

Living in True Self: Moving Away and Moving Toward

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) helps people notice the difference between moving away from unwanted internal experiences and moving toward what matters. The goal is not to eliminate difficult thoughts, emotions, memories, or sensations. Instead, ACT encourages people to make room for difficult experiences while choosing actions that are consistent with their core values.

Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy (MBE) describes one of its central skills as *Living in True Self*. Living in True Self means becoming more aware of who you are beneath the expectations, judgments, fears, and stories that can pull you away from your authentic values. It involves recognizing what matters most and allowing your choices and actions to increasingly reflect those values.

When these approaches are combined, the ACT concept of “away and towards” can become a practical way of understanding Living in True Self:

Moving away from not living in True Self means recognizing patterns that pull you away from your core values.

Moving toward living in True Self means choosing actions that express your core values, even when difficult thoughts and emotions are present.

The goal is not to create a perfect life or eliminate everything uncomfortable. The goal is to repeatedly choose the direction that takes you closer to the person you want to be.

Part 1: What Does “Living in True Self” Mean?

Take a few moments to consider what Living in True Self means to you.

When I am living in True Self, I am:

I know I am living in True Self when I notice:

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What parts of myself do I sometimes hide, suppress, or ignore because I am worried about what other people think?

What expectations, roles, or “shoulds” sometimes pull me away from who I truly want to be?

Part 2: Identify Your Core Values

Values are not goals that can be completed. They are directions for living. For example, you can never “finish” being compassionate, honest, curious, courageous, or connected. You can continue choosing actions that express those qualities.

Check or identify the values that matter most to you:

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| ☐ Compassion | ☐ Family | ☐ Loyalty | ☐ Community |
| ☐ Connection | ☐ Freedom | ☐ Nature | ☐ Growth |
| ☐ Courage | ☐ Honesty | ☐ Responsibility | ☐ Playfulness |
| ☐ Creativity | ☐ Kindness | ☐ Spirituality | ☐ Respect |
| ☐ Curiosity | ☐ Learning | ☐ Authenticity | ☐ Service |

☐ Other (describe below):

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My three most important values right now are:

Part 3: The “Away” Direction

Sometimes people move away from Living in True Self because they are trying to escape or control uncomfortable experiences.

Moving away can look like:

- Avoiding situations because of fear
- Changing yourself to gain approval
- Suppressing emotions
- Staying silent when something matters
- Saying “yes” when you really mean “no”
- Allowing fear to make important decisions
- Getting caught up in self-criticism
- Living according to other people’s expectations
- Avoiding vulnerability
- Disconnecting from yourself, other people, or nature
- Using distraction to avoid uncomfortable thoughts or feelings

Think about a situation in which you have recently moved away from Living in True Self.

What happened?

What thoughts, emotions, memories, or physical sensations were present?

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What were you trying to avoid, control, or get rid of?

What did you do?

How did that action move you away from one or more of your core values?

Part 4: The “Towards” Direction

Moving toward Living in True Self does not necessarily mean feeling better first.

Sometimes moving toward your values means being willing to experience discomfort while doing what matters.

For example:

Fear → Courageous action

Self-doubt → Authentic expression

Anger → Respectful communication

Sadness → Connection

Uncertainty → Curiosity

Guilt → Responsibility

Fear of rejection → Authenticity

Overwhelm → One meaningful step

Think of a situation in which you could choose to move toward Living in True Self.

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The situation is:

The difficult thoughts or feelings I might experience are:

The value I want to express is:

Moving toward that value could look like:

One small action I could take is:

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Part 5: Away or Toward?

Use the following questions when you are unsure which direction you are moving.

Question	Moving Away	Moving Toward
What is motivating me?	"I need to get rid of this feeling."	"I want to live according to what matters."
What am I focused on?	Avoiding discomfort	Living my values
What determines my choice?	Fear, shame, judgment, or avoidance	Values and authenticity
What happens to difficult emotions?	I struggle against them	I make room for them
What happens to my values?	They become secondary	They guide my actions
What happens to my sense of self?	I become disconnected from myself	I become more authentic
Where does the action take me?	Away from the life I want	Toward the life I want

Part 6: Notice the Difference

Think about a current challenge.

The situation:

If I move away:

What would I do if my primary goal were to avoid discomfort?

What short-term relief might I experience?

What might this choice cost me in the long term?

Which core values might I move away from?

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If I move toward:

What would I do if my primary goal were to live according to my values?

What uncomfortable thoughts or feelings might I have to make room for?

Which core value would guide my action?

What small step could I take toward Living in True Self?

Part 7: The MBE “True Self” Pause

When you notice yourself moving away, pause before automatically following the pattern.

1. Notice

What am I experiencing right now?

2. Breathe

Can I allow this experience to be here without immediately trying to change it?

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3. Connect

What is happening inside me, and what is happening around me?

4. Remember

What matters most to me in this situation?

5. Choose

What action would move me toward Living in True Self?

Part 8: My Away-to-Toward Plan

When I notice myself:

I will remember that I may be moving away from Living in True Self.

Instead of automatically trying to eliminate or escape my discomfort, I can say:

“I don’t have to get rid of this feeling before I choose what matters.”

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The value I want to remember is:

The difficult experience I am willing to make room for is:

The direction I want to move is:

Toward: _____

One small action that represents Living in True Self is:

I can take this action even if I feel:

Part 9: Reflection

Think about the difference between avoiding discomfort and moving toward your values.

What did you learn about your own “away” patterns?

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What did you learn about your “toward” direction?

Which value most strongly represents your True Self?

What is one change you could make this week that would move you closer to Living in True Self?

Remember

Moving away asks:

“What can I do to make this uncomfortable experience stop?”

Moving toward asks:

“What can I do to live according to what matters, even while this experience is here?”

Living in True Self does not mean never feeling fear, sadness, anger, uncertainty, or self-doubt. It means becoming willing to experience what is here while choosing actions that reflect your deepest values.

You do not have to feel like your True Self before you act like your True Self.

Every values-based choice is a step in that direction.