

Taking a Step Back from Anxiety

Suppose that instead of struggling so hard with your anxiety difficulties, you take a step back and *entirely change the way you relate to them*. You already know that you can't overcome anxiety by avoiding or resisting it—that only makes it bigger. Suppose you decide that you are also going to stop struggling as much with your anxiety. This does not mean giving up or resigning yourself to it—it just means letting go of the struggle.

Imagine that you could actually *accept* your condition and embrace the discomfort it causes as something that's potentially vital in your life. You may ask: *Accept my condition?* What could that possibly mean?

Again, it does not mean resigning yourself and giving up. Instead, it means stepping back and learning how to better *observe* your anxious thoughts, images, and feelings instead of becoming embroiled and entangled in them. This is a relatively new approach to anxiety: stepping back and learning how to “be with” your difficult thoughts, feelings, and sensations rather than struggling against them. You *can* learn to be with your anxiety with more compassion and gentleness toward yourself.

Another word used to describe the approach of witnessing anxious thoughts and feelings is *mindfulness*—a concept described at length in the previous chapter on meditation. Mindfulness can be defined as paying attention, without any judgment, to the ongoing content of your experience in the present moment. In this definition, “paying attention” and “in the present moment” go together. The tendency is for distractions—either the thoughts/feelings/sensations within us or stimuli in the outer environment—to quickly pull us out of the present moment and away from simple observation of what is going on. Our mind is also constantly judging our experience of ourselves, others, or situations as “good” or “bad” and “right” or “wrong.” In mindfulness, we relax and simply observe what is going on with no judgment. Mindfulness is at the heart of a new approach to anxiety called “acceptance and commitment therapy,” described in this chapter.

Understanding Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and commitment therapy (spoken of as a single word, “ACT”) is an empirically based form of therapy that uses mindfulness strategies along with commitment and behavior change strategies to work with anxiety disorders, depression, and a variety of other psychological problems. ACT differs from traditional cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Instead of teaching you to modify your thoughts and beliefs, ACT emphasizes a mindfulness approach:

just noticing and fully accepting your difficult thoughts and feelings, which helps you gain a certain distance from them in order to be less entangled with them. *Acceptance* of uncomfortable thoughts, images, feelings, and sensations is critical to ACT. It is the opposite of *experiential avoidance*—the tendency to ignore or avoid our uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, which contributes to many forms of psychological difficulty. Beyond learning to observe your immediate stream of experience and cease avoiding unpleasant or painful thoughts and feelings, ACT stresses self-knowledge: knowing your true values and taking action on those values. In brief, the basic idea of ACT is that personal suffering is caused by experiential avoidance, as well as entanglement or *fusion* with dysfunctional thoughts (see below), and a resulting psychological rigidity. This rigidity and avoidance can lead to further confusion about your true values as well as an inability to take needed action to express those values.

In the past decade, acceptance and commitment therapy has been utilized by many therapists and also garnered considerable research support. The term “ACT” is not only an abbreviation for acceptance and commitment therapy, it is an acronym that emphasizes three core principles of ACT: accept, choose, and take action. Let’s take a closer look at each of these principles.

Accept. Accept your anxiety condition, whether that be panic, phobias, worry, or obsessions and compulsions. Be with it (without resignation), even if uncomfortable, instead of struggling to get rid of it. Dropping the struggle frees up energy, which can then be redirected toward constructive goals—for example, getting on with other things in your life that you would like to do.

Choose. Choose the most important directions for your life. Get in touch with what you truly value and want your life to stand for. ACT isn’t only about mindfulness and stepping back from painful thoughts and feelings. It’s also about knowing your true values and being willing to take the necessary risks you need to take in order to live by them.

Take action. Take committed action to change what you truly want to change in your life. An important premise of ACT, which you have probably heard before, is the maxim “If you continue to do what you’ve done before, you’re going to keep getting what you’ve always got.” Again, ACT is not only about choosing to embrace your true values, it’s also about taking actions—including risks—to change your life so that you can live by these values.

If you are fearful, taking action begins with facing your fears so that your life is not limited by them. Yet ACT goes beyond this. It’s a practice of accepting—“taking along”—the inevitable discomfort life brings and even using it in the service of your goals and dreams.

Does all of this sound intimidating? Do you balk at taking risks and potentially experiencing more discomfort and pain? Perhaps you wonder how you could ever fully embrace your anxieties and fears rather than avoid them. If so, consider the alternative of keeping your life exactly where it is right now. Allow your fearful thoughts about truly changing your life to “just be.” Simply take a deep abdominal breath and allow your fearful thoughts to arise—sort of let them “hang out” in your ongoing stream of experience—without pushing them away. By doing this, you’ve taken the first step in making a fundamental change in your relationship with your anxiety that ACT encourages. Rather than pushing away painful experience, you accept it and stay with it.

Mindful acceptance is fundamental to meditation practices (both Eastern and Western) that have been used for thousands of years to gain freedom from mental and emotional suffering. To this, ACT adds a wide array of its own techniques to enhance skill with mindful acceptance. Then it goes further to help you clarify your personal values and to encourage you to take committed actions so you can fulfill those values.

The ACT Approach to Fearful Self-Talk

Acceptance and commitment therapy works on your fearful self-talk in a different way than standard cognitive behavioral therapy. (Recall the four subpersonalities described in chapter 8 on self-talk: Worrier, Critic, Victim, and Perfectionist.) Instead of challenging and changing your self-talk, you *simply step back from it and observe it*. You are not trying to change your self-talk; instead, you *reduce its impact* on you by stepping back from it and just “witnessing” it. Of course, this might not be so easy in the midst of a full-blown panic attack. But what about worry? Instead of always getting caught up or entangled in your worries, suppose you could learn to take a step back from them, let go of your struggle with them, and just let them pass through your mind. This is what ACT aims for, and it teaches a variety of specific techniques to help you disentangle from worried thoughts. Some of these techniques borrow directly from mindfulness meditation techniques; others are quite unique.

Note: The idea of simply observing your anxious thoughts or feelings might put you off if you associate it with detachment, depersonalization, or derealization. These are states that can accompany high anxiety where you feel cut off from everything and may have a sense of unreality. The witnessing or observing of your anxious states encouraged by ACT, however, is very different from depersonalization states and *can only occur in a relative state of relaxation*.

In ACT (and in cognitive behavioral therapy), you start with *identifying dysfunctional thoughts* that cause you problems. For example, common anxious thoughts might include “what if” fears such as “What if I go crazy from this panic attack?” or “What will they think if I sweat and blush while giving my presentation?” The very act of identifying them immediately gives you some distance from them—something that ACT emphasizes as important. In fact, even being aware of the four inner voices described in chapter 8—Worrier, Critic, Victim, and Perfectionist—and the kinds of self-talk they engage in is a step in the direction of greater self-awareness. On the other hand, when you get some distance from your thoughts, you are more free to choose helpful, constructive thoughts, if you wish.

Fusion and Defusion

Fusion is a state of two things being merged or joined together. Much of the time, our thoughts are fused with our ongoing awareness. We don’t see or recognize our thoughts; instead we just act and react *from* them. When we are “fused” with our thoughts, we tend to *believe them as if they were absolute truth*, even if they refer to some future danger that hasn’t even happened

(and isn't likely to). For example, if your heart races when you're anxious, you may be fused with the idea that you are going to have a heart attack. You may absolutely believe this, even if the true probability of it happening is remote.

Another type of fusion includes *adherence to rigid rules* about what you should or shouldn't feel or do. This type of fusion is typical of the Perfectionist subpersonality described in chapter 8. It reveals itself in self-talk that includes the words "should," "must," and "have to." Common examples include "I shouldn't be feeling this way" and "I have to do this right, or it's not worth trying at all."

Yet another type of fusion is to be closely *identified with the negative judgments of your "inner critic."* In this case, you really believe negative self-judgments such as "I'm worthless," "I'm weak," "I'm a failure," or "I can't cope." Fusion with such self-critical statements can lead to severe depression and feelings of hopelessness.

The problem with fusion is that *what you take to be absolutely true and real are simply strings of words and images in your head.* These strings of words and images that your mind creates may have nothing to do with reality, and yet you whole-heartedly believe them as if they were utterly true. Being enmeshed or "entangled" with such thoughts can lead to a lot of suffering. The way out is to stop believing everything you think.

Defusion helps you to "stop believing everything you think." It is a process of disentangling—ceasing to fuse—with unhelpful thoughts. When you defuse a thought, you recognize it for what it is—nothing more than a bunch of words and pictures "inside your head." You step back from your thoughts enough to see them for what they are.

Defusion begins by simply asking yourself to notice what you're thinking. You might say to yourself:

- "So what is my mind telling me right now?"
- "What thoughts are going through my mind right now?"
- "Just notice what my mind is saying."
- "What judgments am I making right now?"

Once you've identified your thoughts—perhaps even written them down—the next important question to ask is whether they are *helpful* or not—whether they *work* for you or not. In contrast with cognitive behavioral therapy, ACT is less concerned with the truth or falsity of a given thought than whether it is *workable*—*whether it is helpful and leads to a richer, fuller or more meaningful life* (as opposed to leading to more stress and suffering). If you are fused with the thought "I'm fat," ACT is not concerned with whether this thought is true or not (unlike your counselor at the local Jenny Craig program); rather, it's concerned with whether the thought is helpful. Does it lead you to feel better and do things to improve your life? Or does fusion with that thought lead to depression and inactivity, such as more time in front of the TV eating ice cream?

So ACT is concerned with loosening up around—disidentifying with—unworkable thoughts, whether they are true or not. The whole point is *to hold painful/critical/fearful thoughts less tightly* so that they are less likely to run your life.

Common Defusion Techniques

Acceptance and commitment therapy offers a wide array of specific techniques to facilitate defusion. Some of these draw heavily from mindfulness meditation techniques while others do not. Here are some common defusion techniques you can use:

Noticing. Just notice what your mind is telling you right now.

Writing thoughts down. When you feel upset, notice your thoughts and write them down on an index card or piece of paper.

Bracketing a thought. Take a thought that you notice and preface it with the phrase "I'm having the thought that ...". For example, you could take the self-destructive thought "I'm a loser" and defuse it or gain some distance from it by saying to yourself, "I'm having the thought: 'I'm a loser.'"

Leaves on a stream. Imagine that you're sitting on the bank of a gentle stream. Leaves drop into the stream and float by you. Now, for the next few minutes, take every thought that pops into your head, place it on a leaf, and let it flow by. Whether you like the thought or not, place it on a leaf and let it float by. If a leaf gets stuck, let it hang around. Don't force it to float away. If you start to feel bored or impatient, just acknowledge that thought: "Here's a feeling of boredom" or "Here's a feeling of impatience." Then place that thought on a leaf, and let the leaf float by.

Watching your thinking (adapted from Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple*). Relax, center yourself in your body, and engage in abdominal breathing for one minute. Now shift your attention to your thoughts. Where are they? Where do they seem located in space? Are they inside your head? Are they floating around in "mental space" in your mind? Are they someplace else? Notice the form your thoughts take. Are they more like words, pictures, or sounds? Notice whether your thoughts are moving or still. If they are moving, at what speed and in what direction are they moving? Notice what is above and below your thoughts. Are there any gaps between them? From time to time, you may find you get caught up in your thoughts. This is perfectly natural and normal. When it happens, just gently acknowledge it, and go back to watching your thoughts.

Computer screen. Imagine your thought on a computer screen. Change the font, color, and format. Animate the words.

Sing the thought. For example, take the thought "I'm a loser" and sing it to the tune of "Happy Birthday." (This is one of the zanier defusion techniques, which may or may not appeal to you, but it works for many people.)

Workability. Ask yourself these questions: "If I go along with a particular thought, buy into it, and let it control me, where does that leave me? What do I get for buying into it? Does buying into that thought lead me to a better and more meaningful life?"

Defusion techniques like these can be used at any time, but they work really well in the context of meditation practices (see chapter 18). For thousands of years, one of the principal aims of meditation practice has been to develop mindfulness—the capacity to witness and disentangle from conditioned thoughts. This is, of course, the whole point of defusion as well.

Acceptance

What really matters to you? Are your fears and anxiety causing you to avoid pursuing goals or taking actions in your life that are truly important to you? How much of your life have you given up to your anxiety? Think about two or three things in your life that really matter but that you are missing out on because you've given up on them due to your anxiety.

Acceptance involves a fundamental shift in attitude. Instead of restricting your life by giving in to your fears, you decide to take the scary step of facing your anxiety. Why? Because having a full life—living in accord with your true values—becomes more important to you than staying safe and comfortable in your anxiety. Embracing acceptance means you deliberately chose to overcome your avoidances, step by step.

While defusion helps you to disentangle yourself from painful thoughts, acceptance helps you to develop the skill to “be with” your feelings—especially fearful feelings—“just as they are,” whether pleasant or painful. In the process of acceptance, you open up and make room for your anxious feelings, stop resisting or pushing against them, and “soften up” around them. Even in the case of panicky feelings, acceptance means letting the feeling be, “hanging out with it” (even if it doesn't go away quickly), and refraining from avoiding it or pushing it away. In short, you *accept* it instead of struggling with or against it. This does not mean you just give up and resign yourself to it. Acceptance is the first thing to do when you move *with* anxiety rather than avoiding and running from it. (After acceptance, you may also choose to engage other coping techniques, as described in chapter 6.) For example, if you wish to stop avoiding flying, going to the grocery store, or giving talks because of a fear that you might panic, your first step toward facing these situations is accept—rather than resist—the anxious feelings that are likely to come up in these situations.

The more you try to avoid fear and anxiety, the bigger they usually become. The longer you run from something you're anxious about, the larger and more foreboding it becomes. ACT reverses this process by empowering you to stop running from fear. When you face and deal with your fear, your fear tends—eventually—to get smaller and less ominous. Though initially you may find it difficult to face your fear, in the long run your fear will diminish. In this case, acceptance with regard to anxiety and fear is very closely related to exposure. As such, it needs to be done gently and gradually—in an incremental progression—rather than all at once.

An important principle of ACT is that making changes in your life usually brings up anxiety. The more you are inclined to avoid anxiety in general, the more you will tend to avoid taking risks to make changes in your life, even if they could be very positive. Acceptance means being willing to embrace the necessary anxiety that often accompanies change. This

may not be easy—and it can be painful—but the alternative of staying the same and not risking change is, in many cases, even worse. For example, think of someone afraid to take elevators above the fifth floor. Imagine all the situations they could not deal with if they held on to their phobia, especially if they lived in a large city. Visiting friends in apartment buildings, going on some job interviews, even obtaining medical care from some doctors, would all be unavailable to them. Such was the situation for the late Jerilyn Ross before she decided to face her fear of elevators. After overcoming her phobia, she went on to be president of the Anxiety Disorders Association of America for almost thirty years.

Common Acceptance Techniques

You can develop your capacity for acceptance in a variety of ways. Here are some commonly used acceptance techniques:

Notice the form of the feeling. Observe your feeling and notice where it's in your body. In your chest or in your gut? In your head or in your throat? What is its shape and size? Is it heavy or light? Is it at the surface of your body or deep inside? Notice different sensations within the feeling. If it just stays there without changing, allow it to be. Make room for it without pushing it away. For example, if you feel a sensation of nausea or queasiness in your stomach, just allow it to be there for five minutes without doing anything to try to diminish or change it. Just "be with" the sensation and observe whether it changes on its own.

Healing Hand. Lay your hand on the part of your body where you feel the feeling most intensely. Send some warmth and nurturance into the area—not to get rid of the feeling but to make room for it.

Softening. See if you can soften up around the feeling, loosen up, and hold it gently.

Allowing. Just allow yourself to be with the feeling—to "hang out" with it for a while. Even if you don't like it or want it, just leave it alone and allow it to be.

The choice to feel. If you could choose to turn off all of your painful feelings, you would also gradually lose your capacity to love and care. However, you can choose to be fully open to loving and caring, and when there is a gap between what you want and what you've got, painful feelings may arise.

Note: All of these acceptance techniques can be used to make space for an unpleasant physical sensation in your body, just as readily as they can be used to accept unpleasant feelings. As with defusion techniques, it is easier to implement acceptance techniques when you are relaxed, instead of caught up in a state of stress. So, if you are feeling highly stressed and have difficulty implementing these techniques, try doing some relaxation techniques first, such as abdominal breathing or progressive muscle relaxation, or, alternatively, release stress through aerobic exercise or yoga. Even better, carve out some time to do some meditation practice. This will enhance utilizing both defusion and acceptance techniques of all kinds.

We all feel anxiety at times. ACT offers us an approach and a set of techniques that allow us to take a step back from our anxiety and move with it rather than struggling so much against it. ACT emphasizes that an important part of overcoming anxiety is learning to stop running from it.

Commitment

The “commitment” part of acceptance and commitment therapy means taking constructive action, based on your values. After you’ve clarified your most important values in life, you decide whether you are ready and willing to overcome any obstacles to realizing them, including your fears and avoidances. If so, you take committed action—“doing what it takes”—to live by your values even if this brings up pain and discomfort. Acceptance, as we discussed above, is a big part of this. Instead of “declaring war” on your anxiety, you accept uncomfortable anxious feelings when they come up. Doing so is what allows you to “take action” to realize your cherished values, to live your life fully. This is ultimately what acceptance and commitment therapy is all about. Without acceptance of anxious feelings and sensations, you will continue give into experiential avoidance. Acceptance is what empowers commitment.

Acceptance and commitment means you may have to face some discomfort. How do you do this? Any and all of the cognitive and behavioral interventions described elsewhere in this book can be used to assist you in doing what it takes to stop avoiding life and live fully by your values. If you feel you are not really clear about what your true values are, then see the following chapter, “Personal Meaning,” and spend some time with the *Personal Values Inventory*. Once you’ve clarified your values, write down specific goals that you are willing to set to realize those values in your life. Then break each goal down into specific actions to take. For each action, identify any fears or avoidances to taking that action and use ACT and/or CBT processes (on your own or with the assistance of a therapist) to overcome your fears.

So, the commitment sequence goes something like this:

1. Define values
2. Set goals
3. Specify actions to achieve goals
4. Identify fears or avoidances that block goal attainment
5. Work through fears using ACT/CBT
6. Take committed action

To sum up, commitment means taking action to live in accord with your true values. It does not mean striving toward total perfection or pressuring yourself to reach every goal you can imagine. It is simply making a commitment to valued living, returning again and again to your most important values—giving them priority over other things that might distract you from them, including your anxiety and fears.

If you are interested in learning more about ACT, see the books listed under “Further Reading” below. If you would like to get in touch with a therapist who specializes in ACT, a directory is available online at contextualpsychology.org.

Summary of Things to Do

1. Think about how the three core principles—accept, choose, take action—of ACT apply to your life. How much are you able to accept or just “be with” your anxiety (and other life challenges) as opposed to struggling with them? Do you choose—do you give priority to—your most important values in life and feel committed to doing whatever it takes to realize them? What actions have you taken to reach the goals and live out the values that are most important to you?
2. Practice defusion. After relaxing for a few moments (using abdominal breathing, muscle relaxation, visualization, yoga, or calming music—see chapter 4), take a step back from your anxious thoughts using one or more of the defusion techniques listed in the section “Common Defusion Techniques.”
3. Practice acceptance. Again, after relaxing for a few moments, practice one of the acceptance techniques listed in the section “Common Acceptance Techniques.” Use this technique with whatever feelings and/or physical body sensations are coming up for you at the moment.
4. Make a commitment to take action in accord with your personal values. If you are unclear about your values, see chapter 20 and spend some time with the *Personal Values Inventory*. Then, on your own or with the assistance of a therapist, define goals that would fulfill your most important values. For each goal, specify actions that need to be taken to realize the goal as well as any obstacles that get in the way of taking those actions. Again, on your own or with the help of a therapist, *choose one action* that would be the most important for you to undertake now. Make a commitment to work through the obstacles and complete that action.

Further Reading

The following two books provide an excellent introduction to ACT:

Forsyth, John P., and Georg H. Eifert. *The Mindfulness & Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2007.

Harris, Russ. *ACT Made Simple*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009.

The Forsyth and Eifert book is a very practical application of ACT principles and techniques to anxiety disorders, while the Harris book, although intended for therapists, is written in a very clear, accessible, and well-organized fashion, making ACT easy to grasp.