

Understanding Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

ACT helps you **increase psychological flexibility**, which is the ability to notice thoughts and feelings without being controlled by them and to act in ways aligned with what truly matters. There are six core processes in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Below is a description of each of these core processes, plus an exercise in nature you can try to help you to understand how each works.

Six Core Processes of ACT

1. *Cognitive Defusion* – Seeing thoughts as just thoughts and not fate

Exercise: “Leaves on a Stream”

- Find a quiet outdoor spot near a tree, stream, or even a patch of grass.
- Close your eyes or soften your gaze.
- Imagine each thought as a leaf floating down a stream. Notice it appear, float, and drift away.
- When your mind clings to a thought, gently place it back on the “stream.”

Reflection: Which thoughts were easiest to let go? Which did you cling to? Did this exercise help you to see thoughts as just processes of the mind?

Optional journaling: List one recurring thought today and write “I notice I am having the thought that ___” before letting it drift downstream.

2. *Acceptance* – Allowing feelings without avoidance

Exercise: “Weathering the Storm”

- Stand or sit outside and notice sensations in your body.
- Identify any uncomfortable feelings (sadness, anxiety, frustration).
- Imagine these feelings as weather passing over you like rain, wind, clouds. They come and go; you do not need to fight them. They are a natural part of existence.
- Breathe into the sensation, observing without judgment.

Reflection: Did noticing the feeling make it more bearable or intense? How did your body respond?

Optional journaling: Describe one emotion you resisted today. How might the acceptance of that emotion change your experience?

3. *Contact with the Present Moment* – Staying aware of the present

Exercise: “Five Senses Nature Check”

Stand or sit outside. Slowly name:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel (touch, temperature, texture)
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste (or notice in mouth/throat)

Focus on each sense fully, letting go of past or future thoughts.

Reflection: Did noticing elements of nature help to get you out of your head and into the present moment?

Optional journaling: Which sense was easiest to connect with? Which was hardest? How did grounding in the present affect your mind?

4. *Self-as-Context* – You are more than your thoughts or feelings

Exercise: “Sky and Clouds”

Find an open outdoor space where you can see the sky. If you can’t go outside, look out a window instead. Imagine your thoughts and feelings as clouds floating in the sky. You are the sky itself: spacious, constant, observing. Notice that even as clouds shift, the sky remains.

Reflection: How did observing your thoughts from “sky perspective” feel? Less overwhelming?

Optional journaling: Write one thought or feeling that usually controls you. Observe it from the “sky” perspective and note any shift in relationship.

5. Values – Clarify what matters most

Exercise: “Tree of Values”

Sit or stand by a tree. Imagine your life as a tree:

- roots = values
- trunk = actions
- branches/leaves = daily life and accomplishments.

Identify 3–5 core “roots” that support your life (e.g., family, honesty, health, creativity). Reflect on whether your current actions nourish these roots.

Reflection: Did picturing your values as a tree help you to clarify what your values are?

Optional journaling: Write your 3–5 values. For each, note one action today that aligns with it.

6. Committed Action – Take meaningful steps aligned with values

Exercise: “Nature Step”

Choose one small step today that reflects a core value (e.g., connecting with a friend, writing, helping someone, going for a run).

Take the step intentionally, noticing your feelings before, during, and after. If uncomfortable feelings arise, practice acceptance and defusion.

Reflection: Did acting deliberately and with intention feel empowering? If so, why?

Optional journaling: Describe the action you took, what obstacles appeared, and how you stayed aligned with your value.

Reflection: Which of these processes feels most familiar or challenging to you right now?