What is ACT?

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: making room for what you cannot control, and acting on what matters.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (said as one word, "act") starts from one observation. A lot of suffering comes from the struggle to get rid of painful thoughts and feelings, more than from the thoughts and feelings themselves. The harder we fight them, the more they run our lives.

ACT does not aim to remove difficult thoughts and feelings. It aims to change how you respond to them, so they have less say over what you do.

The two parts

Acceptance
Opening up to thoughts, feelings and sensations as they are, without fighting them or being pushed around by them.

Commitment
Getting clear on what matters to you, and taking action towards it, even when difficult feelings come along.

Six skills, in everyday words

Skill	What it means
Being present	Paying attention to here and now, instead of being lost in the past or future
Unhooking	Seeing thoughts as thoughts, not as orders or facts
Making room	Letting feelings be there without a struggle
The noticing self	Finding the part of you that observes, and is bigger than any thought or feeling
Knowing what matters	Getting clear on your values: the kind of person you want to be
Doing what matters	Taking steps guided by those values

What it is like

ACT is practical. We use exercises, metaphors and experiments more than debate. I will not try to convince you that your thoughts are wrong. I will keep asking a different question: "If you act on this thought, does it take you towards the life you want, or away from it?"

The aim
To be able to have difficult thoughts and feelings and still do what matters to you. The aim is not to feel good all the time.

ACT was developed by Steven Hayes, Kirk Strosahl and Kelly Wilson.

My notes and questions

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A list of values

Words to help you put a name to what matters.

Values are the qualities you want to bring to how you live: the kind of person you want to be and what you want to stand for. They are not goals to tick off and not rules you must follow. Circle any that matter to you, then star your top five.

Connection
Loving, caring, loyal, supportive, present, open

Kindness
Compassionate, generous, forgiving, gentle, patient

Honesty
Truthful, sincere, real, trustworthy, fair

Courage
Brave, persistent, willing to be uncomfortable

Growth
Curious, learning, open-minded, creative, self-aware

Contribution
Helpful, useful, giving back, making a difference

Responsibility
Reliable, hard-working, committed, conscientious

Independence
Self-reliant, free, choosing my own way

Fun
Playful, humorous, adventurous, spontaneous

Health
Looking after my body and mind, active, rested

Respect
For myself, for others, for difference

Calm
Peaceful, accepting, simple, unhurried

Fairness
Just, equal, standing up for others

Skill
Doing things well, mastering a craft, excellence

Spirituality
Faith, meaning, connection with something larger

My top five

The one I am living most fully at the moment

The one I most want to bring more of into my life

There are no right answers. If you find yourself choosing what you think you should value, pause and ask what you would choose if nobody ever knew.

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What matters to me, area by area

The kind of person you want to be in each part of your life.

Name _____ Date _____

For each area, write a few words about how you want to behave and what you want to stand for. Not what you want to get or how you want to feel. Skip any area that does not matter to you. Then rate how important it is, and how closely your actions have matched it lately.

Area	The kind of person I want to be here	Importance (0 to 10)	Living it (0 to 10)
Partner or intimate relationship			
Parenting and family			
Friends and community			
Work, study or contribution			
Health and body			
Fun, rest and creativity			
Growth, learning or spirituality			

Where is the biggest gap between importance and how I am living?

One small thing I could do this week to close it a little

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Values and goals

The difference between a value and a goal, and how to turn one into the other.

People often mix the two up.

Values

- A direction, like heading west
- Never finished
- Available right now, in any situation
- About how I act
- "Being a caring friend"

Goals

- A destination, like a town on the way
- Can be ticked off
- In the future
- About what I achieve
- "Ring Maeve on Friday"

Why the difference matters

- **Goals without values feel empty.** You reach one and wonder why you bothered, or you chase the next.
- **Values without goals stay vague.** Good intentions that never turn into action.
- **Values are always available.** You may not be able to reach a goal today. You can always take one small step in the direction of a value.

From value to goal to action

Value	Being a present, involved parent
↓	
Goal for this month	A regular evening with each child
↓	
Action this week	Board game with Seán on Thursday, phone in another room

A check for any goal

1. Which of my values does it serve?
2. Is it something I can do, not only something I hope will happen?
3. Does it say what I will do, not only what I will stop? ("Stop shouting" and "not drink" only say what to avoid. Turn them round: what will I do instead?)

A value that matters to me, and a goal that would serve it

The first small action, and when

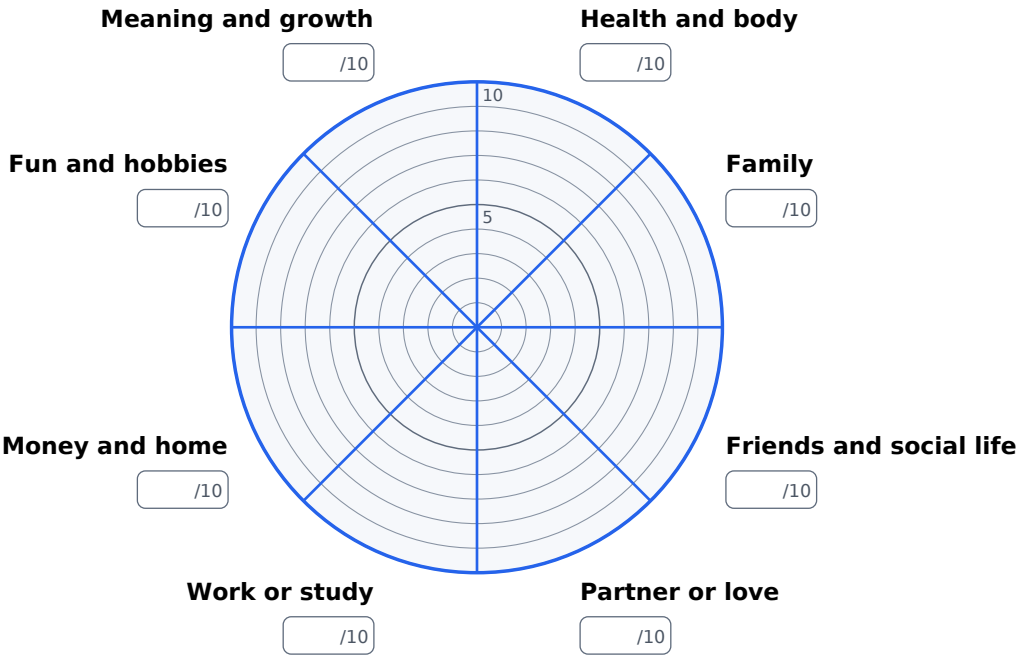
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Life check: how am I doing in each area?

Rate how satisfied you are with each area of your life.

Name _____ Date _____

Rate how satisfied you are with each area, from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely). Write the number in the box, and shade the segment out to that ring if you like.



What stands out when I look at the whole wheel?

The area I most want to give attention to

What would move it up by one point?

A first step this week

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Committed action plan

Turning what matters into something you do this week.

Name _____ Date _____

The value I want to act on

A goal that serves it (specific, and mine to do)

The smallest next step: what, when, where, with whom

What will get in the way

Thoughts and feelings that will try to stop me

- ☐ "I cannot"
- ☐ "What is the point?"
- ☐ Anxiety
- ☐ Tiredness
- ☐ Self-doubt
- ☐ Guilt

Practical obstacles

☐ Time ☐ Money ☐ Other people ☐ Energy

How I will respond to each

How willing am I to have those thoughts and feelings and do it anyway?

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

Not at all — Completely

If willingness is below 7, make the step smaller until it is not.

Who I will tell

After I did it: what happened, and what I noticed

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Unhooking from thoughts

Ways to step back from a thought so it has less control over what you do.

Minds produce thoughts all day long: judgements, predictions, memories, rules. When we are hooked by a thought, we treat it as the truth and it dictates what we do. Unhooking means stepping back and seeing a thought for what it is: words and pictures passing through.

Hooked

- The thought feels like a fact
- It demands all my attention
- I do what it says
- It feels like a threat or a command

Unhooked

- I see it as a thought
- I can notice it and still pay attention to my life
- I choose what to do
- It is just my mind talking

In ACT the useful question is "If I let this thought decide what I do, where does it take me?" Whether the thought is true matters less.

Ways to unhook

"I am having the thought that..."
Put this phrase in front of the thought. Then: "I notice I am having the thought that..."

Thank your mind
"Thanks, mind. Good story." Said lightly, not sarcastically.

Name the story
"Ah, the 'I am not good enough' story. I know this one."

Say it slowly, or in a silly voice
The words stay the same, but they affect you less.

Sing it
To the tune of "Happy Birthday".

Put it on a screen
Imagine the thought as text on a phone. Change the font and colour.

Leaves on a stream
Place each thought on a leaf and watch it float past.

Carry it with you
Write it on a card and put it in your pocket. It can come along, and you can still get on with your day.

Tips

- You are not trying to get rid of the thought or to feel better. You are practising seeing it as a thought.
- Try several. Different ones suit different people and different thoughts.
- If a technique feels like mocking yourself, choose a gentler one.

The thought that hooks me most often, and the technique I will try

From Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Several of these techniques were popularised by Russ Harris.

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Making room for feelings

Opening up around a difficult feeling instead of fighting it.

This is the opposite of what we usually do with painful feelings. Go gently, and start with something moderate, not the hardest thing in your life.

1. **Bring it up.** Think of a situation that brings on a difficult feeling. Let the feeling come.
2. **Observe.** Scan your body. Where do you feel it most? Look at it with curiosity, as if you had never met it before. Where are its edges? Is it heavy or light, moving or still, warm or cool?
3. **Breathe.** Breathe slowly into and around the sensation. Imagine your breath flowing to that place.
4. **Expand.** Imagine opening up space around it. You are not trying to shrink the feeling. You are getting bigger, so there is more room for it.
5. **Allow.** Let it be there. You do not have to like it or want it. Say to yourself: "I do not like this, and I can make room for it." If it changes, fine. If it does not, fine.
6. **Widen.** Keep the feeling in view, and also notice your breathing, your whole body, the room. The feeling is one part of your experience, not all of it.

Reflection

Where was it in my body, and what was it like?

What happened when I stopped fighting it?

What might I do, with this feeling along for the ride, that I have been putting off?

Go carefully

If the feeling becomes overwhelming, open your eyes, press your feet into the floor and look around the room. Come back to it another time, or with me in a session.

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