

ACT Exercise: Part I

Experiential Avoidance

Experiential Avoidance: The ongoing attempt to get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings, even when doing so is harmful, useless and costly. Experiential avoidance is a major cause of depression and anxiety and other psychological problems.

- **A painful thought or feeling I would like to get rid of is. . . .**
- **What have you tried to avoid or get rid of this thought or feeling?**

Distraction: What have you tried to zone out from or distract yourself from this thought or feeling?

Opting out: What activities, interests, events, people, places have you avoided or withdrawn from, and all the opportunities you have missed out on, because you didn't feel good or wanted to avoid feeling bad?

Thinking strategies: When the painful thought or feeling started showing up, which of these thinking strategies did you try?

- Worrying
- Dwelling on the past
- Fantasizing about the future
- Imagining escape scenarios
- Thinking "it's not fair"
- Thinking "if only"
- Blaming others
- Blaming yourself
- Blaming the world
- Talking logically to yourself
- Talking positively to yourself
- Talking negatively to yourself
- Analyzing yourself (why am I like this?)
- Analyzing the situation (why did this happen?)
- Analyzing others (who do they act like this?)

Substances and other comforts: Substances may include foods, drinks, cigarettes, alcohol, etc. Also consider anything else you can think of you have tried (shopping? Netflix binges?) to make yourself feel better when these painful thoughts and feelings show up.

- **What is the cost of avoidance?**
 - Did these coping techniques get rid of this thought or feeling *in the long term*?
 - Did any of them bring me to a richer, more meaningful life?
 - What did these coping mechanisms cost me in terms of time, energy, money, health, relationships?

ACT Exercise: Part II

Defusion and Acceptance Strategies

Defusing thoughts

- Notice:** I notice I'm having the thought that. . . .
- Thank your mind:** "Thank you, mind, for so helpfully pointing that out."
- Name the story:** The "I can't handle this" story
The "I'm not good enough" story
- Let it go:** Let the thought come and go---like leaves on a stream or clouds in the sky
- Distort it:** Sing it to the tune of Happy Birthday; say it sloooowly; make it a movie title
- Recognize your mind's many talents and disguises:**

- Radio station: Radio Doom and Gloom
- Problem solving machine (caveperson thinking)
- Factory spewing criticism and judgment
- Bully (think sixth grade)
- Salesperson (relentlessly stalking you)

Accepting feelings

- Curiosity:** Be a curious scientist, zooming in on shape, color, size, etc.
- Hold on gently:** Visualize holding the feeling very gently, with compassion
- Let it in the room:** No need to engage with the feeling, but allow it to exist in the room
- Expand:** Visualize inner expansion, allowing room for the feeling
- Stage Show metaphor:** Life is like a stage show; bring up the house lights and see the entire stage
- Struggle Switch metaphor:**
Imagine a dial ranging from 1-10; bring the struggle down a notch
- Demons on the Boat metaphor:**
Bring the demons above board into daylight; take control of your course

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- Which of these strategies might you try?
 - What's an action step you could take to implement one of the strategies?

Adapted from *ACT Made Simple*, Russ Harris, M.D., New Harbinger Publications Inc., Oakland, CA, 2009, pp. 124 and 146.

Act on ACT, NALP AEC 2018