



NHS Fife Department of Psychology

# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for Physical Health Conditions

Help Yourself @ [moodcafe.co.uk](http://moodcafe.co.uk)



## Introduction to ACT

There are a variety of approaches that are used to help people cope with physical health problems, and the emotional impact of living with these. This booklet is based on an approach called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The focus of ACT is on improving your quality of life by considering your values and what is important to you, in spite of difficulties you may face.

If you are struggling with this section, it might be that a different approach works better for you, or that you would benefit from more support or guidance in adopting some of the suggestions here. As with most approaches, this will take practice to feel the benefit. For more information on ACT, including links to books, see:

[http://www.thehappinesstrap.com/about\\_act](http://www.thehappinesstrap.com/about_act)

## Why might ACT be useful?

For a lot of people with physical and/or mental health conditions, they've tried a lot of different things to cope with their difficulties. Some of these may have been helpful, and others may have taken you away from broader values or goals. Take some time to think about what you have tried.

- Use the worksheet on the next page to list the treatments and strategies that you have tried.
- Next, think about how these treatments and strategies have benefitted you over the short and long term. You may want to write about benefits in the form of pain relief, improved mood, reduction in symptoms, greater ability to function, relationships, etc.
- Also, think about any costs and difficulties associated with these strategies and treatments, again over both the short and long term.
- While you are doing this, try to focus on *why* these strategies or treatments worked or did not work:

- Was it that they didn't change your health, or improved or worsened it?
- Side effects?
- Did any of them help you do more of the things you wanted to do?
- Once you've written down some things, take a look at what you've written down:
  - Which treatments and strategies have worked well for you?
  - Which haven't worked for you?
  - Do the strategies or treatments that haven't worked well have anything in common with each other?
  - What are the costs associated with these treatments?
  - Perhaps most importantly, did these strategies or treatments help you do the things that are most important to you in life?

Use this space to note down your thoughts:

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**Worksheet 1****Treatments and Strategies: Costs and Benefits**

A lot of people with physical and mental health problems have tried lots of treatments and strategies in the past that have attempted to reduce their symptoms. We are interested in your experience with these strategies and treatments, as well as the results you have achieved with them. Please take a few moments and complete the following table.

Treatment / Strategy	Short term benefits	Long term benefits	Short term costs	Long term costs	What were the ultimate results of this?


Sometimes it's easy to get caught up in treatment strategies that help us in the short term but that can mean we don't achieve what we want in the long term. Some things we do might take us away from what's really important to us. ACT tries to help you re-focus on what you really value and helps you to take steps towards living a life more in line with your values. If this sounds like it could be helpful to you, keep reading and try out some of the suggestions and exercises.

## Changing the way we approach difficult thoughts and feelings

Many people experience difficult thoughts and emotions; it's a normal part of life to have worries, sadness, anger and other thoughts or emotions that can be difficult to deal with. Sometimes these become more difficult and we then try lots of things to get rid of them. Fighting with them, challenging them, doing anything to get rid of them. The approach in ACT is to avoid fighting with them. The reason being is that often the more we try *not* to think or feel something, the harder it becomes.

For example, just try NOT to think about a big grey elephant, with huge ears and textured, wrinkly skin! It's pretty difficult not to think of something when you're trying not to. It also means that a lot of our energy or effort goes into trying not to think of something. Energy that could go into doing things that are more important to us and our values.

Notice the kind of symptoms, thoughts and feelings that you try to get rid of, and what happens when you try to get rid of them. Make a note of the symptoms, thoughts and feelings, and what happens, here.

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Trying to get rid of difficult symptoms, thoughts and feelings is very understandable. If we could just get rid of them, we'd be able to get on with things. But it doesn't usually work like that. If you try not to think about something, it usually ends up being in our thoughts. What does your experience tell you about trying to get rid of a sad feeling by telling ourselves to "cheer up!"? Or how about stopping thinking about that worrying

appointment we've got coming up? Most people find this doesn't work very well for them.

### ***Try this exercise:***

Imagine having a tug of war with a huge big monster. You're holding the rope tight, pulling hard, and the monster is on the other side of a big, dark pit, pulling back. You're starting to get pulled towards the pit, so naturally you pull even harder. But the harder you pull, the harder the monster pulls. But notice that this has been going on for some time. The monster hasn't pulled you into the pit yet and you haven't managed to get rid of the monster by pulling it into the pit either. Seems like you're both still hanging in there, trying to beat the other and not going anywhere much. Does it sometimes feel like you're stuck? What do you need to do? If you saw someone in a tug of war with a monster like that, what could they do? Drop the rope. The monster is still there, but you're no longer caught up in the struggle with it and can get on with whatever is important to you.

Instead of fighting thoughts and feelings, an approach to noticing them and letting them go can be more helpful. Mindfulness is a technique that, with practice, can help you to do this. Practicing this regularly can mean that you start to do this in every-day life and feel the most benefit from it.

### ***Doing things in spite of difficulties: walking in the rain***

Read through the following scenario and make notes in the spaces:

Imagine you're outside, walking somewhere that you need to go to, and it suddenly starts to rain. No, not rain, *pour down*. It's really bucketing and you're starting to get wet. You've got quite a long way to go and no umbrella on you. You're starting to feel fed up and cold and miserable. What would happen to your body and posture? Imagine it now and let your body sense it and change as it would if it were happening right now. Make

some notes here about how your body has changed while you've been imagining walking in the rain.

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OK, let's stick with the same scenario, you're still outside walking in the pouring rain and getting soaked, but this time try imagining that your attitude was "OK, I'm getting wet. I can't do anything about it. Wish I'd remembered my umbrella. Oh well, never mind. I'm still getting really wet!" Pay attention to how this feels in your body and what's happened to your posture with this. Write down how your body changed this time.

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Think about the differences between these two scenarios. Which one do you get more wet in? What does this have to do with living with a difficult condition?

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Being willing to be wet while we walk where we want to go is a bit like doing what's important to us even though we have physical or emotional difficulties. We may not be able to change some things like rain, but if we can change how we stand towards it, it changes our experience. Living life in the presence of the difficulties that you have, while connecting to things that are important to you in the here and now can help you re-focus.

## Discovering what's important: Using a compass

Sometimes we've become very focussed on our difficulties. So much so that we've lost sight of what's important or valuable to us.



Values are a bit like a compass. They guide you as to the direction for your journey through life. We might pass landmarks on the way – perhaps a hill, a town or a tower – these are like goals, destinations. We might 'arrive' at these things, but we never arrive at our valued direction. Our track might waver from the direction that the compass guides us in, and we might feel a bit lost or confused, but our compass can guide us back to the path that's important to us.

You might have values for a number of areas of your life, such as:



Family and  
friends



Work



Self care



Personal  
growth and  
development



Leisure

You may know straight away what your values are. If you're not sure, have a look on the list on the next page to help prompt you. Another worksheet called "my values" found under self-help documents on the "Making Healthier Lifestyle Changes" page on moodcafé may also help you to identify what values are important to you.

Make a note here of the values that are important to you. You don't have to fill the list, even a few that are important to you may be useful in helping you re-connect with them.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. \_\_\_\_\_

- 6. \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. \_\_\_\_\_
- 9. \_\_\_\_\_
- 10. \_\_\_\_\_

**List of Values**

Honour	Experience	Freedom	Flow
Wisdom	Learning	Curiosity	Structure
Integrity	Loyalty	Openness	Rhythm
Peace	Reliability	Perseverance	Excitement
Beauty	Order	Calm	Wit
Nesting	Respect	Wonder	Sustainability
Nurturance	Thoughtfulness	Humour	Self sufficiency
Balance	Patience	Organisation	Independence
Faith	Tolerance	Stability	Leadership
Spirituality	Serenity	Security	Kindness
Love	Attentiveness	Meaning	Expansiveness
Strength	Equality	Understanding	Simplicity
Communication	Caring	Intelligence	Conservation
Self expression	Intimacy	Adventure	Spontaneity

Imagination	Sensuality	Risk	Comfort
Creativity	Play	Courage	Warmth
Forgiveness	Fun	Power	Discipline
Intuition	Effort	Connectedness	Justice
Compassion	Productivity	Citizenship	Detachment
Diversity	Health	Belonging	

If you know what your values are and can identify some goals that will help you achieve those values, you may find goal setting useful. A sheet can be downloaded from the health improvement section. This can help you identify small goals, and help you achieve it in spite of things that might get in the way. A goal may be as small as re-connecting with someone through a phone call or email, or taking a short walk. Anything that is in line with your values.

## Keeping focussed on what's important

It can be easy to become less focussed on values or goals e.g. you might manage some of this for a day or two then go back to old habits. If this happens, try to read through the sections and exercises above again. It will take time for old habits to change but, with practise, many people have found the above approaches help them to improve the quality of their life, despite living with a physical health condition.

Visit [moodcafe.co.uk](https://moodcafe.co.uk)  
for more helpful resources

