

Module 1: Being Present – Focusing on the Here and Now

Welcome! In this first module, we will set the stage for your journey by introducing a new way to approach anxiety and depression. If you're reading this, you or someone you care about may be struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings. The good news is that you're not alone – many people experience anxiety, depression, or other emotional challenges at some point in life. More importantly, *there are practical skills you can learn* to handle these experiences differently. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) offers tools to help you stop fighting your feelings and start building a life that matters to you.

The Problem with Fighting Feelings

It's natural to want to escape pain. When you feel anxious or depressed, you might try many ways to “*feel better*” or get rid of those feelings. Common strategies include: - Avoiding situations that trigger anxiety (for example, skipping social events or not opening mail when you feel overwhelmed). - Distracting yourself or numbing out (binge-watching shows, overeating, using alcohol or other substances to escape feelings). - Battling your own thoughts – maybe you tell yourself “*Stop worrying*” or try to “*think positive*” to chase away negative thoughts. - Withdrawing from activities and people you care about because everything feels like too much effort.

At first, some of these coping methods *do* provide short-term relief. It's understandable why we use them. However, ask yourself: **have these strategies truly solved the problem long-term?** Often, the relief doesn't last. The anxious thoughts come back, the sadness returns, and sometimes avoiding life can even make things worse (for example, loneliness from avoiding friends, or guilt from not getting things done).

Imagine trying to hold a beach ball underwater – you can push it down for a while, but eventually it slips from your hands and bursts back up. Trying to *suppress* or run from emotional pain is a bit like that: the more you push it down, the stronger it can bounce back. In ACT, this constant struggle with your own thoughts and feelings is called **experiential avoidance** – basically, avoiding or fighting internal experiences (emotions, thoughts, memories, bodily sensations) that feel unpleasant. Research and clinical experience show that **the more we desperately try to control or avoid our inner discomfort, the more we can end up suffering**. It's as if we get stuck in quicksand: the more we flail and fight, the deeper we sink.

A Different Approach

What if getting rid of anxiety or sadness isn't the *real* solution? What if fighting those thoughts and feelings is like an unwinnable tug-of-war? Think about it: if you've been struggling for a long time and

nothing has worked permanently, it might be time to consider an alternative. ACT invites you to *drop the rope* in that tug-of-war with your mind. Instead of struggling against your pain, you will learn to **accept what's out of your control (like thoughts and feelings)** and **commit to actions that make your life better**.

This might sound strange or even impossible right now. You may be thinking, “*How can I accept anxiety? I hate it – I just want it gone!*” That’s okay. You don’t have to like these feelings. Acceptance in ACT doesn’t mean *giving up or resigning yourself to suffering*. It simply means **allowing** your thoughts and feelings to be there without constantly fighting them. It’s about acknowledging, “*Alright, I feel anxious/sad/etc., what can I do that’s helpful right now despite feeling this way?*”

Along with acceptance, ACT emphasizes **mindfulness** – which is a fancy way of saying *paying attention to the present moment, here and now, with openness*. When you’re mindful, you are not tangled up in worries about the future or regrets about the past; you’re focused on what is happening right here. This helps break the cycle of getting lost in anxious or negative thoughts. Over these modules, you’ll learn skills in mindfulness (staying present), defusion (stepping back from thoughts), acceptance (opening up to feelings), connecting with your observing self (the part of you that notices experiences), identifying your values (what matters most to you), and taking committed action (moving toward what matters). Each module builds on the previous ones to increase your psychological flexibility – the ability to handle difficult inner experiences while still doing what’s important.

All we ask is that you keep an open mind and give these new approaches a try. Some ideas might feel counter-intuitive or even the opposite of what you’ve been taught. That’s normal. For example, it may feel odd to *allow* anxiety instead of resisting it. But if fighting hasn’t worked, why not experiment with a new strategy? As you go through this program, engage with the exercises. Just reading about these ideas won’t create change – you need to *experience* them. Think of it like learning to ride a bike: you can’t get it from a textbook; you have to hop on and practice. So, let’s start practicing!

Being Present: Learning to Anchor in the Moment

We’ll start with a core skill: **contacting the present moment**, or simply *being present*. When anxiety or depression hits, our minds often zoom into the past or future. You might relive past mistakes, worry about what’s coming, or get lost in “what if” scenarios. This tends to amplify distress – for instance, worrying about tomorrow’s tasks can fuel anxiety, and dwelling on yesterday’s regrets can deepen depression. The present moment, however, is usually more manageable than the scary story our mind is telling us.

Training yourself to come back to *now* is like giving your mind a short rest from those distressing mental movies. In the present, you can directly deal with whatever is happening, one moment at a time. **Mindfulness** is the practice of deliberately focusing your attention on the here and now with

curiosity and without judgment. Rather than automatically reacting to your thoughts or feelings, you observe them like an impartial witness. This can bring a sense of calm or at least a bit of relief from the mental noise.

Think of your attention as a flashlight in a dark room – wherever you shine it, that becomes your focus. In anxiety and depression, the flashlight often points inward at worries or negative beliefs. With mindfulness, we gently redirect that flashlight to what’s actually around us right now. By doing so, we often realize *“Right now, in this moment, I am okay. I can handle this moment.”* One moment at a time is not so overwhelming.

Let’s try a simple exercise to help you practice being present.

Exercise: 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

This is a quick grounding exercise you can do anytime you feel overwhelmed by thoughts or feelings. It uses your five senses to bring you back to the present.

1. **Look** around and name **five things you can see** right now. They can be anything – *“I see a blue wall, a coffee mug, a window, my phone, a lamp.”* Say them out loud or in your mind.
2. **Feel** four things you can physically touch. For example, *“My feet on the floor, the texture of my shirt, the cool air on my skin, the chair supporting me.”* You can actually touch and notice the sensation (like rubbing your hands on your knees and noticing that feeling).
3. **Listen** for three sounds. Pause and really hear the environment: *“I hear the hum of the refrigerator, cars passing outside, my own breathing.”*
4. **Smell** two things in the environment. This one can be subtle. You might note *“I smell my shampoo from my hair, and the fresh air by the window.”* If you can’t find two smells, just think of two scents you enjoy.
5. **Taste** one thing. Maybe just notice the taste in your mouth, or take a sip of water or a bite of food if available and pay attention to that. If nothing’s there, imagine a favorite taste (like chocolate, or toothpaste when you last brushed).

After you go through the five steps, take a slow, deep breath. Notice if you feel just a little more *grounded* or settled in the here and now.

Reflect: What did you notice as you did this exercise? Often, people find that for at least a few moments, their worrying mind quieted down. By focusing outward on your surroundings, you gave your brain a mini-break from stress. You might also realize there are things around you that you usually overlook when you’re stuck in your head. This practice can help train you that when anxiety or depression pulls you into darkness, you have a tool to reconnect with the present and find a sliver of calm or clarity.

Putting It into Practice

Being present is a skill – think of it like a muscle that gets stronger with use. This week, **practice the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise** whenever you notice yourself getting caught up in worries or heavy moods. It only takes a minute or two. You can also practice it once each day at a set time (for example, every morning or before bed) to build the habit.

Additionally, start becoming aware of when your mind drifts away from the present. Just notice it: “Ah, I’m replaying that argument from yesterday” or “I’m worrying about that meeting tomorrow.” Gently guide your attention back to whatever you’re doing at that moment, even if it’s something mundane like washing dishes or walking to class. Use your senses: feel the warm water on your hands or notice the trees as you walk.

Remember, **the goal isn’t to have zero thoughts of past or future** – that’s impossible. The goal is to catch when you’ve been pulled into a mental maze and choose to return to now. Even if you have to refocus your attention 100 times in an hour, that’s okay – you’re training your brain each time you do it.

Key Takeaways from Module 1

- **Struggling with thoughts and feelings can backfire:** The more we fight anxiety or sadness, the more stuck we can feel. Consider that trying to “fix” internal experiences like emotions may not be as effective as we think.
- **You are not alone or broken for feeling this way:** Suffering is a normal part of being human, and many others face similar struggles. It doesn’t mean you’re weak – it means you’re human.
- **A new approach:** Rather than battling your mind, you can learn to relate to it differently through acceptance and mindful awareness. You’ve started to explore that by practicing being present.
- **Be present:** Focusing on the here and now (mindfulness) is a powerful tool to step out of the whirlpool of worries and despair. When in doubt, remember to *ground yourself in the present* – use your senses, take a breath, notice what is around you.
- **Practice matters:** The exercises might seem small, but they are the building blocks of change. Try the grounding technique daily and whenever stress builds. Over time, these small moments of presence add up to a calmer, more centered you.

Take some time this week to re-read this module and practice being present. In the next module, we’ll build on this foundation. We’ll look at how to change our relationship with the *thoughts* that often fuel anxiety and depression.

Keep up the good work – even reading this and trying the exercise is a positive step forward. **Onward to Module 2!**