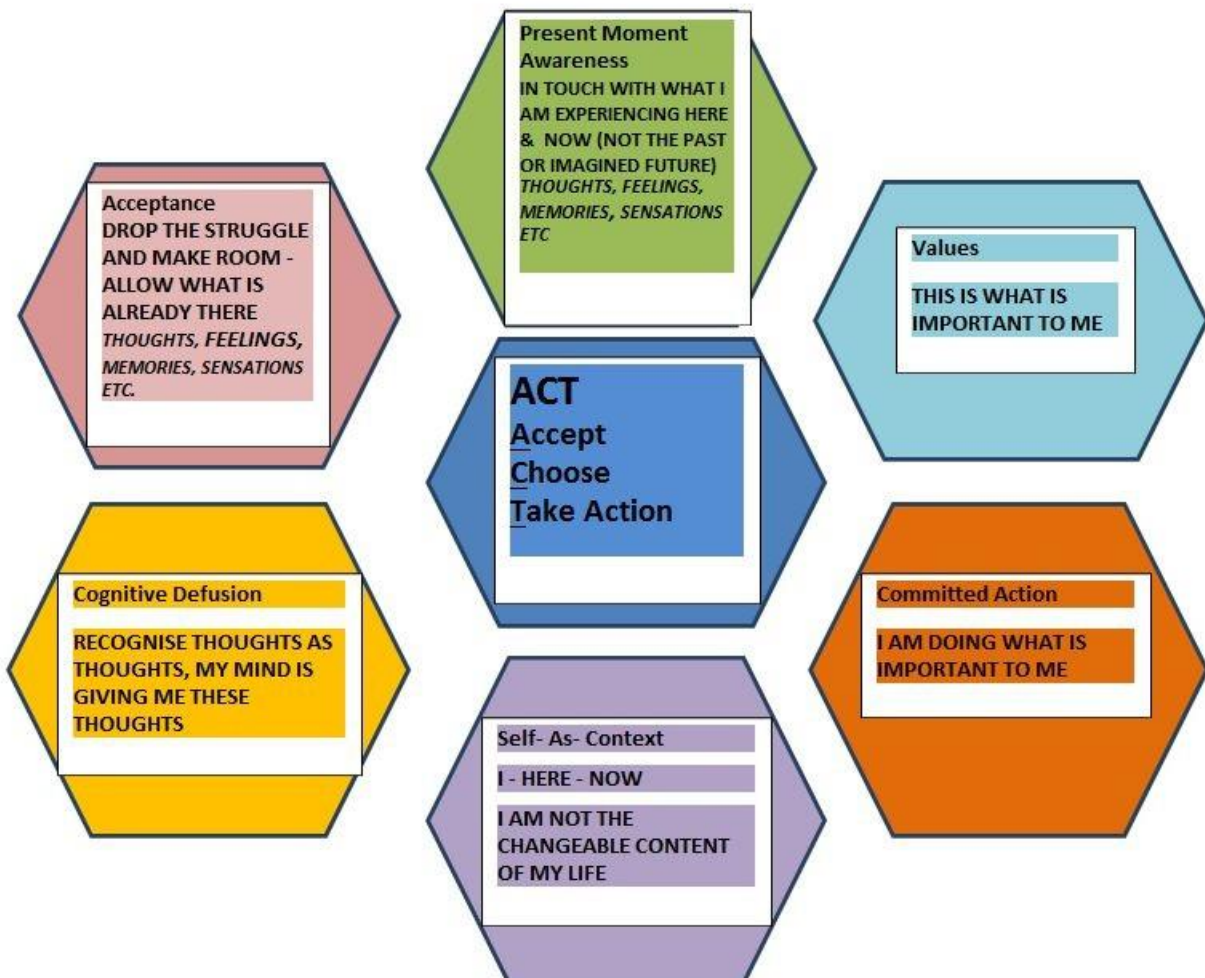


# ACT QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

## ACCEPTANCE & COMMITMENT THERAPY

### PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY



ELIZABETH MAHER

© Elizabeth Maher 2014

Except as provided by the New Zealand Copyright Act 1994 no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by : New Zealand Acceptance & Commitment Therapy Training Ltd.  
22A Taylor Street, Cambridge, 3434, New Zealand

ISBN: 978-0-473-23364-8

## Foreword

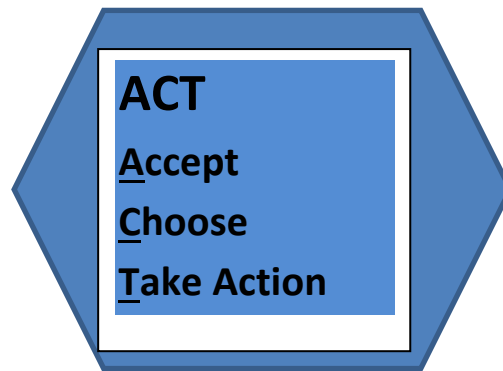
This booklet has been developed to support practitioners to develop their ACT knowledge and practice. It is designed as a quick reference guide covering the main ACT processes to serve as a reminder and refresher for those who may have already started on developing their ACT practice. It contains a variety of worksheets and metaphors. This material has been developed from a range of sources (as credited in the Acknowledgments), as well as helpful ideas from clients and colleagues.

A big thank you to everyone who has offered their helpful and constructive feedback and support. Thank you Louise Shepherd and Esther VW.

**Elizabeth Maher**

## Table of Contents

<i>Psychological flexibility</i>	4
<i>Stuck worksheet</i>	5-6
<i>Flex</i>	7
<i>Flex worksheet</i>	8
<i>Workability worksheet</i>	9
<i>Present moment awareness</i>	10
<i>Mindfulness</i>	11-12
<i>My stories</i>	13
<i>Acceptance</i>	14
<i>My struggle</i>	15
<i>Scary visitors</i>	16
<i>Cognitive defusion</i>	17
<i>Mind auction</i>	18
<i>Self as context</i>	19
<i>Jukebox</i>	20
<i>Values</i>	21
<i>Tornado Watch metaphor</i>	22
<i>Committed action</i>	23
<i>Valued living map</i>	24
<i>Pit-stop metaphor</i>	25
<i>ACT sandstorm metaphor</i>	26-28
<i>Some notes on self-compassion</i>	29
<i>ACT thought record</i>	30
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	31



## The goal of ACT is Psychological Flexibility

**‘in any given situation can I choose to respond in a way that is in line with what is important to me’**

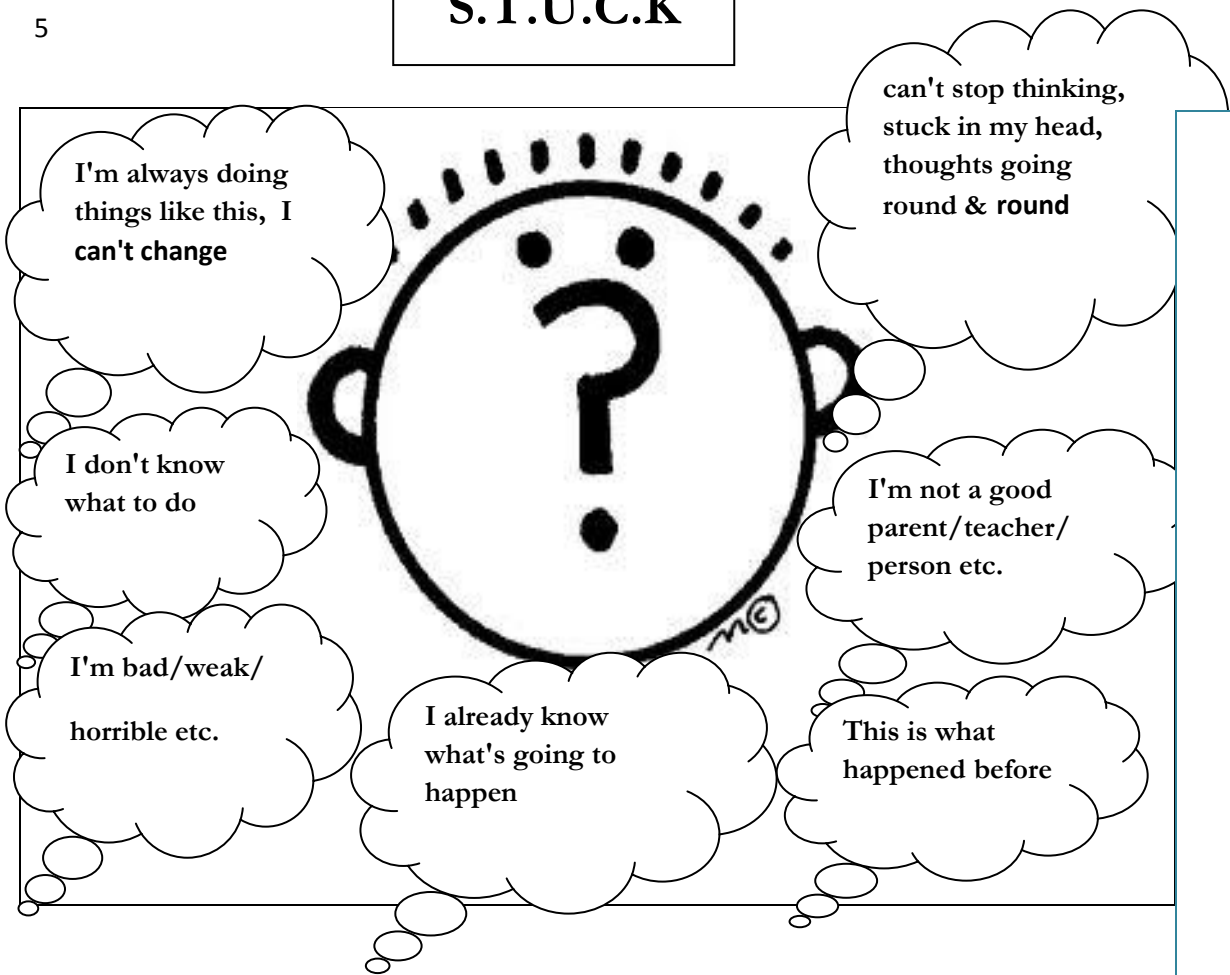
**Accept** – this is how I am feeling in this current situation, these are the thoughts that my mind is giving me in this current situation. Acceptance of what I am experiencing internally (feelings, thoughts, sensations, memories), make room for it.

**Choose** – I can choose how to respond to this situation. I can choose a response that works for me – moves me forward in line with what is important to me and what I want my life to be.

**Take Action** – in line with the choice that I have made, act in a way that moves me forward

- \* Feelings, thoughts, situations occur – internal and external events
- \* Experienced in a STUCK context leads to psychological inflexibility
- \* Experienced in a FLEX context leads to psychological flexibility

# S.T.U.C.K



Struggle

Trapped

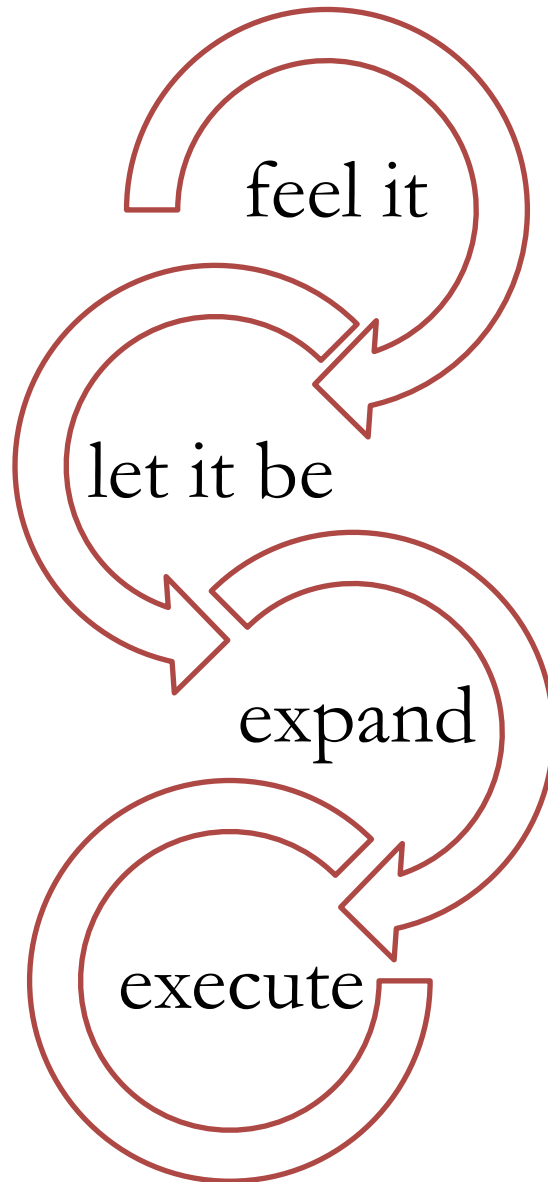
Undecided

Consumed

Knots

## Stuck Worksheet

<b>Stuck</b>	experiential avoidance	
<b>Trapped</b>	attachment to conceptualised past/future	
<b>Undecided</b>	lack of clarity/contact with values	
<b>Consumed</b>	cognitive fusion, attachment to conceptualised self	
<b>Knots</b>	inaction, impulsivity, persistence avoidance	

**F.L.EX.**

- \* **Feel it** – *what am I feeling, where am I feeling it in my body, what are the qualities of this feeling (e.g. size, colour, intensity, shape)*
- \* **Let it be** – *let go of the struggle with the feeling*
- \* **Expand** – *make room for the feeling, expand awareness*
- \* **Execute** – *choose and engage in an action that works in line with what is important to you*

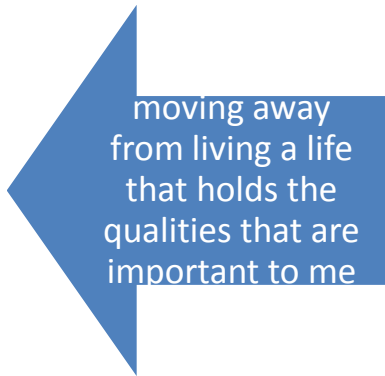


## F.L.EX Worksheet

<p>Feel it</p>	<p>present moment awareness</p> <p><b>IN TOUCH WITH WHAT I AM EXPERIENCING HERE &amp; NOW (NOT THE PAST OR IMAGINED FUTURE)</b> <i>THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, MEMORIES, SENSATIONS ETC</i></p>	
<p>Let it be</p>	<p>Acceptance</p> <p><b>DROP THE STRUGGLE AND MAKE ROOM - ALLOW WHAT IS ALREADY THERE</b> <i>THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, MEMORIES, SENSATIONS ETC.</i></p>	
<p>Expand - Make room for it</p>	<p>cognitive defusion</p> <p><b>RECOGNISE THOUGHTS AS THOUGHTS, MY MIND IS GIVING ME THESE THOUGHTS</b></p> <p>self-as-context</p> <p><b>I - HERE - NOW</b> <b>I AM NOT THE CHANGEABLE CONTENT OF MY LIFE</b></p>	
<p>Execute - Choose and engage in Workable Response</p>	<p>Values</p> <p><b>THIS IS WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO ME</b></p> <p>committed action</p> <p><b>I AM DOING WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO ME</b></p>	

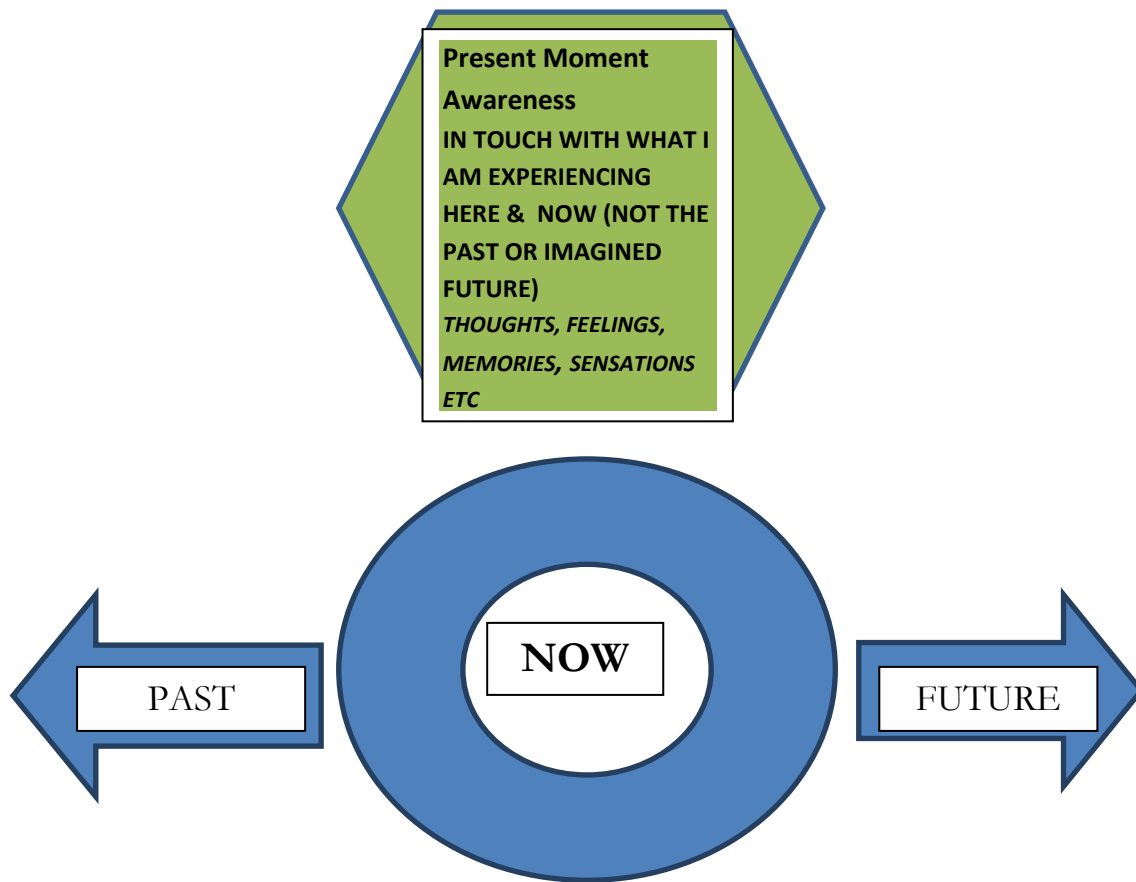
## Workability

### WHICH BEHAVIOUR WORKS FOR ME?



Behaviours moving away – UNWORKABLE	Behaviours moving me forward - WORKABLE

## Present Moment Awareness



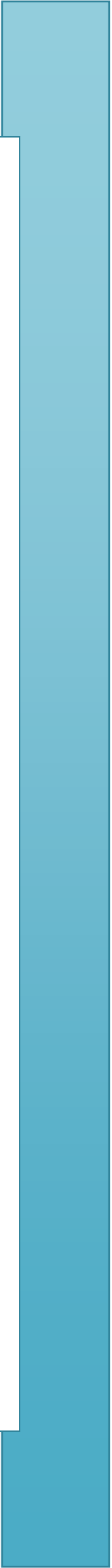
- \* Can I be in touch with what I am feeling, thinking, feeling in this moment?
- \* Can I allow myself to pay attention to this present moment with all that it holds?
- \* Being present **NOW** rather than my mind being pulled to an imagined future – or back to the past – worrying, fearful, anxious thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories.
- \* Am I ‘stuck in my head’ with all these, running on automatic pilot, not connected or engaged with the present moment.
- \* Can I step out of my head and **BE HERE FULLY NOW?**
- \* **MINDFULNESS** –  
 Constant flow of experience – what I am experiencing changes from moment to moment, I can connect with each momentary experience - allowing it to be there (as it already is) and allowing myself to then move on to the next experience.

## Mindfulness



- \* Awareness & thinking are different capacities
- \* learning to relate to our experience differently
- \* let go of goals and expectations
- \* engage with the experience just as it is
- \* Healing in awareness
- \* More accurate perception of experience
- \* Make room for distressing emotions
- \* Disentangle from unhelpful thoughts

# Mindfulness





For example:

Chapter 1 – I am a failure and I have these reasons to prove it and this is what always happens to me and is happening now

Chapter 2 – I am weak and I have these reasons to prove it and this is what always happens to me and is happening now

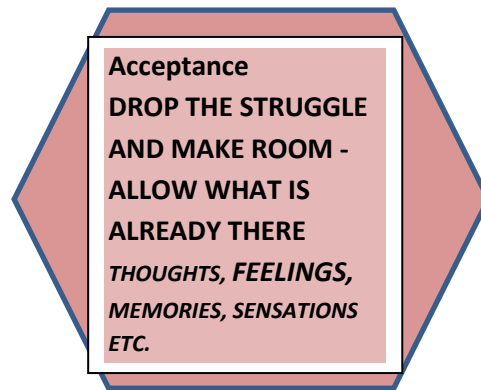
Chapter 3 – I am not good enough and I have these reasons to prove it and this is what always happens to me and is happening now

Chapter 4 – I am strong and I have these reasons to prove it and this is what always happens to me and is happening now

My choice:

- \* Hold on to the story and why it is true?
- \* Awareness of the present moment, awareness and recognition of the story being a story
- \* STUCK context - leads to automatic behaviours acting from the story
- \* FLEX context – the story and its thoughts and feelings may show up, and it is more workable for my actions in the present moment to be guided by what is important to me – my values – rather than being guided by my story.

## Acceptance



*“When suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool.”*

— *Chinua Achebe*

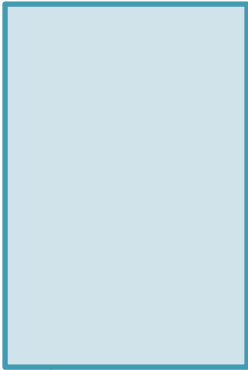
Being Human means experiencing a whole variety of internal experience (emotions, thoughts, sensations etc.)

Attempts to avoid internal experience (experiential avoidance) leads to **S.T.U.C.K**

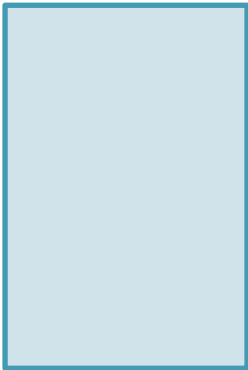
### Acceptance in ACT:

- \* Acceptance of what I am experiencing internally here and now
- \* I am feeling upset, angry, anxious etc. I can choose not to struggle against it
- \* I can allow what is already present in this moment
- \* I can allow myself to be in contact with the thoughts, feelings memories, feelings, sensations without trying to get rid of them
- \* It is the struggle and attempts to rid myself of these feelings that causes problems rather than the experience of these feelings
- \* Struggle – e.g. berating myself, self-argument, avoidance, substance misuse,
- \* I don't have to like it
- \* Willingness to have these experiences in the service of moving forward in the direction that is important to me – workable behavior

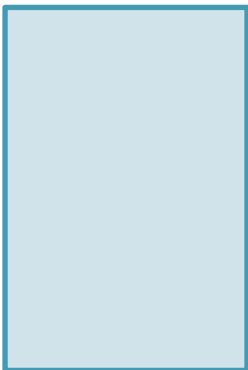
## My struggle



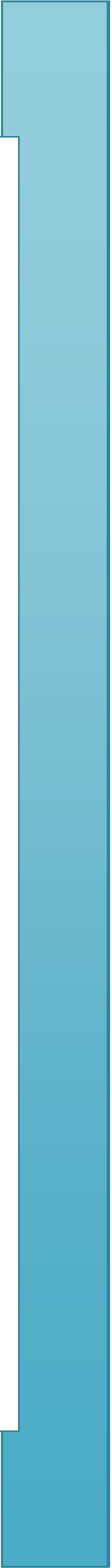
I struggle with these emotions, thoughts, sensations, memories



I struggle with the above in these ways (*ways to get rid of them, avoidance*)



the impact of my struggle is





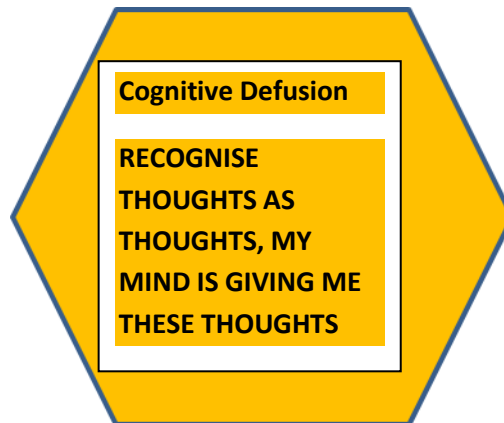
## Scary Visitors

I am standing at the door, holding the handle tightly to keep it locked. I feel scared, and that I can stop this and keep safe by putting my energy into holding the door tightly closed. My daughter comes up and asks for a cuddle. I want to give her a cuddle, but I'm afraid of letting go of the door handle, or not attending to it. I try and give her a cuddle with one hand, both of us can feel how distracted I am.

I want to give her all my attention in that moment, I want to be an attentive, engaged mother...I will have to let go of the door. As I do so, the door opens. I feel overwhelmed initially but then realize that I can make room for the feelings, emotions, fears, and thoughts, that come in. I realize that when I am holding on to the door handle, they take most (if not all) of my attention. When I allow them in, I am free to choose whether or not I focus on them. They are still there, but I can still be the mother that I want to be. I also have a clearer view of them, and this can help me come up with more effective ways of dealing with them.

Am I willing to drop the struggle and experience uncomfortable experiences in the service of moving forward and living in line with what is important to me?

## Cognitive Defusion



### **My mind has given me this thought**

My thoughts are not:

- \* Necessarily fact
- \* Orders
- \* Always helpful

My thoughts are:

- \* Products of my mind
- \* Variable
- \* Contradictory
- \* Transient

### **I can choose to:**

- \* Recognize my thoughts as thoughts
- \* Acknowledge that they are there and choose not to engage with them
- \* Choose to respond to the situation in line with what is important to me rather than what my mind is giving me

## Mind Auction

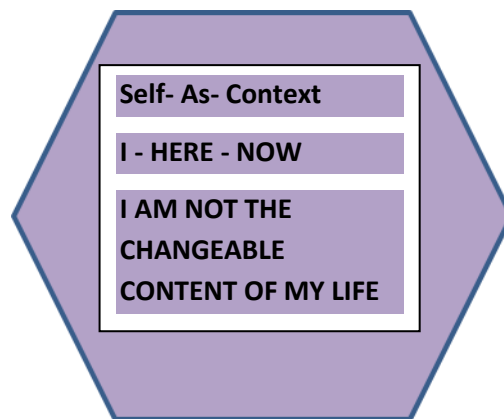
### AUCTION

GOING,  
GOING, GONE

Aim: Just because your mind is selling these thoughts, it doesn't mean that you have to buy them

- \* Identify the thoughts the client has been fusing with
- \* Instruct client that you are going to play an auction game in which your role is the mind selling various thoughts. If the client recognises any of the thoughts as ones that they have sometimes 'bought' i.e. engaged/fused with then they can buy them. The currency they have to pay for them is pain, hurt, anxiety, low mood, feeling stuck, giving up (you can add more like this).
- \* Therapist as auctioneer states various thoughts including those the client has fused with and for each one that the client 'buys', the client states clearly which of the currency they have paid with for that particular thought
- \* Eg. Selling – "I am a failure" – client buying with low mood
- \* Examples of thoughts – I am not good enough, nobody likes me, things are never going to work out, what's the point, it's all my fault, I'm an idiot
- \* Then ask client if they have been to a real auction and what advice they would give to someone going to a real auction (e.g. stick to your budget, pay only what it's worth, don't get carried away)
- \* Then ask client how this relates to the thoughts that they are buying
- \* Use this to educate about the nature of the mind as producing thoughts, we can't choose what thoughts pop into our head (relates to auctioneer still presenting sale items regardless of bidding – thoughts may keep coming up even if we don't buy them), are we willing to pay the price of fusion/buying the thoughts, we have a choice whether to buy them or not

## Self-as-Context



- \* I have experienced different things at different times in my life
- \* I am experiencing this here, now
- \* It was I who experienced that, there, then
- \* It is I who will experience that, there, then
- \* Can I connect with the sense of I who is/was/will be present in that moment – whatever the moment holds?
- \* Can I connect with this sense of I who experiences, but is not defined by the experience?
- \* This sense of I that is always present in the moment but not defined by it as what is in each moment is dynamic, changeable, transient

### Connecting with this sense of I;

- \* A sense of stability as the same I experiencing
- \* Facilitates acceptance of what I am feeling in this moment
- \* Recognizing this experience as being of this moment, experience will change from moment to moment
- \* Changeable flow of experience
- \* Facilitates defusion – I can allow the experience to come and go without being stuck and fusing with it
- \* I can choose to let go of unworkable patterns of behavior and scripts of being without losing my sense of self
- \* In each moment, no matter what it holds, I can choose how I want to respond to the script



The tunes in my jukebox;

- \* Memories
- \* Events
- \* Beliefs
- \* Ideas
- \* Experiences

These tunes play at different times, my choice is fusion, the tunes play and it feels as though I am in that place again, STUCK or

- \* I am not the content of my life
- \* Recognition that I am in the present moment, here, now
- \* Recognition of these tunes as experiences that I have/have had
- \* I can choose whether or not to dance to the tune – is it workable? Does it move me forward in line with my values?
- \* I can choose awareness – awareness of the tune, awareness of how it makes me feel, awareness of space from which I can choose – S.T.U.C.K or F.L.E.X

## Values



**What is important to me in terms of:**

- **Qualities that I want to reflect in my life**
- **What kind of person do I want to be?**

Our response in situations is often based on how we are feeling and what we are thinking at that moment.....rather than what is more workable and moves us forward in line with what is important to us

**Values are;**

- \* Not just words saying this is important to me....but actions – doing what is important to me
- \* A journey – there is no end point...moving forward living in line with my values
- \* Give me a sense of direction – I can use this to choose workable responses
- \* The reason for contacting the present moment, acceptance, defusion, connecting with stable sense of self
- \* An ongoing, dynamic, living process that can be actively used to guide our choices and behaviours. This is a skill that can be developed and used as an effective tool.

## Tornado Watch Metaphor



I love gardening, particularly growing my own vegetables. I enjoy sowing the seeds and watching them grow. I feel a great sense of pride that my loving care and attention has contributed to their growth. Now imagine that one day there is a tornado and my vegetable garden is ruined. How do you think I might feel? It is now important to me to try and prevent this happening again. Gradually what starts as an understandable concern grows into something else. I spend a lot of my time worrying about another tornado coming and ruining my garden and beating myself up about what I didn't do, the 'signs' I didn't see, and what I could have done. I start to spend a lot of time watching the weather reports, I spend a lot of time checking the skies, I spend a lot of time checking my plan of what to do if it happens again, I feel tense and anxious a lot of the time. Gradually all these things take up so much of my time that I am only gardening for short periods of time. My vegetables aren't doing so well and I am really upset about this.

Sometimes in our lives difficult upsetting events occur and we can feel as though the things we value have been damaged by this tornado. It is understandable to then feel upset and worried, and to try and plan for what we could do differently next time that maybe helpful. We may go onto tornado watch and spend a lot of our energy caught up in the anxiety and worry and neglecting what we actually value in our lives. If you weren't on tornado watch, what would you spend your energy on? What is your 'vegetable garden'? What would you be growing in your vegetable garden?

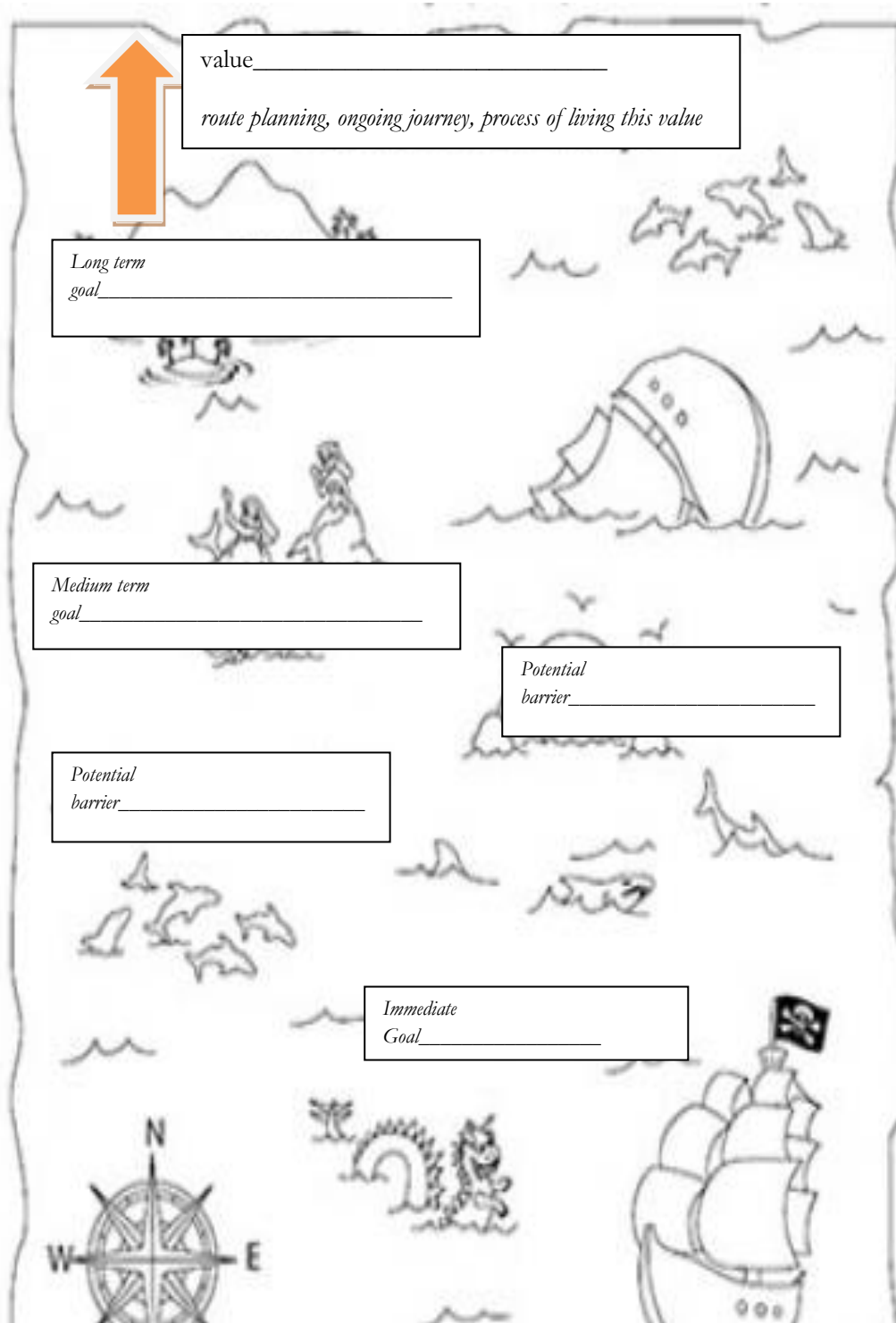
## Committed Action



- \* Values are the direction... committed actions are the steps along the way
- \* Each choice and action is important and they all link together in living my life in one with my values
- \* Behavioural activation strategies that are focused and based on behavioral analyses. Examples include;
  - Graded task assignments
  - effective goal setting (clear, specific, achievable)
  - behavioural experiments
  - activity charts; scheduling and monitoring (increasing pleasure and mastery)
  - skills training
- \* Facilitates acceptance (making room for emotions and engaging in valued activity anyway), defusion, valued living, expansion
- \* Identify potential barriers and strategies to address these
- \* Normalize setbacks



# Valued Living Map



## Pit-stop Metaphor



Pit-stop strategy is an essential part of completing the race. Pit-stops are planned along the way and are an opportunity to make necessary adjustments (e.g. change to wet tyres if it starts raining, make mechanical adjustments, support and advise the driver). It is impossible to race effectively without having a good pit-stop strategy. The pit-stop lane is connected at both ends to the racing lane, therefore still part of the race

In terms of therapy, set-backs can be viewed as pit-stops -

- \* opportunities to make the adjustments necessary to continue with our **valued life direction.**
- \* **opportunities to make a stand for and re-commit to our values, opportunity for committed action and goal setting.**

## ACT SANDSTORM METAPHOR

Sandstorms are violent wind storms that occur in the desert when high winds lift particles of sand into the air thus unleashing a turbulent and suffocating cloud of sand. They can occur unexpectedly and last for as little as a few minutes or as long as a few months. Regardless of how long they last, the effects can be abrasive and blinding to exposed skin. To survive a sandstorm one therefore has to experience the sandstorm from a different position of having exposed skin covered, and 'riding' the storm. A sandstorm can move whole sand dunes, thus changing the landscape. It can therefore be difficult to rely on the landscape to show you which direction to go in. The stars which are constant and remain unchanging can be used instead as a compass for guidance. There is therefore a real danger of getting lost in a whirling wall of sand, as well as the abrasive effects on exposed skin and eyes. To survive a sandstorm, one has to cover exposed skin, and then sit and wait for it to pass whilst experiencing the sights, sounds, smell, taste of the storm, but doing so from a position that allows you to experience it, but not be caught up and exposed in it. Major sandstorms are a natural occurrence – they are part of life in the desert and cannot be avoided.

Difficult life situations/worries/anxieties/fears/problems can be like sandstorms. They are a natural occurrence of life and living. We can sometimes feel as though we are caught in the middle of a sandstorm, lost (moving sand dunes and changing landscapes), and unsure of which direction to move in.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLEXIBILITY	ACT RESPONSE – PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY
<p>AVOIDANCE:</p> <p>Try and out-run the storm</p> <p>Don't go into any areas that the sandstorm may occur</p>	<p>ACCEPTANCE &amp; CONTACT WITH THE PRESENT MOMENT:</p> <p>Accept that sandstorms are a normal occurrence and fully experience them when they occur</p>
<p>COGNITIVE FUSION:</p> <p>Feelings of fear, anxiety, and worry become overwhelming and you identify with these feelings, and become one of the whirling sand particles</p>	<p>COGNITIVE DEFUSION, SELF AS CONTEXT, CONTACT WITH THE PRESENT MOMENT:</p> <p>Looking at the storm, not from it, you can experience the storm from this position, you can feel the fear, anxiety, and worry, but can view yourself in the context of someone experiencing the sandstorm rather than 'being' the sandstorm.</p>
<p>ATTACHMENT TO CONCEPTUALISED SELF:</p> <p>Define self as this fear/anxiety – "I am weak, I can't cope"</p>	<p>SELF AS CONTEXT:</p> <p>Storm is happening to you, but is not you, you can experience the fear/anxiety as the 'observer', experience them as events occurring now – not relational to a conceptualised self that is weak or unable to cope</p>
<p>LACK OF DEFINED VALUES:</p> <p>Poor visibility in a sandstorm, changing landscape, feel lost, loss of focus and direction</p>	<p>VALUES;</p> <p>The landscape changes but you can use what remains constant - the stars – your values, to guide you and give you a sense of direction</p>

<p>INACTION, IMPULSIVITY AVOIDANT PERSISTANCE &amp; DOMINANCE OF CONCEPTUALISED PAST:</p> <p>Lack of engagement with life and avoidance due to fear of the sandstorm and inability to cope</p>	<p>COMMITTED ACTION:</p> <p>In line with moving towards your valued direction</p>
<p>DOMINANCE OF CONCEPTUALISED FUTURE:</p> <p>Fear of the future, prediction that sandstorm will occur and expectation of not coping with it</p>	<p>INCREASED AWARENESS OF THE TRANSCEDENT SELF:</p> <p>Sandstorms may re-occur, unavoidable part of living, and although they may be difficult experiences, you can experience them, and still lead a life with meaning and fulfilment guided by your values</p>

## Some Notes On Self-compassion

### Expectations and standards

- \* expectations and standards are workable when they inspire us, move us forward, motivate us to keep trying
- \* expectations and standards are unworkable when used to 'beat ourselves up with'!
- \* there may be times when we feel we have not met our standards and expectations – self-compassion can be a more workable response facilitating acceptance of how we feel, but also then make room for this, and move on.

### Learning

- \* self-compassion allows us to recognize the journey of learning
- \* facilitates acceptance and making room for 'winding paths' with pit-stops along the way.

### Human 'be-ing'

- \* Experiencing a variety of experiences, pleasant or unpleasant
- \* We can hold both at the same time
- \* Constant, changeable flow of experience

### Mindfulness

- \* Keeping the mindfulness stance beyond the mindfulness exercise
- \* Openness and non-judgment extending to holding our pain (and ourselves) without condemnation but with care and compassion
- \* Acceptance of the present moment as it is



## Acknowledgements

Bach, P., & Moran, D. (2008). *ACT in practice: Case conceptualization in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Dahl, J. C., & Lundgren, T. L. (2006). *Living beyond your pain: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to ease chronic pain*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Eifert, G. H., & Forsyth, J. P. (2005). *Acceptance & Commitment Therapy for anxiety disorders: A practitioner's treatment guide to using mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based behavior change strategies*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Harris, R. (2008). *The Happiness Trap: How to stop struggling and start living*. Boston, MA: Trumpeter

Harris, R. (2009). *ACT Made Simple: An Easy-To-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Hayes, S. C., and Smith, S. (2005) *Get out of your mind & into your life – The New Acceptance & Commitment Therapy*, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Hayes, S. C. (Ed.). (2007). *ACT in Action DVD series*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Hayes, S. C., & Strosahl, K. D. (Eds.). (2004). *A practical guide to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Hayes, S. C., Follette, V. M., & Linehan, M. M. (Eds.). (2004). *Mindfulness and acceptance: Expanding the cognitive-behavioral tradition*. New York: Guilford Press.

Luoma, J. B., Hayes, S. C., & Walser, R. D. (2007). *Learning ACT: An Acceptance & Commitment Therapy Skills-Training Manual for Therapists*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger & Reno, NV: Context Press.

Hayes, S.C, Strosahl, K.D., & Wilson, K.G. (2012). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change (2nd edition)*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.