



Syracuse Integrative Psychiatry

Comprehensive care. Transformative outcomes.

5108 Velasko Road, Suite 2000, Syracuse, NY 13215
www.syracuseintegrativepsychiatry.com

Understanding ACT: Core Skills for Psychological Flexibility

What is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)?

ACT is an evidence-based psychotherapy that helps you live a rich, meaningful life while accepting the pain that inevitably comes with it. The goal isn't to eliminate difficult thoughts and feelings—it's to develop **psychological flexibility** so you can live according to your values even when life is hard.

"The goal of ACT is not to feel better, but to get better at feeling."

— Steven Hayes, Founder of ACT

The Six Core Processes of ACT

1. Acceptance

What it is: Making room for difficult thoughts, feelings, and sensations rather than struggling against them.

Why it matters: The more we try to avoid or control uncomfortable internal experiences, the more they control us. Acceptance allows us to move forward with our lives.

Practice: When you notice a difficult emotion, try saying to yourself: "I'm willing to make room for this feeling. I don't have to like it, but I can allow it to be here while I do what matters to me."

2. Cognitive Defusion

What it is: Changing your relationship with thoughts rather than trying to change the thoughts themselves. Learning to see thoughts as just thoughts—mental events, not facts.

Why it matters: We often get "fused" with our thoughts, believing they're absolutely true. Defusion creates distance so thoughts have less power over us.

Practice: When you notice a difficult thought like "I'm worthless," try labeling it: "I'm having the thought that I'm worthless." This simple shift reminds you that thoughts are not facts.

3. Present Moment Awareness

What it is: Bringing flexible attention to the here-and-now, noticing what's happening right now rather than getting lost in worries about the future or regrets about the past.

Why it matters: Most of our suffering happens when our minds are stuck in the past or future. The present moment is where life actually happens.

Practice: Take three slow breaths. Notice the sensation of air moving in and out. Notice what you can see, hear, and feel right now. When your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the present.

4. Self-as-Context (The Observing Self)

What it is: Accessing the part of you that notices your experiences but is not defined by them. You are not your thoughts, feelings, or diagnoses—you are the person experiencing them.

Why it matters: When we identify too closely with our thoughts or emotions, we lose perspective. The observing self provides a stable vantage point.

Practice: Notice your thoughts and feelings as if you're watching clouds pass in the sky. You are the sky—vast and unchanging. Thoughts and feelings are the weather—constantly changing, passing through.

5. Values

What it is: Identifying what truly matters to you—the kind of person you want to be, the qualities you want to embody, what you want your life to stand for.

Why it matters: Values are like a compass. They guide us toward meaningful living even when the path is difficult. They give us reasons to keep going.

Practice: Ask yourself: "If I could be remembered for one thing, what would I want it to be?" "What kind of person do I want to be in my relationships?" "What gives my life meaning?"

6. Committed Action

What it is: Taking concrete steps in the direction of your values, even when it's uncomfortable. Choosing what matters over what's comfortable.

Why it matters: Values without action are just wishes. Committed action is how we build a meaningful life, one choice at a time.

Practice: Identify one small action you can take today that aligns with your values, even if you don't feel like it. For example: "I value connection, so I'll text a friend even though I feel anxious."

Psychological Flexibility: Putting It All Together

These six processes work together to create **psychological flexibility**—the ability to:

- Be present with whatever you're experiencing
- Open up to difficult thoughts and feelings
- Do what matters even when it's hard

Psychological flexibility is the opposite of being stuck. It means you can adapt, respond to life's challenges, and keep moving toward what matters to you.

What ACT Is NOT

- **ACT is NOT about positive thinking.** We're not trying to replace negative thoughts with positive ones.
- **ACT is NOT about feeling better.** Sometimes you'll still feel anxious, sad, or uncomfortable—and that's okay.
- **ACT is NOT about eliminating symptoms.** The goal is to live meaningfully despite symptoms, not to make them disappear.

- **ACT is NOT resignation.** Acceptance doesn't mean giving up—it means acknowledging reality so you can respond effectively.

How to Use These Skills in Daily Life

When you notice difficult thoughts or feelings:

1. **Notice** what you're experiencing (Present Moment)
2. **Name** it: "I'm having the thought that..." or "I'm feeling..." (Defusion)
3. **Make room** for it without struggling (Acceptance)
4. **Remember** you are not your thoughts or feelings (Self-as-Context)
5. **Connect** with what matters to you right now (Values)
6. **Take action** in line with your values, even if discomfort is present (Committed Action)

Remember

You don't have to wait until you feel better to start living better. You can take meaningful action right now, with all your difficult thoughts and feelings along for the ride.

ACT is a skill that improves with practice. Be patient and compassionate with yourself as you learn. Every moment is a new opportunity to practice psychological flexibility.