

A MEANINGFUL LIFE



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THE SIX CORE PRINCIPLES OF ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT):

1. DEFUSION

Recognizing thoughts, images, and memories for what they are – just words and pictures – and allowing them to come and go as they please, without fighting them, running from them, or giving them more attention that they deserve.

2. EXPANSION

Making room for feelings, sensations, and urges and allowing them to come and go as they please, without fighting them, running from them, or giving them undue attention.

3. CONNECTION

Bringing full awareness to your here-and-now experience with openness, interest, and receptiveness; focusing on and engaging fully in whatever you're doing.

4. THE OBSERVING SELF

A transcendent part of you; a perspective from which to observe difficult thoughts and feelings, without being hurt by them. The one part of you which is unchanging, ever-present, and impervious to harm. It has no physical properties: it is "pure awareness."

5. VALUES

Clarifying what is most important in your heart: what sort of person you want to be, what is significant and meaningful to you, what you want to stand for in this life.

6. COMMITTED ACTION

Taking effective action in line with your values (again and again, no matter how many times you go off track).

These six basic principles are neatly summarized in the basic ACT formula:

A = Accept your thoughts and feelings and be present.

C = Connect with your values.

T = Take effective action.

The more you live by these six core principles, the more fulfilling and rewarding your life will be. But don't believe this just because I say so. Try it out and trust

your own experience. If these principles work for you, if they give you a rich, full life, then it makes sense to embrace them as fully as possible.

The way you live your life is a personal choice. And while most people find that these six basic principles will transform their lives in many positive ways, it's important to remember they are not Ten Commandments. Apply them if and when you choose to, and always in the interest of making life richer, fuller, and more meaningful. But don't make them into rules that must be obeyed absolutely and at all times.

I'm quite sure there will be plenty of times when you "forget" what you've learned. You'll get caught up in unhelpful thoughts, struggle uselessly with your feelings, and act in self-defeating ways. But the instant you recognize what you're doing, you can choose to do something about it – if you want to, that is. Again, this is a personal choice. You don't have to do anything. In fact, I'm sure there will be times that you deliberately choose not to use the principles in this handout. And that's okay. Just aim to be more aware of the choice you make and the effects they have on your life. That way, you are more likely to make choices that enhance your life, rather than ones that diminish it.

Feeling Stuck?

If you haven't made many (or any) significant changes, you've probably come up against one or more components of **FEAR**:

- Fusion / Identification with your thoughts and feelings
- Excessive expectations
- Avoidance of discomfort
- Remoteness from your values

So if you're feeling stuck or you're putting off taking action, take a few moments to identify what's getting in your way and think about how to resolve it. If you're fusing with unhelpful thoughts such as, "It's too hard," "I can't do it," "It won't work," "I can't be bothered," or, "I'll do it later," then practice defusion skills. If your expectations are unrealistic, break your goals down into smaller steps, give yourself more time, and allow yourself to make mistakes. If you're avoiding uncomfortable feelings such as fear or anxiety, practice your expansion skills and develop willingness. If you're remote from your values, then keep asking yourself, "What do I really care about?" "What really matters deep in my heart?" "What sort of person do I want to be?" and, "Deep down inside, what do I really want?"

Applying ACT in Different Domains of Life

In whichever domain of life you feel dissatisfied – whether it's health, work, friends, family, relationships, or something else – applying the basic ACT principles will help you transform it. Whatever you're doing, engage yourself fully in it. Whoever you're with, be present. When unhelpful thoughts arise, defuse them. When unpleasant feelings arise, make room for them. And whatever your values are, be faithful to them.

Using the six core principles of ACT can help you rise to the Serenity Challenge: "Develop the courage to solve those problems that can be solved, the serenity to accept those problems that can't be solved, and the wisdom to know the difference." If your problems can be solved, then take effective action, guided by your values, to solve them. If your problems can't be solved, use defusion and expansion to accept this. And the more awareness you bring to your experience right now – the more you'll be able to tell which problems are which.

No matter what sort of problematic situation you encounter in life, there are only ever two sensible courses of action:

1. Accept it.
2. Take effective action to improve it.

Of course, sometimes the only way to improve the situation is to leave it. But if you can't leave it and if no effective action is possible right now, then the only option is to accept it until you can take effective action.

Focus on What's in Your Control

Whatever you attempt to do, you'll get the best results when you focus on what is in your control (and the worst results when you focus on what's not in your control). So what is in your control? Well, mainly two things: **your actions and your attention**. You can control the actions you take, no matter what your thoughts and feelings may be telling you (as long as you're doing). And you can control how you direct your attention; that is, what you focus on and whether you do so with openness, interest, and receptiveness.

Apart from your actions and your attention, you don't have much control over anything else. For example:

- You have little control over your feelings, thoughts, memories, urges, and sensations – and the more intense they are, the less control you have.
- You have no control over other people. (You can influence other people, of course, but only through your actions. Therefore, those people are not directly in your control; only your actions are. Even if you were to point a gun at someone's head, you couldn't control them, because they could still choose to die rather than obey you.)

- You have no control over the world around you. (You can interact with and transform the world around you, but only through your actions – your actions are in your control; the world isn't.)

Therefore, it makes sense to put your life's energy mainly into action and attention. Do what you value. Engage yourself fully in what you're doing. And pay attention to the effect your actions are having. Remember, each time you act in line with your values, no matter how tiny that action is, you're contributing to a rich and meaningful life.

The Purpose

The whole purpose is to help you escape from the vicious cycle of the happiness trap – to live a full and meaningful life instead of basing your existence on chasing “good” feelings and avoiding “bad” ones. Of course, in a full human life you will experience the full range of human feelings. You will experience every emotion, from joy and love to fear and anger, and willingly make room for them all.

There's an ancient Eastern saying: “If you don't decide where you're going, you'll end up wherever you're heading.” To live a meaningful life, you need direction, and **your values are there, deep in your heart**, to provide it. So connect with those values; use them for guidance. Cultivate a sense of purpose. Keep setting meaningful goals and pursue them vigorously.

At the same time, appreciate **what you have in your life right now**. This is important, because **now** is the only time you ever have. The past doesn't exist; it's nothing more than memories in the present. And the future doesn't exist; it's nothing more than thoughts and images in the present. **The only time you ever have is this moment.** So make the most of it. Notice what is happening. Appreciate it in its fullness.

And remember: *life gives most to those who make the most of what life gives.*

(This handout is based on an extract from the book “The Happiness Trap” by Russ Harris)

