

This is one of the very best acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) books out there for those interested in moving from a conceptual understanding to really learning how to apply these concepts and skills. Written with both precision and depth, this book is a must-read for any ACT practitioner wanting to put their book learning into practice.

—**Jenna LeJeune, PhD**, Cofounder and President, Portland Psychotherapy, Portland, OR

This book distinguishes itself through its unparalleled collection of personal and clinical practice exercises that guide therapists from beginner through advanced proficiency across all six core ACT processes. Whether you're learning ACT fundamentals or refining your therapeutic presence, this book gives you tools to advance your skills—on topics from functional contextualism to relationship rupture repair—and provides a complete developmental pathway found in no other book.

—**Jason B. Luoma, PhD**, CEO, Portland Psychotherapy, and Senior Scientist, Portland Institute for Psychedelic Science, Portland, OR

This is the ACT book I wish I'd started with—a smart, well-written guide that uses simple, clear language to lay out the what, when, and why of ACT interventions. It's packed with genuinely useful exercises that bring the concepts to life in practical ways, while perfectly illuminating ACT's philosophy, theory, and six core processes. An ideal introduction for anyone beginning to learn ACT or wanting to deepen their understanding of the approach.

—**Miranda Morris, PhD**, Peer Reviewed ACT Trainer, Past President, Association for Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS), ACBS Fellow, and Founder, True North Therapy and Training, Bethesda, MD

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Introduction

Orientation to the Deliberate Practice of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT—pronounced as one word; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012) is an intervention that turns on three primary understandings of what it means to be human. Humans are unique in their limitless ability to derive relations through language—figuring out how things are connected, even without being directly taught. For example, if you learn that a dog is called a “blute” and a “blute” is a type of “pet,” you can understand that a dog must be a pet. This kind of reasoning is central to how language—our “minds”—work. It is a form of verbal behavior that helps us grasp new ideas by relating them to things we already know. This ongoing process of “languageing” or thinking allows for creativity, problem solving, and the expansion of knowledge. However, it also enables us to carry on internal dialogues that can fuel psychological suffering.

Second, humans have two ways of knowing the world—verbal knowing and experiential knowing. Verbal knowing is what we referred to previously—knowing the world with the mind. Experiential knowing is what we refer to when we learn through engagement with the environment and practice. Recognizing and engaging these two ways of knowing can assist in reducing suffering.

Third, the function of human behavior and its patterns can be targeted to increase psychological flexibility and human thriving. We will explore these understandings more thoroughly in this book. However, we wanted to introduce ACT with a sense of the breadth and scope of the model, speaking to human languageing more broadly, given its central role in the intervention, but also speaking to its foundational premises, which are built on behaviorism and the understanding of the function of behaviors. Although we will explore how

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thinking participates in human suffering, it is perhaps not in the ways you might think. From the ACT perspective, our ability to think is part of the problem of suffering, but also necessarily part of the solution to suffering. In ACT, we are not trying to stop or fix thoughts related to suffering. Instead, we help people notice them for what they are—thoughts—so they can choose actions guided by their values, not by the mind's chatter.

PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY

As seasoned therapists, we each reflected on our years of learning ACT and wanted to share some of that process. Our journeys in ACT started with workshops where we were introduced to the problem of internal control of private experience (experiences occurring inside the skin: thoughts, emotions, sensations, memories)—our efforts to eliminate unwanted thoughts and emotions found wanting. We were most impacted by the experiential work, finding a home in the approach, recognizing ACT's deep connection to what it means to be human, and being fully present to the felt experience of life.

Showing up to the here and now of emotional pain was a compassionate and spacious move. This presence and freedom allowed more room for the full expanse of human experience, including joy. At the end of these workshops, we felt enriched and excited to use ACT in our therapeutic work. We quickly learned that we had only begun the journey. Years later, we are humble in our approach, still learning, and just as excited about the intervention.

We have also discovered that there is no final arrival at “knowing” ACT as lived. It is a practice. Just as learning to be human and to be in our lives from a psychologically flexible perspective is a never-ending process, so is the ACT skills journey. And that is a challenge and an adventure that we hope will inspire you as you work through this book.

PERSONAL AND CLINICAL PRACTICE

We have witnessed over time, in training others and supporting them to learn and implement ACT, that pulling the philosophical assumptions, behavioral principles, different levels of process, and practical techniques together to make a coherent and consistent therapy can be challenging. Given this challenge, we approach the effort to help you learn from two points of view. First, to do ACT well, we hold that you must engage it from the inside out. Therefore, you will be invited to engage in self-reflective or personal practices throughout the book.

Your relationship with your internal experience will be vital in understanding how ACT works for others. If you are invested in excessive and misapplied control of your internal experience, your delivery of ACT will collapse, missing the mark of an experiential approach to healing suffering. The spirit of the intervention will be lost if the therapist is not in an equal, vulnerable, authentic,

and compassionate position, thereby going against one of the therapeutic relationship competencies espoused in ACT.

Second, practicing with colleagues and others interested in learning the therapy will allow you to receive feedback, continue to hone your skills, and expand your understanding of the intervention. To become an expert, feedback and reflection with others on the processes and their fluid implementation are necessary. Thus, the chapters contain both personal practice (self-reflection) and clinical practice (practice with others) to help you develop your skills. These practice exercises will assist you in meeting the goals of this book.

GOALS OF THIS BOOK

As a process-based therapy, ACT focuses on a number of competencies in the intervention that expand beyond simple techniques. Our key aims are to help both newer and seasoned clinicians develop skills and self-efficacy in implementing ACT as an integrated therapy, fluidly moving from one process to the next or flexibly implementing them across a session. The focus will then be on including both “starter” skills and those that bridge therapists to the next level of understanding and practice, including intermediate and advanced skills. In addition to the written material, there are deliberate practice exercises in ACT. Deliberate practice refers to structured, goal-directed training that hones ACT competencies through repeated, feedback-informed exercises and self-reflections, helping therapists move from basic fluency to advanced, more flexible use of the model. These exercises are meant to

1. assist therapists in understanding the underpinnings of ACT—its theoretical foundations—through experiential work, including working through clinical examples;
2. help therapists implement the model using a functional contextual approach;
3. assist therapists in learning ACT through a process that includes personal experience with the material, thus the self-reflection practices;
4. provide basic, intermediate, and advanced skills in ACT techniques and exercises designed to evoke and reinforce clinically relevant material supporting positive and values-based change related to self and therapy; and
5. assist therapists in developing competencies supporting the therapeutic alliance from an ACT perspective.

TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audience of this book is broad. We are interested in assisting therapists in learning ACT skills and implementation. This may mean that newer therapists will need to grapple with behavioral principles if unfamiliar with behaviorism

(see Ramnerö & Törneke, 2008). However, this book does provide a good introduction to the model and is excellent for supplementing additional reading (see Hayes, 2019; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012; Luoma et al., 2017). We believe the book will be helpful to any, including more seasoned therapists, who are working to hone their skills in ACT and learn how it is fluidly implemented in the therapy room. We also note that the book can be helpful for individuals looking to improve their skills in fostering a meaningful therapeutic alliance from an ACT perspective.

Finally, given that ACT is a transdiagnostic (i.e., designed to address the underlying psychological processes that contribute to a wide range of psychological difficulties, rather than focusing on disorder-specific symptoms), principle-based intervention, therapists working with various conditions and populations can benefit from working through this book. We have intentionally designed the skills to fit and be adapted to different settings and populations, including those that support brief and extended-term therapies, a range of client types from younger to older people, and various presenting problems. We have also designed the practices to be useful for all who wish to learn ACT. The exercises can be used in supervision or adapted for use in therapy.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK'S STRUCTURE

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Deliberate Practice to Develop and Enhance Skills in ACT is designed to guide you through learning ACT in a structured, step-by-step way—from core theory and model to applied clinical skills (all case examples and dialogue are fictional or sufficiently disguised to protect patient confidentiality). The book is organized into a series of parts that build on one another, each laying the foundation for the next to support deep, integrated learning.

Part I includes Chapter 1. Chapter 1 introduces you to an overview of ACT as a therapy model, distinguishing between ACT process and technique. The chapter is designed to orient you before exploring ACT more deeply and sets the stage for a journey in understanding ACT as a process-based therapy that guides clients into mindful awareness and values-based living.

Part II of this book explores ACT as a modern behavioral approach grounded in a robust theoretical framework that integrates several key principles. Chapters 2 through 6 explore ACT's core. ACT is rooted in functional contextualism, a philosophy of science that emphasizes understanding behavior in the context of its function and environmental contingencies rather than its form. Building on this foundation, ACT incorporates behavioral principles to understand and influence patterns of human action. Central to ACT's theoretical underpinnings is relational frame theory, which provides a functional account of human language and cognition, explaining how linguistic processes contribute to psychological suffering. The ultimate aim of ACT is to foster psychological

flexibility, the ability to stay present and engaged in meaningful action, even in the face of difficult thoughts and emotions. Together, these concepts form a cohesive framework that guides the therapeutic processes in ACT, helping individuals build a more values-driven and fulfilling life.

Part III serves as a beginner's introduction to the six core processes. Chapters 7 through 12 define each process and invite readers to explore them from the "inside out" through carefully crafted exercises that integrate conceptual learning with hands-on experience. As ACT is an experiential therapy, this approach mirrors the dynamic, workshop-style format often encountered in ACT training, providing a beginner-friendly yet immersive journey into these transformative practices. Each chapter also offers clinical practice exercises to grow your skills through practice with colleagues. The chapters in this section cover acceptance (Chapter 7), defusion (Chapter 8), contact with the present moment (Chapter 9), self-as-context (Chapter 10), values (Chapter 11), and committed action (Chapter 12). These chapters offer readers the tools to cultivate psychological flexibility and apply ACT principles in their lives and those of others.

Part IV moves on to intermediate work in ACT to further build your skills in the intervention. We more fully orient you to ACT's approach in Chapters 13 through 19 by walking you through case conceptualization as a starting point, helping you to recognize how conceptualization is explored and continued throughout treatment. We also spend time reviewing the competencies for each ACT process. We provide deliberate practice exercises to help you orient to these competencies.

With the six core processes of ACT, you need to learn not only to teach and explore but also to model and evoke the processes in the therapy room. We will assist you in learning to recognize the processes in the moment, in your client, and in yourself (paying attention to function, not content), modeling the processes (not just talking about them or demonstrating them), and evoking the processes (by altering the context through your interactions with the client). Remember, through it all, the goal is creating psychological flexibility—let that be your guide.

Part V includes Chapters 20 through 22 and the Epilogue. This provides the advanced skills practice in the book. Readers are invited to begin the process of integrating what they have learned into a more fluid and flexible therapy practice. Beginning with integrating the pillars into interrelated processes, we will focus on pulling the skills of acceptance and defusion (open to experience and variation in behavior), present moment and self-as-context (awareness and perspective in the service of selecting workable behaviors), and values and committed action (engagement in chosen purpose behavior that is retained over time) together at once in a more integrated and fluid way. The goal will be to help the reader focus on broader interrelated aspects of the therapy.

An essential, indeed critical aspect of ACT work is implementing the fluidly integrated processes into a changing and growing therapeutic relationship that explores intrapersonal and interpersonal processes and functional analysis,

ideographically applied, throughout therapy. Relationship ruptures will also be explored as part of this advanced work. The goal is to work with the entire model, learning how to integrate all six processes into a coherent intervention tucked inside a collaborative, healing relationship.

DELIBERATE PRACTICE EXERCISES

Each chapter in the separate parts explores definitions and explanations of the topic, followed by personal and clinical practice exercises. The personal practice exercises can be completed on your own. They are completed before the clinical practice exercises, allowing you to experience the work directly and gain an internal understanding before applying it with others. Creating the time and space to engage in these exercises without rushing through them or being distracted is essential. Rushing or trying to move quickly through the personal practice or being distracted during the practice will mean missing the point of the exercise and its intended learning by experiencing quality. The growing awareness of your experience, tracking your behavior, and gaining self-knowledge in the service of choice and values takes dedication and time. It might help to consider how you would like a client to move through the exercise if they were invited to complete it and then engage in it similarly. The goal is exploration, discovery, and respect for your learning process.

The clinical practice exercises are designed to be completed with at least one partner. They can be done with other learners, supervisors, colleagues, peer support groups, or at ACT training. The opportunity to practice a skill, build your understanding, and receive feedback from someone is built into these exercises. Completing the practice and then engaging in discussions will assist learning. If you and your partners have time, try the practice, get feedback, and try again. As you become more facile within the practice, feel free to be creative and expand on what you are doing, but work to remain consistent with the model. Again, exploration and discussion will be helpful here.

If you are a beginner, we recommend that you work through the book sequentially, building your knowledge and skill from front to back. If you are further along in your training, you are welcome to review the exercises in the earlier chapters to see whether they assist you in some way or provide ideas for practice with self or others, or reconnect you to important aspects of the model and intervention. Otherwise, moving on to later sections of the book is fine, as these can stand alone as practices if you already have a grounding in the ACT approach.

Each chapter and their exercises are designed to directly support the five learning goals mentioned previously through a combination of structured content and experiential engagement. Definitions and conceptual explanations lay the groundwork for understanding ACT, while personal practice exercises promote self-reflection, experiential contact with ACT processes, and the development of psychological flexibility—mirroring how we hope clients will engage in the work. These solo practices foster deeper insight into the model and its application,

supporting both personal integration and functional contextual thinking. Clinical practice exercises, completed with a partner or group, build core competencies, strengthen the therapeutic alliance, and provide opportunities for feedback and refinement of skills at basic, intermediate, and advanced levels. Both forms of practice—done intentionally and without rushing—encourage exploration, discovery, and a respectful, process-oriented approach to learning ACT.

WE INVITE YOU TO BEGIN

Grounded in mindfulness and acceptance strategies as well as commitment and behavior change strategies, ACT helps clients move forward in their lives. Explicitly guiding clients to reconnect to an experiential sense of self provides a place where freedom to choose and relating to internal experience in an open way allows values-guided living to emerge. We hope you find this work as engaging as we do, building your knowledge and skill in helping clients to live more meaningful lives.