

ACE Difficult Thoughts

The ACT tool Acknowledge, Connect, Engage (ACE) is a brief grounding and mindfulness strategy used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to help you stop being driven automatically by difficult thoughts, emotions, memories, urges, or physical sensations and instead reconnect with the present moment and choose how to respond.

In ACT, experiential avoidance occurs when we try to avoid uncomfortable or difficult thoughts or feelings. Avoiding them in this way is usually the very thing that makes them stick around. This is because telling yourself not to think about it is thinking about it, and the more you tell yourself not to think about it, the more you find yourself thinking about it until all of your energy is wrapped up in this snowball effect.

When we encounter difficult thoughts or feelings, our usual way of responding is to either OBEY the thought or STRUGGLE with the thought. We OBEY it when we believe it to be factual. We STRUGGLE with it when we try to argue with the thought. In ACT, difficult thoughts such as “I’m a failure” can be approached in three ways. A person may OBEY the thought by treating it as true and allowing it to dictate behavior, such as giving up or avoiding opportunities. They may STRUGGLE with it by trying to suppress, eliminate, or prove the thought wrong, which can give the thought even more attention.

ACT offers a third option: notice the thought without obeying or fighting it. For example, “I’m noticing the thought that I’m a failure.” This creates distance from the thought and allows you to acknowledge the feeling while choosing behavior based on your values rather than on the thought itself. The goal is not to eliminate difficult thoughts but to reduce their control over behavior and increase your psychological flexibility.

ACE is one way to do this. ACE stands for **A**cknowledge, **C**onnect, and **E**ngage. The chart below shows how this process works.

Acknowledge	Notice and name what is happening internally without trying to get rid of it: “I’m noticing anxiety,” or “I’m having the thought that I can’t handle this.”
Connect	Bring attention back to the physical body by noticing your feet on the floor, breathing, posture, hands, or other bodily sensations. This provides an anchor in the present moment.
Engage	Reorient attention to the environment and the activity at hand. Then continue with what you are doing, ideally in a way that reflects your values.

Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy (MBE) can be incorporated into ACE tool by using nature and present-moment awareness to deepen each step. The MBE approach adds an important element to ACE: You can use your relationship with nature as an anchor for mindful awareness and values-based action:

Acknowledge: Begin by noticing and naming what is happening internally without judging or trying to change it. For example, you might notice, “I’m having the thought that I’m a failure,” along with feelings of sadness, shame, or anxiety. MBE can add awareness of how these experiences are reflected in your body and how nature can provide a safe context for observing them. You might simply notice, “I feel tension in my chest, and I’m noticing the thought that I’m a failure.”

Connect: Next, shift your attention from the thought to the present moment through embodied mindfulness and connection with nature. You might feel your feet against the ground, notice your

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breathing, listen to birds, feel the wind, observe the movement of leaves, or focus on the textures and sounds around you. Nature becomes an anchor that helps you recognize that the thought is something occurring within your awareness rather than an absolute definition of who you are.

Engage: Finally, bring your attention back to what you are doing and consider how you want to respond. MBE's emphasis on connection, nature as teacher, and living in True Self can help you ask, "What matters to me right now?" or "What would be consistent with the person I want to be?" Instead of allowing "I'm a failure" to dictate your behavior, you might choose a small action that reflects your values. These engaging actions might include trying again, reaching out to someone, completing a task, or taking care of yourself in other ways.

In this way, MBE expands ACE from simply acknowledging the thought, connecting with the present moment, and engaging in valued action to using embodied mindfulness and connection with nature as pathways to psychological flexibility. You don't have to eliminate the thought or prove it wrong. You can just notice it, connect with yourself and your surroundings, and then choose how you want to engage with life and with your True Self.

You can practice using ACE in this manner using the space below. First acknowledge the thought or feeling, then go out into nature if you're not there already, and connect back to your body, nature, and the environment. Finally, engage in the activity you were participating in when the thought or feeling occurred. It may help to fill out the blanks below with what you did in each step.

Acknowledge	Notice and name what is happening internally without trying to get rid of it: "I'm noticing anxiety," or "I'm having the thought that I can't handle this." <i>The thought or feeling I'm having is...</i>
Connect	Bring attention back to the physical body by noticing your feet on the floor, breathing, posture, hands, or other bodily sensations. This provides an anchor in the present moment. <i>I'm feeling connected by...</i>
Engage	Reorient attention to the environment and the activity at hand. Then continue with what you are doing, ideally in a way that reflects your values. <i>I will engage by...</i>