



Accept, Commit & Act

*A toolkit for maintaining wellbeing
after lockdown*

Introduction



We are likely facing challenging times ahead and may be facing a new 'normal' in the future. It is therefore important to look at some of the knowledge and skills you can learn in order to positively adapt to changing, uncertain circumstances by focusing on what matters most to you and how you can do what it takes to continue to work towards these things.

This toolkit highlights some of the key skills and techniques from an Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach, which promotes acceptance of what is out of our personal control and committing to actions that improve and enrich our lives.

Fear

What fears might come up as lockdown starts to lift?

We may be facing:

- Fear about going back to work (in case we catch or spread the virus)
- Fear of seeing elderly relatives (in case we spread the virus to them)
- Fear of socialising (it might not feel safe yet, what if cases of the virus go back up?)
- Fear of the future (worrying about when things will ever go back to normal)
- Fear about our own and others' health (especially vulnerable people getting the virus)

These fears might stop us from doing the things that help maintain our wellbeing, such as:

- Seeing friends and family
- Building new relationships
- Being productive and successful
- Looking after ourselves – getting enough sleep, exercise, etc.
- Setting new goals/pursuing our dreams

We won't be able to engage in these activities because we are getting caught up in our negative thoughts and trying to avoid uncomfortable feelings that come up when we focus on those thoughts. This is keeping us stuck. Changing and adapting gives rise to uncomfortable feelings and negative thoughts, but if we're not willing to accept this discomfort and stop paying attention to these thoughts then we won't move forward. And if we lose touch with what's important to us, we won't be motivated to change either.

How can we overcome this fear in order to maintain our wellbeing? The first thing is to know what matters most to you.



Values: knowing what matters

Values are our deepest desires for the way that we want to interact with the world, other people, and ourselves. They are what we want to stand for in life, how we want to behave, what sort of person we want to be, and what sort of strengths and qualities we want to develop. However, if you were asked for your values, you might first answer by stating goals rather than values. This is not uncommon as our society is largely goals focused rather than values focused. However, values are far more empowering than goals because they are always available to us. In any moment we can act on them, but this is not true of goals.

Example 1

GOAL
TO GET MARRIED
(You cannot guarantee you will ever achieve this goal)

VALUE
TO BE LOVING AND CARING
(You can do this even if you don't have a partner. You can be loving and caring towards friends, neighbours, family, pets, or ourselves!)

Example 2

GOAL
TO GET A BETTER JOB
(You cannot make this happen)

VALUE
TO BE HELPFUL, EFFICIENT,
AND PRODUCTIVE
(At any time you can act on this value even if you don't like your current job or you don't currently have a job.)

It is a good idea to try and identify your own values as these will enable you to work towards a rich and meaningful life no matter what your current circumstances are.



“Values are like a compass. A compass gives you direction and keeps you on track when you’re travelling. And our values do the same for the journey of life. We use them to choose the direction in which we want to move and to keep us on track as we go. So when you act on a value, it’s like heading west. No matter how far west you travel, you never get there; there’s always further to go. But goals are like the things you try to achieve on your journey: they’re like the sights you want to see or the mountains you want to climb while you keep on travelling west.”

Russ Harris

Be in the 'here and now'

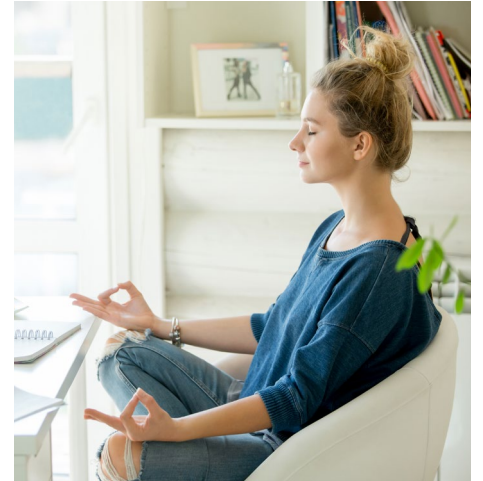
When thinking about your values, many of you might have thought of something like 'living in the moment', or 'appreciating what I've got', which require us to be present in the here and now. In addition, the more in touch we are with our own thoughts and feelings, the better we are able to adjust our behaviours and make choices that take our life in the direction we want to go.

EXERCISE: Connect with your environment

Using your senses notice five things you can hear, five things you can see, and five things you can touch.

EXERCISE: Body awareness

Notice the position of your whole body. Do an internal scan and notice what you feel in every part of your body, feet, head, neck, fingers, etc. If thoughts or feelings distract you (and they will!), bring your attention back to your body.



By using techniques such as connecting with your environment or mindful breathing, you can pay attention to what is really going on around you and what is coming up within you. If you try one of the exercises in this toolkit you might notice that there is a lot going on that you normally miss when you are disconnected. This is called being mindful.

When you are practising mindfulness, you can observe and manage your thoughts and catch them when they start to run away towards worst case scenarios. You can hold your focus on what you choose. Even more importantly, the continued practice of focusing the mind on the present builds a muscle of resilience that will help you time and time again. When we practise bringing ourselves back to the present moment, we strengthen our ability to cope with all sorts of crises, whether global or personal.

There are plenty of free apps available to help calm your mind and start your own mindfulness practice, here are a couple to get you started:

- www.calm.com
- www.headspace.com/mindfulness

Doing what it takes: defusing from negative thoughts

“Imagine you are in a boat far out to sea and below deck are a bunch of monsters which are emotions, thoughts, feelings, and urges. If you keep drifting aimlessly, they stay below, but as you near land they clamber on deck and overwhelm you. So, you make a deal. You’ll keep drifting as long as the monsters stay below. But drifting is not fun. Besides, other ships are happily landing why not yours? But if you try to land, the monsters will resurface. What to do? You could try to throw the monsters overboard...but there are too many to fight off. But take a good look at those monsters in broad daylight and you’ll discover that they’re noisy and ugly, but they can’t actually harm you. And once you get used to them, they’re not really that scary. And you’ll see they’re much smaller than you thought. They may never be cute and cuddly, but they no longer have power over you. So now you can head to shore and do the things you like. Your monsters love to pop up when you try new things, but they can’t stop you.”

Adapted from Russ Harris (The Happiness Trap)

“...we identify thoughts that hold us back and pay them less attention.”

Changing and uncertain times can bring up negative thoughts and unhelpful emotions for all of us, which can in turn distract us from being present and from working towards our values. When we get caught up in our thoughts, a thought can seem like:

- the absolute truth, or a rule that you have to follow “I shouldn’t be feeling this way”
- a threat, something you need to get rid of as soon as possible “If I go outside I will get the virus”
- something that’s happening right here and now even though it’s about the past or the future ruminating on old mistakes, or worrying about the future
- something very important that requires all of your attention
- something you can’t let go of even if it worsens your life “I can’t cope; I don’t need help; I’m nothing without my job”

The antidote to this is defusion – we identify the thoughts that hold us back and pay them less attention. In a state of defusion, you can see a thought for what it is, nothing more or less than a bunch of words or pictures inside your head. In a state of defusion, you recognise that a thought:

- may or may not be true
- is definitely not a rule that you have to follow
- is definitely not a threat to you
- is not something happening in the physical world (it is merely words or

pictures inside your head)

- may or may not be important (you have to choose as to how much attention you pay it)
- can be allowed to come and go of its own accord without any need for you to hold on to it or push it away.

The thoughts are still there, but you're not giving them all your attention, and that's what defusion is.

Some defusion techniques

- Put the phrase "I'm having the thought that" in front of your negative thought, e.g. "I am having the thought that I am useless"
- Sing your thought to the tune of happy birthday
- Say your thought in a funny voice
- Repeat your thought over and over 30 times
- Imagine the thought coming and going like passing cars, birds flying across the sky, trains pulling in and out of the station, suitcases on a conveyor belt, etc.

These techniques aim to help you see that your thoughts are not necessarily important, threatening, or true, they are just thoughts. However, you may feel like a lot of your thoughts and concerns are important or valid and you should be thinking about them because they might happen and you need to prepare. But with this approach, we're not trying to focus on whether a thought is true or false, but whether it is workable. In other words, we want to know if a thought is helping you to move toward a richer, fuller, and more meaningful life. So we'll take that thought "I'm useless". Does holding on tightly to this thought help you to live the life you truly want? Or If you believe you're useless will you not try new things? If you get caught up in this thought, does it help you do the things you want? Or if you believe you're useless are you less likely to go for that promotion or ask that person on a date? We can all probably agree that if we were fused with the thought 'I am useless' our life would likely be very boring and meaningless.

Defusion example

"Jot down some of your negative thoughts on a sheet of paper. Now hold the paper in front of your face and get all absorbed in those words. While you're all caught up in these thoughts you are cut off or disconnected from the things that make life meaningful (friends, family, movies, music, food, sport, work, nature, etc). And while you're holding on tightly to these thoughts, it's hard to do the things that make life work. Imagine trying to cook dinner, drive a car, cuddle a pet, or watch a movie when you're doing this... Now tuck that sheet of paper under your arm... and notice that you can now connect and engage with the things that make life meaningful."

Russ Harris (The Happiness Trap)

Doing what it takes: making room for uncomfortable emotions



In the present moment we can have some anxious or uncomfortable emotions, particularly during these uncertain, changing times, and it is important to acknowledge and accept them rather than trying to push them away or escape them. The same goes for sadness stemming from the loss of our regular ways of living, worry about lack of supplies or apprehension about kids getting cabin fever. That's because research has shown that avoidance of such emotions will only make them stronger and longer lasting. Notice negative emotions and physical sensations as they come up, look into them with curiosity, describe them without judgment, and then let them go.

“Suppose you love mountain climbing. It's something you're absolutely passionate about. And one day you set out to climb this mountain that you've heard great things about. But when you get close to the mountain you discover that a swamp runs all the way around it. It's a big surprise. No one told you about it. But now the only way you'll get to climb that mountain is to wade through the swamp. You don't wallow in it, just for the sake of it. You waded through the swamp because climbing that mountain matters.”

Russ Harris

Exercise: Making room

You may want to close your eyes and try and let your thoughts come and go in the background without paying them too much attention, refocusing back on the feelings whenever you get distracted:

1. Observe – scan your body for uncomfortable feelings (where are they strongest or weakest; are they still or moving; what size, shape, colour, texture, etc are they), find the sensation that bothers you the most and observe it with curiosity and openness.

2. Breathe – slow deep breaths. Breathe directly into and around sensations and make room for them. It's as if you open up and expand around the feeling.

3. Allow – allow the sensations to be there even if you don't like them. Simply acknowledge any unhelpful thoughts or judgements or resistance towards the feeling, then let it go.

We're not trying to get rid of the sensation or alter it. The goal is to see it as it is and make peace with it. Ideally you would do this exercise and focus on the sensation until you drop the struggle with it. Preferably you would want to practise this as often as possible.

“Instead of fighting our emotions, we can invest our energy in creating the best possible life...”

Why should you sit with unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions? What is the point? Acceptance is in service of working towards your values, so we're not just asking you if you are willing to make room for uncomfortable feelings for the sake of it, we're asking “are you willing to make room for this feeling if this will enable you to do what really matters to you?”. Instead of fighting our emotions, we can invest our energy in creating the best possible life, given the circumstances.

TIP

To see how your negative thoughts and fears might be stopping you from doing certain things, you may want to ask yourself: What would I stand for if fear couldn't stop me? What would I do if fear wasn't a barrier? What activities would I start/continue?

Summary

- ✓ Whatever you're doing, engage fully with it.
- ✓ Whoever you're with, be fully present for them.
- ✓ When unhelpful thoughts arise, defuse from them.
- ✓ Whenever unpleasant feelings arise, make room for them, so you can work towards your values
- ✓ And whatever your values are, be faithful to them.
- ✓ If goals can be achieved, take effective action in line with your values
- ✓ If goals can't be achieved, defuse from negative thoughts, accept feelings that arise, and adapt your goals in line with your values.

Adapted from The Happiness Trap by Russ Harris

Further information

Further reading

If you want to know any more about the ACT approach, we recommend the following publications:

- *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris
- *A Liberated Mind* by Steven Hayes
- *ACT With Love: Stop Struggling, Reconcile Differences, and Strengthen Your Relationship With Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* by Russ Harris

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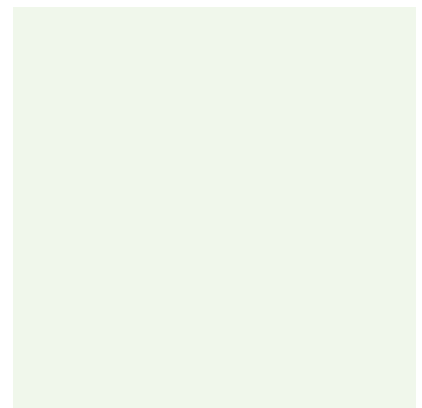
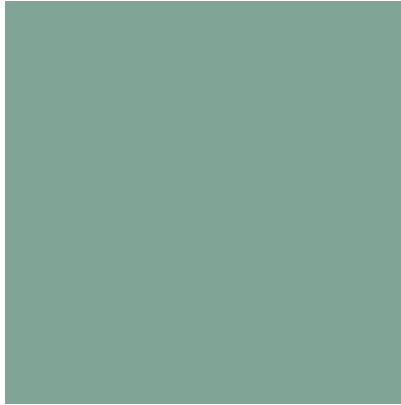
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