven days, I choose to remain in my job.” Or “For the next week, I choose to spend X hours at work and Y hours with my family.”

Step 6: Take a Stand

Take a stand based on your values. You’re already making a choice, so you can enhance your sense of vitality and well-being by acting on that choice, guided by your values. Ask yourself: ‘What do I want to stand for in the next twenty-four hours?’ ‘What values do I want to live by in this area of life?’

If you’re staying in your relationship for one more day, ask yourself, ‘What sort of partner do I want to be for this one day?’ If you’re staying in your job for another day, what sort of employee do you want to be for that one day?

If you choose for one more day not to have the operation, then how do you want to spend those twenty-four hours?

In the family-versus-career dilemma, you might ask yourself, ‘During the hours I spend with my family, what sort of parent do I want to be? And during the hours I spend at work, what sort of worker do I want to be?’

How To Cope With A Difficult Dilemma – by Russ Harris

Step 7: Make Time to Reflect

Put aside time on a regular basis to mindfully reflect on the situation. The best way to do this is as in step 2: use a diary or a computer to write down the costs and benefits of each option and see if anything has changed since last time you did this. You could also try to imagine what life might be like—both the positives and the negatives—of going down each potential path. For example, in the family-versus-career dilemma, one path might be spending thirty hours with the family and fifty hours at work per week, and another path might be spending forty hours with the family and forty hours at work per week.

For most people, a reflection time of ten to fifteen minutes three or four times a week suffices, but you can do as little or as much as you like. The key thing is that the time be spent in *mindful* reflection. Don't try to do it while also watching TV, doing housework, driving, going to the gym, cooking dinner, and so on. The aim is to just sit quietly with your pen and paper, or a computer, and do nothing but write down and reflect on the pros and cons of each choice for as long as you think is useful. Most people find ten to fifteen minutes three or four times a week is more than enough.

Step 8: Name the Story

Throughout the day, unhook yourself from unhelpful thoughts that can easily pull you into worrying, ruminating, or 'analysis paralysis.' An effective way to do this is by 'naming the story'. *Therapist:* Throughout the day, your mind will try to hook you back into the dilemma, to get you going over it again and again. That's only natural. But if that were truly helpful, you'd have resolved this by now. (After all, how many hours have you already spent thinking about this?!) So whenever your mind tries to hook you, try saying to yourself, "Aha! Here it is again. The 'stay or leave' story. Thanks, Mind." Then push your feet into the floor, get present, and focus your attention on doing something meaningful. You might also find it helpful to remind yourself, "I'll think about this later, mindfully, in my reflection time."

(Note: when naming the story, come up with your own individualised name for it: e.g. the 'different job' story or the 'work versus family' story or the 'have a child' story – or simply the 'dilemma' story.)

Step 9: Practice Expansion

Feelings of anxiety will almost certainly arise—again and again and again—no matter which option you choose. So practice "expansion" when they do so. Breathe into those feelings; open up and make room for them; acknowledge to yourself, "Here's anxiety"; and remind yourself, "This feeling is normal. It's what everybody feels in a challenging situation with an uncertain outcome."

Step 10: Have Self-Compassion

Last but not least, we develop self-compassion. Talk to yourself gently and kindly, and unhook yourself from unhelpful, self-judgmental mind chatter using whatever defusion techniques work best for you. Remind yourself that you're a fallible human being, not some high-tech computer that can coldly analyze the probabilities and spit out the "perfect" answer. And remind yourself, this is a very difficult decision; if it were easy, you wouldn't have a dilemma in the first place.

Three Possible Outcomes for Your Dilemma

There are 3 possible outcomes:

1. In some cases, over time, one option will start to look obviously better than the other; this will then make your decision easier.
2. In some cases, over time, one option will no longer be available. This means, the decision is made for you.
3. In some cases, over time, the dilemma will continue, without any resolution. In these cases keep cycling through the steps above. Practice lots of self-compassion, and mindfully live by your values in the face of this ongoing stress.

TEN TIPS FOR MOTIVATING YOURSELF TO PRACTISE NEW SKILLS OR PURSUE IMPORTANT GOALS – by Russ Harris

1. Link the Goal To Values

Values can provide a deep motivation that helps to sustain the practice of new skills, or the pursuit of challenging goals, even when it's boring, tedious or anxiety-provoking (as it so often is). Ask yourself: is this really important to you? What is it that matters enough, that you'd even *think about* doing something like this? What values would underlie this course of action? How would doing this make a positive difference in your life? If we can link our new behavior to something personally meaningful, we're far more likely to do it!

2. Set Goals Effectively

A wealth of research shows that if we set goals effectively, we significantly increase the chances of following through on them. A simple acronym for goal-setting is: S.M.A.R.T.

S = Specific

What specific actions will you take?

If a goal is vague and non-specific (e.g. I'm going to really be there for my kids this week) it's going to be hard to know if you have achieved it or not. So change it to a specific goal (e.g. I'm going to get home at 4pm on Friday and take the kids to the park to play basketball.)

M = Meaningful

What values will you be living by, when you do this?

If the goal is not meaningful – i.e. aligned with values – why bother? Either set a new one that is meaningful, or explicitly link the current goal to values, so it becomes meaningful (e.g. remind yourself “Doing this would be living my values of being loving and caring.”)

A = Adaptive

How will this action be adaptive for your life (i.e. make your life better)? What are the likely benefits?

If the goal seems likely to have more costs than benefits – then change it. For example, if the value is justice, and the goal is to “Punch anyone who treats me unfairly”, then clearly this is going to be maladaptive (i.e. make your life worse).

Be clear about the benefits, and remind yourself what they are e.g. “Practicing this mindfulness skill will help me to handle anxiety-provoking situations more effectively.”

R = Realistic

Is the goal realistic for the resources currently available - which may include time, energy, money, physical health, social support, and so on?

If not, modify the goal so that it *is* realistic for the available resources; or else put it to one side and make a new goal. (Of course the new goal might be to get the necessary resources for the original goal.)

T = Time-framed

What day, date, and time will this occur, and for how long will you do it?

A time-frame contributes to the specificity of the goal.

3. Take Small Steps

The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. So if the goal seems too big, make it smaller. If ten minutes of mindfulness practice is too much, cut it back to five. If doing it daily is unrealistic, perhaps do it every second or third day, or weekly.

Ask yourself: “On a scale of zero to ten, where ten is ‘I’ll definitely do this no matter what’ and zero is ‘There is absolutely no chance I’ll ever do this’ – then how likely are you to actually do this?” If you score less than seven, best to change the goal to something smaller and easier.

4. Carrot Versus Stick

Many people try to motivate themselves through being harsh, judgmental, self-critical, or punitive. But if beating yourself up were a good way to change behavior, wouldn't you be perfect by now?

Learn to “drop the stick”: unhook yourself from excessive expectations and harsh self-judgments, and instead practice self-acceptance and self-compassion. Then “create a carrot” by linking your action to values, and reflecting on the likely positive outcomes. For example, ask yourself, “If I do this, what will I be standing for?” or “If I do this, what will the benefits be, in the long term?”

TEN TIPS FOR MOTIVATING YOURSELF TO PRACTISE NEW SKILLS OR PURSUE IMPORTANT GOALS – by Russ Harris

4. Carrot Versus Stick- continued

Acknowledge every little step “in the right direction”. Pay attention to what you are doing, and notice what difference it makes in your life. Find ways to reward yourself for following through. These rewards may be as simple as saying to yourself “Well done. You did it!”, or keeping a record in a journal, or reporting your progress to others who are supportive.

5. Anticipate Obstacles

When you commit to a goal, it’s helpful to ask yourself, “What might get in the way of that?” As the saying goes, “forewarned is forearmed”. So once we have identified obstacles to action, we can then plan how to get around them. And if there is no possible way around an obstacle? Then clearly we’ll need to set a different goal, and make room for our inevitable disappointment or frustration.

Some of the most common obstacles to the intended course of action are activities that compete with it for time and energy. In such cases, we can ask ourselves, “What am I willing to give up, or do less of, or say ‘no’ to, in order to free up time and energy for doing this?”

6. Confront the Costs

Although the ‘carrot’ is far more useful than the ‘stick’, at times it is important for us to realistically and deeply connect with the costs of *not* following through. We may compassionately and gently ask ourselves, “If I keep on doing what I’m doing: What is it costing me, in terms of health/wellbeing/relationships? What am I missing out on? What will my life be like: one year from now? Two years from now? Ten years from now?”

7. Cultivate Willingness

The practice of new skills is often boring or tedious; and the pursuit of goals that pull us out of the “comfort zone”, almost always generates significant anxiety. So if we are unwilling to make room for discomfort, then obviously we will not take action. So we can ask ourselves: “Am I willing to feel some discomfort, in order to do what matters?” or “Am I willing to make room for sweaty hands, and a knot in my stomach, and a tightness in my chest, and a voice in my head that tells me scary things, if that’s what I need to make room for in order to do the things that really matter?” This of course, overlaps with our first strategy: linking the goal to values.

If you are unwilling to make room for the inevitable discomfort, you may need to a) work on acceptance skills; b) enhancing the link to your values; or c) setting an easier goal that elicits less discomfort.

8. Defuse From Reason-giving

The mind is a reason-giving machine, and as soon as we even *think* about doing something that pulls us out of our comfort zone, it cranks out all the reasons why we can’t do it, shouldn’t do it, or shouldn’t even have to do it: *I’m too tired, I’m too busy, it’s not important, it’s too hard, I’m not good enough, I can’t do it, I’ll fail, I’m too anxious*, and so on. And if we wait until the day our mind stops reason-giving, *before* we do the things that really matter in life ... we’ll never get started. So if fusion with reason-giving is a major barrier to action, then naturally we target it with defusion: e.g. “Aha! Here it is again. The ‘I can’t do it story’. Thanks, mind!”

9. Enlist Support

Social support is often hugely motivating. Can you find a partner, friend, relative, co-worker, or neighbor, with whom you can share his aspirations and achievements? Someone who will encourage and support you? Acknowledge your successes and cheer you on? Is there a group or a course you could join that might serve this purpose? Can you find an “exercise buddy” to go running with, or a “study buddy” to help you with homework?

10. Use Reminders

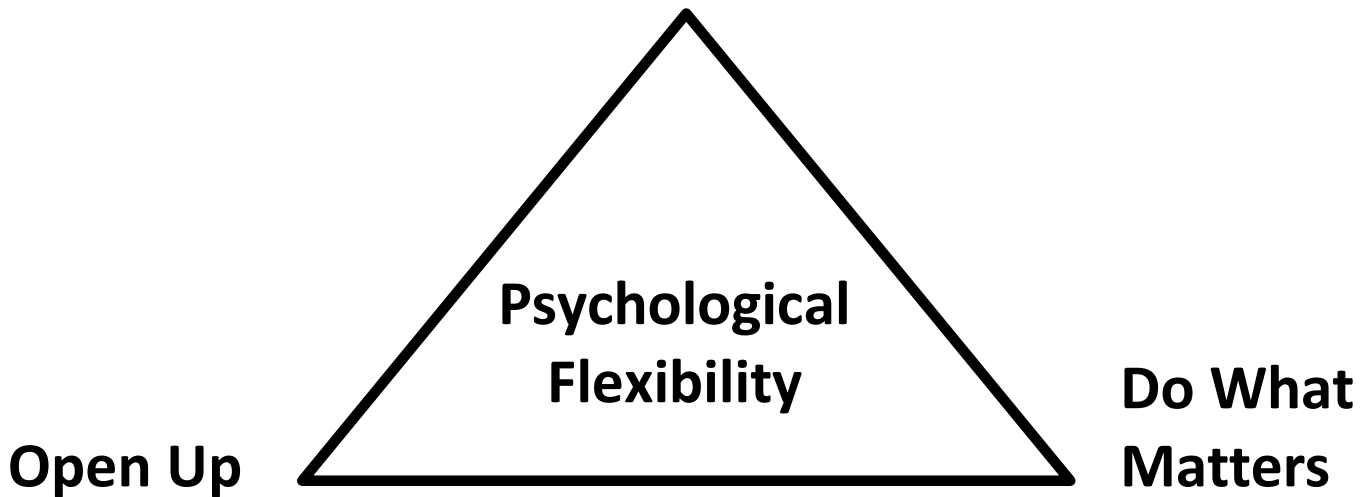
It’s very easy for us to forget what our goals are. So how can we create “reminders”? Can we put messages or alerts in the computer, mobile phone, calendar, or journal? Can we ask people in our support network to remind us? Can we stick up notes on the mirror or the fridge or the car dashboard? Can we put a sticker on our watch strap, or an elastic band around our wrist, or a gadget on our key ring, so that whenever we see these things they remind us of our goals?

Can we use a recurring event to cue our new behavior: for example, we might do a breathing exercise for ten minutes immediately after dinner, or as soon as our alarm clock goes off in the morning? Can we schedule the activity into a calendar or diary or onto our daily “To Do” list – and highlight it in some way, to emphasize its importance? (This of course also gives the goal a time-frame, and helps avoid competing activities.)

The 'Triflex' Psychological Flexibility Assessment Tool

Throughout 'Getting Unstuck In ACT', I refer to the 'triflex' rather than the 'hexaflex'. The worksheet on the following page is designed to take advantage of the simpler triflex conceptualisation. You can see it asks you to assess the client on a scale of 0 to 10 for each of the three corners of the triflex: Being present (contacting the present moment & self-as-context), Opening up (defusion & acceptance), and Doing what matters (values and committed action). The main idea is for ACT coaches and therapists to use it as an assessment tool: a) to track the client's progress from session to session, and b) to help choose what to work on with the client in the next session. Of course, the therapist can also share the assessment with the client, if desired.

Be Present



Opening Up

Able to separate, unhook, detach from thoughts and feelings?

Able to open up & make room for thoughts and feelings, and allow them to freely flow?

Being Present

Able to engage fully in here-and-now experience? Ability for task-focused attention?

Aware of own thoughts and feelings? Able to empathise? Able to take perspective on self and self-story?

Doing What Matters

Able to be clear about & connected with values?

Able to take and sustain values-guided action?

Able to set goals? Sufficient skills to achieve goals?

Today's Scores, 0-10: 0 = low strength and 10 = high strength

Opening up:

Being present:

Doing what matters:

BRAINSTORM: What core areas could you target in the next session? What might you do in the next session: consider questions you might ask, tools, techniques, strategies, metaphors, worksheets, experiential exercises, goal-setting, skills practice?

ACT QUESTIONS & ANSWERS



A Practitioner's Guide to
150 Common
Sticking Points
in Acceptance &
Commitment Therapy

RUSS HARRIS

Dropping Anchor: A Script

In the ideal scenario, before starting this exercise, you've asked the client what she's experiencing and she's been able to tell you what thoughts, feelings, emotions, and memories are showing up; this means you can refer to them specifically. You might say, for example, "There's a very painful memory showing up right now, and a lot of sadness and a lot of anger." But if the client is too distressed to speak, or unable or unwilling to say what thoughts and feelings are present, then you can refer to them with nonspecific terms such as pain, or painful thoughts and feelings, or emotional storm, as in the script that follows.

Take your time with this exercise. You should allow a good ten seconds between instructions. And give your voice a kind and calming quality. The therapist should model all the actions for the client, to help reduce the client's self-consciousness.

- There's a lot of emotional pain showing up for you right now. I can see how much you're struggling with it, how difficult it is for you. And I really want to help you handle it. So please would you follow my instructions? Okay. First, just see if you can push your feet hard into the floor. Push them down. That's it. Feel the ground beneath you.
- Now sit forward in your chair, and straighten your back. Feel the chair beneath you; notice your back supporting you.
- Now slowly press your fingertips together, and as you do that, gently move your elbows and your shoulders.
- Feel your arms moving, all the way from your fingers to shoulder blades.
- Take a moment to acknowledge there's a lot of pain here that you're struggling with... You didn't ask for it... but here it is...and it's challenging and it's difficult and you want it to go away, and yet it's not going... Silently acknowledge to yourself what type of pain it is... For example, say to yourself, *Here's sadness* or *Here's anxiety* or *Here's a painful memory*. (If the therapist knows what the pain is, he can specifically mention it.)
- Now notice that as well as this pain, there's also a body around that pain—a body that you can move and control. Straighten your back again, and notice your whole body now—your hands, feet, arms, legs. Gently move them, and feel them moving... Have a good stretch... Notice your muscles stretching... Press your feet down and feel the floor.
- Now also look around the room—up, down, and side to side—and notice five things that you can see.
- And also notice three or four things you can hear—sounds coming from me or you or the room around you.
- And also notice you and me, working here together, as a team.
- So notice, there's something very painful here that you're struggling with, and at the same time see if you can also notice your body in the chair...and gently move that body, have a stretch...that's it, take control of your arms and legs.
- And also notice the room around you.
- And also notice you and me here, working together as a team.

The therapist continues to cycle through the exercise—acknowledging the pain, expanding awareness, establishing control over body movement—until the client is grounded and able to engage in the session. At this point, the therapist brings the exercise to an end by asking these types of debriefing questions:

- Do you notice any difference now? Are you less caught up in the emotional storm? Are you less hooked by these difficult thoughts and feelings? Are you less “swept away” by the storm? Are you less “pushed around” or “jerked around” by these feelings?
- Is it easier for you to engage with me, to be present, to focus?
- Do you have more control over your actions now—over your arms and legs and mouth? Check it out, move your arms and legs, have a stretch; do you notice you have control?

Note: in all these questions, the therapist *never* asks if the storm or the emotional pain has reduced or gone away—because this is not the purpose of the exercise. To ask such questions would send the wrong message: that the aim is to reduce or distract from emotional pain. Of course, this does often happen, but in ACT that’s a bonus, not the main aim; and there’s plenty of times that it won’t happen.

APPENDIX 1

ACT Case Formulation Worksheet

What does the client describe as the main problem(s)?

What does the client want from therapy/coaching?

Emotional Goals: What thoughts, images, feelings, emotions, sensations, memories, urges would he like to have less of?
(*Note: We convert these to behavioral goals with the reframe: "So we'll be learning new skills to handle these difficult thoughts and feelings more effectively, so they have less impact and influence over you."*)

Behavioral Goals: What would the client like to stop/start; do more/less of? How would she like to treat himself, others, the world differently? What goals would she like to pursue? What activities/skills would she like to start, resume, develop? What people, places, events, activities, challenges would she like to approach rather than avoid? What relationships does she want to improve, and how? What life problems does he want to solve?

EXTERNAL BARRIERS: Are there any external barriers (as opposed to psychological barriers) to a rich and full life (e.g., legal, social, medical, financial, occupational problems) that require problem solving and/or skills training?

UNWORKABLE ACTION: What is the client doing that makes life worse, keeps her stuck, worsens problems, inhibits growth, prevents healthy solutions, impairs health, damages relationships, etc.? (What would we see and/or hear on a video?)

What **IMPORTANT** or **MEANINGFUL** people, places, events, activities, situations, goals, problems, and challenges is the client avoiding or escaping (e.g., withdrawing from, quitting, procrastinating, giving up on, or staying away from)?

FUSION: (Include examples of specific thoughts, as well as of processes such as "worrying")

PAST & FUTURE: (rumination, worrying, fantasizing, blaming, predicting the worst, reliving old hurts, idealizing the past or the future, flashbacks, "if only..." "why did it happen?," catastrophizing, resentment, regrets, etc.)

SELF-DESCRIPTION: (self-judgments, self-limiting ideas about "who I am" or "what I can and can't do," self-labels)

REASONS: (reasons the client gives for why she can't, won't, or shouldn't change, or why her life can't be improved)

RULES: (about how I, others, and life should be: look for key words such as *should, have to, must, ought, right, wrong, always, never, can't because, won't until, shouldn't unless*, etc.)

JUDGMENTS: (mostly these will be negative, but sometimes positive; may be about anyone or anything: other people, oneself, one's job, one's body, one's thoughts and feelings, the past, the future, or even life itself)

OTHER:

EXPERIENTIAL AVOIDANCE: (Private experiences the client is trying to avoid or get rid of, or is unwilling to have) THOUGHTS, IMAGES, MEMORIES, EMOTIONS, FEELINGS, SENSATIONS, URGES, CRAVINGS, WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS:

LOSS OF CONTACTING THE PRESENT MOMENT:

The 4 Ds: Distractibility, Disengagement, Disconnection, Dissociation?
Deficits in ability to narrow focus, broaden focus, sustain focus, or shift focus?

VALUES & COMMITTED ACTION:

IMPORTANT LIFE DOMAINS: What life domains and what people does the client care about (e.g., work, study, health, parenting, marriage or other intimate relationship, friends, family, spirituality, community, environment)?

VALUES: What values seem important within those domains?

GOALS & ACTIONS: What values-congruent goals and activities does he (a) already have, and (b) want to pursue?

NEED FOR SKILLS TRAINING: What important skills does the client lack or fail to use (e.g., problem solving, goal setting, self-soothing, assertiveness, communication, conflict resolution, relaxation, empathy)?

RESOURCES: What strengths, skills, and other personal resources does the client have that could be utilized? What external resources could be accessed? Who can the client turn to for help and support?

MY PERSONAL BARRIERS: What difficult thoughts and feelings show up for me regarding this client?

BRAINSTORM: What questions, exercises, worksheets, metaphors, tools, techniques, and strategies can I use in the next session? What skills training may be required? Is values-based problem solving required for external barriers?

APPENDIX 2

Informed Consent

It's essential that we get informed consent from our clients to do ACT—to explain the model, let the client know what to expect, and elicit agreement. Without it, we can expect problems. The brief guide that follows will help you approach this important task.

Key Points

At the bare minimum, I recommend you include the following points when obtaining consent (modifying the language to suit your way of speaking and your clientele):

- The name “acceptance and commitment therapy” reflects a key message: accept what is out of your personal control, and commit to action that improves your life.
- It's a very active form of therapy/coaching. It's not just talking about your problems and feelings. Our aim here is to work together as a team, to help you be the sort of person you want to be and build the sort of life you want to live.
- Part of this approach involves learning skills to handle difficult thoughts and feelings more effectively, so they have less impact and influence over you. When we introduce these skills, I'll ask you to practice them between sessions. You don't have to do that, of course, but it's like learning to play a guitar or drive a car: the more practice you do, the better you get.
- ACT also involves clarifying your values: finding out what matters to you, what you want to stand for in life, what strengths and qualities you want to develop, how you want to treat yourself and others. And it also involves taking action to solve your problems, face your challenges, and do things that make life better.
- I want you to leave here after each session with an action plan: something practical to take away and use to actively improve your life.

Consider adding the following:

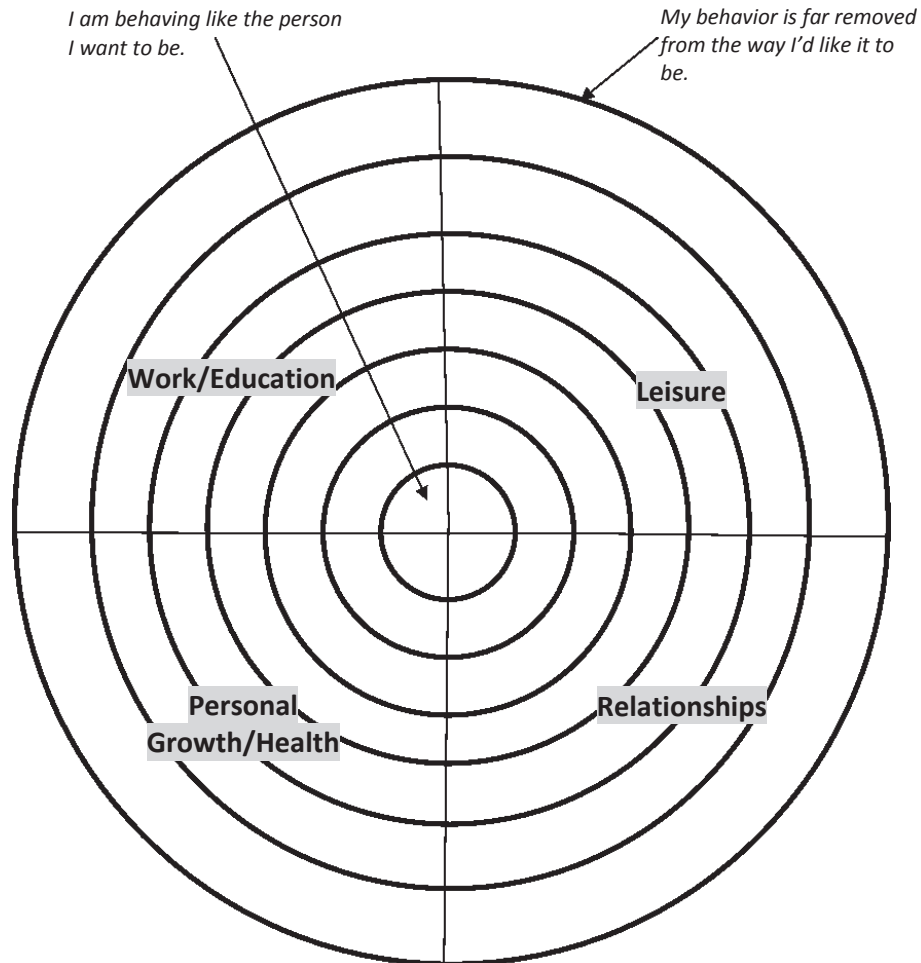
- At times, therapy may seem like a roller-coaster ride, but I'll be there in the roller-coaster car with you.
- I will ask you at times to try new things that may pull you out of your comfort zone—like learning new skills to handle difficult thoughts and feelings—but you never have to do them. You are always free to say no to anything I suggest.

Press Pause

This isn't essential, but I highly recommend you run through this in your first session because it will give you a very powerful way to interrupt problematic behavior and reinforce workable behavior as it arises in session.

- Can I have permission to “press pause” from time to time, so if I see you doing something that looks like it might be really helpful or useful, in terms of dealing with your problems and improving your life, I can just slow the session down and get you to really notice what you are doing?
- For example, I may ask you to pause or slow down, take a couple of breaths, and notice what you're thinking or feeling or saying or doing. That way, you'll be able to see more clearly what you're doing, and we can look at ways you can use it outside of this room. Is that okay?
- And can I also press pause if I see you doing something that looks like it may be contributing to your problems or making them worse, so we can address it?
- And of course, this goes both ways—you can also press pause on me, any time you like.

APPENDIX 3

The Bull's-Eye

Adapted from *Living Beyond Your Pain* by J. Dahl and T. Lundren, 2006, by permission of New Harbinger Publications (Oakland, CA), <http://www.newharbinger.com>.

YOUR VALUES: *What really matters to you, deep in your heart? What do you want to do with your time on this planet? What sort of person do you want to be? What personal strengths or qualities do you want to develop?*

1. **Work/Education:** includes workplace, career, education, and skills development.
2. **Relationships:** includes your partner, children, parents, relatives, friends, coworkers, and other social contacts.
3. **Personal Growth/Health:** may include religion, spirituality, creativity, life skills, meditation, yoga, nature; exercise, nutrition, and health risk factors such as smoking, alcohol, drugs, or overeating.
4. **Leisure:** how you play, relax, stimulate, or enjoy yourself; activities for rest, recreation, fun, and creativity.

THE BULL'S-EYE: make an X in each area of the dart board to represent where you stand today.

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APPENDIX 4

Defusion from Barriers to Therapy

Many clients naturally come up with all sorts of reasons why therapy won't or can't work for them: I've tried before, I can't do it, it's too hard, this is bullshit, I've always been this way, this is who I am, I'm too depressed, I'm too anxious, I'm an addict, I've been diagnosed with X, my life is Y, other people are Z, I'm too A, I'm not B enough, therapy is useless, this won't work, you can't help me because of CDE, I have disorder FGH, I've got no motivation (or energy, or willpower, or discipline), I've been permanently damaged by IJK and can never recover, and so on.

Luckily, in ACT, we don't get into challenging the content or validity of cognitions by assessing whether they are true or false, valid or invalid, positive or negative, right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, warranted or unwarranted. If we had to try to convince clients that their doubts about therapy are false, invalid, or unwarranted, we'd be in trouble! Doubts about therapy are perfectly natural, and only to be expected. However, if clients (or their therapists) fuse with these doubts, it will get in the way of effective work. Thus, such cognitions are good candidates for defusion, right from the word go. So let's take a look at how we can make this happen.

I aim to create, as fast as possible, a context of defusion: a space where we can allow unhelpful cognitions to be present, and see them for what they are. I also want to facilitate a context of acceptance, where there is no fighting with or challenging of thoughts, no trying to invalidate or get rid of them.

My first step is generally to use the simple but effective strategy of *noticing and naming*: noticing the presence of cognitions, and nonjudgmentally naming them. For example, I might say, "I can see there's a bunch of thoughts (or concerns, worries, doubts, fears, objections, and so forth) showing up for you right now about why this won't work for you."

Validate

As therapists, it's vital that we validate such cognitions. They are commonplace—among both clients that are new to therapy and those who have experienced a lot of it. And they are completely normal and natural thoughts to have.

So I tend to say something like, "Those are all very common thoughts (or concerns, worries, doubts, fears, objections, and so forth). Many of my clients have similar thoughts when we first start working. It's perfectly natural. And to be honest, I expect they'll crop up again and again."

A big part of both defusion and acceptance in ACT is helping clients to understand that their mind is not irrational, weird, or defective; it's basically just trying to help. This is both normalizing and validating for clients.

I tend to say something like "These thoughts are basically your mind trying to look out for you, do you a favor. It's basically trying to save you from something that might fail or go wrong or be unpleasant. What your mind is saying is: *Hey, are you sure you want to do this? You might just be wasting your time, money, and energy. This might even make things even worse for you.*"

I continue: "And you know, the truth is, there's probably nothing I can say that will stop your mind from doing that. It's just doing its job—just trying to protect you."

I then, quite often, say something like this: "You know, there's a part of me that really wants to reassure you, to say, 'Hey! This will work for you!' But the truth is, I can't guarantee that it will work. And if you ever go to any type of health professional who guarantees you 'This will work!'—my advice would be don't go back, because that person is either lying or deluded. Because no one can ever guarantee that. I mean, sure, I could show you all the research. I

mean, there are over a thousand papers published on the ACT model; it's helped hundreds of thousands of people around the world. But that wouldn't guarantee it will work for you. And I could tell you about all my other clients it's helped, but again that won't guarantee it will work for you.

"But there are two things I will guarantee. I guarantee I'll do my best to help you. And I guarantee, if we give up because your mind has doubts, we won't get anywhere. So even though your mind will keep coming up with reasons as to why this can't or won't work for you—can we go ahead with it anyway?"

By this point, many clients will be unhooking from their doubts, concerns, objections, and other barriers to therapy. But what if this isn't happening? What if the client continues to insist that therapy can't or won't help? Well, before we go any further, there are three important cautions to keep in mind:

First, the therapist must be compassionate, respectful, and incredibly validating of the client's experience. If the techniques described in this document are delivered in a dismissive, impatient, uncaring, or otherwise-invalidating manner, this will obviously offend or upset the client. (And of course, this holds true for any type of intervention in any model of therapy!)

My second caution is about language. Please: don't stick to the script! The idea is to modify and adapt everything in ACT to suit your own way of speaking and working. The words I like to use may be vastly different from the words you'd prefer to use; if so, please change them! Mix, match, adapt, modify, add more, or cut back. In other words, make ACT your own; do it in your own way, true to your own personality and your own manner of speaking.

My third caution is that there is not one intervention in any model of therapy that works predictably and favorably with all clients. So if you apply anything from this book (or from any other material I have written) and it's not having the effect intended, then be flexible. Consider: Do you need to modify what you're doing in some way? Or are you better to cease doing it, and do something else instead?

Write It Down

Now, if the previously mentioned strategies fail to help the client unhook from her objections, doubts, concerns, or other thoughts that act as barriers to therapy, my next step is very often to write those thoughts down. Doing this usually makes it a whole lot easier for any of us to take a step back and "look at" our thoughts—instead of getting caught up in them.

Typically, I ask for permission to write the thoughts down: "So you have some real and valid concerns about whether this will work for you. And I think we need to address these concerns right now, or we're not going to get anywhere. So is it okay if, as a first step, I quickly jot them all down, so I can make sure we address them all?"

And now I write the thoughts down—every objection or concern the client has about why this won't work: I've tried before, I can't do it, it's too hard, this is bullshit, I've got diagnosis ABC, I'm too depressed, my life is V, other people are X, I'm too Y, I'm not Z enough, and so on.

And as I'm doing this, I'll repeat some or all of my previous comments: "I just want to reiterate, these are all very common..."; "Many of my clients have similar thoughts when we first start working..."; "It's perfectly natural—your mind is trying to help, to save you from something that might be unpleasant..."; "So really, we can expect these kinds of thoughts to keep cropping up, again and again."

I often then say, "You know, I don't think I'll be able to persuade you or convince you that this approach is the right for one you, that it's going to work for you. In fact, my guess is, the harder I try to convince you, the more those thoughts are going to show up. What do you think?"

At this point, most clients will reply along the lines of "Yeah, I guess you're right." (And often there's a hint of amusement in this response, which is usually indicative of some defusion.) The door is now wide open to usher in the concept of workability.

Following the previous step, I usually say something like “So here’s the thing. These thoughts (pointing to the thoughts written on the paper) are going to show up again and again and again as we do this work together. I have no idea how to stop that from happening. And each time they do, we have a choice to make about how we respond to them.

“One choice is: we give up. We let your mind call the shots. Your mind says *This won’t work*, so we go along with that, we call it a day, and we pack it in.

“A second choice is: we get into a debate. I try hard to convince your mind to stop thinking this way; I try to prove your thoughts are false and to convince you that this approach will work. The problem is, that kind of debating will eat up our valuable session time, and I can pretty much guarantee your mind will win the debate anyway—so we won’t be any better off.

“A third choice is: we can let your mind say this stuff, and we can just carry on...we just keep on working together as a team...working away here, to help you build a better life...and even though your mind will keep saying all this (pointing to the thoughts on the paper), we just keep on working.”

Finally, I ask, “So which of those options would you prefer?”

If our client now agrees to option three, well, that’s defusion, right there: the thoughts are present, but they are no longer dominating the client’s behavior in self-defeating ways. And the client is also consciously allowing the thoughts to be present: a gentle first step toward acceptance of unwanted thoughts.

If our client now comes up with more objections, we can add them to the list, and then repeat the same three choices. If our client tries to debate, we can notice and name it: “So it seems like you want me to debate this with you. But there’s just no point. I won’t win. I won’t convince your mind. So we really have just two choices here: give up and pack it in, or let your mind say this stuff and carry on.” If the client now agrees to option three—again, that’s defusion, right there!

I’ve only ever twice had a client choose option one. Both times, I replied, “Okay. I get that’s the choice you’d like to make. But given that you’re already here, it seems a shame to give up now. Can we at least finish this one session, given you’re here? And for this one session, can we not get into a debate about these thoughts? Can we just let your mind say this stuff, and carry on?” Both times, the client agreed. (Obviously, this strategy may not work with a mandated client, but that’s a different issue.)

Ongoing Defusion

The therapist can now use this for ongoing defusion and acceptance throughout the session. For example, when new objections occur, the therapist can write them down and again ask the client to choose how to respond.

If the same objections recur, the therapist can respectfully and compassionately acknowledge it and point to the paper: “We’ve got that one down already. So again, there’s a choice to make here...”

An alternative to the above is to give the sheet to the client with a pen, and ask her to tick each thought as it recurs. The therapist can respectfully and compassionately acknowledge it each time. “Keeps showing up. So do we give up, or waste time debating, or do we acknowledge the thought just popped up again and carry on?”

One option is for the therapist to keep the paper, and on the next session, present it to the client: “I expect these will all show up again today. Any of them showing up right now? Most of them? Cool. Can we let them be there, and carry on? Great. And let’s see if your mind comes up with any new ones today.”

Reason-Giving

Note that the strategies outlined above fit very neatly with the metaphor of the reason-giving machine. (Our mind is like a reason-giving machine. As soon as we even think about stepping out of our comfort zone into a challenging situation, the reason-giving machine starts cranking out all the reasons why we can't do it, shouldn't do it, or shouldn't even have to do it..)

Reason-giving (coming up with reasons why we can't or shouldn't change our behavior) is one of the main categories of problematic fusion we encounter in ACT. So in using the strategies above, the therapist is already helping the client to notice reason-giving and defuse from it. And we can of course use this strategy with any type of reason-giving that occurs later in therapy. It's also a great way for helping clients defuse from helplessness and hopelessness.

Finally, note just how much we've covered here in terms of defusion. We now have a wealth of strategies to draw on repeatedly and develop further in subsequent sessions. And note too that all of this could be done in the very first session, even as we're getting to know the client: taking our initial history and formulating a treatment plan.

APPENDIX 5

The Hands as Thoughts and Feelings Exercise

This exercise is predominantly a metaphor for defusion, although it references all six core ACT processes. It's evolved from my earlier Hands as Thoughts exercise (Harris, 2009a), and the instructions overlap a lot with the Pushing Away Paper exercise detailed in appendix 6. It's very useful to help clients understand the rationale for and benefits of developing defusion skills, and to explicitly link these to the client's therapy goals. However, it's only a metaphor; it won't give clients the ability to defuse. We need to follow it up with active training of defusion 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, for example, "your husband, Michael, and your teenage daughter, Sarah."

When I do this, I usually carry my chair over to the client, and we both sit side by side, with our backs to the wall, facing 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; I've just found it more powerful to do so. I also like to do two lovely variants on this exercise. One option is to write down some relevant thoughts and feelings on a sheet of paper, and use this instead of one's hands; and yet another option is to write them down with an indelible all-surface marker on something thin, flexible, and transparent such as bubble wrap, acetate, or cellophane.

Therapist: *(sitting side by side with the client, both facing the room)* 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, such as "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 our hands are our thoughts and feelings, and let's put them together like this. *(Therapist places his hands together, side by side, palms upward, as if they are the pages of a book. The client copies him.)* Now, let's see what happens when we get hooked by our thoughts. *(The therapist slowly raises his hands toward his face, until they are covering his eyes. The client copies him. Both keep their hands over their eyes as the next section of the exercise unfolds.)*

Now notice three things. First, how much are you missing out on right now? How disconnected and disengaged are you from the people and things that matter? If the person you love were right there in front of you, how disconnected would you be? If your favorite movie were playing on a screen over there, how much would you miss out on?

Second, notice how difficult it is to focus your attention on what you need to do. If there's an important task in front of you right now, how hard is it to focus on it? If there's a problem you need to address or a challenge you need to tackle, how hard is it to give it your full attention?

Third, notice how difficult it is, like this, to take action, to do the things that make your life work, such as...*(therapist 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 hooked. We’re missing out, we’re cut off and disconnected, it’s hard to focus, and it’s hard to do the things that make life work.

Now, let’s see what happens as we unhook from our thoughts and feelings. (*Therapist now slowly removes his hands from his face, and lowers them until they drop into his lap. The client copies him.*) So notice what happens as we unhook. What’s your view of the room like now? How much easier is it to engage and connect? 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 were a task you needed to do or a problem you needed to address, how much easier would it be to focus on it, like this? 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 indicates his hands, now once more resting in his lap*) haven’t disappeared. We haven’t chopped them off and gotten rid of them. They’re still here. So 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 toward 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.

APPENDIX 6

Pushing Away Paper Exercise

This exercise is predominantly a metaphor for acceptance and experiential avoidance, although it references all six core ACT processes. It's evolved from my earlier Pushing the Clipboard exercise (Harris, 2009a), and the instructions overlap a lot with the Hands as Thoughts and Feelings exercise detailed in appendix 5. "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, for example, "your husband, Michael, and your teenage daughter, Sarah."

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 up to the wall, we both face toward 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, and 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, such as "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, counselors, 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 is it to focus on it?

Third, notice while all your effort and energy is going into doing this, how hard it is to take action, to do the things that make your life work, such as (*therapist 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 and 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 were a task you needed to do or a problem you needed to address, how much easier would it be 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 indicates 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 toward 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.

APPENDIX 7

Triggers-Behavior-Payoffs Worksheet

| <p>Triggers <i>(situation, thoughts, and feelings that immediately precede the behavior)</i></p> | <p>Behavior <i>(what you do)</i></p> | <p>Payoffs <i>(outcomes of the behavior that keep it going)</i></p> <p>Common payoffs include:</p> <p><i>Escape/avoid people, places, situations, events; escape/avoid unwanted thoughts & feelings; get your needs met/get what you want; feel good; feel safe or familiar; feel like you deserve it; feel like you are right and others are wrong; feel powerful or in control; gain attention; look good to others; make sense (of life, the world, yourself, others)</i></p> |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

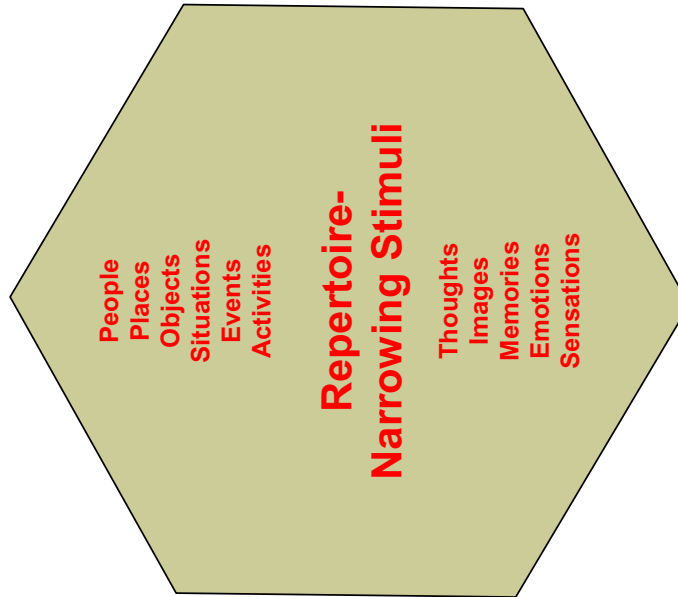
APPENDIX 8

Exposure Crib Sheet

ACT Exposure Crib Sheet

Contacting the Present Moment

Dropping anchor, Expansive awareness,
Mindful stretching, breathing, moving
0-10, how present are you right now?
Notice you and me, working together, as a team



Acceptance

Notice & Name
Open up, allow
Let it flow through you
Hold yourself kindly
0-10, how much are you fighting this?
Are you willing to make room for this?

Defusion

Notice & Name difficult thoughts & memories
I'm having a memory of:
Notice size, shape, location, movement
0-10, how hooked are you?

Values

What's this work in the service of?
What matters enough that you are willing to do this?
What values are you living, simply in doing this challenging work?
0-10, how in touch with those values are you right now?

Committed Action

What goals will this help you with?
0-10, how much control do you have over your actions right now?
Mindfully move your arms, legs, body
Are we okay to keep going with this?

Self-as-Context

There's a part of you noticing everything
T.I.M.E.S. change – and this part of you can step back and notice it happening
Use this part to bring up the lights on the stage show

APPENDIX 9

A Clinician's Guide to Getting Unstuck from Just About Anything

ACT practitioners will all get stuck at times, no matter how experienced and knowledgeable they may be. In this appendix, I'll recap the strategies that I have found to be the most useful for helping therapists to get themselves and their clients unstuck. And I'll remind you where you can find them within this book. Any time you find yourself confused, stuck, worried, frustrated, or hopeless about how to work with a client, I encourage you to run through this guide, step by step, and actively apply it. I'm confident that if you do, you'll find something useful.

Case Formulation

Whenever you are stuck with a client, take at least ten to fifteen minutes to fill out an ACT Case Formulation worksheet (appendix 1). This will usually (a) give you a wealth of ideas for where you can intervene, and (b) highlight important areas of information you are missing. When doing this, we always want to ensure that we complete the section on our own personal barriers and apply ACT to ourselves to deal with our own fusion and avoidance. After all, the more fused and avoidant we are in session, the less effective we'll be with our clients.

The Choice Point

The choice point (chapter 1: Playing with the Choice Point) is a great tool for quickly plotting out any issue or problematic behavior, from suicidality and aggression to addiction and anorexia, and generating an action plan to deal with it. It will help you to identify the difficult thoughts and feelings that "trigger" the behavior, which you'll then target with *unhooking skills* (defusion, acceptance, present moment, self-compassion, self-as-context). It will enable you to pinpoint difficult situations and problems that you'll target with values-guided problem solving and committed action. And it'll aid you in identifying alternative, values-congruent behaviors to replace the *away moves*.

Even if you don't use the choice point overtly in session with your client, it can be very useful for you to draw one out as part of your own case formulation: either as a broad snapshot of all the client's problems, or as a detailed map of one specific client behavior.

Informed Consent and Behavioral Goals

By far the most common issues I encounter in supervision are due to omission by the therapist of these two essential steps: obtaining informed consent to do ACT (appendix 2) and establishing behavioral goals for therapy (chapter 3: Ghastly Goals). If you've skipped over either or both of these fundamentals, your client may want something completely different from therapy than what you are offering, in which case you can expect confusion, resistance, or sessions without any sense of direction. Remember, if you don't establish behavioral goals (what the client wants *to do*), your client will almost always have emotional goals (what the client wants *to feel*), and if so, he will assume that the purpose of therapy is to get rid of unpleasant thoughts and feelings and replace them with pleasant ones.

So ask yourself:

- Have I obtained informed consent for ACT? (If yes, has the client forgotten or misunderstood? Do I need to obtain it again?)
- Have I clearly established behavioral goals (as opposed to emotional goals) for therapy?

Press Pause

In session, is your client behaving in ways that interfere with therapy? If so, get permission to “press pause” (appendix 2) and start using this as an active intervention. Use “press pause” to interrupt the behavior as it occurs, then respectfully and compassionately explore it. Bring openness and curiosity to the behavior, and look at it in terms of workability. Explore whether it is towards or an away move. Does it help you and the client work together as a team? Does it help the client move toward or away from the behavioral goals established for therapy (chapter 3: Ghastly Goals)? Once the client agrees that the therapy-interfering behavior is an away move or is getting in the way of working together effectively, one option is to plot the behavior itself on a choice point diagram. This enables you to identify the antecedent thoughts and feelings that trigger the behavior, target them with unhooking skills, and generate more effective behaviors.

Setting an Agenda

If you're not getting much accomplished in a session, then you'd be wise to set an agenda at the start of each session (chapter 11: Sticky Structure). Agree on an area of life to work on, or a skill to practice, or a quadrant of the bull's-eye or an aspect of the choice point to focus on. Use the agenda itself to train focusing, refocusing, and commitment: every time the client goes off track, respectfully notice and name it, and gently and respectfully guide him back to the agenda.

Creative Hopelessness

When a client is fixated on feeling good or getting rid of unwanted thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, and so on, we will need to introduce (or reintroduce) creative hopelessness (chapter 8: Crummy Creative Hopelessness). This opens the client to new, more flexible ways of responding to difficult thoughts and feelings.

After creative hopelessness, we usually move to dropping the struggle (also in chapter 8), and from there, we can segue into any unhooking skill, such as defusion, acceptance, self-compassion, or dropping anchor. All these mindfulness skills teach clients new ways of responding to their painful thoughts and feelings, with an attitude of openness and willingness rather than avoidance.

Overcoming Our Own Self-Doubt and Fear of Failure

Do you have self-doubt about introducing experiential exercises to clients? Are you worried that the techniques will be ineffective or the client will see them as lame or feel invalidated? The inconvenient truth is, such unwanted outcomes are always possible. (And this is nothing special about ACT; it's true for any intervention in any model of therapy.) So if fear of failure or self-doubt is holding us back, we want to apply ACT to ourselves. We might say to the client:

I really want to help you to XYZ. (*XYZ are the client's behavioral goals for therapy.*) And I have an idea of something that could help. The problem is, my mind is trying to talk me out of it. My mind is saying, *You'll find this lame or silly or invalidating.* And I'm feeling anxious about introducing it to you; I notice my heart is racing, and my stomach is churning. And my mind is saying, *Shut up! Don't say anything else. Change the topic.* But I'm also listening to my values as a therapist; my aim is to help people. And if I don't introduce this to you because I'm not willing to make room for my own anxiety about it, then I'm not being true to my values, and I don't think I'm doing you the service you came for. So even though I feel anxious, and my mind's saying you won't like this, I'd like to introduce you to something that I think can really help you to XYZ.

Again, notice how the fundamentals must be in place: we need to have established behavioral goals for therapy, and have informed consent for ACT, in order to make this work.

We also want to introduce the idea of experiments: "Can we treat this as an experiment? I never know what will happen in advance. I think it will be helpful for you; otherwise I wouldn't suggest it. It usually is for most people, but I can never know for sure. Can we do this as an experiment and see what happens? And afterward, you tell me if it's helpful or not."

Overcoming Resistance to Exercises

If your client seems unwilling to do experiential exercises or learn new skills in session, check:

Have you gotten informed consent?

Have you established behavioral goals?

Are you giving a clear rationale for each and every exercise—making it clear as to how it will help the client with her behavioral goals?

Are you setting up each exercise up as an experiment?

Are you responding effectively when interventions backfire?

For more on these topics, read chapter 4: *Beastly Barriers*.

If the client is hesitant to do exercises due to her anxiety, then first validate and normalize the anxiety. Then ask if you can focus the session on learning new skills to handle anxiety; be clear that the reason for doing this is to help your client achieve her therapy goals. Explicitly tease out that the way she is responding to her anxiety in session is preventing her from achieving those very goals. Once she agrees, your next step will usually need to be creative hopelessness (chapter 8).

Doing ACT vs. Talking About ACT

Check with yourself: are you actively practicing core skills in session with your client? Or are you just talking about ACT? Don't fall into the trap of thinking metaphors are enough. If you introduce a metaphor such as hands as thoughts and feelings (appendix 5) or pushing away paper (appendix 6), you must then go on to actively practice defusion skills or acceptance skills. (If your client doesn't want to practice skills, then see the previous point.) Get crystal clear: what does the client want from therapy? If she doesn't want ACT, then you have to make a choice: use a different model or refer her to someone else.

Dropping Anchor

If your client is experiencing extreme fusion, emotional dysregulation, dissociative states, flashbacks, or other intense emotional and cognitive reactions that interfere with therapy, then make your sessions about dropping anchor (chapter 7: Dodgy Dropping Anchor). Build anchoring skills first, before going on to other aspects of the model.

Defusion from Hopelessness

If your client is feeling hopeless about himself, life, the future, or therapy itself, this is obviously going to interfere with progress. So our first step is usually going to involve defusion from the hopelessness itself. See chapter 12: Measly Motivation. See also chapter 9: Dastardly Defusion, especially the Q&A on “What techniques work best with extreme fusion?”

Building Motivation

If your client is lacking motivation to do the challenging work of therapy, first get buy-in through informed consent (appendix 2) and establishing behavioral goals (chapter 3). Then work on defusion from hopelessness and other barriers to therapy as described in the previous point. And then, as soon as possible, bring in values to build motivation. For more on this topic, see chapter 12: Measly Motivation.

Reinforcing Change Between Sessions

If your client is failing to make changes between sessions, then your first step is to find out why. Start your next session by exploring what the barriers are, and then target them. For failure to do “homework,” use the strategies in chapter 12: Measly Motivation.

Keeping Sessions Focused and Productive

If your client keeps going off topic, switching problems, jumping from worry to worry, changing the subject, or filling up the session with worrying and ruminating, there are a few steps to take. Assuming you have informed consent and have established behavioral goals for therapy, the next two steps are to (a) get permission to “press pause” and start using it to interrupt such fused behavior as it arises, and (b) set an agenda for the session.

Once all this is in place, use press pause to interrupt fused behavior, and then target the fusion itself. Often, for such extreme fusion, it's good to start with simple but powerful exercises such as those in chapter 9: Dastardly Defusion, especially the ones described in the Q&A on “What techniques work best with extreme fusion?”

Functional Analysis

Last but definitely not least, don't forget about good old-fashioned functional analysis (chapter 5: Freaky Functional Analysis). If you're finding it difficult to constructively influence any type of problematic behavior—whether it's happening in session or between sessions—take the time and effort to analyze it in terms of ABCs (antecedents, behavior, and consequences). This will usually give you a wealth of ideas for effectively interrupting the problematic behavior and reinforcing a more workable behavior as an alternative.