

**Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
(ACT) Training Manual for Stress
Reduction in Patients with Inflammatory
Bowel Disease (IBD)**

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Session 1

Description of ACT:

This course is based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or ACT. ACT is scientifically based psychotherapy that has been shown to be useful for a wide range of problems. Research has supported ACT for treating people with anxiety, depression, delusions, chronic stress and different health problems like diabetes, chronic pain, obesity, and cancer.

The research on which ACT is based suggests that many of the common sense ways in which we try to overcome problems in our lives can be unhelpful. As a result, ACT challenges some of the most conventional ways of thinking about how we approach these problems. What ACT asks you to do is fundamentally change the way in which you deal with your personal experience: your thoughts, feelings, emotions and so on.

Introduction:

Say your name, why you were called your name, and what you hope to get from the course.

Feeling Good Exercise:

We are going to start with an exercise that involves looking at your beliefs about how to deal with difficulties in your life. There is a sheet in your folders called the ‘feeling good exercise.’ It consists of seven pairs of statements. Select one statement with a tick from each pair – either A or B – that most reflects your current belief.

From a young age we are taught that we should be able to control our thoughts and feelings: “cheer up,” “chill out,” “there’s nothing to be afraid of” and so on. This belief can become really ingrained in us. The more you selected option A on the sheet, the greater the likelihood that trying to control how you think and feel is creating suffering in your life.

A series of experiments by a Harvard Psychologist, Daniel Wegner, showed why this is the case. He studied individuals’ ability to get rid of an unwanted thought. In the early studies he asked them first to think of a ‘white bear’ and then asked them to get rid of this thought from their minds. He found that not only could they not do this; thoughts of white bears eventually began to appear more than ever – a rebound effect. A lot of research has since shown that suppressing thoughts and emotions doesn’t work over the long term. In other words, not only does thought suppression not work, it actually increases the frequency of the very thoughts we are trying to get rid of. Therefore, you can guess what will happen if you try to force a thought like “I’m not good enough” or “I can’t cope” out of your mind. Despite this, research shows that approximately 80% of people try to get rid of unwanted thoughts.

Why do we do this, attempt to control the way we think and feel? Control works very well in the external world – it’s a major reason why humans are the dominant species on the planet despite not having the strength of gorillas or the speed of cheetahs and so on. We can control things in the world outside the skin by problem solving: If you don’t like something, you figure out how to get rid of it, and then get rid of it. For example, if you don’t like a leak in the roof you can fix it. The problem is this approach doesn’t work well when we apply it to the world inside the skin – how we think and feel.

Creative Hopelessness:

Using the efforts and evaluations sheet, I would like you to list a couple of thoughts and emotions that you have from time-to-time that you don't like, for example, stress, sadness or anxiety. Then, list the things you sometimes do to get rid of these thoughts and emotions. Finally, rate how effective each of these strategies are, first in the short-term and then in the long-term – rate them from 1 to 5, where 1 is not effective at all and 5 is extremely effective.

- Discuss this exercise in pairs.
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?
 - Effective short-term but ineffective long-term: this is a really serious problem because short-term effects are far more reinforcing – they have a much greater influence over how we behave – than long term effects.
 - What are the costs associated with this?

Despite what we have just talked about, for many people overcoming a problem like stress refers not only to an ultimate end but also an end achieved by a specific means. For example, overcoming stress must first involve eliminating stressful feelings. Naturally people do not want these feelings, but nobody wants to sit at their 90th birthday and somebody to stand up to say how “I never felt stressed or anxious, but never did anything with his life.” In line with this, we are going to take a look at the things in life that are most important to you.

Values card sorting exercise:

Each card in the deck describes a personal value or quality that you can bring to your actions on a daily basis. What I would like you to do is to sort your deck of cards into three piles:

1. Values that are very important to me
2. Values that are somewhat important to me
3. Values that are not very important to me

There are no right or wrong answers to this – You should sort the cards based on what you yourself personally value, rather than what other people think should be important to you.

- Set aside the pile of cards containing the values that are not very important to you.
- Go through the remaining two piles, and pick out the top three values that are most important to you.

Homework

1. Now, I would like you to select which of the three values you would most like to work on.
2. I want you to think of something you could do: a specific goal that you could achieve between now and our session next week that would move you closer to the value you selected – to be a little bit more like the person you want to be.
3. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is “I am absolutely certain I am going to do this” and 0 means “there is no way I am going to do this”, right now, being brutally honest, rate how likely it is that you will complete this goal between now and our next session.
4. If the answer is lower than 7, set yourself a smaller goal.

5. Finally, if you feel comfortable, discuss your goal with the person beside you. Research shows that if you state your goal to at least one other person, you are more likely to follow through with it. However, if you are not comfortable discussing your goal, you can discuss how you found the process of clarifying your personal values and anything you noticed about it.
6. Is anyone willing to share their goal with the group?

As we've already discussed, spending your time and energy trying to avoid unwanted feelings stress and anxiety and get rid of thoughts such as "I can't handle this stress" or "I am a failure" is not useful – the evidence shows you don't get a good return for your investment. We want to invest our time and energy moving towards what we have identified in that exercise: the things in life that are important to us. As we go forward with the course we will look at specific ways to help you to do that as you learn more effective ways to interact with stressors in your life.

FEELING GOOD EXERCISE

Listed here are a number of beliefs about negative moments in our lives, for example, feeling bad, having unwanted thoughts, memories or unpleasant physical sensations. For each pair of beliefs, check the one that is closest to how you currently address these moments in your life.

- ____ 1a. Negative experiences will hurt you if you don't do something to get rid of them.
- ____ 1b. Negative experiences can't hurt you, even if they feel bad.
- ____ 2a. When negative experiences occur, the goal is to do something to get them under control so they hurt less.
- ____ 2b. The attempt to control negative experiences creates problems; the goal is to let them be there, and they will change as a natural part of living.
- ____ 3a. The way to handle negative experiences is to understand why I'm having them, and then use that knowledge to eliminate them.
- ____ 3b. The way to handle negative experiences is to notice they're present without necessarily analyzing and judging them.
- ____ 4a. The way to be "healthy" is to learn better and better ways to control and eliminate negative moments.
- ____ 4b. The way to be "healthy" is to learn to have negative moments and to live effectively.
- ____ 5a. The inability to control or eliminate a negative reaction is a sign of weakness.
- ____ 5b. Needing to control a negative experience is a problem.
- ____ 6a. The appearance of negative experiences is a clear sign of personal problems.
- ____ 6b. The appearance of negative experiences is an inevitable part of being alive.
- ____ 7a. People who are in control of their lives are generally able to control how they react and feel.
- ____ 7b. People who are in control of their lives need not try to control their reactions or feelings.

Efforts & Evaluations Worksheet (EEW)

Write down everything you have done in an attempt to solve your problems. Be thorough and specific. You should be able to come up with several examples of strategies you've used in your attempts to solve these problems (e.g., swearing to stop doing something, criticising yourself, talking to others etc.).

Then honestly evaluate how far these strategies have brought you toward solving these problems.

Attempt:

Evaluation:

Overall Evaluation:

Values Assessment Homework

The following are areas of life that are valued by some people. Not everyone has the same values, and this worksheet is not a test to see if you have the “correct” values.

Try to describe your values as if no-one would ever read this worksheet. As you work, try to think about each area in terms of both concrete goals you might have, and also in terms of more general life directions. So, for instance, you might value getting married as a concrete goal and being a loving spouse as a valued direction. The first example, getting married, is something that could be completed. On the other hand, being a loving spouse, does not have an end. You could always be more loving, no matter how loving you already were.

Work through each of the life domains. These domains overlap. You may have trouble keeping family separate from marriage/intimate relations. Do your best to keep them separate. Your therapist will provide assistance when you discuss this goals and values assessment. Clearly number each section, and keep them separate from one another. You may not have any valued goals in certain areas. You may skip those areas and discuss them directly with your therapist.

It is also important that you write down what you would value if there was nothing in your way. We are not asking what you think you could realistically get, or what you or others think you deserve. We want to know what you care about, what you would want to work towards, in the best of all situations. While doing the worksheet, pretend that magic happened, and that anything is possible!

Marriage/Couples/Intimate Relations

In this section, we would like you to write down a description of the person you would like to be in an intimate relationship. Write down the type of relationship you would want to have. Try to focus on your role in that relationship.

Family Relations

In this section, describe the type of brother/sister, son/daughter. Father/mother you want to be. Describe the qualities you would want to have in these relationships. Describe how you would treat these people if you were the ideal ‘you’ in these various relationships.

Friendships/Social Relations

In this section, write down what it means to you to be a good friend. If you were able to be the best friend possible, how would you behave toward your friends? Try to describe an ideal friendship.

Employment

In this section, describe what type of work you would like to do. This can be very specific or very general. (Remember this is an ideal world!) After writing about the type of work you would like to do, write about why that appeals to you. Next, discuss what kind of worker you would like to be with respect to your employer and coworkers. What would you want your work relations to be like?

Education/Training

If you would like to pursue an education, formally or informally, or to pursue some specialised training, write about that. Write about why this sort of training or education appeals to you.

Recreation

Discuss the type of recreational life you would like to have, include hobbies, sports, leisure activities, etc.

Spirituality

We are not necessarily referring to organised religion in this section. What we mean by spirituality is whatever that means to you. This might be as simple as communing with nature, or as formal as participation in an organised religious group. Whatever spirituality means to you is fine. If this is an important area of life, write about what you would want it to be. As with all of the other areas, if this is not an important part of your values, skip to the next section.

Citizenship

For some people, participating in community affairs is an important part of life. For instance, some people feel that it is important to volunteer with the homeless or elderly, lobby governmental policy makers at the local or central level, participate as a member of a group committed to conserving wildlife, or to participate in the service structure of a community service group. If these sorts of community oriented activities are important to you, write about what direction you would like to take in these areas. Write about what appeals to you in this area.

Physical well-being

In this section, include your values related to maintaining your physical well-being. Write about health-related issues such as sleep, diet, exercise, smoking etc.

ACT Course

In this section, write about what you would like to accomplish in the ACT course. What do you hope to do or become in the ACT group? What sort of group member would you want to be?

Session 2

Recap of Session 1

Last week we started off by looking at how trying to control our thoughts and feelings can create problems in our lives. We talked about how trying to force thoughts out of our minds, for example “I am not good enough”, can backfire and actually increase the thoughts that we are trying to get rid of.

We also carried out an exercise looking at different strategies that we use to get rid unwanted thoughts and feelings such as stress or anxiety and found that these strategies usually work in the short-term but are not effective in the long-term and often have significant costs.

We finished off by looking at the things in life that are important to you.

Review homework

Rationale

This week we are going to focus on developing skills that will help you to handle your mind more effectively when it starts hindering you moving in the direction you want your life to go.

Believe it or not, the human mind evolved to think negatively. Our ancient ancestors lived in a world of constant danger – dangerous animals with big teeth roamed the land and so on. Back then a person’s mind had to be very alert to danger, anticipating anything that could hurt or harm them in any way. If two cavemen were walking along and noticed a bush shaking and one thought “I think I should get out of here,” while the other thought “everything is okay, there is nothing to worry about,” who do you think would be more likely to survive? These were the people that survived to raise children and as a result we inherited this mind-set. At its most basic, the modern mind is essentially a “don’t get killed machine” that warns us about anything and everything that could go wrong: “I will fail,” “she will reject me,” “I will never be happy.”

Down through the years, when thoughts like this were creating a problem in a person’s life, psychologists would often try to help the person change or control these thoughts. The problem with this is that most research now shows that this usually does not work very well. We are going to look at an alternative approach that has been found to be more effective.

Although they can be really unpleasant sometimes, thoughts in-and-of themselves are not dangerous; the danger is when we really buy into unhelpful thoughts and take them literally. By this I mean when you take a thought, for example “I cannot cope,” and consider it as an absolute fact or gospel truth. What we are going to practice now is learning how to stop investing time, effort and energy in getting caught up in these thoughts and stories – when doing so prevents you from taking your life in the direction that you want it to go.

It is important to say now that we have no interest in whether your thoughts are right or wrong, good or bad, true or false – we are only interested in the extent to which they are helpful in taking your life in the direction that you want it to go.

Pushing away paper

Imagine in front of you is 1) everything that matters in your life: the people, activities and places that you love, 2) all of the difficulties in your life are out there too and 3) all of the tasks that you have to perform day-to-day to keep your life working.

Now imagine that the card represents a thought that you don't want. Now I want you to take it in both hands and push it away from you as far as you can. Straighten out your elbows and get it as far away from you as you can.

Keep pushing it away and notice 3 things: 1) how tiring this is, 2) how distracting it is from the things that really matter to you and 3) how difficult it is to perform the activities that keep your life working.

Now I want you to rest the card on your lap. 1) Notice how much less effort this is, 2) notice how much easier it is to engage with things in life, 3) (*move hands around*) and how much easier it now is to take action.

Notice that the thought has not disappeared. But you have found a new way of responding to it, so that it doesn't hold you back or stop you from taking effective action and engaging in your life.

And of course, when you have a useful thought – use it: thoughts give us important information. But if not, just let it sit there.

Defusion/Fusion

The technical name for this state of getting really caught up or entangled in your thoughts is fusion, just like when two pieces of metal are welded together we say they are fused. On the other hand, what we are practicing is known as defusion: it is a new way of relating to thoughts so that they have much less of an impact and influence over our behaviour.

Observing your thoughts: Leaves on a Stream

This will be an eyes-closed exercise.

Imagine a beautiful slow-moving stream. The water flows over rocks, around trees, descends downhill, and travels through a valley. Once in a while, a big leaf drops into the stream and floats away down the river. Imagine you are sitting beside that stream on a warm, sunny day, watching the leaves float by.

Now become conscious of your thoughts. Each time a thought pops into your head, imagine that it is written on one of those leaves. If you think in words, put them on the leaf as words. If you think in images, put them on the leaf as an image. The goal is to stay beside the stream and allow the leaves on the stream to keep flowing by. Don't try to make the stream go faster or slower; don't try to change what shows up on the leaves in any way. If the leaves disappear, or if you mentally go somewhere else, or if you find that you are in the stream or

on a leaf, just stop and notice that this happened. File that knowledge away and then once again return to the stream, watch a thought come into your mind, write it on a leaf, and let the leaf float away downstream.

- Discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?

Homework

Leaves on the stream audio.

Session 3

Recap of session 2

In session 2 we looked at how thoughts when believed as literally true can cause problems for us. We talked about a more useful way to view thoughts is to observe them as thoughts and notice whether following the thought is useful in bringing us closer to the things we value. We looked at the leaves on the stream technique as a way to practice noticing thoughts.

Review of homework

Rationale

Mindfulness will help to increase your awareness of your thoughts and emotions and your reaction to them and will provide you with a new skill that can be used in response to stress. Mindfulness usually involves paying attention to things that we ordinarily don't pay attention to and for this reason we are going to begin with a brief mindfulness exercise that focuses on paying attention to the feeling of the breath moving in and out of the body, followed by mindful eating and walking.

Mindfulness of Breathing

Begin by getting comfortable in your chair with your back straight, feet flat on the floor and your shoulders loose.

Now gently close your eyes.

For the next few minutes, there is nowhere you have to be, nothing you have to do, or no one you have to please. It is your time: time for you to purely and simply be present – here and now – and to notice what is happening, with an attitude of openness and curiosity.

And gently beginning to notice your breathing.

Noticing anything at all about the sensations of your breathing.

You may notice the sensation of air as it enters your nostrils... feeling cool on the way in and warm on the way out.

And taking a few breaths now as you notice the sensation of air flowing in and out... cool on the in-breath and warm on the out-breath.

You may notice the rise and fall of your chest and stomach as you breathe... rising on the in-breath and falling on the out-breath. Take a few moments to observe this.

As you continue to notice your breathing, you may notice that your breathing is rapid... or you may notice that your breathing is shallow... whatever you notice about your breathing, there is no need to change it... simply observe your breathing pattern... and if your breathing pattern changes, simply notice that as well.

And continuing to notice your breathing by paying attention to the rise and fall of your stomach. With the in-breath your stomach may rise a lot or it may rise just a little... whatever

you notice, continue to observe as you focus on your breathing and the sensation of the rise and fall of your stomach.

From time to time, your attention will become distracted by thoughts or feelings. Each time this happens, simply notice what distracted you, then bring your attention back to your breath. No matter how often your attention wanders – whether a hundred times or a thousand – your aim is simply to note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to the rise and fall of your stomach.

Continue to notice your breathing... gently returning to your breath when thoughts arise... for a few more moments.

And now getting a sense of whereabouts you are in the room... the sounds around you. And when you're ready opening your eyes. Noticing what you can see... hear... and feel. If you like, have a stretch.

- Discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?

Raisin Exercise

A First Taste of Mindfulness

Holding First, take a raisin and hold it in the palm of your hand or between your finger and thumb.

Focusing on it, imagine that you've just dropped in from Mars and have never seen an object like this before in your life.

Seeing Take time to really see it; gaze at the raisin with care and full attention. Let your eyes explore every part of it, examining the highlights where the light shines, the darker hollows, the folds and ridges, and any asymmetries or unique features.

Touching Turn the raisin over between your fingers, exploring its texture, maybe with your eyes closed if that enhances your sense of touch.

Smelling Holding the raisin beneath your nose, with each inhalation drink in any smell, aroma, or fragrance that may arise, noticing as you do this anything interesting that may be happening in your mouth or stomach.

Placing Now slowly bring the raisin up to your lips, noticing how your hand and arm know exactly how and where to position it. Gently place the object in the mouth, without chewing, noticing how it gets into the mouth in the first place. Spend a few moments exploring the sensations of having it in your mouth, exploring it with your tongue.

Tasting When you are ready, prepare to chew the raisin, noticing how and where it needs to be for chewing. Then, very consciously, take one or two bites into it and notice what happens in the aftermath, experiencing any waves of taste that emanate from it as you continue chewing. Without swallowing yet, notice the bare sensations of taste and texture in the mouth and how these may change over time, moment by moment, as well as any changes in the object itself.

Swallowing When you feel ready to swallow the raisin, see if you can first detect the intention to swallow as it comes up, so that even this is experienced consciously before you actually swallow the raisin.

Following Finally, see if you can feel what is left of the raisin moving down into your stomach, and sense how the body as a whole is feeling after completing this exercise in mindful eating.

- Discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?

Mindful Walking

Begin by standing still and becoming aware of your body and how it feels. Notice your posture, feel the weight of your body pressing down toward the ground, and your heels pushing into your shoes; become aware of all the subtle movements that are keeping you balanced and upright.

Allow your knees to bend very slightly and feel your hips as your center of gravity. Take a few deep belly breaths and bring your awareness into the present moment.

Now begin to walk slightly slower than normal pace, maintaining an almost imperceptible bend in the knees. With each step, be aware of the gentle heel-to-toe rhythm as each foot makes contact with the ground.

Breathe naturally and fully, deeply filling your lungs with each inhalation, but being careful not to strain or struggle in any way. Allow your eyes to focus softly ahead of you, taking in as much of the periphery as comfortable. Try to maintain a soft body and breathing awareness as you walk naturally and easily.

When your attention drifts away from the sensations of walking and breathing, take notice of those thoughts, moods, or emotions without judgment and gently guide your awareness back to the present moment, back to the walking.

Continue this mindful walking for anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes or longer if comfortable.

When it's time to end the meditation, allow yourself to come to a gentle halt. Pause—once again experiencing yourself standing still—as you feel the earth beneath your feet. Take a few deep breaths as this session comes to close. Slowly return to your regular activity.

- Discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?

Homework

The mindfulness exercises we practiced in this session are useful for acquiring skills that can be helpful when coping with stress, but what is most important is how you use these skills in your day-to-day life.

Over the next week I would like you to choose a routine activity from your daily life and each day make a conscious decision to bring moment-by-moment awareness to that activity. For example you might choose an activity like drinking tea or coffee, having a shower, brushing your teeth or going for a walk. During the activity let your awareness focus on the sensations and movements of your body and use your breath to help you to stay focused. I have a worksheet here to help you to note each time you tried this and any observations you had.

Choose a **routine activity** from your daily life and each day make a conscious decision to bring moment by moment awareness to that activity. Possibilities for this could include: drinking tea or coffee, folding clothes, having a shower, brushing your teeth, going for a walk etc. Let your awareness focus on the sensations and movements of your body and use your breath to help you to stay anchored in the present moment.

Day/Date	Routine Activity	Comments

Session 4

Recap of Session 3

Last week we began by looking at how developing the skill of mindfulness can increase your awareness of your experience and can provide you with a useful tool that can be used in response to life stressors. We worked on developing this skill by practicing a couple of mindfulness exercises such as mindfulness of breath, mindful walking and the raisin exercise. We finished off by talking about carrying this forward into everyday life by practicing mindful awareness of routine activities.

Review of homework

Rationale

We are now going to work on developing a skill that is central to the ACT model and will help you cope with life stress in an alternative way. A useful way to introduce this is by using the polygraph metaphor. Suppose I had you wired up to the best polygraph machine that's ever been built. This is the perfect machine, the most sensitive ever made. When you are all wired up to it, there is no way you can be aroused or anxious without the machine knowing it. So I tell you that you have a very simple task here: all you have to do is to stay relaxed. If you get the least bit anxious, however, I will know it. I know you want to try hard, but I want to give you an extra incentive, so I also have a .44 Magnum which I'll hold to your head. If you just stay relaxed, I won't blow your brains out, but if you get nervous (and I'll know it because you're wired up to this perfect machine), I'm going to have to kill you. Your brains will be all over the walls. So, just relax! . . . What do you think would happen? Guess what you'd get? Bang. How could it be anything else? The tiniest bit of anxiety would be terrifying. You'd be going "Oh, my God! I'm getting anxious! Here it comes!" Bang! You're dead meat. How could it be any other way?

Contrast behaviour that can be controlled with that which cannot "Hoover up the floor or I'll shoot you" is okay, but "Relax or I'll shoot you" is not okay. Show how this maps onto all of the patients situations. Now you have the perfect polygraph machine already hooked up to you: it's your own nervous system. It is better than any machine humans have ever made. You can't really feel something and not have your own nervous system in contact with it, almost be definition. And you've got something pointed at you that is more powerful and more threatening than any gun –your own self-esteem, self-worth, the workability of your life. So you are actually in a situation very much like this. You're holding the gun to your own head and saying "Relax". So guess what you get? *Bang!*

Today we are going to look at how struggling with emotions like stress and anxiety can take you away from what is important and provide an alternative to avoidance to help move the group the direction they want their lives to go – even when you are faced with unpleasant feelings and emotions. Mindful awareness of the present moment, the topic of last week's session, is one way to do this. This week we are going to look at a way of being okay with the fact that our lives are filled with experiences that are both pleasant and unpleasant – we call this way acceptance.

That makes me feel exercise

Group members get into pairs of two. One of the pair is asked to volunteer to go first. The first person in the group is instructed to start by identifying what they are currently feeling and labeling it in the sentence 'I feel X'. The other member of the pair is instructed to respond with how the persons identified feeling makes them feel by saying 'That makes me feel Y'. They are instructed to go back and forth starting each sentence with the convention 'That makes me feel' and then identifying how the persons proceeding emotion made them feel. For example:

Person 1 'I feel anxious'

Person 2 'That makes me feel sad'

Person 1 'That makes me feel remorse'

Person 2 'That makes me feel uncomfortable'

Person 1 'That makes me feel annoyed'

Person 2 'That makes me feel curious'

Person 1 'That makes me feel calm'

Let the pairs continue to do this for 1-2 minutes.

- Discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?

Physicalizing Exercise

I think of a situation, person, or event in your life that's a little bit stressful. It doesn't have to be a major life issue, just something that has been bothering you lately, something or someone that might bring up some feeling or reaction in your body when you think about it. Sit yourself upright in the chair. Nice and dignified, but not too rigid [Facilitator demonstrates]. Relax your shoulders and jaw. Gently close your eyes, and start becoming aware of the sensation and position of your body sitting here in the chair ~**pause**~ noticing your posture ~**pause**~ noticing the position of your head on top of your shoulders ~**pause**~ now broaden your awareness to notice all the many sensations throughout your entire body right now ~**pause**~ from the top of your head to the tip of your toes ~**pause**~ like developing a strong sense of your entire body sitting here in this chair, in the present moment ~**pause**~ and now narrow your awareness to your **stomach** as you breathe in and as you breathe out ~**pause**~ noticing the physical sensations in your **stomach** as you breathe ~**pause**~ each time your mind drifts away to other things, returning your awareness to current sensations in your **stomach** ~**pause**~ I would now like you to think about the stressful event, situation, or person that you've chosen for this exercise; allow yourself to think about your challenging or stressful situation for a few moments ~**pause**~ really "go there" in your mind ~**pause**~ really put yourself in the situation ~**pause**~ and, as you do this, become aware of any changes in your body ~**pause**~ do you notice any particular physical reactions in your body as you think about this event or situation? ~**pause**~ If you do notice a particular reaction or feeling, become aware of it *as a physical sensation* ~**pause**~

become aware of exactly whereabouts in your body you experience this feeling or sensation ~**pause**~ perhaps draw an imaginary line around the sensation to identify exactly whereabouts in your body it sits ~**pause**~ even if the sensation or feeling is unpleasant, just notice it for a moment for what it *actually* is—a physical sensation—not something you have to get rid of or struggle with ~**pause**~ bringing some curiosity to your feeling or sensation, as if you haven't noticed it in this way before ~**pause**~ Still thinking about the stressful event or situation you've chosen for this exercise, what I'd like you to do is imagine that your sensation or feeling is now a physical object that has popped out of you and is now sitting there on the desk in front of you ~**pause**~ if this sensation or feeling *were* a physical object, what kind of shape would it take on? ~**pause**~ what would it look like? ~**pause**~ What colour would your feeling object be? ~**pause**~ What kind of texture would your feeling or sensation have if it were an object? ~**pause**~ If the object could move, how fast does it look like it could move? ~**pause**~ How heavy does it look? ~**pause**~ Just imagining for a moment this feeling or sensation as if it had physical properties ~**pause**~ What would this sensation or feeling look like if you could step back from it like this ~**pause**~ [slightly longer pause] and now I'd like you to *welcome back* your feeling object, back inside your body where it belongs ~**pause**~ and once again spend a few moments identifying whereabouts in your body you experience this sensation ~**pause**~ where is it in your body exactly? ~**pause**~ *what* is it exactly? ~**pause**~ just experience your feeling as a physical sensation, nothing more and nothing less ~**pause**~ once again draw an imaginary line around the feeling you are experiencing to identify where it sits in your body ~**pause**~ And now, shift your awareness back to current sensations and movement in your **stomach** as you breathe in and as you breathe out ~**pause**~ and then expand your field of awareness from the sensations in your **stomach** to the sensations throughout your entire body ~**pause**~ again developing a strong sense of your entire body in the present moment ~**pause**~ I'll bring the exercise to a close in a moment; before I do, take a moment to congratulate yourself on taking the time out today to practice being mindful of feeling and sensation ~**pause**~ and getting ready to come back into the room ~**pause**~ remember whereabouts in the room you are sitting ~**pause**~

Dealing with Discomfort

We are now going to work through an exercise that will allow you to practice opening up to uncomfortable physical sensations and reducing your struggle with them. In pairs with seats facing each other instruct the group:

1. Get comfortable in your chair with your back straight, feet flat on the floor and your shoulders loose.
2. Now for one minute you will look into each others eyes.
3. During the minute the provider should instruct the group to first notice the thoughts and feelings they are having as they look into their pairs eyes. Then instruct them to notice someone sitting across from them having feelings and thoughts just as they are.

- Dry hands off and discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs.
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?

Homework

Acceptance of emotions audio

Session 5

Recap of Session 4

Last week we looked at how our attempts to avoid unpleasant or unwanted feelings such as stress and anxiety can make matters worse not better. We looked at how opening up to these feelings and being willing to remain in contact with them – rather than trying to get rid of them can help you move in the direction you want your life to go. We practiced a couple of exercises that brought you into contact with uncomfortable feelings – such as the seeing a feeling as an object exercise.

Review homework

Rationale

This week we are going to focus on developing skills that will help you to handle your mind more effectively when it starts ramping up your stress levels and move in the direction you want your life to go.

Taking your mind for a walk

We are now going to work through an exercise to demonstrate the mind's tendency to constantly chatter – often in unhelpful ways.

1. Find a partner as this exercise will be done in pairs.
 2. In your pairs, one of you will be the person and the other will be that person's mind. You will be going for a walk together.
 3. The person's job is to go wherever he or she chooses and the mind must follow.
 4. The mind's job is constantly communicate with the person about anything and everything: the mind should evaluate, judge, predict, criticise and warn the person. However, the person cannot communicate with the mind and if this happens the mind should stop them (“never mind your mind”).
 5. The person should listen to the mind without talking back and go wherever the person chooses to go.
 6. After a couple of minutes I will ask you will change roles.
- Change roles
 - Discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs
 - Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group? (*When we walk alone, each of us takes our own mind for a walk – just as we do as we go about our lives.*) (*This exercise demonstrates that we have thoughts, but our behaviour is not dictated by our thoughts – your mind may have told you to turn left, but you may have chosen to turn right.*)

Choices vs. Decisions

It is important to distinguish between decisions and choices. These two are often confused. A decision is when you select among different courses of action for a reason. A reason comes from evaluating the pros and cons of different courses of action. For example, you might decide to do your shopping in a particular supermarket because it is close to your house, they have all of the items that you want and the prices are good. These reasons guide your decision to do your shopping in that particular supermarket. Choices are different. A choice is selecting among different courses of action regardless of reasons.

- Choose between Coke and Fanta?
- Why did you choose Coke? E.g. “I like the taste” – this is a decision as it’s made for a reason.
- Could you come up with some reason why you might choose Fanta?
- Could you come up with a false reason?
- Although you rather the taste of Coke, could you still choose Fanta?

That was a choice because, although reasons were present, it was made regardless of reasons.

Making the distinction between decisions and choices is important because sometimes it can be **reasonable** to do certain things: reasons could include having a really stressful day or having an intense urge. The important point is that in spite of any reason that can enter your mind, you can still **choose** not to engage in any behaviour and you can still **choose** to take your life in the direction you want it to go.

Reasons exercise

Write down a description you believe to be true of yourself e.g., impulsive, aggressive, shy, etc.

Now write down a reason you are that way. For example, you might say I am impulsive because I was spoilt as a child.

Next I want you to write down another reason that you also believe to be true that is different to the first reason. For example, I am impulsive because I have an anxious temperament.

Discuss what you notice in pairs.

Rules of the game.

Get participants to complete the rules of the game exercise worksheet in groups of three.

Discuss as a group what each group noticed.

Defending a rule exercise.

Break the group into two smaller groups. Get everyone to write on a rule they hold about the way the world should be on a piece of paper. E.g., It’s important to be kind. Let them know that this rule will be seen by others. Then fold up the paper with the rule on it and hand it to the person on their left. Then select someone in each group to start. Instruct everyone that the game is that they have to defend to the group the rule that they now hold in their hand. Once

everyone has defended their rule to the group then the participants pass the rule they defended onto the person on their left. This time the cycle starts again but the person now must defend the opposite position to what the rule states.

Discuss what you noticed in your group.

Discuss what was noticed as larger group.

Homework

Notice rules that you and others hold about the world.

RULES OF THE GAME EXERCISE

Each of us uses certain basic rules about the way “life is” to help guide our functioning. Although these rules are largely arbitrary, we tend to view them as absolute truth. Sayings such as “No pain, no gain” or “Where there’s a will, there’s a way” have a profound impact on how we view ourselves and life itself.

In this exercise, please take some time to “locate” the most basic rules (perhaps in the form of sayings) with which you operate in each of the content areas listed here.

1. Rules about relationships with other people (e.g. trust, loyalty, competition).

2. Rules about feeling bad inside.

3. Rules about overcoming life obstacles.

4. Rules about justice in life.

1. Rules about your relationship with yourself.

As the exercise is discussed, the therapist can highlight any number of features of life sayings:

1. How black and white the instruction is (e.g. “Least said, least mended”).
2. How severe the consequence for non-compliance (“Haste makes waste”).
3. How the instruction favours “good content” and discourages “bad content” at the community level (e.g. “Smile and the world smiles with you, cry and you cry alone”).
4. How undesirable content is laundered to make it desirable (e.g. You’re never happy unless you’re unhappy”).
5. How undesirable content is to be addressed privately through acts of strength and will (e.g. “The Lord helps those who help themselves”).

Of special interest are general rules that emphasize overcoming life’s difficulties through control strategies or through sheer force of will.

Session 6

Recap of Session 5

Last week we looked again at ways to unhook from unhelpful thoughts or “defusion.” As getting caught up or entangled in difficult thoughts. We spoke about the difference between decisions and choices: a decision is based on reasons, while a choice refers to selecting a course of action despite reasons. We looked at the rigidity of rules and how they can stop us noticing our own experience.

Review of homework

Rationale

The type of thoughts that people most often get really caught up or entangled in are statements that your mind makes about you as a person. These statements are sometimes positive (e.g., “I am a kind person”) and sometimes negative (“I have very little willpower”). If you add up all of these statements, you get the story that you tell yourself about who you are.

The problem with this is that when you say “I have no willpower,” you can’t be telling the whole story because surely there are times when you have shown willpower. The same applies to any other label, positive or negative, that you put on your “self.” More importantly, the statements and stories each of us has about who we are can really keep us stuck in a rut because we normally behave in ways that fit with how we see ourselves. This is not to say that the stories you have about yourself aren’t real or true – the vast majority probably are. The point is that each of these stories does not tell the whole story. Letting go of attachments to these statements could create a lot more possibilities and flexibility in how you behave. But before letting go of these statements and stories about who you are, you probably want to know what the alternatives are? I will provide a metaphor to point you in the right direction.

Self Story

Write down self descriptions you make about yourself on a piece of paper. What kind of *self-descriptive* _____ do you fuse with?

- judgements e.g., about body, personality, weaknesses, roles
- beliefs
- self-limiting attitudes – e.g., I can’t do X because of Y
- predictions about the future

Chessboard Metaphor

Imagine a chessboard that is covered in black and white pieces. Think of the black pieces as “negative” thoughts, feeling and emotions. For example, feelings of anxiety, thoughts you are not good enough, etc. And think of the white pieces as “positive” experiences such as

feelings of happiness or thoughts like “I’m good at my job.” Now imagine that the two teams are lined up on opposite sides of the board, black on one side and white on the other. What people typically do is get behind the white team and go to war against the black pieces. They struggle against uncomfortable feelings and try to get rid of unwanted thoughts. People assume that if you knock enough black pieces off the board you will eventually overpower them, but if we really look at our experience – as we have done in previous weeks – we see that this is not the case. Yet most people keep on fighting and as a result live their lives in a warzone – psychologically speaking. In this metaphor, suppose that you aren’t the pieces, who are you?

Without the chessboard the pieces have no place to be. What would happen to your thoughts if you were not there to be aware that you thought them or your feelings if you weren’t there to feel them? What if you are not defined by your thoughts, feelings or emotions, but are instead an observer of these experiences. Throughout your life there have been many changes in your thoughts, feelings, your roles and your body, yet you have been you your whole life. This may be a little bit confusing so we are now going to practice an exercise that will get you in contact with your observing self.

The Observer Exercise

We are going to do an exercise now that is a way to begin to try to experience that place where you are not your programming/content. There is no way of failing this exercise, we’re just going to look at whatever you’re thinking or feeling, so whatever shows up is fine. Close your eyes, get settled into your chair, and follow my voice. If you find yourself wandering, just gently come back to the sound of my voice. For a moment now, turn your attention to yourself in this room. Picture the room. Picture yourself in this room and exactly where you are. Now begin to go inside your skin, and get in touch with your body. Notice how you are sitting in the chair. Notice any bodily sensations that are there. As you see each one, just sort of acknowledge that feeling, and allow your consciousness to move on [pause]. Now notice any emotions you are having and if you have any, just acknowledge them [pause]. Now get in touch with your thoughts and just quietly watch them for a few moments. [pause]. Now I want you to notice that as you noticed these things, a part of you noticed them. You noticed those sensations . . . those emotions . . . those thoughts, and that part of you we will call the “observer you”. There is a person in here, behind those eyes, that is aware of what I am saying right now. And it is the same person you’ve been your whole life. In some deep sense this observer you is the you that you call you.

I want you to remember something that happened last summer. Raise your finger when you have a image in your mind. Good. Now just look around that image. Remember all the things that were happening then. Remember the sights . . . the sounds . . . your feelings . . . and as you do that, see if you can notice that you were there then noticing what you were noticing. See if you can catch the person behind your eyes who saw, and heard, and felt. You were there then and you are here now. I’m not asking you to believe this. I’m not making a logical point. I am just asking you to note the experience of being aware and check and see if it isn’t so that in some deep sense the you that is here now was there then. The person aware of what you are aware of is here now and was there then. See if you can notice

the essential continuity—in some deep sense, at the level of experience, not of belief, you have been you your whole life.

I want you to remember something that happened when you were a teenager. Raise your finger when you have an image in your mind. Good. Now just look around that image. Remember all the things that were happening then. Remember the sights . . . the sounds . . . your feelings . . . take your time. And when you are clear about what was there, see if just for a second, you can catch that there was a person behind your eyes then who saw, and felt, and heard all of this. You were there then too and see if it isn't true, as an experienced fact not a belief, that there is an essential continuity between the person aware of what you are aware of now and the person who was aware of what you were aware of as a teenager in that specific situation. You have been you your whole life.

Finally remember something that happened when you were a fairly young child, say around age six or seven. Raise your finger when you have a image in mind. Good. Now just look around again. See what was happening. See the sights . . . hear the sounds. . . feel your feelings . . . and then catch the fact that you were there seeing, hearing and feeling. Notice that you were there behind your eyes. You were there then, and you are here now. Check and see if in some deep sense the “you” that is here now was there then. The person aware of what you are aware of is here now and was there then.

You have been you your whole life. Everywhere you've been, you've been there noticing. This is what I mean by the “observer you”. And from that perspective or point of view, I want you to look at some areas of living. Let's start with your body. Notice how your body is constantly changing. Sometimes it is sick and sometimes it is well. It may be rested or tired. It may be strong or weak. You were once a tiny baby but you grew. You may have even had parts of your body removed, like in an operation. Your cells have died, and literally almost every cell in your body was not there as a teenager, or even last summer. Your bodily sensations come and go. Even as we have spoken they have changed. So if all this is changing and yet the you that you call you has been there your life, that must mean that while you have a body, as a matter of experience and not of belief, you do not experience yourself to be just your body. So just notice your body now for a few moments, and as you do this, every so often notice you are the one noticing [give the client time to do this].

Now let's go to another area: your roles. Notice how many roles you have or have had. Sometimes you're in the role of a [fit to client—e.g., “mother”] . . . sometimes you're a . . . other times you're a leader . . . or a follower . . . etc]. In the outside world, you're in some role all the time. If you were to try not to be, then you'd be playing the role of not playing a role. Even now, part of you is playing a role . . . the client role. Yet all the while notice that you are also present. The part of you that is “you” is watching and aware of what you are aware of. And in some deep sense that “you” does not change. So if your roles are constantly changing, the you that you are has been there your whole life, it must be that while you have roles, you do not experience yourself to be your roles. Do not believe this. This is not a matter of belief. Just look and notice the distinction between what you are looking at, and the you that is looking. Let's go to another area: emotions. Notice how your emotions are constantly changing. Sometimes you feel love, and sometimes hatred, calm and then tense, joyful-sorrowful, happy-sad. Even now you may be experiencing emotions . . . interest, boredom, relaxation. Think of things you have liked, and don't like any longer; of

fears that you once had that are now resolved. The only thing you can count on with emotions is that they will change. Though a wave of emotion comes, it will pass in time. And yet while these emotions come and go, notice that in some deep sense that “you” does not change. That must be that while you have emotions, you do not experience yourself to be your emotions. Allow yourself to realise this as an experienced event, not as a belief. In some very important and deep way you experience yourself as a constant. You are you through it all. So just notice your emotions for a moment and as you do, notice also that you are noticing them [leave a brief period of silence].

Now let’s turn to a very difficult area. Your own thoughts. Thoughts are difficult because they tend to hook us and pull us up to piece-level. If that happens, just come back to the sound of my voice. Notice how your thoughts are constantly changing. You used to be ignorant—then you went to school and learned new thoughts. You have gained new ideas and new knowledge. Sometimes you think about things one way, sometimes another. Sometimes your thoughts may make little sense. Sometimes they seem to come up automatically, from out of nowhere. They are constantly changing. Look at your thoughts even since you came in today, and how many different thoughts you have had. And yet in some deep way, the you that knows what you think is not changing. So that must mean that while you have thoughts, you do not experience yourself to be just your thoughts. Do not believe this. Just notice it. And notice that even while you realise this, your stream of thoughts will continue. And you may get caught up with them. And yet in the instant that you realize that, you also realize that a part of you is standing back, watching it all. So now watch your thoughts for a few moments, and as you do, notice also that you are noticing them [leave a brief period of silence].

So as a matter of experience and not of belief, you are not just your body . . . your roles . . . your emotions . . . your thoughts. These things are the content of your life, while you are the arena . . . the context . . . the space in which they unfold. As you see that, notice that the things that you have been struggling with, and trying to change are not you anyway. No matter how this war goes, you will be there, unchanged. See if you can take advantage of this connection to let go just a little bit, secure in the knowledge that you have been you through it all, and that you need not have such an investment in this psychological content as a measure of your life. Just notice the experiences in all the domains that show up, and as you do, notice that you are still here, being aware of what you are aware of [leave a brief period of silence].

Now again picture yourself in this room. And now picture the room. Picture [describe the room]. Take a few more deep breaths. And when you are ready to come back into the room, open your eyes.

Discuss the client’s experience of this exercise. Focus on the experience itself without analysing it. It is usually worth touching on the active implications of this experience, if only briefly. The therapist can link the client to experiences with the Chessboard Metaphor, for example: “There is one other thing that the board, as a board, can do other than hold pieces. It can take a direction, regardless of what the pieces are doing at the time. It can see what is there, feel what is there, and still say “Here we go”.

Sometimes clients are heavily involved with their story of how they got here. The following exercise illustrates how language “filters” experience. Further, in changing psychological

content rapidly and beyond the normal range for a given individual, the consistent context of self as perspective becomes more evident.

- Discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?

Self-compassion

We are now going to move on to look at the way in which we treat ourselves. There is a common misconception that being self-critical or hard on yourself will keep you in line. But research shows that self-criticism is not the motivator it is cracked up to be. Self-critics are much more likely to be depressed and anxious and self-criticism is often coupled with an intense fear of failure in people such that they don't even try to achieve their goals because the possibility of failure is unacceptable to them.

It might seem all warm and fuzzy, but research shows that it can be beneficial to take a more caring and compassionate approach with ourselves. When people make such lifestyle changes and they have an occasional slip, those who have developed the skill to forgive themselves are more likely to succeed than those who beat themselves up over it. We are now going to do an eyes closed exercise to practice self-compassion.

Compassionate hand exercise

Begin by getting comfortable in your chair with your back straight, feet flat on the floor and your shoulders loose.

Now gently close your eyes.

Start by focusing your awareness on your breath. Notice the sensations of the air entering and exiting your nostrils with each breath. Keep your attention here for a few moments – just observing your breath.

Now bring to mind a difficult situation you've encountered.

See if you can put yourself in that situation: where were you, what happened, what were you doing, what were others saying or doing, see if you can be present with this experience as fully as you can. Noticing how you reacted then. And notice how you may be reacting now. Slow things down as best as you can and notice difficult thoughts, physical sensations and emotions that may be showing up right now. Just stay with this experience as best as you can.

Now pick one of your hands and imagine that this is the hand of a person that leaves you feeling good, understood, loved and cared for. It may be someone from your past or someone in your life right now. Allow your hand to be filled with the feeling you have when you are around that kind and caring person.

When you are ready, place this hand slowly and gently on the part of you that hurts the most. You may feel tension in your chest or discomfort in your head neck or heart. Just pick one

place where the feelings are most intense and place the hand there. Or if you are not feeling much of anything, just go ahead and place the hand on your chest. Allow that kind and compassionate hand to rest on you – feel it against your skin and clothes. Notice the warmth of your hand flowing from the palm of your hand into your body and into the place of discomfort. Imagine that hand is a hand of healing and support, that it's opening your heart to be kind to yourself. Just hold that hand of kindness on you gently, allow yourself to open up to this gentle action – feeling waves of caring and warmth penetrating your body and noticing any softening as you do that.

Go on now to make one last gesture of kindness with both hands. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Let them gently rest there as you hold yourself kindly. Allow yourself to sit this way: just caring for yourself, giving yourself comfort and support.

This exercise will end soon, so for this moment set the intention to bring a sense of compassion and support to yourself and your life. Bring your focus to your breath now and gently bring your awareness back into the space around you, hearing and noticing any sounds around you. As you open your eyes, just notice one or two objects in the space around you.

- Discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?

Homework

Observer you audio.

Session 7

Recap of session 6

Last week we looked at how the statements and stories each of us has about ourselves can keep us stuck in a rut because we usually behave in ways that fit with how we see ourselves. We moved on to consider an alternative and performed an exercise that highlighted the way in which our bodies, thoughts and feelings constantly change as we go through life, but the part of us that notices these experiences – the observing self – stays the same.

Review homework

Rationale

In today's session we are going to develop our perspective taking skills so that we can expand our perspective both of our own experience and of the experience of others. We also want to emphasise the importance of coming out of the problem solving mode of mind and appreciating the world around us in the present moment.

Sweet spot

In pairs sitting across from each other. Select a sweet moment in your life it can be as simple as drinking your favourite coffee. In your pairs decide who will speak first when you open your eyes. This exercise is about listening with appreciation. Sometimes we see what people tell us like a maths problem to be solved in this exercise we want to hear what they tell you like it's a sunset to be appreciated. Therefore the listener will not interrupt or nod or intervene in anyway.

Now close your eyes. Allow your attention to gently move to your breath, here, now. Notice as each breath comes into your body and each exhale out. Now we are going to do an exercise involving a memory. Bring to mind a sweet moment in your life. There is no right or wrong moment any sweet moment will do.

When you have settled on a memory raise your right index finger.

Now in your minds eye go back into that moment. Imagine the colours you noticed at that time. Imagine the sounds you could hear at that time. Imagine the thoughts you were having at that time. Contact how you felt at that time.

Now speakers get ready to tell the other person in your pair about this sweet moment in your life. Listeners prepare to listen with appreciation.

Open your eyes and start speaking. [time it for one minute]. Ding. Instruct them to go a layer deeper. Time for one more minute. Then get them to close their eyes and reverse roles.

- Debrief with their pair
- Ask people to share anything the noticed with the group.

Invalidated Self Exercise

Think of a time when you were in distress that someone invalidated your pain? As you scroll through the different memories keep in mind that there is no right or wrong memory. Any time that you felt invalidated can work for this exercise. Pause. When you have settled on a memory please raise your right index finger. Pause. Bring to mind the colors you could see at that time. Pause. The sounds that you could hear at that time. Pause. Contact what you were thinking at that time. Pause. Contact how you felt at that time. Pause. Radiate kindness to yourself at that time. Pause. Now gently come back to your breath here and now. Pause. Notice that you were there then and you are here now. Now we are going to go to a different memory, Pause. Think of a time when you invalidated someone else's pain when they were distressed. Any time that you invalidated someone else's pain can work for this exercise. Pause. When you have settled on a memory please raise your right index finger. Pause. Bring to mind the colors you could see at that time. Pause. The sounds that you could hear at that time. Pause. Contact what you were thinking at that time. Pause. Contact what you felt at that time. Pause. Contact Radiate kindness to yourself at that time. Pause. Now gently come back to your breath here and now. Pause. Notice that you are here now, you were there at that time when you were invalidated and you were there at that time when you invalidated someone else. Pause. Now imagine yourself going back in time and responding differently to this person. Pause. Gently come back to your breath here and now.

- Debrief with their pair
- Ask people to share anything the noticed with the group.

Preparing for Committed Action

We are now going to come back to an exercise that we completed in session 4 as we reflect on committed action in the face of adversity. We are now going to work through an exercise that will allow you to practice opening up to uncomfortable physical sensations and reducing your struggle with them. In pairs with seats facing each other instruct the group:

1. Get comfortable in your chair with your back straight, feet flat on the floor and your shoulders loose.
2. Now for one minute you will look into each others eyes.
3. During the minute the provider should instruct the group to first notice the thoughts and feelings they are having as they look into their pairs eyes. Then instruct them to notice someone sitting across from them having feelings and thoughts just as they are.

- Dry hands off and discuss your experience of this exercise in pairs.
- Is anyone willing to share anything you noticed about this with the group?

Homework

At the end of the session get each participant to think of a valued action that they could do between now and the final session. Get them to rate the likelihood of achieving the action on a scale of 1-10. If the likelihood is lower than 7 ask them to break it down into a smaller more manageable unit. Get them to share if willing with a pair their intended

goal for the week that is in line with their values. Ask them to pay particular attention to the thoughts and feelings that come in their way of completing the task over the course of the week.

Session 8

Recap Session 7

Session 7 built on the flexible sense of self developed in session 6 to expand participants perspective taking of both their own and others experiences to help notice the common humanity and interconnection between us all. The session also began to introduce the concept of committed action in preparation for the final session.

Review of homework.

Rationale

When we use the term “commitment” in our day-to-day conversations, we are referring to a promise about something we are going to do in the future. From an ACT perspective, however, commitment is something we do in the present. Commitment to any behaviour is a “one day at a time” activity – sometimes one minute or one second at a time; it’s a game of inches. It concerns the in-the-moment process of choosing to do something that puts you in better alignment with what truly matters to you – inch by inch. And when we fail or are pulled off the course we want to take, we find ourselves in a new moment where we can turn back towards the things in life we value.

When we practice an eyes closed mindfulness exercise, sometimes you probably find yourself thinking about something that happened earlier or something you are planning to do later. Eventually you notice that your attention has wandered and gently return to the exercise. How many times? You return one more time than you wander. Similarly, we sometimes drift off the course we want our life to take. When this happens, we can pause and notice that we are disconnected from the things in life that are important to us; then we gently get back on track. How many times? One more time than we turn away. Similar to mindfulness, the essence of commitment is in that moment of return.

Goal Setting

We are now going to spend some time figuring out exactly where it is you want your bus to go and planning a route to get there.

On our first night, we looked into the overarching reasons why you want to reduce stress and the things in life you value most. We are now going to look at taking additional steps in this valued direction: the direction you want your life to move in. We are going to work on setting goals. The reason why this is important is that when you try to make a lifestyle change, there is a greater likelihood of success if you focus on moving towards the life you want to live rather than focusing on moving away from cigarettes or other problems (i.e., dead man’s goals).

The first step in effective goal setting is to identify the value or values that will guide your course of action. Although we spent time clarifying values in the first session, values are like the continents on a globe of the world: no matter how fast you spin the globe, you can never

see all the continents at once; there are always some at the front and some at the back. Across time our choices differ regarding which values come to the front and which move to the back. For this reason, we are going to spend the next few minutes identifying the values that are very important to you at the moment.

Step 1: Clarify your Values

On the handout there is a list of the most common values. I want you to read each value and consider whether it is very important, quite important or not important and indicate this by putting the letter V, Q or N beside each value.

When you are done, go through each value you marked with a V and select the five most important. Write your top 5 values down on the respective section of the goal setting handout.

The values that you have selected as most important are like a compass. They guide you and your actions. They help you to set a course, stay on course and find your way when you're lost. Values, however, are never finished, completed or done. They are the qualities that we want to bring to our actions on an ongoing basis. Goals, on the other hand, are things that can be completed or achieved – they can be ticked off the list. Marriage is a goal; being loving is a value. Marriage is something that can be ticked off the list; being loving is a way of behaving on an ongoing basis. I can achieve the goal of marriage but neglect the value of loving. Similarly, quitting smoking is a goal; self-care is a value. A value is like travelling west. No matter how far you go, you can always travel further west. Goals are like reaching Portlaoise, Galway, New York etc. Your values guide the goals that you set for yourself.

Step 2: Set a SMART Goal

Now, I would like you to look at the values you wrote down and think of one practical thing you could do to express one or more of these values. Choose a goal that is a practical step in the direction of your values. When doing this, the best approach is to set a SMART goal. You want the goal to be **specific**. For example, don't choose something vague like "I will get healthy." Instead specify the actions that you are going to take: "I will go to the gym." The goal should also be **meaningful**; it should be aligned with the values that are very important to you. Thirdly, the goal should be **adaptive**: it should aim to improve your life in some way. Fourthly, the goal should be **realistic**; it should be something that you can realistically accomplish with the resources available to you (e.g., time, money, fitness, etc.). Finally, the goal should be **time-framed**. For example, "I will go to the gym at 6pm tomorrow evening and spend one hour exercising."

Once you have your SMART goal in mind, the next step is to figure out whether it is a long-term or short-term goal. If it is a long-term goal – something to be completed in the next few months and years – you'll need to consider short-term goals to get you there. On the other hand, if it is a short-term goal – something that is achievable in the next few days and weeks – you might consider where this goal is leading you and where you'd like to go after it is completed. Now, take a few minutes to write your Long-term and short-term goals on the respective section of the handout.

After writing down your short-term goal or goals, select the one you want to work on and define the specific actions you need to take to achieve that goal. For example, the short-term goal of going to the gym could be broken down into getting your sportswear ready, rearranging your schedule to accommodate going to the gym or maybe even enquiring into joining a gym.

Step 3: Identify Benefits

Now, I would like you to think about the goal that you have chosen and consider what would be the greatest things about achieving this goal. When you are clear on these positive consequences, write them down on the respective section of the handout.

Step 4: Identify Obstacles

Now we are going to take a look at the obstacles or barriers that might stand in the way of you achieving your goals. Begin by considering if you were to start working towards this goal right now, what would you expect to encounter psychologically that could slow you down? Consider difficult thoughts and feelings such as low motivation, self-doubt, insecurity, awkwardness etc. Make note of these difficulties on the handout.

After noting some of the barriers and obstacles in the way of you accomplishing your goal, reflect on the strategies you have learned in our sessions up to this point and consider what would be most useful when you are faced with these difficulties. For example, you might practice the brief S.T.O.P. exercise or willingly open up to the uncomfortable feelings as you did with the ice-cube in your clenched fist. Make note of the strategies you might use.

Next, I want you to think about possible external obstacles to you achieving your goal. External obstacles might include a lack of time, lack of skills or difficulties with other people. Make note of these.

Now, make note of the things you could do to deal with these external difficulties if they show up.

Finally, if you feel comfortable, discuss your goal with the person beside you. If you are not comfortable discussing your goal, you can discuss how you found the process of goal setting and anything you noticed about it.

- Is anyone willing to share their goal with the group?

The Matrix

On the handout there is a diagram called the matrix. The matrix provides a way of looking at virtually any behaviour that you can think of. The top half of the matrix concerns what is experienced through your five senses. For example, you can see, hear, smell, taste and touch your pen. The bottom half of the matrix concerns mental experience. For example, if you put your pen away you can imagine what it looks, sounds, smells, tastes and feels like. The

important point is to notice the difference between experiencing through your five senses and mental experience.

The left side of the matrix represents movement away from uncomfortable experience such as stress, anxiety or self-doubt. Can you give me some examples of uncomfortable experiences that people tend to avoid? What kind of things do people do to get away from these uncomfortable experiences (*comfort eating, “try not to think about it” (bottom left)*)

The right side of the matrix represents movement toward what you value in life. This refers to actions that bring you closer to what you personally consider to be important, be it health, family, recreation, education, work etc. Can you give me some examples of what you consider to be important in life? Can you give me some examples of things people do (i.e., behaviours that others can see – with hands, feet or mouth,) to bring them closer towards the personal values that we have mentioned? (*play with children; go to the gym; take a course; meet up with friends etc.*)

Another important aspect of the matrix concerns “hooks.” Hooks are things that show up in your life and really capture your attention, emotionally grab you or get to you and stick with you for a while. For example, when somebody is really rude or disrespectful and you find this annoying and later complain about this person. We call things that really get to you and stick with you for a while “hooks.” Can you give me a few examples of hooks in your life (e.g., cut-off in traffic)? Being able to notice these hooks and what you tend to do after being hooked is a good skill to develop.

When we consider what we covered in our previous session – how trying to get rid of thoughts often backfires and how avoiding uncomfortable feelings often makes matters worse in the long-term – it becomes clear that we have far less control over mental experience than most people assume. In addition, if I were to ask you to look at the wall and not see it or touch your chair and not feel it, you could not do this. The point is that we have very little choice over what happens on the vertical axis of the matrix. But where we do have a choice is the horizontal axis. We can choose our actions. We can choose to act to avoid uncomfortable experience or we can choose to take action that brings us closer to what we value in life.

Example of committed action

Psychological flexibility & review

Now, we are going to look at how ACT helps people and how our work throughout the course ties in with this. ACT helps people by developing what is known as psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility is the ability to take effective action guided by your values even if things are going on in your head or in your life that make it difficult. It is what enables you to take the bus in the direction you want it to go. Psychological flexibility is based on 6 skills: acceptance, defusion, present-moment awareness, the observing self, values and committed action guided by those values.

Acceptance

When uncomfortable feelings get between you and what you want acceptance is the skill you need to keep you moving in the direction you want to go. Our work on acceptance began in the first session by examining the things you sometimes do to get rid of discomfort. We looked at how these attempts to avoid uncomfortable feelings generally work in the short-term but tend to be ineffective in the long-term and their costs usually far outweigh their benefits. The Chinese finger trap was used to get across this idea that the struggle to get away from uncomfortable feelings often makes matters worse not better. However, it also touched on something else – an alternative: by willingly coming into contact with our uncomfortable feelings we can create some room for manoeuvre. We spoke about how this process of acceptance means actively coming into contact with your uncomfortable feelings in the service of living the life you want to live; as opposed to resignation which means passively giving up the fight with them. We then worked through a couple of exercises that gave you opportunity to practice acceptance, as the key is not to know acceptance it is to do acceptance. In the first exercise you visualised your internal reaction to a difficult situation as an external object. In doing this, you were practicing observing and describing these feelings without struggling with them.

Present-moment awareness

The second component of psychological flexibility that we looked at was present-moment awareness. We focused on this during the course. Sometimes we are going through life on autopilot. By increasing your ability to focus on the present moment, you become better at catching thoughts and feelings that may have led you down the wrong path. Once you can catch or pick up on these thoughts and feelings, you have the opportunity to defuse or accept them. We worked on increasing our present-moment awareness in the session by practicing a couple of mindfulness meditations – basically focusing our awareness on things we normally don't pay attention to and returning our awareness to these things without judgement whenever it wanders. We practiced a meditation that encouraged you to focus your awareness on the feeling of the breath moving in and out of the body. We also looked at how being able to S.T.O.P. (*slow your breathing, take note, open up, & pursue your values*) can be helpful when you are faced with difficult emotions. Would it be okay if we spend a few minutes practicing this now?

Start by getting comfortable in your chair, with your feet flat on the floor and your shoulders loose.

- Now, take a few deep breaths and mindfully observe the breath flowing in and out of your body. This will help to keep you grounded or anchored in the present moment.
- And take note of your experience right now. Notice what you are thinking. Notice what you are feeling. Notice what you are doing. Notice how your thoughts and feelings are constantly swirling around and you can easily get caught up in them if you are not careful.
- Open up to the feelings you are having. Breathe into them and make room for them. Make room for your thoughts as well: don't try to push them away or don't try to

cling onto them. See them for what they are – just thoughts – and give them space rather than getting caught up in them.

- The final step is to pursue a valued course of action. Connect with your values: ask yourself “what do I want to be about in the face of this of this?” “How would I like to act, so that I can look back years from now and feel proud of my response?”

Defusion

Another one of the key skills that make up psychological flexibility is defusion. We focused on developing this skill. To recap, defusion is a different way of relating to your thoughts, so that they have much less impact and influence over you. It’s a helpful skill for handling your mind more effectively and take your life in the direction you want it to go. Rather than change or control thoughts (i.e., by encouraging you to think more positively), defusion allows us to stop getting really caught up or entangled in unhelpful thoughts – thoughts that don’t help us to take our lives in a valued direction. In a nutshell, defusion allows us to see thoughts for what they are – just words and images passing through our minds – rather than what they say they are. During the session, we practiced defusing thoughts in an eyes closed exercise that involved visualising yourself sitting at a bus stop and observing your thoughts on the sides of buses that pulled up, stopped and drove away again whenever they were ready. In doing this, you we developing the skill of defusion by noticing your thoughts come and go without getting all caught up in them. Another simple defusion technique that can give you some distance from unhelpful thoughts is to insert the phrase “I’m having the thought that ...” before the thought. For example, when an unpleasant thought like “I’m a mess” comes to mind, think to yourself: “I’m having the thought that a I am a mess” or the even longer phrase “I notice I’m having the thought that I am a mess.” This has been found to reduce the impact and influence of unhelpful thoughts.

The observing self

During the course we looked at the part of you that is aware of everything you see, hear, touch, smell, feel, think and do. ACT calls this part of you the observing self and it is another one of the core components of psychological flexibility. We talked about how the labels, statements and stories each of us have about who we are can really keep us stuck in a rut, because we typically behave in ways that fit with how we see ourselves. We talked about how letting go of our attachments to these labels, statements and stories can open up a lot more possibilities and flexibility in how we behave. We discussed the observing self as an alternative to clinging to these restrictive labels, statements and stories. The observing self is like the sky, while thoughts, memories and feelings are like the weather. The weather constantly changes throughout the day. And whatever it is, the sky always has room for it. No matter how bad the weather, no matter how violent a thunderstorm or severe the sun, the sky cannot be damaged in any way. Even hurricanes and tsunamis, which may cause death and destruction on the land, are unable to hurt the sky. And, as time passes, the weather will change again and again, while the sky remains as pure and clear as ever. Similarly, whatever you are thinking, whatever you are feeling, whatever you are sensing, whatever you are doing, this part of you – the observing self – is always there, aware of it. During the session, we worked through an exercise to bring you into contact with your observing self. The

exercise showed how your observing self stays the same across time while the things you normally define yourself by – your body, thoughts and feelings – are constantly changing.

Values

Another essential part of psychological flexibility is being able to clarify and connect with your personal values. Your values are your heart’s deepest desires for the sort of person you want to be, what is meaningful for you, and what you want your life to stand for. It’s your values that justify the hard work you have done since starting this course. You began work on clarifying your personal values in the first session with the values card sorting exercise. You then used the values wheel to look at the relative importance of each of your chosen values and the extent to which your day-to-day actions were in line with these. Tonight’s work on goal setting also began with a values clarification exercise, as values serve as a compass to guide the goals we set and actions we take.

Committed action

The purpose of all of the skills I have mentioned so far – acceptance, defusion, present-moment awareness and the observing self – is to enable you to take effective action guided by your values. All of our work on these skills risks being for nothing unless you can get your feet moving in the direction you want your life to go. This is the final component of psychological flexibility and is known as committed action. Committed action is action that you take again and again, no matter how many times you fail or go off track. We worked on committed action in tonight’s session by looking at how to effectively set SMART goals guided by our values and how break these goals down into action plans.

Goal Setting

Step 1. Identify Your Guiding Values

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

Step 2. Set SMART Goals

S = specific, M = meaningful, A = adaptive, R = realistic & T = time-framed.

The value(s) above will be expressed in the following long-term goal:

1.

Which, in turn, will be expressed in these short-term goals:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Define specific actions you need to take to achieve your chosen short-term goal:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Step 3. Identify Benefits

Clarify for yourself, what would be the most positive outcome(s) of achieving your goal?
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.

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

then I will use the following skills to unhook, accept and get present:

If external difficulties arise, such as:

1. _____

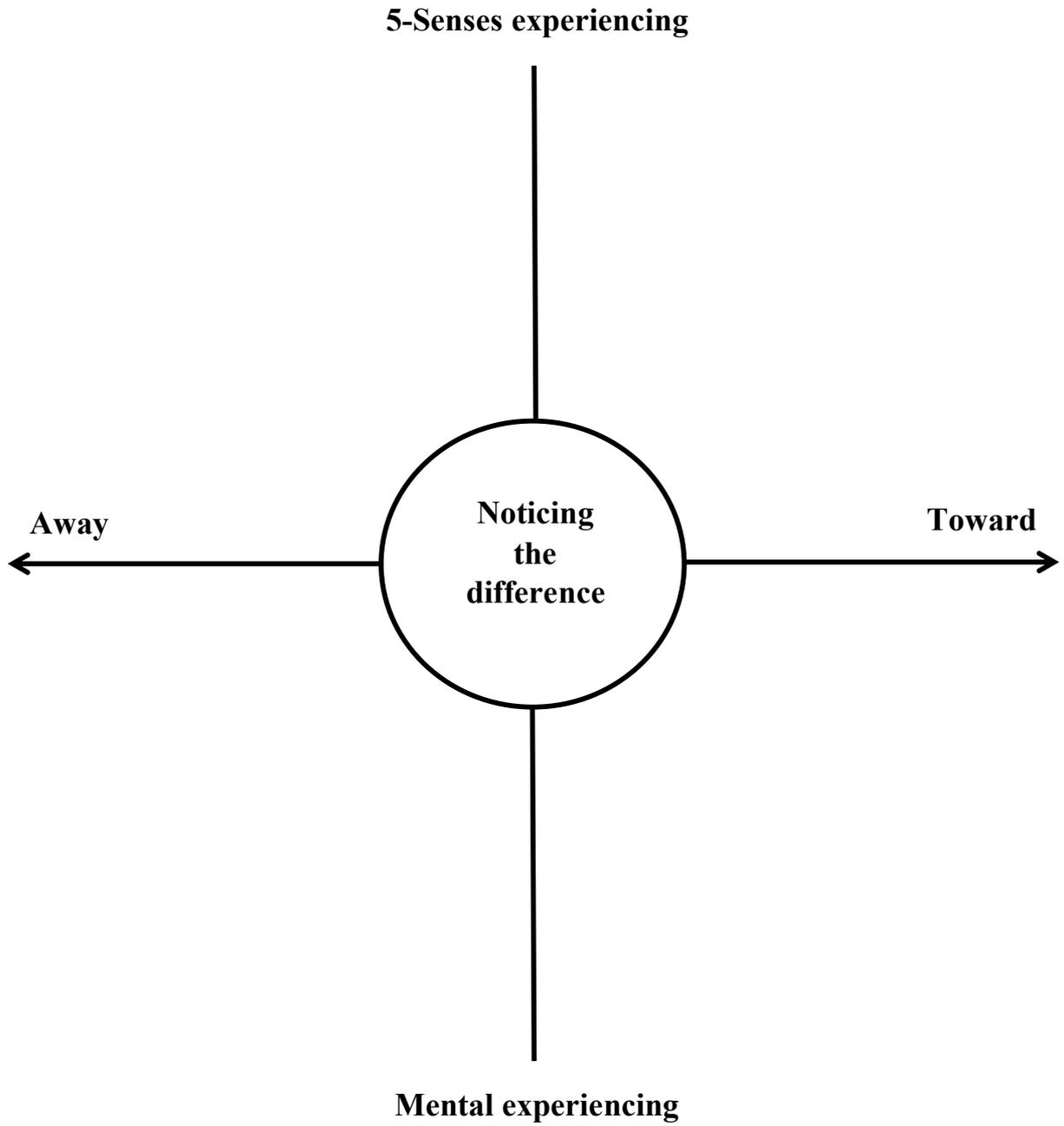
2. _____

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

1. _____

2. _____

The Matrix:



Hook

Response
