

ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY

Mechanisms and Metaphors

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ACT THERAPY

Pronounced like the word *act*
not letter by letter (as in CBT)

Overview

- Introduction
 - Guiding Concepts
 - Functional Contextualism
 - Relational Frame Theory
 - Psychological Flexibility
 - Hexaflex Model - 6 core processes, metaphors and a case example
(10 minute break halfway through)
 - Breakout Group - “Dancing around the hexaflex” with John
 - Graphic Tools - ACT Matrix and Choice Point
 - Q &A
-

Introduction

- ACT teaches clients to relate to their internal experiences in a new way – Focusing on personal values, and not on controlling distressing thoughts and emotions.
 - Developed by Steven C Hayes, along with Kirk Strosahl and Kelly Wilson.
 - The first ACT workshop was in 1982
 - There is no one protocol or training method, no certification
 - There are many focused protocols, ACT for _____, hundreds of studies, many excellent ACT trainers/developers who have contributed to its further development and tons of resources to explore
-

Behaviorism

- Behaviors are both external and internal (physical and mental) events
 - ACT is considered a third-wave cognitive and behavioral therapy as it focuses on mindfulness and acceptance - **how** you relate to what you think and feel, not just the content - **what** you think and feel
 - Applied Behavioral Analysis - look at the act in context
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Functional Contextualism

Behavior can only be understood in relation to the context in which it occurs. Context includes past experiences (again both physical and mental) and present motivators.



Functional Contextualism focuses on the function of a symptom, rather than judging it good or bad.

Workability

Is what you are doing moving you towards your values, and providing a rich and meaningful life?

- Less weight on the truth (content) of a situation
 - Less judgment
 - What matters is if you are moving towards your values
-



Relational Frame Theory



- Human verbal/cognitive behavior develops from forming arbitrary relations between events.
- Our language networks expand as we experience the world
 - Around age 3: nickel > dime
 - At around age 5 or 6: 10¢ > 5¢
- The way we use language is what makes it hard to be human - we often use language/thoughts to avoid discomfort – we catastrophize, ruminate, tell stories, develop rigid rules, etc.

Relational Frame Theory

No learned behavior is ever unlearned, though it may change in strength. We can't just get rid of these difficult (or any) relationships.

We can't control where our mind goes.

Mary had a little _____

ACT and Relational Frame Theory

ACT does not typically seek to train specific forms of thought. Rather, it attempts to untangle verbal knots by loosening the binds of language itself...ACT attempts to guide the person to notice that a thought is just a thought and to take needed actions regardless of the thoughts that might exist.

[Hayes, Pistorello and Levin \(2012\) Acceptance and Commitment Therapy as a Unified Model of Behavior Change, The Counseling Psychologist 40\(7\) 976-1002.](#)

So the person that thinks "I'm bad" may still have that thought as frequently as before, but the thought "I'm bad" will no longer lead to the same reactions. This is why it is not necessary from an ACT perspective to change the client's thinking - what is more important is to change the behavioral functions of the client's thinking.

Pierson, H., & Hayes, S. C. (2007). Using acceptance and commitment therapy to empower the therapeutic relationship. In P. Gilbert & R. L. Leahy (Eds.), *The therapeutic relationship in the cognitive behavioral psychotherapies* (pp. 205–228). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. p. 208

Psychological Flexibility

The objective of ACT is to help develop **psychological flexibility**

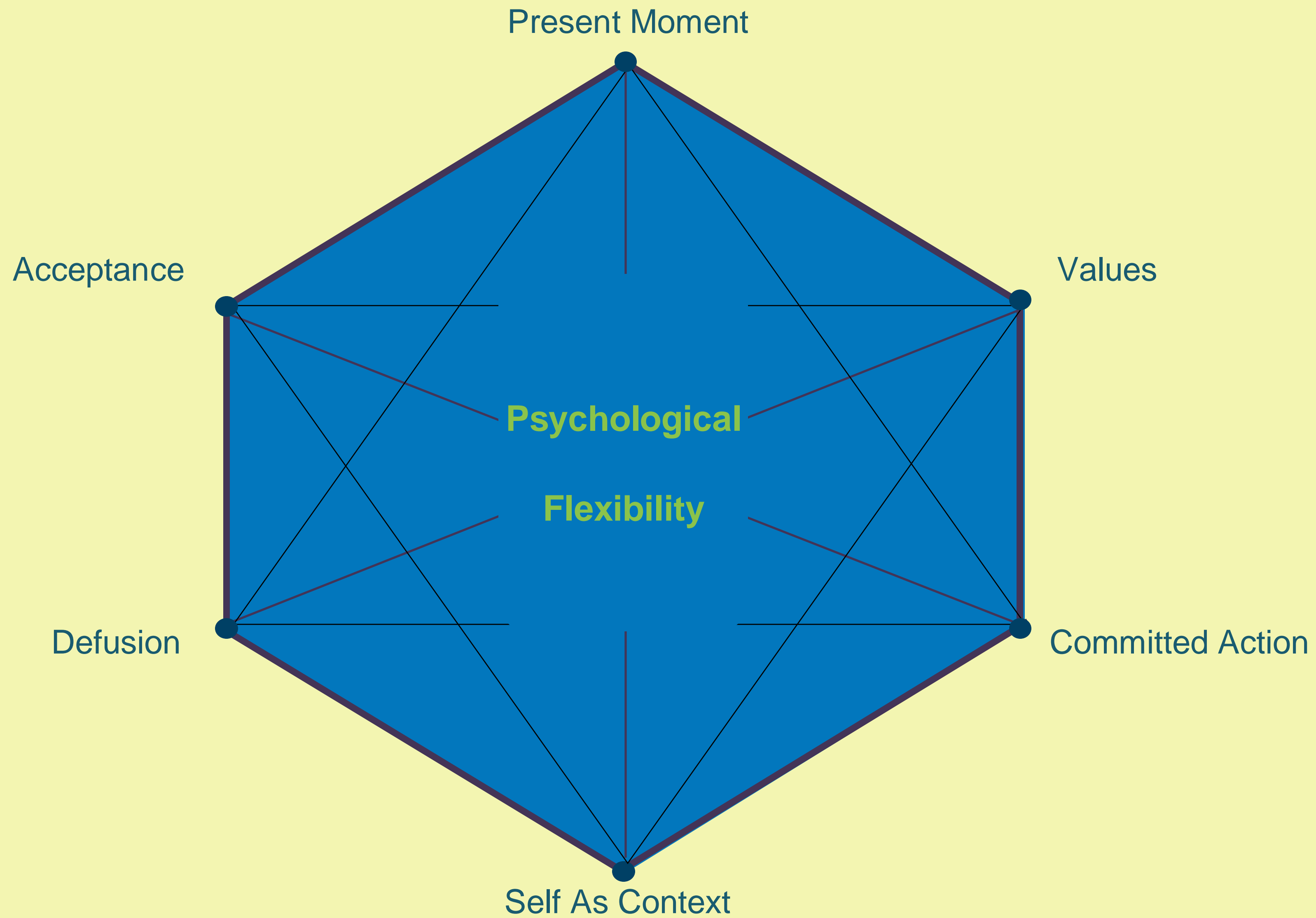
... it's the ability to **respond** to life in a **workable** way, a way that enables us to live **vital, meaningful lives**.

Westrup, D (2014) *Advanced Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Experienced Practitioner's Guide to Optimizing Delivery* p 9

Psychological flexibility can be defined as contacting the present moment as a conscious human being, fully and without needless defense—as it is and not what it says it is—and persisting with or changing behavior in the service of chosen values

Hayes, S, Strosahl, K & Wilson, K (2012) *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change* pp 96-97

ACT HEXAFLEX



Chat GPT's case study of Emily and her Journey to Career Satisfaction

Background:

Emily, a 30-year-old marketing professional, has recently been struggling with anxiety and burnout in her career. She feels overwhelmed by constant pressure to perform well, and this is affecting her mental health and relationships. She has a desire to shift to a career in the non-profit sector, which aligns more with her values, but she feels stuck, unsure of how to make this transition while managing the anxiety she experiences about failure and uncertainty.

Present Moment Awareness

- Flexible and deliberate attention to one's experience as it happens
 - Allows for mindfulness, which is defused, accepting, nonjudgmental, deliberate awareness of experiential events as they happen in the moment
 - PAUSE in session and notice how emotions, thoughts and feelings impact our patients
 - Practicing Present Moment Awareness helps us notice the transition away from being present and to have more flexibility in that process
 - Not a control strategy - not meant to be distraction or relaxation
-

Present Moment Exercises

- 5 Senses Experiencing
 - Focus on Breath
 - Body Scan meditation
 - Shuttle between inner self and outer world observation
 - Shuttle between thinking about an emotional memory and focusing on being present
 - Dropping Anchor
-

Present Moment Awareness:

Emily often finds herself ruminating on past mistakes or worrying about future outcomes, leading to more stress and indecision. She works on mindfulness techniques to help her ground herself in the present. For example, when she feels anxious about her job change, Emily practices deep breathing and observes her surroundings, paying attention to the present moment rather than getting caught up in spiraling thoughts. This helps her manage her anxiety and become more centered.

Defusion - Understanding your mind

Video by
ACT Auntie – Louise Gardner



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLi8-Mi6eqA>

Defusion

- Is a technique that encourages observation rather than engagement with thoughts
 - Lessens the intensity of the unwanted function of a thought
 - Separates you from your thought, so you are not identifying with it
 - I feel stupid vs stupid is me
 - Provides distance
 - I can't do that
 - I feel that I can't do that
 - I am having the thought that I feel I can't do that
 - It is not a control strategy to get rid of emotional pain
-

Defusion Metaphors

- Leaves on a stream/ soap bubbles/clouds
- Milk, Milk, Milk (pickle, phrase)
- Play with your voice (Sing/Pace/Accent) or with writing (font/color)
- Hands
- River metaphor
- Spiky ball
- 100 pennies vs a dollar
- Title the thought (The ____ Story)
- Thank your mind



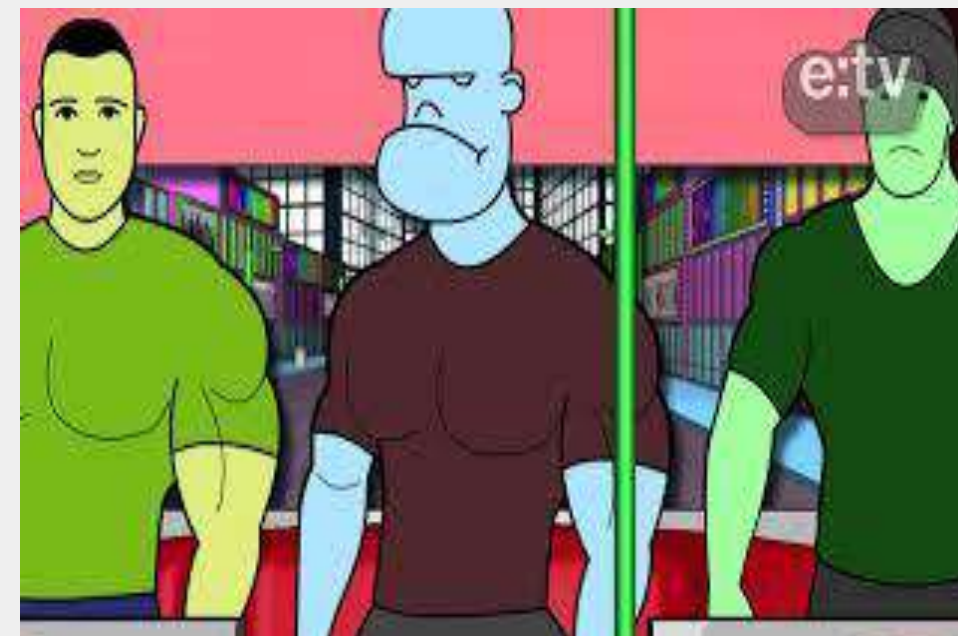
Cognitive Defusion:

In therapy, Emily often has intrusive thoughts like "I'm not good enough" or "I'll never succeed if I switch careers." These thoughts paralyze her decision-making process. Her therapist teaches her a defusion technique where she observes these thoughts as mere words or passing clouds, rather than absolute truths. For example, when she thinks, "I'm not good enough," Emily practices saying to herself, "I am having the thought that I am not good enough." This helps her see the thought as just a mental event, not a fact, reducing its power over her actions.

Acceptance

- Alternative to experiential avoidance
- Active willingness to have inner experiences – thoughts, feelings, memories and sensations
- Acceptance isn't a goal in and of itself, but it makes values-based action more likely to be taken
- It is not a control strategy – Opening up, not giving up

Passengers on a Bus - Joe Oliver



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z29ptSuoWRc>

Acceptance Metaphors

- Clipboard Metaphor / Tug-of-War
 - Passengers on the Bus
 - Beach ball / Chinese finger trap/hungry tiger
 - Chocolate cake
 - Physicalize the feeling - shape, temperature, size, color, etc
 - Making room for feeling in back pocket, shoe, etc
 - Open the door - how long can you tolerate this
-

Acceptance:

Emily struggles with a strong desire to avoid uncomfortable feelings, especially anxiety and fear of failure. Through ACT, she learns to embrace these feelings instead of avoiding them. During a session, she is encouraged to sit with the uncomfortable sensations that arise when she imagines leaving her secure job for an unknown future. Initially, this is challenging, but Emily slowly learns that by accepting these emotions as part of her human experience, she can move forward without being controlled by them.

B
R
E
A
K

Our minds can be like
Radio Doom & Gloom...



@ACT Auntie

Self-As-Context

- Observable self - I am the one listening to my mind talk
 - The story I tell myself about me, is only part of me
 - A healthy sense of self is one that is held lightly and can respond flexibly
 - “I’m shy” can be a description of one’s tendencies, but not a rigid determinant of one’s life
 - Anthropologist/detective
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Self-As-Context Metaphors/Exercises

- Sky and Weather - You are the SKY, everything else is the weather
- I can't possibly_____
- Talking and Listening exercise
- Best pen in the world! (Fusion with self-evaluations)



By Susie Esse

Self-as-Context:

Emily tends to define herself by her thoughts and emotions, often feeling like a "failure" when she has doubts or fears about her career change. In therapy, she explores the concept of "self-as-context," which helps her see herself as more than just her thoughts and feelings. She is encouraged to reflect on her values, skills, and experiences outside of her current anxieties, realizing she is a whole person capable of growth, regardless of her current emotional state. This shift in perspective allows her to be more compassionate toward herself.

Values

- Not goals (goals are achievable, values are a direction)
 - Specific goals are directed by client values
 - Values are dynamic and evolving (being a good parent looks different over time)
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Values Metaphors/Exercises

- A compass
 - 2 sides of a coin pain/value
 - obituary/tombstone/eulogy
 - Values cards
 - Values Bullseye
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Values Clarification:

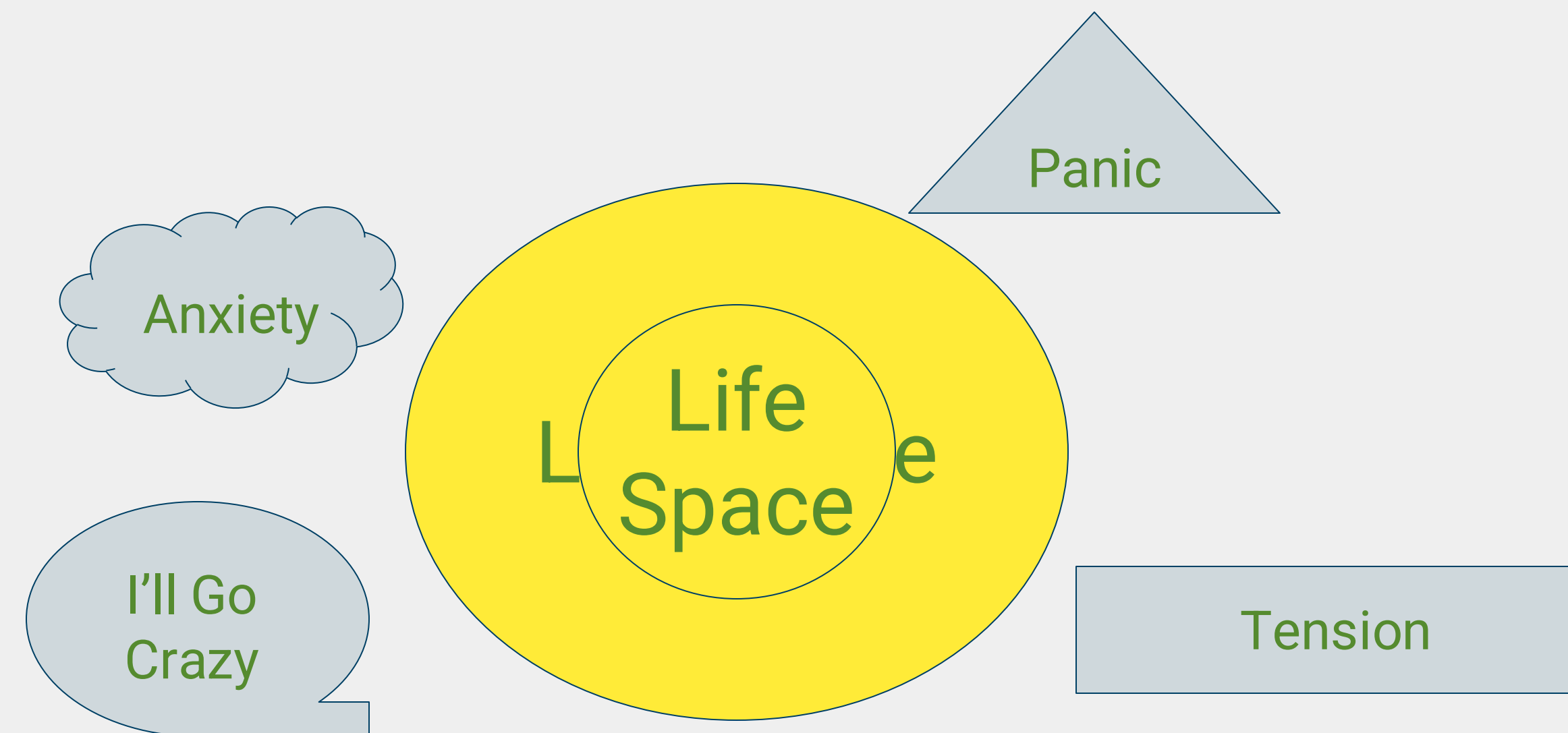
Emily has always been passionate about helping others and contributing to social causes, but she hasn't fully explored how to integrate these values into her career. Her therapist uses a values clarification exercise to help Emily identify what truly matters to her. Through reflection, Emily realizes that helping underserved communities, making a positive social impact, and working in a supportive environment are all core values for her. This clarity reinforces her desire to transition into the non-profit sector.

Committed Action

- Action in the direction of what you care about even in the presence of obstacles
 - Based on values, where we choose to make change
 - Little steps to start, and build from there
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Committed Action Metaphors/Exercises

- Walking the path (overgrown vs well-worn but wrong direction)
- Teach skills needed (SMART goals, social skills)

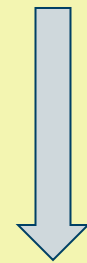


Committed Action:

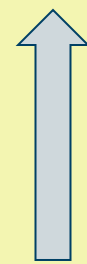
Armed with clarity about her values, Emily starts taking small, practical steps to align her actions with her goals. She updates her resume to highlight her skills in marketing for social causes, applies for volunteer opportunities at non-profits to gain experience, and starts networking with individuals in the sector. She sets a goal to apply to at least three non-profit jobs within the next month. Although she still experiences anxiety, she moves forward with actions that align with her values, reinforcing her sense of purpose and direction.

Three Pillars of Psychological Flexibility

Acceptance

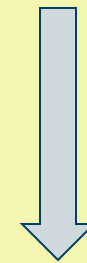


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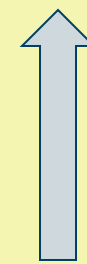


Defusion

Present Moment



AWARE



Self As Context

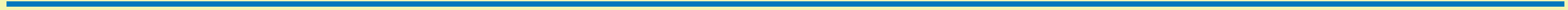
Values



ENGAGED

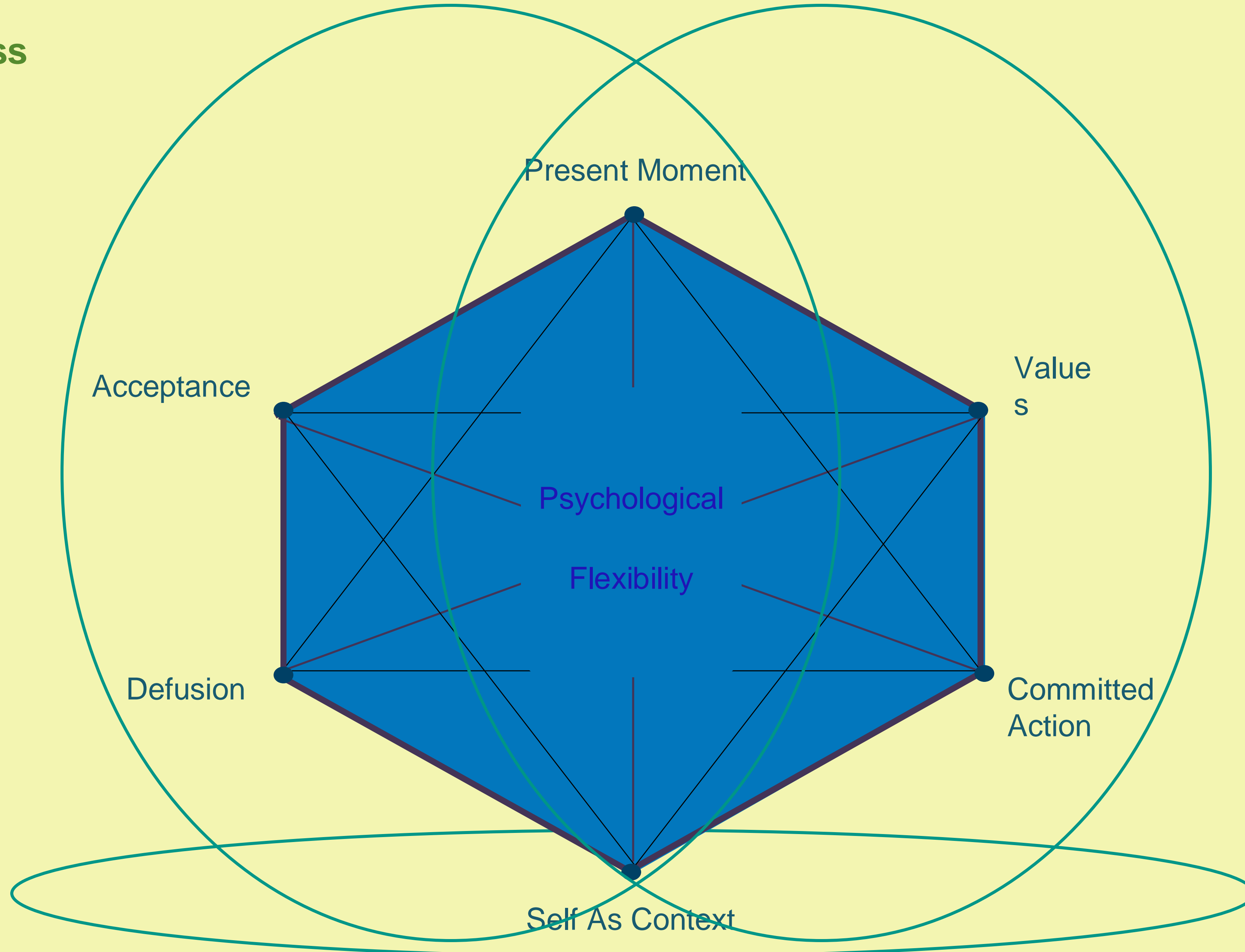


Committed Action



Mindfulness

Self-Kindness



**Self-Compassion
and
Psychological
Flexibility Model**

The ACT Practioner's Guide to the
Science of Compassion

Tirch, Schoendorff and Silberstein,
pp 33-36

Common Humanity

Breakout session: John

John, age 28, a software developer, has chronic anxiety, characterized by constant worry about work performance, future events, and his social interactions. He describes feeling physically tense most of the time, with difficulty concentrating at work and trouble relaxing during his free time. His anxiety manifests in both cognitive (e.g., intrusive worries about making mistakes, fear of social judgment) and physical symptoms (e.g., muscle tension, difficulty sleeping). The patient reports that he avoids social events and often procrastinates on work tasks due to fear of failure or criticism.

The anxiety has been impacting his daily functioning, particularly his work performance, as he struggles to meet deadlines and often feels overwhelmed by his responsibilities. He also feels disconnected from his friends and family because of his tendency to withdraw and avoid social situations.

Acceptance, Present Moment, Defusion, Self-as-Context, Values, Committed Action

Creative Hopelessness - Informed Consent

- People want to “fix” themselves ASAP and get rid of discomfort
 - What they have been doing has not been working
 - They often hold tightly to short-term solutions that don’t work in the long term
 - In order to effectively engage in ACT
 - One needs to let go of unworkable solutions
 - And engage in new thinking, to work differently
-
- Rather than winning the battle, ACT involves stepping out of the battle.
 - There, we can observe those interactions
 - Then learn skills to handle those difficult thoughts and feelings
 - While clarifying what matters, and committing to do more of that
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The ACT Matrix

Kevin Polk

**Sensory Experiencing
/Outside**

What do you do to feel relief from unpleasant thoughts and feelings?

What kind of stuff do you do to move towards what is important to you (values)?

**Relief
/Away**

**Contentment
/Towards**

Noticing

What unpleasant thoughts and feelings get in the way?

Who or what is important to you?

**Mental Experiencing
/Inside**



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCCSpOtDPV0>

AWAY

The Choice Point
Russ Harris

TOWARDS

HOOKS

VALUES

HOOKED

UNHOOKED

Choice
Point

**Thoughts, Body
Sensations,
Feelings and Urges**

Questions?

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