

## Responding to Emotions Differently: A Guide to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Emotions are a natural part of being human. They can be joyful, painful, or somewhere in between. But sometimes, we get stuck in patterns of reacting to our emotions in ways that don't serve us—like avoiding, suppressing, or getting overwhelmed by them.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) offers a way to process emotional pain more adaptively, helping you live a richer and more meaningful life.

### What is ACT?

ACT is a mindfulness-based approach that teaches you to accept your emotions as they are, rather than fighting or avoiding them. It also helps you clarify your values and take committed action toward what truly matters to you, even in the presence of difficult emotions.

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## New Ways to Experience Emotions

ACT provides radically new ways to experience difficult emotions—not as threats to fight or run from, but as opportunities for growth and connection. Here's how:

### A. Mindfulness & Acceptance

1. **Dropping Anchor:** Use mindful grounding techniques to stay present. For example, focus on your breath or notice the sensations in your body.
2. **Noticing and Naming:** Observe your emotion without judgment. Say, "I'm feeling [emotion]."
3. **Defusion:** Step back from unhelpful thoughts about the emotion (e.g., judgments, rules, or reason-giving).
4. **Acceptance:** Allow the emotion to be present without resistance.
5. **Self-Compassion:** Treat yourself with kindness, as you would a friend.
6. **Self-as-Context:** Recognise that you are more than your thoughts and feelings—you are the observer of them.

**Exercise:**

- When you feel a strong emotion, pause and say, “I’m feeling [emotion]. It’s okay to feel this way.”
- Imagine your emotion as a wave rising, peaking, and falling. Observe it without trying to change it.

**Example:**

If you’re feeling anxious, instead of saying, “I shouldn’t feel this way,” try, “I’m feeling anxious, and that’s normal. It’s just my body’s way of preparing me.”

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**B. Appreciating & Utilising**

1. **Wisdom of the Emotion:** Ask, “What is this emotion telling me? What does it want me to address or change?”
2. **Pain as an Ally:** Consider how this emotion might be trying to help you.
3. **Channelling Energy:** Use the energy of the emotion constructively. For example, channel anxiety into preparation or anger into advocating for fairness.
4. **Evolutionary Purpose:** Reflect on the adaptive function of the emotion. For example, fear protects us from danger, and sadness signals loss.

**Exercise:**

- Write down a difficult emotion and answer: “What is this emotion trying to tell me? How can I use its energy in a helpful way?”
- Reflect on how this emotion might serve a purpose in your life.

**Example:**

If you’re feeling angry about an injustice, use that energy to take constructive action, like writing a letter or joining a cause.

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## C. Metaphors

Seeing emotions in new ways can reduce their intensity and impact. Try these metaphors:

- **Weather and Sky:** Emotions are like the weather—they come and go, but you are the sky, vast and unchanging.
- **Waves:** Emotions rise, peak, and fall.
- **Chessboard:** Emotions are like chess pieces, and you are the board.
- **Stage Show:** Emotions are just one aspect of the broad stage show of life.
- **Harmless:** Emotions are harmless, even if they're painful or uncomfortable.
- **Normal:** A full human life comes with the full range of emotions.
- **Control:** Emotions don't have to control you; you can live your values even when difficult feelings are present.

### Exercise:

- Choose a metaphor that resonates with you and use it to reframe a difficult emotion. For example, “My anger is like a wave—it will rise and fall.”

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## New Ways to Express Emotions

### In Private

Learn to express emotions to yourself in new ways:

- “I’m noticing anxiety.”
- “I’m having a feeling of sadness.”
- “Here is anger showing up.”
- “This is a moment of suffering.”

### Exercise:

- Practice naming your emotions throughout the day. For example, “I’m noticing frustration right now.”

## With Others

Express emotions in ways that align with your values:

- “I notice I’m feeling angry right now.”
- “I’m noticing the urge to yell, but I don’t want to act on it.”
- “I’m feeling sad and angry, and I’d like to talk to you about it.”
- “I’m feeling really down, and I need a hug.”
- “I’m sorry I snapped at you. My angers on the surface, but underneath, I’m really hurting.”

### Exercise:

- Role-play a conversation where you express your emotions clearly and calmly. For example, “I’m feeling upset about what happened, and I’d like to work through it together.”

## Artistically

Express emotions through creative outlets like drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, or collage.

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## Step-by-Step Process for Handling Emotions

### Step 1: Mindful Acknowledgment

1. **Drop Anchor:** Ground yourself in the present moment.
2. **Notice and Name:** Observe your thoughts, feelings, and urges without judgment.
3. **Defuse:** Step back from unhelpful interpretations of the situation.

### Example:

If you’re furious because your partner is late, you might say, “Here’s the ‘She doesn’t care’ story. It’s just a thought, not a fact.”

## Step 2: Reinterpret and Strategise

1. **Workability:** Ask, “If I act on these thoughts, will it move me toward or away from my values?”
2. **Values-Based Action:** Reinterpret the situation as an opportunity to live your values.
3. **Skill Practice:** Use mindfulness, acceptance, or self-compassion to handle your emotions.

### Example:

If you value being a loving partner, ask, “How would a loving partner handle this situation? What ACT skills can I use here?”

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## Reinterpreting Emotions in ACT

Reframe difficult emotions in ways that facilitate acceptance and values-based action:

- “This emotion is normal; it’s a natural reaction to a difficult situation.”
- “I have room for this feeling; it can’t harm me.”
- “This is a moment of suffering; everyone feels like this at times.”
- “I can have this feeling and still choose to act on my values.”
- “This feeling will rise and fall in its own time.”

### Exercise:

- Write down a difficult emotion and reframe it using one of these statements. For example, “My anxiety is like the weather—it will pass.”
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## Final Thought

Emotions are not the enemy—they’re messengers. By practicing acceptance, defusing unhelpful thoughts, staying present, clarifying your values, and taking committed action, you can respond to your emotions in a way that enriches your life. Remember, it’s not about feeling good all the time; it’s about living a life that’s meaningful to you, even when it’s hard.