



# **Introduction to ACT and the Extended Psychological Flexibility Model**

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# Finding ACT



A Working Manual for the Treatment of  
Emotional Avoidance Disorders

# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

(ACT)

Fall 1995 Version

others are often readily apparent. Watch  
for two hours) will help a lot. There is  
It does, however, require a certain inve  
socialization.

The next twenty pages or so of  
philosophical space within which ACT  
**The Situation**

**Most humans are hurting.** The  
worried, compulsive, psychotic, work  
through a divorce, avoidant of intimacy  
drumbeat of sad statistics that docume  
statistics when, for example, discussi

funds. But psychotherapists generally m  
collectivity.

**It is Hard for Humans to be Happy**

If non-humans had the capacity  
include shelter, food and drink, warmth,  
interaction, and precious little else. In th  
things. They live, as we say, a dog's life.  
understand the misery of a person living

What is remarkable, however, is  
happy and still they are not happy. Huma  
Humans can have TVs, VCRs, computers  
Humans can have great looks, a list of sex  
on and still be miserable. Humans can ha

relationships, sexual identity, careers, anger, sadness, or the m  
*An Alternative Assumption*

This approach brings a different assumption to the stud  
*assumption of destructive "normality"*: the idea that what is ord  
functional. By this view, psychological health is a goal for non  
earn it. We have to learn to produce it. In line with this assum  
much be the removal of disorder but the establishment of a mor

**Why Psychological Health is not Automatic and Normal**

I am arguing that human language has changed dramati  
beings. In accord with the assumption of destructive normality,  
language as an ordinary psychological process that might accou  
explain what I think human verbal behavior is and why it has ha  
do not think that what I mean by "verbal" is human vocalization  
not referring merely to social communication, as when our pet d

# Say yes


To the things that matter  
and all that conveys...

# What are we doing today?

- Language, Suffering & Psychological Flexibility
- The Control Agenda and Creative Hopelessness
- The 6 Core Process of ACT
  - **Open:** Defusion & Acceptance
  - **Aware:** Present Moment & Self as Context
  - **Engaged:** Values & Committed Action



# How are we doing it?

- Some exercises may evoke uncomfortable thoughts and feelings
  - Always an invitation, never a requirement
  - ACT is not just a therapy we use with our clients, but a philosophy for living fully
  - Confidentiality
- 





# HUMAN SUFFERING

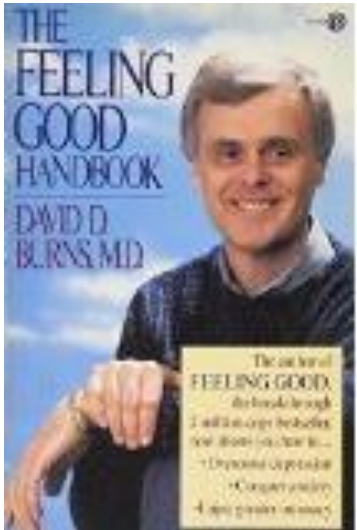
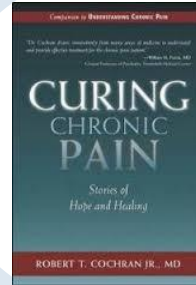
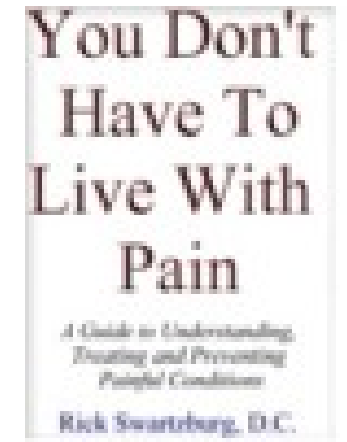
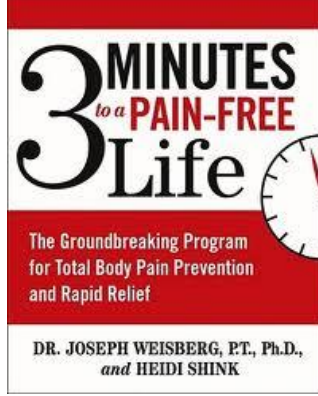
*In ACT, we take an  
unusual stance...*



# Normal Human Behavior

- In their natural state, humans should be psychologically happy.
- Normal people = Happy people
- Psychological disorders are problems caused by abnormal processes.
- As therapists, we need to understand these abnormal processes and change them.





*The water we swim in...*





**HAPPINESS IS A  
STATE OF MIND**

**RELEASE  
NEGATIVITY**

**LIVE  
WITHOUT  
FEAR**

**STOP  
WORRYING,  
START LIVING**

**THINK POSITIVE.  
BE POSITIVE**

**DON'T LET  
THINGS GET  
YOU DOWN**

**DON'T  
WORRY,  
BE  
HAPPY**

**GET RID OF WHAT'S  
HOLDING YOU BACK**

**WIN THE  
STRUGGLE**

**CHOOSE JOY**



# ACT's Take on Suffering

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Pain is a normal part of the human experience

---

Cognitive processes can be destructive and can amplify normal pain

---

We need to understand these processes and work within them to promote well-being

# **We are evolved to have pain!**

Anxious thoughts and feelings are a normal response to perceived or anticipated threat

Depressive thoughts and feelings are a normal response to loss, rejection, injury, etc.

Recalling memories of frightening events is part of a normal learning process

Worrying about how others view you is built in to being a social pack animal



# How Do We Get Rid of Pain?

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The Control Agenda

# Common Strategies

- Drink alcohol
- Smoke
- Sleep
- Fantasize
- Procrastinate
- Work too much
- Work too little
- Get more training
- Use positive self-talk
- Read self-help books
- Exercise
- Meditate
- Social media
- People-please
- Shop
- Watch TV
- Lie
- Try harder
- Clean
- Get Therapy

**How does it work in the short term?**

**How does it work in the long term?**

**What has this strategy cost you?**



# The Control Agenda & “Creative Hopelessness”

When we treat pain as a problem...

Efforts to get rid of or change pain = control agenda

Our clients are not “wrong” – they are unaware of the paradox

Illuminate the unworkability of strategies that don’t work

Exploring the control agenda clears the way for alternative ways of showing up to pain (and life!)

Not a one-off intervention, but an ongoing exploration for our clients and for ourselves

# Origins of ACT



Roots: Behaviorism



Philosophy: Functional Contextualism



Theory: Relational Frame Theory



# Behaviorism:

## Some basics

Behavior is shaped by consequences  
(e.g., reinforcement)

If we are seeing a behavior, it has been or  
is currently being reinforced

All behavior makes sense!

# Behavior

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Anything a human being does

---

Inside and out (e.g., thoughts, feelings, dancing, breathing, etc.)

---

Some behaviors are under our control and some are not

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Behavior can only be understood in its *context*

# Context

All of the factors that influence behavior including:

- Environmental
- Physical
- Biological
- Historical
- Psychological
- Cultural
- Learning history

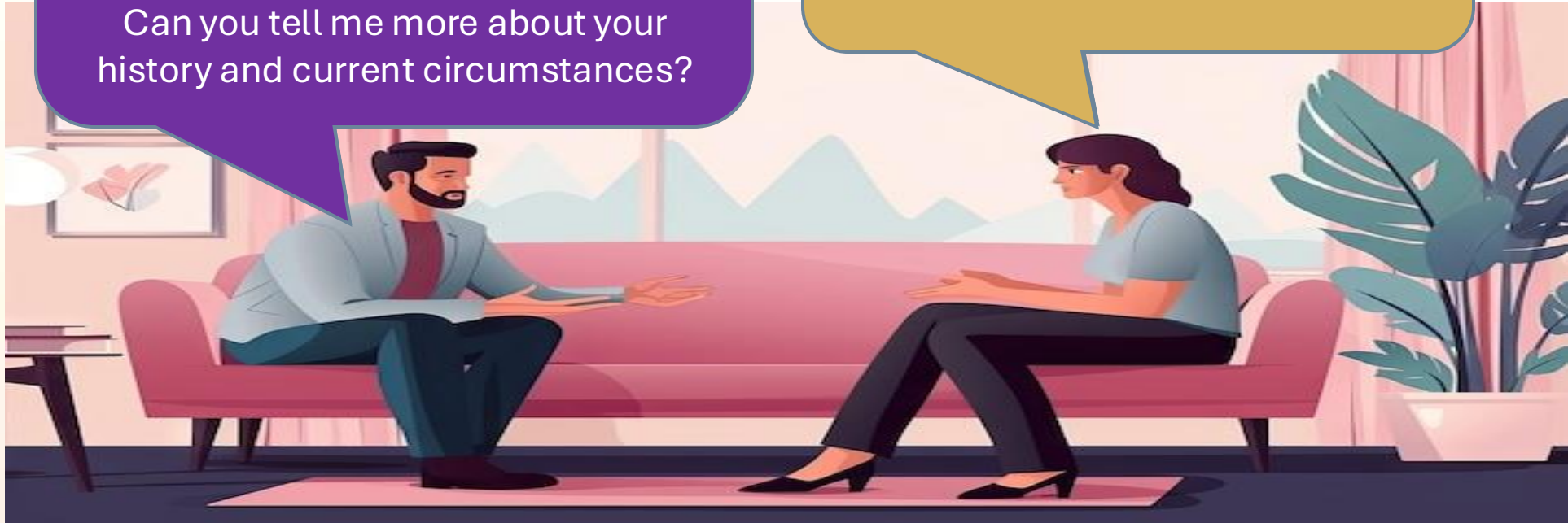
Some contexts that influence behavior appear obvious; some do not

# Behavior in Context

So, I hear you describing feeling sad, unmotivated, indecisive, tired, and having trouble sleeping.

Can you tell me more about your history and current circumstances?

My spouse has been verbally and physically abusing me for 10 years





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I'm Lazy





# Function

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The relationship between stimulus and response

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Outcome/results (i.e., “What happens?”)

---

ACT looks at the **functions** of events, thoughts, and feelings

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In therapy, we are looking at behavior - in context - and asking “How is that working?”

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Consider:

- "When I criticize my partner..."
- "When I try to avoid feeling anxious.."
- “I’m lazy”



Functions?

# What works?

How does a given thought or behavior function to move a person toward or away from:

- What matters to them?
- What they want to cultivate in their lives?
- Who they want to be?
- Their values?

In ACT, truth is not defined in terms of true/false, right/wrong, accurate/inaccurate

***Truth is defined by what works to move us toward valued ends***



# Watch Your Language!

## Language and Cognition as Part of the Problem

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### Relational Frame Theory (RFT)

- A theory of human language/cognition that illuminates the role of language in human suffering
- We can understand cognition/language as the “mind”
- Mind processes: evaluating, describing, remembering, comparing, attributing, predicting, etc.
  - Neither good nor bad – it depends
  - All of these processes involve “relating”
- We relate constantly - creating vast networks in our minds of same/different, better/worse, you/me, if this-then that, etc.





# Language is a double-edged sword that permits us to:

Plan

Solve problems

Communicate

Anticipate

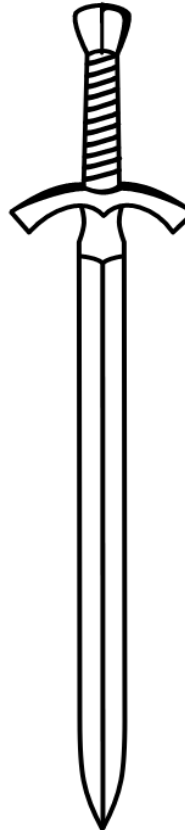
Fantasize

Create

Develop rules to manage our lives

Learn from other people

Learn from indirect experience



Imagine an awful future

Revisit past events

Evaluate ourselves, others and experiences

Be aware that we and others will die

Re-live traumatic events

Develop strategies for living that don't work or are even harmful

Compare ourselves to others

Try to solve problems that don't exist yet



Let's do  
some  
relating!

Stupid people get bad grades.

I got bad grades.

I am \_\_\_\_\_

People who aren't productive at work  
are lazy.

People who are lazy are bad.

I am not productive at work.

I am \_\_\_\_\_



# Our Minds Evolved to Keep Us Safe, Not to Help us Live Our Best Lives!

Our minds can and do construct what feels to us like reality

- Past, present and future
- Evaluations, worries, regrets, fears, failures, threats, etc.

We spend a lot of time in these verbal constructions - we struggle with them and often organize our behavior around them

We get very identified with the contents of our minds – we relate to this content as literally true and indicative of who we are

We live much of our lives in a reality that is constructed by the mind rather than one that is connected to our direct, *lived experiences*

# Changing How We Relate to the Mind

Helping people relate differently to the content of the mind is a primary goal of ACT

We work to:

- Increase *awareness* of mind processes
- Increase *openness* to internal experiences as they come and go
- Increase *engagement* with what matters

This involves helping people get back in contact with another way of knowing the world – experiential knowing!

- Verbal knowledge vs. experiential knowledge

# Thought watching

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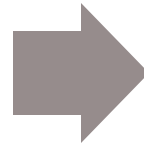
Choose an unwanted, “sticky” thought that you would like to change or get rid of, one that shows up with some frequency.

- I am having the thought that \_\_\_\_\_
- I am noticing I am having the thought that \_\_\_\_\_
- I am aware that I am noticing that I am having the thought that \_\_\_\_\_

**COGNITIVE  
FUSION**



**EXPERIENTIAL  
AVOIDANCE**



**HOW WE GET  
STUCK**



# Cognitive Fusion



# Cognitive Fusion

Becoming entangled with thoughts and treating them as literal truths

Getting stuck in your head

Getting hooked by or buying into thoughts

Letting thoughts dominate behavior

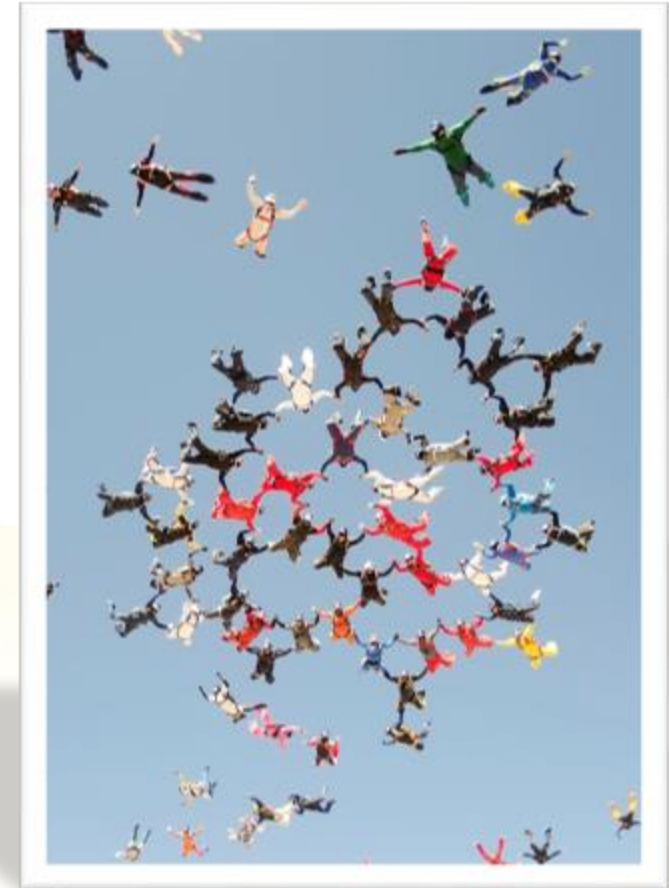
Relying on what your mind says over your lived experience

*When doing so  
interferes with  
valued living*

# If/then Exercise

If \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't such a problem for me,  
(thought, feeling, self-story)

I would \_\_\_\_\_.  
(something you value)



# If/then example

If anxiety wasn't such a problem for me,  
(thought, feeling, self-story)

I would become an ACT trainer.  
(something you value)



# Hands as Thoughts

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- 1) Imagine that your hands are the thoughts/feelings you most want to get rid of
- 2) Put your hands together, palms facing upwards, as if they were pages on an open book
- 3) Slowly raise your hands up toward your face until you are loosely covering your eyes
- 4) Take a look around and notice how this impacts your view and connection with your environment
- 5) Now, slowly lower your hands and notice the difference
- 6) Notice how as the distance from your hands (thoughts) and your eyes increase, you are able to take in more information and it is easier to connect with others or your environment


# Experiential Avoidance





# Experiential Avoidance

Efforts to avoid unwanted  
thoughts, feelings,  
sensations, memories, etc.



When doing so has negative  
consequences and  
interferes with valued living

*Please don't think about...*

# Fusion and Avoidance function to...

Create inflexible thinking and behavior



Disconnect us from what we care about



Keep us from pursuing the things that matter to us



And our lives shrink...

## Core Assumption of ACT:

Our clients are not  
broken or sick –  
*they are stuck.*



And WE are not broken or sick – we get stuck too!

Pain is not the problem.

Pain is an inevitable part of  
the human experience



Pain is not the problem.

It is the struggle against pain  
that is the **problem**

# Broad Aims of ACT

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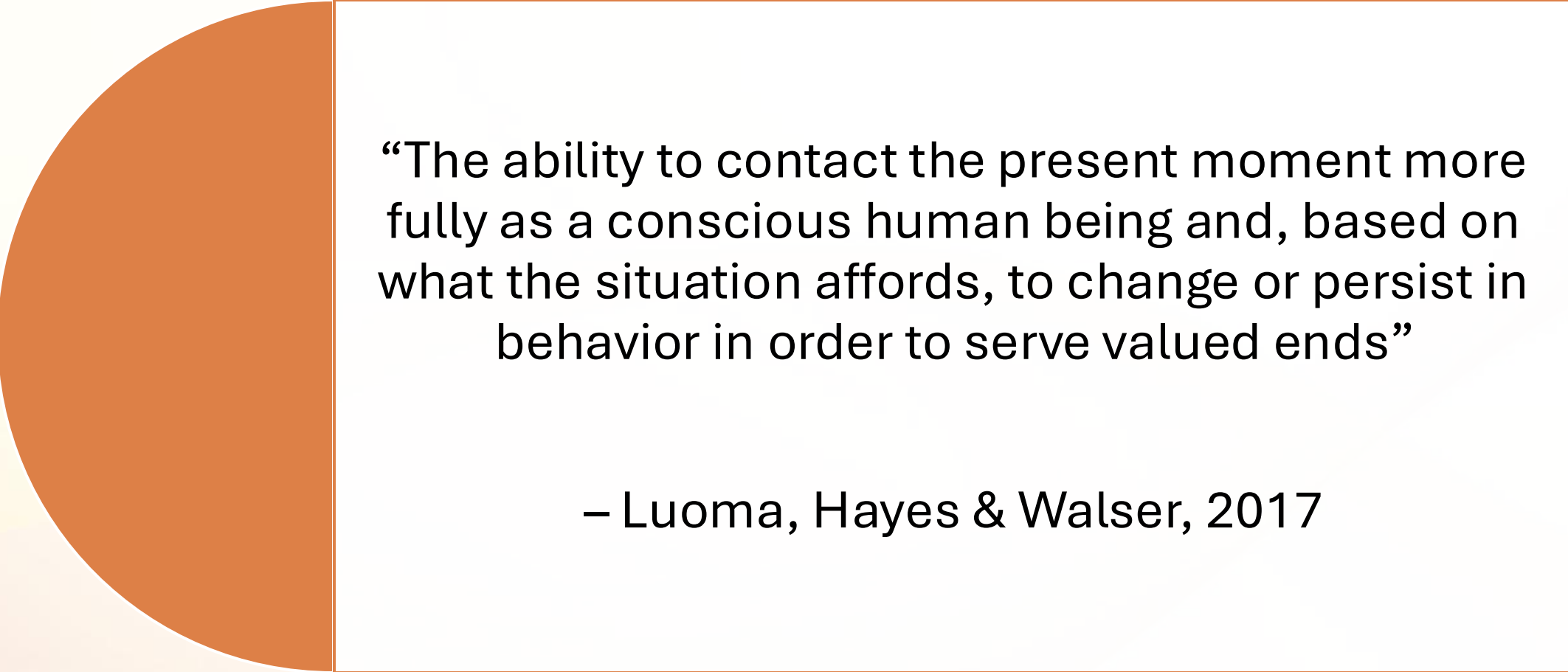
Drop the struggle with unwanted thoughts and feelings

Increase *psychological flexibility*

Move toward what matters



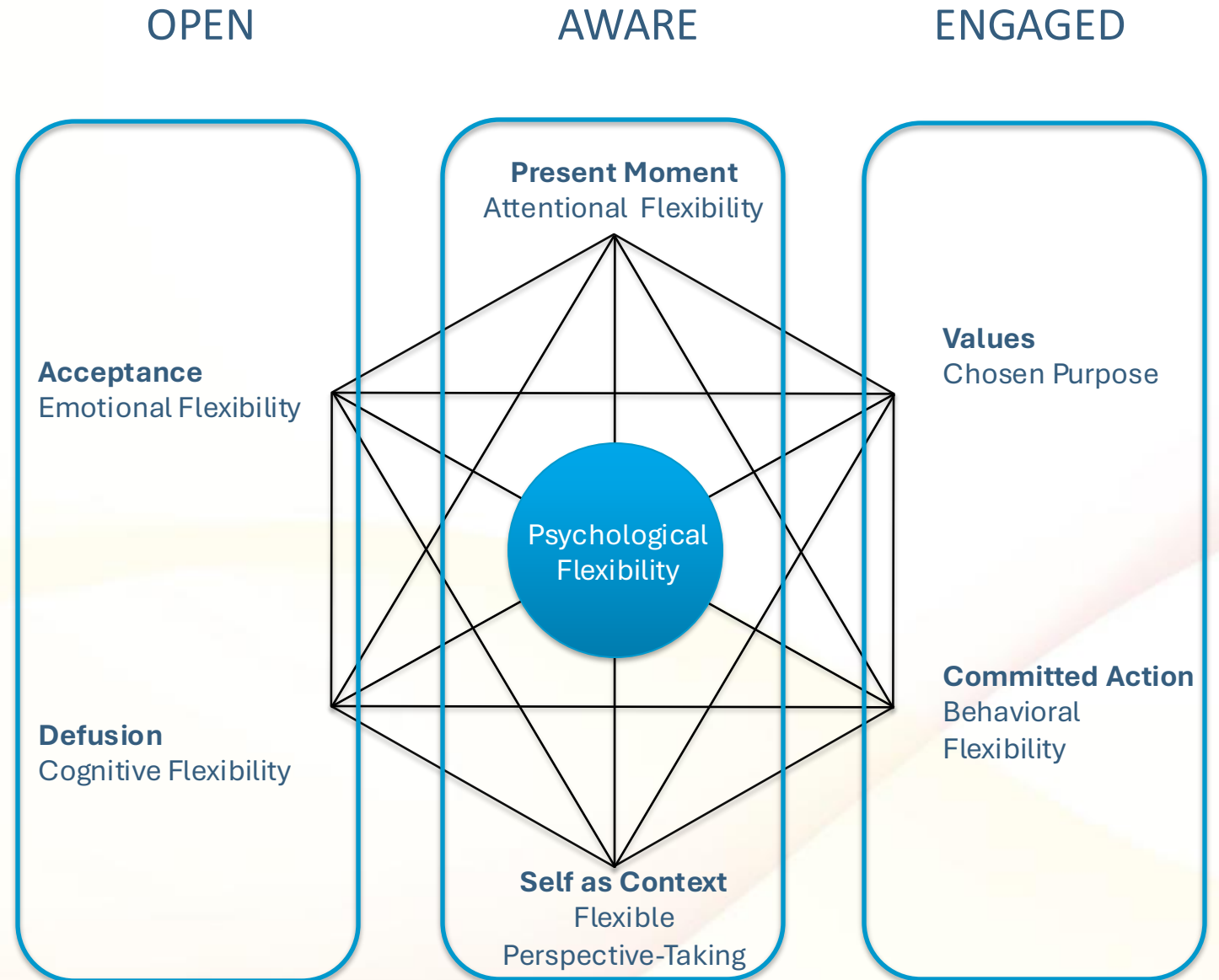
# Psychological Flexibility



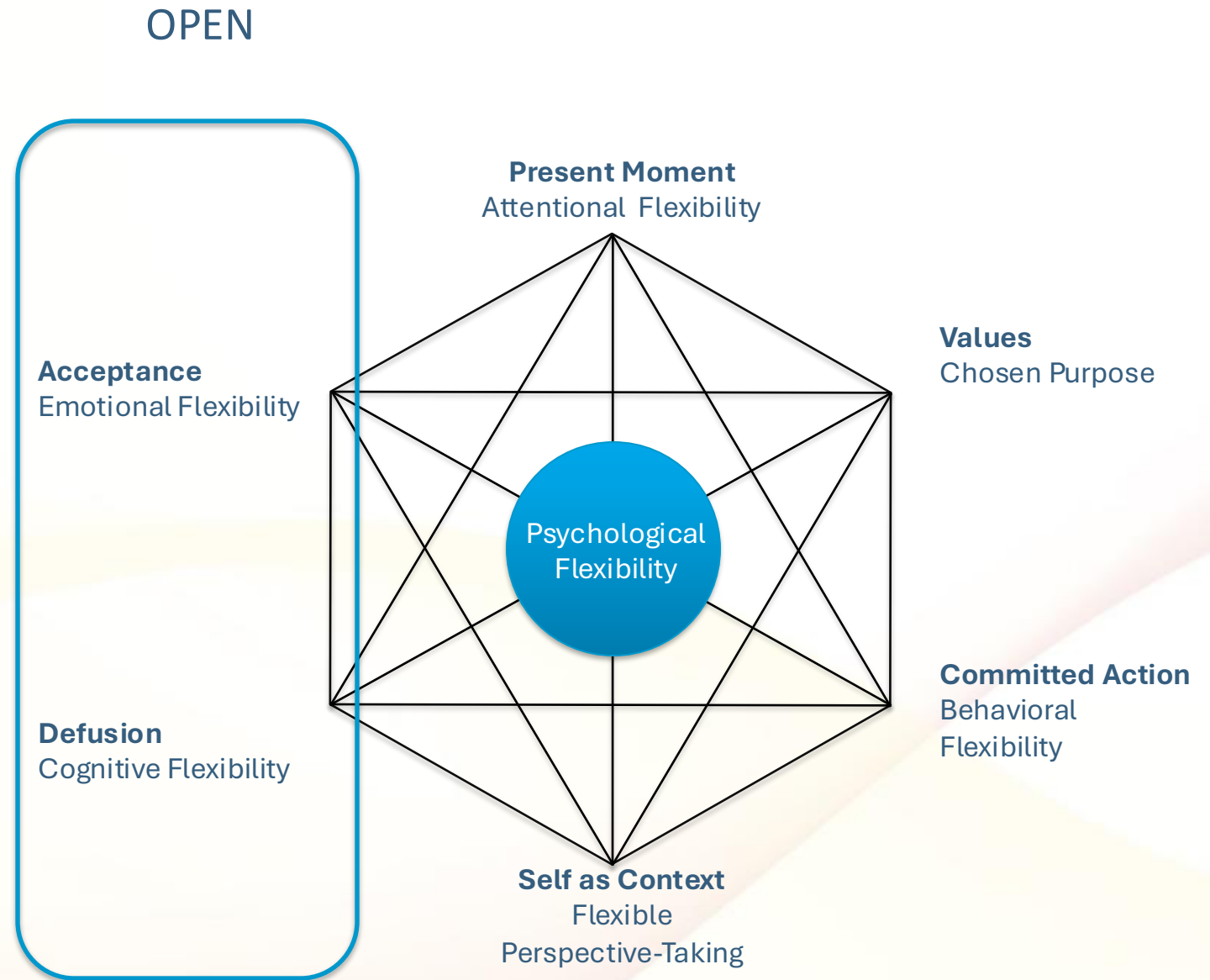
“The ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being and, based on what the situation affords, to change or persist in behavior in order to serve valued ends”

– Luoma, Hayes & Walser, 2017

# The ACT Model of Psychological Flexibility



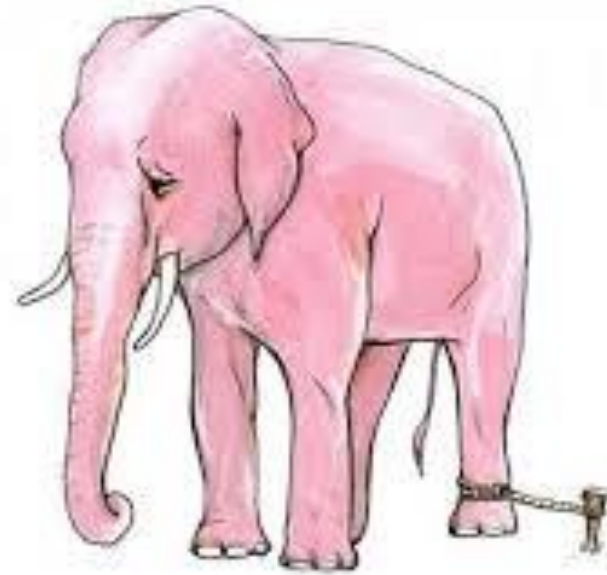
# The ACT Model of Psychological Flexibility





# DEFUSION

*Cognitive Flexibility*



Don't believe  
everything you think



Holding it Tightly

# Defusion

Cognitive Flexibility



Cognitive Inflexibility

Stepping back from thoughts  
and observing

Trying to get rid of or change  
thoughts

Treating thoughts in terms of  
workability

Buying into thoughts, even if  
they are unhelpful

Changing the relationship to  
thoughts

Letting thoughts dominate  
behavior

# What does fusion look like in session?

It doesn't matter

I can't do that

But what if...

I have to

I can't stand it

There's no point

It's not fair

This isn't working

# Therapist Language in Session

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So, you're having the thought that....

---

That sounds like a really painful thought to be having.

---

Can you notice what thoughts are coming up right now?

---

It's easy to get hooked by a thought like that, yeah?

---

If you hold tight to that thought, does it move you toward or away from what you care about?



# Defusion Techniques

Thought watching

I'm noticing the  
"Nobody Likes Me"  
story again...

Holding tight to crumpled paper

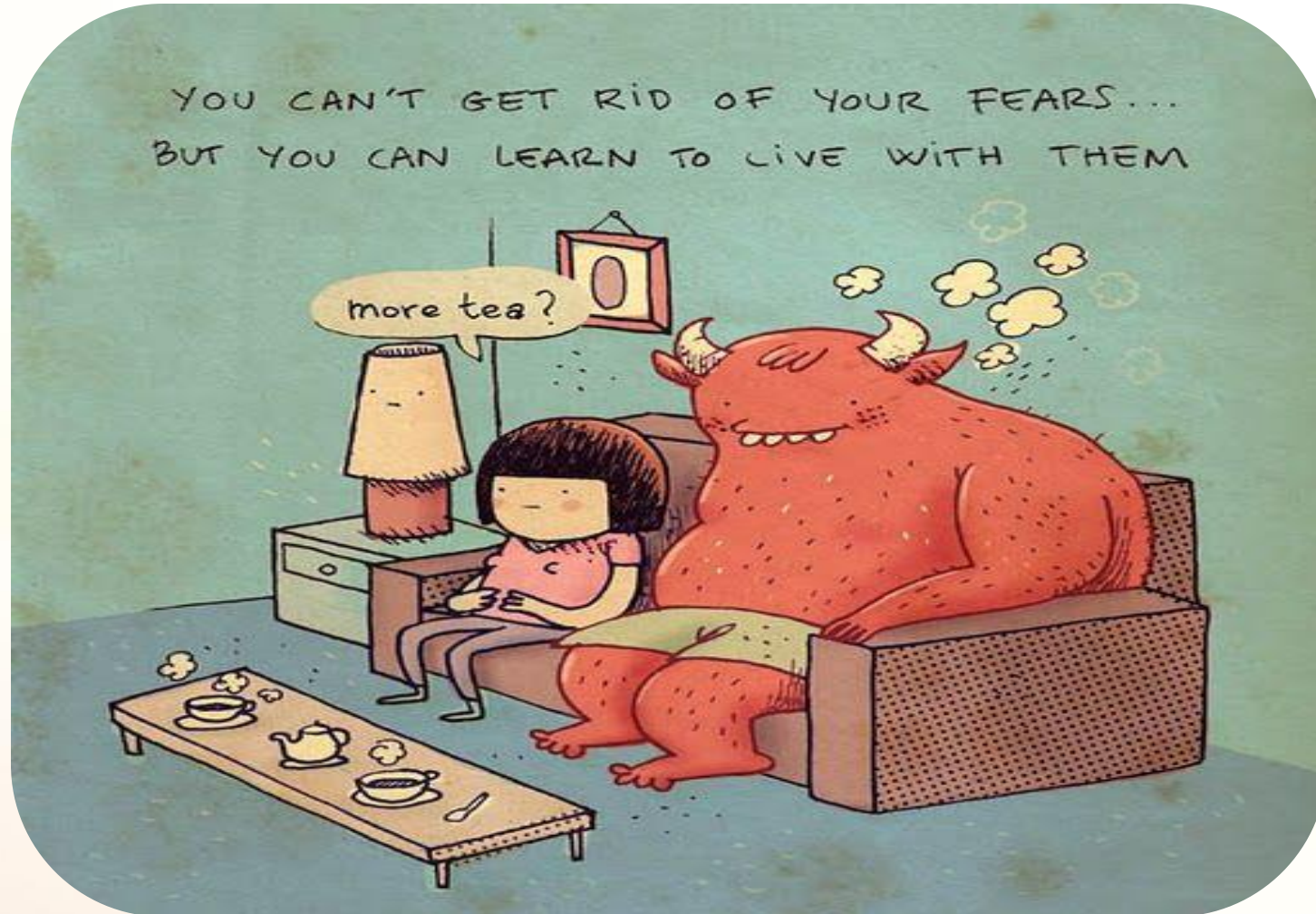
Name the story (e.g., The "I'm An Idiot" Story)

Treat "the mind" or "the chatter" as an  
external event – almost as a separate entity



# Acceptance

## *Emotional Flexibility*





# Holding Your Pain

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# Acceptance

Emotional Flexibility



Emotional Inflexibility

Making room for thoughts, feelings, sensations, and urges *as they are*, not as the mind says they are

Willingness to have painful experiences in the service of what matters.

Taking a compassionate stance with our experience of pain

Efforts to avoid unwanted thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories and urges

Struggles to fix, control, or eliminate pain that move us away from what matters

Treating pain as the enemy

# What does avoidance look like in session?

Changing the  
subject

Swallowing down  
tears

Apologizing for  
emotions

Storytelling with lack  
of emotion

Urgency and rapid  
cadence in speech

"I'm too nervous to  
go to Becky's party"

"It's too much"

"I can't go there"

"If I let myself cry,  
I'll be overwhelmed"



# Therapist Language in Session

Can we honor that sadness?

I can see this is hard for you – would you be willing to let yourself just be with this pain? Not try to get rid of it, just let it move through?

Where in your body is the anxiety showing up? What do you notice about it?

What would it be like if you brought some kindness to this pain?



# Pushing Away Pain

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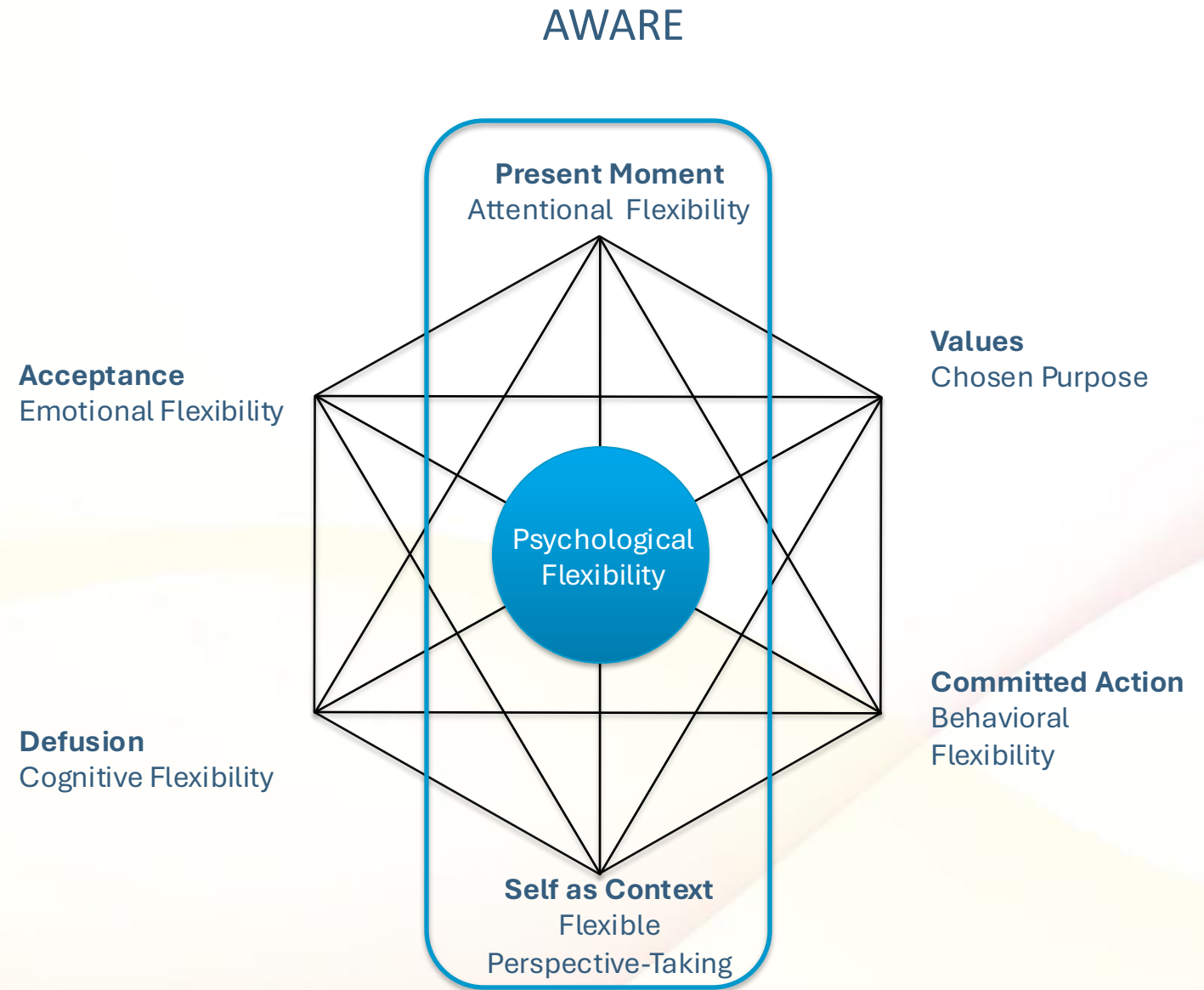
- Imagine that your hands are the thoughts/feelings (or a single thought) you want to get rid of
- Take both hands and push them away from you – as hard as you can (without injuring yourself)
- Push hard!
- Notice 3 things as you push:
  - How is this? Tiring?
  - How distracting is it? How difficult to engage or connect?
  - How difficult is it to take action?
- Now let your hands fall to your sides or rest in your lap
- Notice your thoughts & feelings have not disappeared

When we describe that which is unacceptable,  
we describe the edges of the world we are free  
to inhabit

- Kelly Wilson



# The ACT Model of Psychological Flexibility




Credit: Robyn Walser



# Present Moment

## *Attentional Flexibility*

A person wearing a blue suit is holding a small, square red gift box with both hands. The box is wrapped in red paper with a subtle grid pattern and is tied with a red ribbon in a bow. The background is blurred, showing more of the person's suit and a hint of a yellow object on the left.

*“There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done.  
One is called Yesterday and the other is called Tomorrow.  
Today is the right day to Love, Believe, Do and mostly Live.”*

- Dalai Lama XIV



# Flexing Attention

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# Present Moment Awareness

Flexible Attention



Inflexible Attention

Moving attention as needed

Attention stuck in the imagined future, remembered past, or evaluations

Awareness of a broader context  
– internal and external

Insensitivity to the broader context

Learning is facilitated

Learning is inhibited



# What does low present moment awareness look like in session?



Rapid speech

Storytelling  
& news reporting

Crisis of the Week

Checked Out

Lack of eye  
contact

Overfocused on  
remembered  
past, imagined  
future

# Therapist Language In-Session

This sounds important – can we slow down a bit?

How is the anxiety showing up for you in this moment?

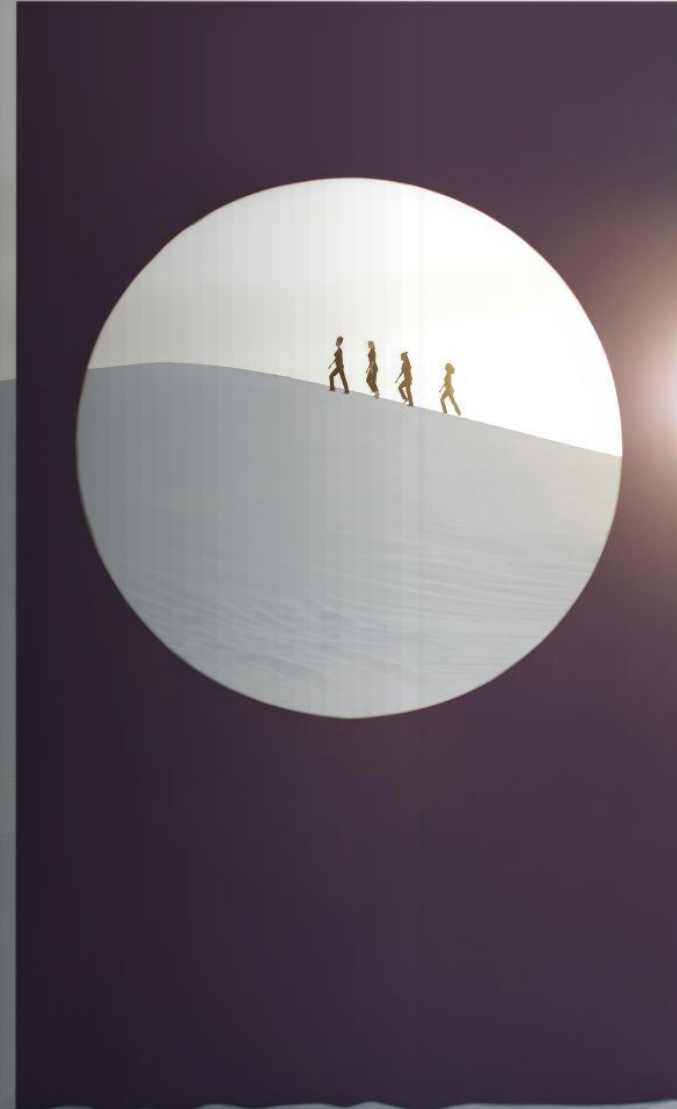
As you say that, can you notice what is coming up?

I'm noticing my stomach clench when you tell me that



# Self as Context

*Flexible Perspective Taking*



# I am.....

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I am \_\_\_\_\_

Is this true all the time? Everywhere? In all circumstances?

Now, tune into variability: I am \_\_\_\_\_, or not.

Now take a step back: I am having the thought that I am \_\_\_\_\_, or not.

I am having the thought that I am \_\_\_\_\_, or not, under some circumstances and at some times.

# Self as Context

Flexible Perspective-taking



Inflexible Perspective-taking

Self as awareness - the part of us that observes and notices our experiences

Self as the collection of thoughts and stories that we use to explain our identity to ourselves and others

Not verbal – experiential!

Based in language

Flexible perspective taking over time, place, and person

Static, constant, and/or rigid over time, place and person

# What does inflexible perspective taking\* look like in session?

I'm not enough

What's wrong with me?!

I don't deserve \_\_\_\_\_

I am anxiety disordered

This is just who I am

Why can't I be like other people who have their s--t together?

\* A.k.a.: *Self as Content*



# Therapist Language in Session

How long has your mind been telling you this story of yourself?

When you look back on this period in your life, what do you want to be able to say about how you navigated this situation?

If your friend/loved one was here now, what do you imagine they would say?

Can you notice right now that there's a you who can notice thoughts, feelings, sensations? A you who is not the same as these experiences?

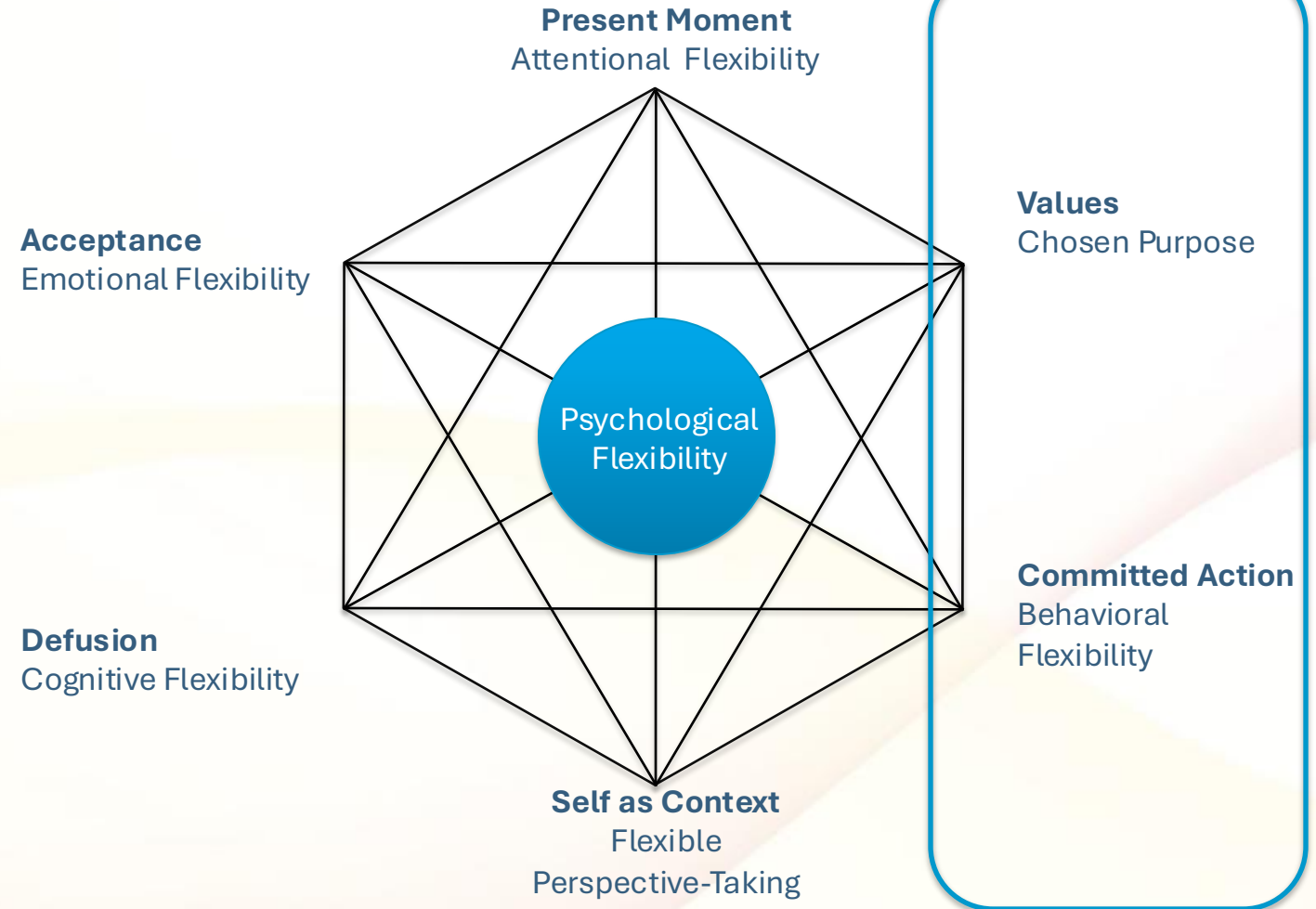


# Through the Eyes of a Compassionate Other

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# The ACT Model of Psychological Flexibility



Credit: Robyn Walser



A woman in a purple athletic top and black leggings is climbing a steep, reddish-brown rock face. She is using a rope and a climbing harness. The background is a clear blue sky. The image is part of a presentation slide with a light orange and yellow curved border on the left and bottom.

# VALUES

*Chosen Purpose*

“When I dare to be powerful,  
to use my strength in the service of my vision,  
then it becomes less important whether  
I am afraid.”

– Audre Lorde



# 85<sup>th</sup> Birthday

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# Values/Chosen Purpose

Contact/clarity



Lack of contact/clarity

Living according to what truly matters,  
to who and how they want to be

Focused on process of living NOW

- Ongoing qualities of behavior that are freely chosen & *intrinsically rewarding*

Feels vital and alive with a willingness  
to face difficulty

Living according to the rules, the  
“should”, the “musts”

Focused on future/past

- compliance with what is expected
- outcomes & achievement of goals

Feels “stuck”, resigned, confused



# Valuing: Qualities of Actions, not Feelings

Caring

Supporting

Adventuring

Awaring

Loving

Connecting

Trusting

Persisting

Learning

Adapting

Being  
patient

Asserting

Giving

Bringing  
authenticity

Resting

# What does loss of contact with values look like in session?

I really value family, so  
getting married is a  
priority

I value my kids  
respecting me

I just want to be happy  
and at peace

I should be more  
confident

I don't know what I  
want anymore



Values are a compass for  
therapy. (And life...)

# Therapist Language in Session

What's important to you in this part of your life? What do you want to cultivate?

If no one could ever know \_\_\_\_\_, would you still care about pursuing it?

What kind of person do you want to be in this relationship? How do you want to show up to this situation?

If you had the thing you want, (e.g., money, a new job), how would you want to behave?

What does this grief tell you about what matters most?

# Turning Pain into Purpose





A scenic landscape photograph showing a stone path leading through a lush green field towards misty mountains. The path is made of irregular stones and is flanked by tall grass and wildflowers. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains, some of which are shrouded in mist or fog. A small wooden structure is visible on the right side of the path.

# Committed Action

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*Flexible Behavior*



# Committed Action

Behavioral Flexibility



Behavioral Inflexibility

Behavior organized primarily around living from a place of personal values

Responses that are sensitive to context and function

**Effective**

Flexible patterns of action that we can build up into larger and larger ways of behaving while allowing for all internal experience

Behavior organized primarily around the avoidance of distress

Habitual responses that are insensitive to context and function

**Ineffective**

E.g., inaction, persistent unworkable action

# What makes Committed Action so important?

Insight alone is not enough

New learning comes from practice

Committed action provides opportunities to practice choosing willingness again and again

Can promote the other core processes

The answer to pain is not painlessness – it is **engagement!**

# What gets in your way?

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What is a values-based move you have been considering but not acting on?

What thoughts and feelings show up when you think about making that move? What barriers show up?

Imagine what it would be like if you were to make that move.

What is one small step you could take in the direction of that move?

Would you be willing to take this one action while intentionally making space for whatever shows up?

## Therapist language in session

If you weren't feeling depressed, how would you be spending your time?

I know this is hard for you to talk about. You really are taking a step toward your values just by exploring this with me.

If you were a "confident" person, what do you think you would do when you were at the party?

If you could take one small step in the direction of this value, what might that be?

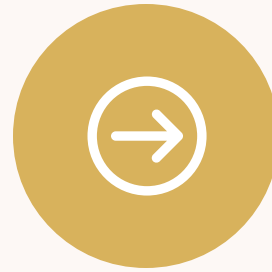
# Home Practice



THIS IS COMMITTED  
ACTION



PRACTICE BETWEEN  
SESSIONS IS VERY  
HELPFUL



KEEP IT MANAGEABLE  
– SMALL MOVES



PROCESS THEIR  
EXPERIENCES IN  
SESSION

# Thank You!