

**An Easy-to-Read Primer
on Acceptance and
Commitment Therapy**



ACT

made simple

———— A quick-start guide to ACT basics and beyond ————

- Understand & apply the six core processes of ACT
- Create your own mindfulness techniques
- Overcome resistance & motivate the unmotivated
- Learn tools for profound life change
- Build powerful therapeutic relationships

RUSS HARRIS

author of *The Happiness Trap*

Foreword by STEVEN C. HAYES, PH.D.

“Russ Harris is an open, centered, and engaged teacher of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), and, in *ACT Made Simple*, he succeeds in delivering a transparent account of a complex and powerful treatment. I recommend this book to mental health and medical providers and to their teachers.”

—Patricia J. Robinson, Ph.D., coauthor of *Behavioral Consultation and Primary Care* and *The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Depression*

“*ACT Made Simple* is simply the most accessible book written to date for therapists interested in learning ACT. Russ Harris explains ACT concepts in a style that is both engaging and straightforward. His advice on overcoming therapy roadblocks is invaluable and will be useful to both novice and experienced ACT practitioners.”

—Jason B. Luoma, Ph.D., psychologist at Portland Psychotherapy Clinic, Research, and Training Center

“Perhaps the most elegant, easily digestible book on using the principles of mindfulness and acceptance to improve your own life and the lives of others. Inside are a litany of creative exercises and strategies that are ready for immediate use. But none of the benefits would be possible without the supportive, entertaining voice of Russ Harris. There is something new to be learned with each reading.”

—Todd B. Kashdan, Ph.D., professor of psychology at George Mason University and author of *Curious? Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life*

“ACT aims to increase psychological flexibility. Learn from this book and you’ll be *doing* ACT rather than just talking about doing ACT. And you’ll be doing it with greater flexibility.”

—Hank Robb, Ph.D., ABPP

“Let’s face it: psychological concerns are complex. If modern behavior therapy is to rise to the occasion of reducing human suffering, it will require a similarly intricate and comprehensive approach. ACT attempts to provide a multifaceted treatment model to address these complexities, and *ACT Made Simple* has risen to the occasion by reducing the difficulties in understanding the unique ACT approach. Harris’s expressive style is matchless. Comprehensive scientific and clinical literature rarely reads this well. This is a clear, understandable introduction to a powerful intervention approach. Many practitioners who are new to ACT will want to start with *ACT Made Simple*.”

—Daniel J. Moran, Ph.D., BCBA, coauthor of *ACT in Practice*

"This much-needed book is a must for mental health clinicians interested in learning ACT. True to his physician roots, Harris has taken a very practical approach to understanding ACT. He does a wonderful job of taking complicated ACT concepts and making them easy to understand. His writing is full of wit, self-disclosure, and down-to-earth communication. Readers of this book will finish it with a much better understanding of core ACT principles and interventions."

—Kirk D. Strosahl, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Depression*

"For newcomers to ACT, there is no better place to start than with this book. Russ Harris masterfully makes ACT come alive with an accessible writing style and illustrative examples of its application in alleviating a wide range of types of human suffering. Practical tips and homework assignments throughout will actively engage you to go beyond merely reading about ACT and begin to apply it to your own life and in your work with clients. For those who may have been holding out for *ACT for Dummies*, the wait is over. This book is for you!"

—Robert Zettle, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Wichita State University
and author of *ACT for Depression*

"For those of you who train or supervise nurses, physicians, social workers, or other professionals unfamiliar with psychological lingo, *ACT Made Simple* is a must. Russ Harris has succeeded in the challenge of translating difficult psychological concepts embedded in ACT into plain, colorful, diverse language that anyone working clinically will understand. Each section is simply organized, easy to follow, and user-friendly. Harris has included highly useful sections of practical tips and common pitfalls that even the trained ACT therapist will find useful. I highly recommend *ACT Made Simple* as a primer for ACT training."

—JoAnne Dahl, Ph.D., author of *The Art and Science of Valuing in Psychotherapy*

"*ACT Made Simple* is just that. Dr. Harris has, once again, written a very accessible book that should be read by all clinicians wanting to learn, engage or otherwise implement ACT in their practice. This book is a must for ACT readers. My thanks to Dr. Harris for making ACT so user-friendly and understandable."

—Robyn D. Walser, Ph.D., author of *The Mindful Couple*

ACT made simple

**An Easy-to-Read Primer
on Acceptance and
Commitment Therapy**

RUSS HARRIS, MD

New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Publisher's Note

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering psychological, financial, legal, or other professional services. If expert assistance or counseling is needed, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books

Copyright © 2009 by Russ Harris
New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
5674 Shattuck Avenue
Oakland, CA 94609
www.newharbinger.com

All Rights Reserved

Acquired by Catharine Sutker; Cover design by Amy Shoup;
Edited by Carole Honeychurch; Text design by Tracy Carlson

PDF ISBN: 978-1-57224-764-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harris, Russ, 1938-

ACT made simple : an easy-to-read primer on acceptance and commitment therapy / Russ Harris ; foreword by Steven C. Hayes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57224-705-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-57224-705-3 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Acceptance and commitment therapy. I. Title.

RC489.A32H37 2009

616.89'1425--dc22

2009023487

Dedication

To my brother Genghis: for all your love, support, inspiration, and encouragement over the years; for pushing me when I needed pushing; for anchoring me when I needed stability; for showing me the way when I got lost; and for bringing so much light, love, and laughter into my life.

Contents

Foreword	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
INTRODUCTION	
What's It All About?	1
CHAPTER 1	
ACT in a Nutshell	6
CHAPTER 2	
Stuck, Not Broken	19
CHAPTER 3	
The House of ACT	33
CHAPTER 4	
Getting Experiential	40
CHAPTER 5	
Opening ACT	50
CHAPTER 6	
Creative What??!!	81
CHAPTER 7	
Watch Your Thinking	97

CHAPTER 8

Open Up 134

CHAPTER 9

Be Here Now 156

CHAPTER 10

Pure Awareness 173

CHAPTER 11

Know What Matters 189

CHAPTER 12

Do What It Takes 208

CHAPTER 13

Getting Unstuck 225

CHAPTER 14

I and Thou 233

CHAPTER 15

The Therapist’s Journey 239

APPENDIX 1

Case Conceptualization Made Simple 245

APPENDIX 2

Resources 247

References 251

Index 257

Foreword

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is oddly counterintuitive. The mind fights it. Even experienced ACT therapists and successful ACT clients can connect with something in the work, move forward, and then weeks later suddenly find that the vitality is gone from that connection because they have subtly reformulated it mentally into something more “normal” but also much less useful.

ACT is not about training the normal mode of the mind. It is about getting out of your mind and into your life. Minds don’t like that agenda.

This very phenomenon partially explains why ACT is a new therapy for most clinicians, even though it was developed almost thirty years ago.

We deliberately spent a long time working out the underlying processes and theory in hopes that these would serve as a guide when we lost our way. We could say, in precise behavioral language, what was meant by “mind.” We could research, in precise behavioral experiments, how defusion altered the impact of cognition or how acceptance changed the role of emotion.

This strategy did indeed help keep the work focused, but it greatly delayed thorough presentations of the work. (The first book on ACT was completed only ten years ago, nearly twenty years after ACT began.) It also made early ACT writings very complex. Clients have a hard time shifting from a problem-solving mode into a mindful appreciation mode. The underlying theory explains why and what to do about it—and we were ready with these detailed geek-science explanations even if at times they were virtually unreadable to those not versed in behavior analysis.

Fortunately, the heart of the work shone through for some at least. Creative clinicians and authors, including the author of this beautiful new book, began to find simpler and clearer ways to help others connect with the work. The advent of ACT self-help books accelerated that process even further as authors learned how to write in ways that people can understand.

Now the ACT literature is vast, with scores of books and hundreds of articles. Clinicians need a place to begin to explore that territory. My prediction is that they have just found it.

Russ Harris is brilliant in his ability to sniff out needless complexity and present complex clinical ideas in an accessible way. *ACT Made Simple* is ACT. Unquestionably. This book rings with a clear note on every page. Russ has put in the years to understand the work deeply (even the geek science underlying relational frame theory) and learn to apply and extend it with integrity. In this book, he has brought his considerable talents to bear on the clear presentation and formulation of the ACT model, and he has brought his clinical creativity to new methods and new ways of getting to the heart of these issues with clients.

That is a great combination and a significant contribution. Particularly if you are new to the work, this book will do a masterful job of opening up the ACT model for you to explore. It is just as the title says: *ACT Made Simple*.

—Steven C. Hayes, Ph.D.
University of Nevada

Acknowledgments

First, a humongous thank you to my wife, Carmel, for all her love and support; for putting up with my obsessive-compulsive writing disorder; for encouraging me to keep writing during all those dark patches where I thought I was writing nothing but crap; and for being my “sounding board” and actively helping me to develop my ideas.

Thanks also to all those friends and colleagues who read early drafts and gave me invaluable feedback: Julian McNally, Georg Eifert, Hank Robb, and Ros Lethbridge.

As usual, I’d like to dump a zillion truckloads of gratitude on Steve Hayes, the originator of ACT—and that gratitude also extends to Kelly Wilson, Kirk Strosahl, Robyn Walser, and Hank Robb, all huge sources of inspiration for me. I also am very thankful to the entire ACT community, which is very supportive and inspirational; many ideas within these pages have arisen from discussions on the worldwide ACT Listserv.

Next I’d like to thank my agent, Sammie Justesen, for all her good work; and a heap of thanks to the entire team at New Harbinger—including Jess Beebe, Catherine Sutker, and Matt McKay—for all the hard work, care, and attention they have invested in this book.

Editors are the unsung heroes of successful books, and so I’d like to sing my thanks to the heroic efforts of my editor, Jean Blomquist, who truly had her work cut out for her in knocking this book into shape.

And finally I want to thank my son, Max. While he is far too young to help me with the book directly, he has helped enormously in a more indirect manner, simply by being in my life and filling it with so much love.

INTRODUCTION

What's It All About?

Life is spelt H.A.S.S.L.E.—Albert Ellis

Life is difficult.—M. Scott Peck

Life is suffering.—Buddha

Shit happens!—Anonymous

WHY, WHY, WHY?

Why is it so hard to be happy? Why is life so difficult? Why do humans suffer so much? And what can we realistically do about it? Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) has some profound and life-changing answers to these questions. This book aims to take the complex theory and practice of ACT and make it accessible and enjoyable. If, like me, you've got a bookcase full of mostly unfinished academic textbooks, you'll appreciate the fact that ACT is engaging and playful. I've deliberately kept technical jargon to an absolute minimum and opted for everyday language wherever possible. I hope to make ACT accessible to the broadest possible range of professionals—from coaches, counselors, and mental health nurses, to social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and all health professionals.

SO WHAT IS ACT?

We officially say ACT as the word “act” and not as the initials A-C-T. There’s a good reason for this. At its core, ACT is a behavioral therapy: it’s about taking action. But it’s not about just any old action. First, it’s about values-guided action. There’s a big existential component to this model: What do you want to stand for in life? What really matters, deep in your heart? What do you want to be remembered for at your funeral? ACT gets you in touch with what really matters in the big picture: your heart’s deepest desires for whom you want to be and what you want to do during your brief time on this planet. You then use these core values to guide, motivate, and inspire behavioral change. Second, it’s about “mindful” action: action that you take consciously, with full awareness—open to your experience and fully engaged in whatever you’re doing.

ACT gets its name from one of its core messages: accept what is out of your personal control, and commit to taking action that enriches your life. The aim of ACT is to help us create a rich, full, and meaningful life, while accepting the pain that life inevitably brings. ACT does this by

- teaching us psychological skills to handle painful thoughts and feelings effectively, in such a way that they have much less impact and influence—these are known as *mindfulness skills*; and
- helping us to clarify what’s truly important and meaningful to us—that is, clarify our values—and use that knowledge to guide, inspire, and motivate us to set goals and take action that enriches our life.

ACT rests on an underlying theory of human language and cognition called relational frame theory (RFT), a theory that now has over one hundred and fifty published peer-reviewed articles supporting its principles. We won’t cover RFT in this book because it’s quite technical and takes a fair bit of work to understand, whereas the aim of this book is to welcome you into ACT, simplify the main concepts, and get you off to a quick start.

The good news is you can be an effective ACT therapist without knowing anything about RFT. If ACT is like driving your car, RFT is like knowing how the engine works: you can be an excellent driver while knowing absolutely nothing about the mechanics. (Having said that, many ACT therapists say that when they understand RFT, it improves their clinical effectiveness. Therefore, if you’re interested, appendix 2 will tell you where to go for more information.)

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

I’ve aimed this book primarily at newcomers to ACT who want a quick and simple introduction to the model. It will also be useful for more experienced practitioners who want a quick refresher course: an ACT primer, if you like. I’ve designed it to complement other ACT textbooks that offer

more theory or more in-depth discussions of the ACT processes and their clinical applications. I'll mention some of these textbooks as we go along and others in the resources section (appendix 2) at the end.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

If you're brand-new to ACT, I strongly recommend you read this entire book from cover to cover *before* you start using any of it. This is because the six core processes of ACT are all interdependent, so unless you have a good sense of the entire model and the way these different strands interweave, you may well get confused and head off in the wrong direction.

And, of course, reading it is not enough; you'll also need to actively practice the exercises as you go. After all, you can't learn to drive merely by reading about it; you have to actually get in a car, put your hands on the wheel, and take it for a spin. When you're ready to start using ACT with your clients, you can either use this book to loosely guide you, or you might prefer to use a protocol-based ACT textbook that will coach you along in detail, session-by-session.

First off, in chapters 1 through 3, we're going to zip through an overview of the model and the theory underlying it. Then in chapters 4 and 5, we'll cover the basics of getting started, including how to do experiential therapy, obtain informed consent, and structure your ongoing sessions. In chapters 6 through 12, we'll go step-by-step through the six core processes of ACT and how to apply them to a wide range of clinical issues. The emphasis in each chapter will be on simplicity and practicality so you can start using this approach straight away. (But please keep in mind: newcomers should first read the whole book, cover to cover, before applying it.)

In the last section of the book, chapters 13 through 15, we'll cover a wide range of important topics including common therapist pitfalls, overcoming barriers to change, enhancing the client-therapist relationship, dancing around the six core processes, embodying ACT in everyday life, mixing and matching ACT with other models, and where to go next on your journey as an ACT therapist.

From chapter 5 onward, you'll find these "practical tip" text boxes popping up:

Practical Tip In these sections, you'll find practical tips to help your clinical practice and common pitfalls to watch out for.

YOUR ROLE IN ALL THIS

I heard a great saying recently: "Be yourself: everyone else is already taken." Your role in learning and practicing ACT is to be yourself. I wasted a lot of time and effort in my early ACT work trying to do ACT word-for-word as written in the textbooks. And then, after I saw Steve Hayes and Kelly

Wilson—two of the founders of ACT—in action, I tried very hard to copy their unique styles of doing therapy. This didn't work very well for me. It all went much better when I allowed myself to be me and developed my own style and my own way of speaking, a manner that felt natural and also suited the clients I work with. I'm sure you'll find the same.

So as you go through this book, use your creativity. Feel free to adapt, modify, and reinvent the tools and techniques within these pages (provided you're remaining true to the ACT model) to suit your own personal style. Wherever I present metaphors, scripts, worksheets, or exercises, change the words to fit your way of speaking. And if you have better or different metaphors that accomplish the same ends, then please use yours rather than the ones in this book. There's enormous room for creativity and innovation within the ACT model, so please do take every advantage of it.

GETTING STARTED

Few people come to ACT and dive in head first. You, like most, may start off by dipping a toe in the water. Next, you put a whole foot in. Then a knee. Then an entire leg. Now you find yourself in this odd position, with one leg in the water and one leg out. And generally you stay there for quite a while, half in, half out, not quite sure if ACT is for you. Finally, one day, you take the plunge. And when you do so, you discover the water is warm, welcoming, and invigorating; you feel liberated, buoyant, and resourceful; and you want to spend a lot more time in it. Once this happens, there's generally no going back to your old way of working. (So if this hasn't already happened to you, I hope it will by the end of this book.)

One reason for this initial uncertainty about ACT is that it challenges conventional wisdom and overturns the ground rules of most Western psychology. For example, most models of therapy are extremely focused on symptom reduction. Their assumption is that clients need to reduce their symptoms before they can lead a better life. ACT takes a radically different stance. ACT assumes that (a) quality of life is primarily dependent upon mindful, values-guided action, and (b) this is possible regardless of how many symptoms you have—provided that you respond to your symptoms with mindfulness.

To put it another way, mindful, values-congruent living is the desired outcome in ACT, not symptom reduction. So although ACT typically reduces symptoms, this is never the goal. (By the way, as "values-congruent living" is a bit of a mouthful, for the most of the book I'll shorten it to "valued living." Sorry, I know it's not great English.)

Thus in ACT, when we teach a client mindfulness skills, the aim is *not* to reduce his symptoms but to fundamentally *change his relationship with his symptoms* so that they no longer hold him back from valued living. The fact that his symptoms reduce is considered a "bonus" rather than the main point of therapy.

Of course, we don't say to our clients, "We're not going to try to reduce your symptoms!" Why not? Because (a) this would set up all sorts of unnecessary therapeutic barriers, and (b) we know that symptom reduction is extremely likely. (Even though we never aim for it, in almost every trial

and study ever done on ACT, there is significant symptom reduction—although sometimes it occurs more slowly than in other models.)

So what this means is, if you come to ACT from models that are very focused on trying to reduce symptoms, it's truly a massive paradigm shift. Fortunately most people—therapists and clients alike—find it a liberating one. However, because ACT is so different from most other psychological approaches, many practitioners initially feel awkward, anxious, vulnerable, confused, or inadequate. I certainly did. (And I still do at times!) The good news is ACT gives you the means to effectively handle those perfectly natural feelings. And the more you practice ACT on yourself to enrich and enhance your own life and to resolve your own painful issues, the more effective you'll be in applying it with your clients. (How's that for a bonus?) So, enough of the preamble: let's get started!

CHAPTER I

ACT in a Nutshell

WHAT IS A "MIND"?

This is too hard. I can't do this. Why isn't this working? It all seemed so easy when I read it in the textbook. I wish there was a real therapist here to tell me what to do. Maybe I'm not cut out for this sort of work. I'm so dumb. Maybe I should refer this client to someone else who knows what they're doing.

Does your mind ever say things like this to you? Mine certainly does. And so does the mind of every therapist I've ever known. Now take a moment to reflect on what else your mind does that's unhelpful. For example, does it ever compare you harshly to others, or criticize your efforts, or tell you that you can't do the things you want to do? Does it ever dredge up unpleasant memories from the past? Does it find fault with your life as it is today and conjure up alternative lives where you'd be ever so much happier? Does it ever drag you into scary scenarios about the future and warn you about all the possible things that might go wrong? If so, it sounds as if you have a normal human mind. You see, in ACT, we start from the assumption that the normal psychological processes of a normal human mind readily become destructive, and sooner or later, they create psychological suffering for all of us. And ACT speculates that the root of this suffering is human language itself.

Language and the Mind

Human language is a highly complex system of symbols that includes words, images, sounds, facial expressions, and physical gestures. Humans use language in two domains: public and private. The public use of language includes speaking, talking, miming, gesturing, writing, painting, sculpting, singing, dancing, acting, and so on. The private use of language includes thinking, imagining, daydreaming, planning, visualizing, analyzing, worrying, fantasizing, and so on. (A commonly used term for the private use of language is *cognition*.)

Now clearly the mind is not a “thing” or an “object.” We use the word “mind” to describe an incredibly complex set of interactive cognitive processes, such as analyzing, comparing, evaluating, planning, remembering, visualizing, and so on. And all of these complex processes rely on the sophisticated system of symbols we call human language. Thus in ACT, when we use the word “mind,” we’re using it as a metaphor for “human language.”

Your Mind Is Not Your Friend—or Your Enemy

ACT regards the mind as a double-edged sword. It’s very useful for all sorts of purposes, but if we don’t learn how to handle it effectively, it will hurt us. On the bright side, language helps us make maps and models of the world; predict and plan for the future; share knowledge; learn from the past; imagine things that have never existed and go on to create them; develop rules that guide our behavior effectively and help us to thrive as a community; communicate with people who are far away; and learn from people who are no longer alive.

The dark side of language is that we use it to lie, manipulate, and deceive; to spread libel, slander, and ignorance; to incite hatred, prejudice, and violence; to make weapons of mass destruction and industries of mass pollution; to dwell on and “relive” painful events from the past; to scare ourselves by imagining unpleasant futures; to compare, judge, criticize, and condemn both ourselves and others; and to create rules for ourselves that can often be life constricting or destructive. Because language is both a blessing and a curse, we often say in ACT, “Your mind is not your friend—and it’s not your enemy either.” So now that we know what a “mind” is, let’s turn to a very important question.

WHAT IS THE AIM OF ACT?

The aim of ACT, in lay terms, is to create a rich, full, and meaningful life while accepting the pain that inevitably goes with it. Later this chapter, we’ll look at a more technical definition of ACT, but first take a moment to consider this question: why does life inevitably involve pain?

Clearly there are many, many reasons. We’ll all experience frustration, disappointment, rejection, loss, and failure. We’ll all experience illness, injury, and aging. We’ll all face our own death and the death of our loved ones. On top of that, many basic human emotions—normal feelings that each and every one of us will repeatedly experience throughout our lives—are inherently painful: fear, sadness, guilt, anger, shock, and disgust, to name but a few.

And as if all that were not enough, we each have a mind that can conjure up pain at any moment. Thanks to human language, wherever we go, whatever we do, we can experience pain instantly. In any moment, we can relive a painful memory or get lost in a fearful prediction of the future. Or we can get caught up in unfavorable comparisons (“Her job is better than mine”) or negative self-judgments (“I’m too fat,” “I’m not smart enough,” and so on).

Thanks to human language, we can even experience pain on the happiest days of our lives. For example, suppose it's Susan's wedding day, and all of her friends and family are gathered together to honor her joyful new union. She is blissfully happy. But then she has the thought *I wish my father were here*—and she remembers how he committed suicide when she was only sixteen years old. Now, on one of the happiest days of her life, she's in pain.

And we're all in the same boat as Susan. No matter how good our quality of life, no matter how privileged our situation, all we need do is remember a time when something bad happened, or imagine a future where something bad happens, or judge ourselves harshly, or compare our life to someone else's that seems better, and instantly we're hurting.

Thus, thanks to the sophistication of the mind, even the most privileged of human lives inevitably involves significant pain. Unfortunately, typical human beings commonly handle their pain ineffectively. All too often when we experience painful thoughts, feelings, and sensations, we respond in ways that are self-defeating or self-destructive in the long run. Because of this, one major element of ACT is teaching people how to handle pain more effectively through the use of mindfulness skills.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

"Mindfulness" is an ancient concept, found in a wide range of ancient spiritual and religious traditions, including Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Western psychology has only recently started to recognize the many benefits of developing mindfulness skills. If you read a few books on the subject, you'll find "mindfulness" defined in a variety of different ways, but they all basically boil down to this:

Mindfulness means paying attention with flexibility, openness, and curiosity.

This simple definition tells us three important things. First, mindfulness is an *awareness* process, not a *thinking* process. It involves bringing awareness or paying attention to your experience in this moment as opposed to being "caught up" in your thoughts. Second, mindfulness involves a particular attitude: one of openness and curiosity. Even if your experience in this moment is difficult, painful, or unpleasant, you can be open to it and curious about it instead of running from it or fighting with it. Third, mindfulness involves flexibility of attention: the ability to consciously direct, broaden, or focus your attention on different aspects of your experience.

We can use mindfulness to "wake up," connect with ourselves, and appreciate the fullness of each moment of life. We can use it to improve our self-knowledge—to learn more about how we feel and think and react. We can use it to connect deeply and intimately with the people we care about, including ourselves. And we can use it to consciously influence our own behavior and increase our range of responses to the world we live in. It is the art of living consciously—a profound way to enhance psychological resilience and increase life satisfaction.

Of course there's a lot more to ACT than just mindfulness. It's also about valued living: taking action, on an ongoing basis, that is guided by and aligned with core values. Indeed, we teach

mindfulness skills in ACT with the express purpose of facilitating valued action: to help people live by their values. In other words, the outcome we aim for in ACT is mindful, valued living. This will become clearer in the next section, where we look at the six core processes of ACT.

THE SIX CORE THERAPEUTIC PROCESSES OF ACT

The six core therapeutic processes in ACT are contacting the present moment, defusion, acceptance, self-as-context, values, and committed action. Before we go through them one by one, take a look at the diagram in figure 1.1, which is light-heartedly known as the ACT “hexaflex.” (This diagram differs from the standard version you’ll find in most ACT textbooks in that underneath each technical term I’ve written a short catchphrase to help you remember what it means.)

Let’s take a look now at each of the six core processes of ACT.

Contacting the Present Moment (*Be Here Now*)

Contacting the present moment means being psychologically present: consciously connecting with and engaging in whatever is happening in this moment. Humans find it very hard to stay present. Like other humans, we know how easy it is to get caught up in our thoughts and lose touch with the world around us. We may spend a lot of time absorbed in thoughts about the past or the future. Or instead of being fully conscious of our experience, we may operate on automatic pilot, merely “going through the motions.” Contacting the present moment means flexibly bringing our awareness to either the physical world around us or the psychological world within us, or to both simultaneously. It also means consciously paying attention to our here-and-now experience instead of drifting off into our thoughts or operating on “automatic pilot.”

Defusion (*Watch Your Thinking*)

Defusion means learning to “step back” and separate or detach from our thoughts, images, and memories. (The full term is “cognitive defusion,” but usually we just call it “defusion.”) Instead of getting caught up in our thoughts or being pushed around by them, we let them come and go as if they were just cars driving past outside our house. We step back and watch our thinking instead of getting tangled up in it. We see our thoughts for what they are—nothing more or less than words or pictures. We hold them lightly instead of clutching them tightly.

Acceptance (*Open Up*)

Acceptance means opening up and making room for painful feelings, sensations, urges, and emotions. We drop the struggle with them, give them some breathing space, and allow them to be as

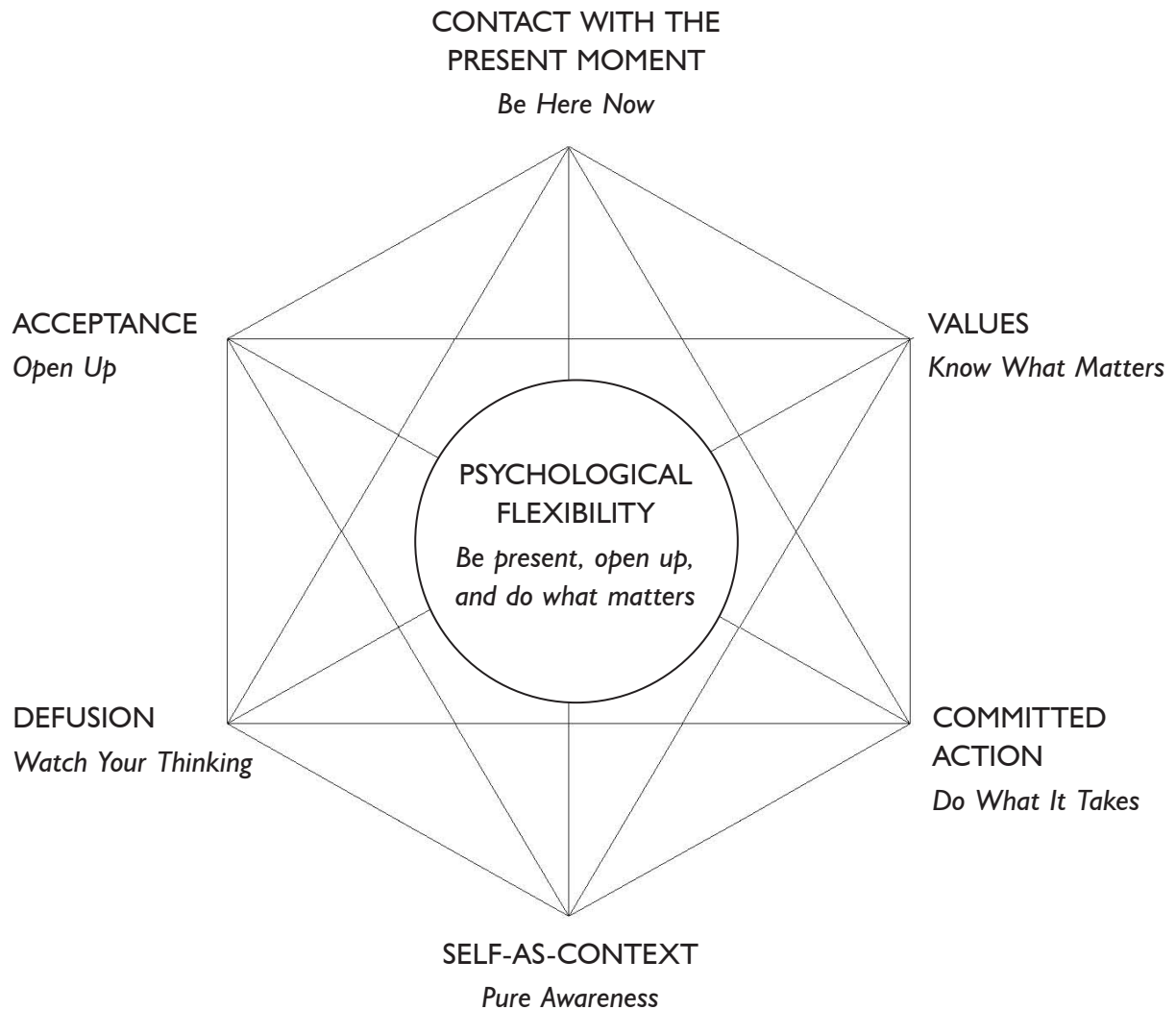


Figure 1.1 **The ACT Hexaflex**

they are. Instead of fighting them, resisting them, running from them, or getting overwhelmed by them, we open up to them and let them be. (Note: This doesn't mean liking them or wanting them. It simply means making room for them!)

Self-as-Context (*Pure Awareness*)

In everyday language, we talk about the "mind" without recognizing that there are two distinct elements to it: the thinking self and the observing self. We're all very familiar with the thinking self:

What makes a great stage actor? As a competition to find Britain's best am-dram society gets under way, old hands Roger Allam, Miriam Margolyes and others offer a few words of advice.

The ACT is a standardized test used for college admissions in the United States. It is currently administered by ACT, a nonprofit organization of the same name. The ACT test covers four academic skill areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science reasoning. It also offers an optional direct writing test. It is accepted by all four-year colleges and universities in the United States as well as more than 225 universities outside of the U.S.