

Module 3: Opening Up to Difficult Emotions (Acceptance)

By now, you've begun to change how you deal with thoughts by practicing mindfulness and defusion. But thoughts are only part of the story. What about the **raw feelings** – the anxiety in your chest, the heaviness of sadness, the anger or guilt that can well up inside? In this module, we learn how to handle painful emotions in a healthier way. The ACT approach encourages us not just to tolerate these feelings, but to *open up* and make space for them, so they no longer control our lives.

Why We Resist Emotional Pain

It's completely understandable to dislike and resist feeling bad. From an early age, we're taught to avoid pain. If you touch a hot stove, you quickly learn *"Don't do that!"* It makes sense to avoid external dangers. But we often apply the same logic to internal pain (like sadness, fear, or shame): *"This feels awful, I need to get rid of it or escape from it."* You might think if you let yourself feel anxiety or depression fully, it will overwhelm you or never stop. Perhaps you worry that *accepting* these feelings is like admitting defeat or agreeing with the negative thoughts.

So, we do our best to resist or avoid painful emotions. You might try to ignore feelings, distract yourself, or shove them down. In Module 1, we explored how fighting feelings – like struggling in quicksand – usually just pulls us in deeper. Here's another way to think about it: have you seen those Chinese finger trap toys? You stick your fingers in both ends of a little tube. Instinctively, you pull to try to get your fingers out – but the tube tightens and traps you the harder you pull. The trick is counter-intuitive: you have to *push in* to loosen the trap and free your fingers. Dealing with emotions can be similar. The more we *pull away* and struggle ("I don't want to feel this!"), the more trapped we become in that emotion. If we instead *lean in* – allow ourselves to feel it – we often find the emotion is more manageable and passes more naturally.

Think of an emotion like a wave in the ocean. If you frantically try to fight a wave, it can knock you down. But if you ride it or dive into it, you can emerge on the other side. Emotions, when allowed, usually peak and then subside on their own. If you've ever had a panic attack, you might recall that it eventually calmed down; if you've cried hard from grief, eventually the sobs lessened. The body can't sustain extreme emotion indefinitely – it will rise and fall. What prolongs our suffering is when we keep feeding the emotion with fear and resistance, effectively trying to *block* the wave. That can make the distress last longer or feel worse.

What is Acceptance?

In ACT, **acceptance** means willingly opening up to your inner experiences – **allowing** emotions, sensations, and urges to be present without desperately trying to change or escape them. It's also referred

to as “*willingness*.” This doesn’t mean you like the feelings or want them; it means you stop the futile war against them. Another way to put it is **embracing** your feelings – not in the sense of loving them, but holding them gently instead of pushing them away.

Let’s clarify a big misconception: *Acceptance is **not** the same as giving up or approving of suffering.* You’re not saying “Oh joy, I’m anxious, how wonderful!” and you’re not refusing to seek improvements in your life. What you *are* saying is, “I am experiencing something uncomfortable, and I will allow it to be here, so I can focus on what I need to do.” It’s about **dropping the struggle** with the emotion. By doing so, you actually reduce the extra pain caused by fighting. There’s a saying: “*Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional.*” We can’t avoid some pain in life – that’s the price of admission for having a heart and caring about things. But how we respond to that pain determines whether we just feel the pain, or whether we add a layer of suffering on top of it by fighting and ruminating.

Acceptance is an **active** process, not passive resignation. It takes courage – it can feel scary to invite in something like anxiety or sadness. Think of it as opening the door to a guest that you know is a bit unpleasant, but treating them with kindness anyway. If you slam the door or barricade it, that guest just keeps knocking louder. If you let them in and offer a seat, they eventually leave on their own after a while. In practice, acceptance might look like this: you notice a lump in your throat and heaviness in your chest (signs of sadness), and instead of immediately turning on the TV to distract yourself, you pause. You acknowledge “I’m feeling sad.” You might even place a hand on your chest, breathe, and allow the heaviness to be there, maybe even shedding a few tears. You treat yourself with compassion, as if comforting a friend who feels sad, rather than berating yourself for feeling that way. This is acceptance – letting the emotion exist without trying to suppress it or judge yourself for it.

Why do this? Because when you stop the constant avoidance, two things happen. First, you often realize the emotion, while uncomfortable, is not *truly* unbearable – you *can* survive it. It might diminish sooner when you’re not fueling it with fear. Second, by not pouring all your energy into fighting feelings, you free up energy to put into living your life (doing things you care about). Acceptance gives you back the time and effort that was tied up in an unwinnable battle.

Allowing Feelings: How To Do It

Acceptance or willingness is a skill you can practice. It’s like learning to relax into the emotion rather than tensing up. We’ll do an exercise to experience what this feels like. As always, be gentle with yourself during this practice – you can start with a mildly uncomfortable feeling if you like, rather than the most intense pain in your life. The idea is to learn the process on manageable feelings first.

Exercise: Making Space for a Difficult Feeling

1. **Identify a feeling:** Think of something that's been bothering you lately – perhaps a situation that brings you mild to moderate emotional discomfort (let's not choose your most traumatic memory for now). Alternatively, you might notice you're feeling some emotional discomfort right now (maybe a bit of anxiety or sadness as you read this). Choose one **emotion** to work with (e.g., anxiety, sadness, anger). Name it: say to yourself, *"I feel [nervous/sad/angry/etc]."*
2. **Scan your body:** Close your eyes if you're comfortable, and take a few slow breaths. Turn your attention inward and observe where you feel this emotion in your body. Emotions often manifest physically. Do you feel tightness in your chest? A knotted stomach? A lump in your throat? Perhaps a hot, flushed face or tense shoulders? Identify as clearly as you can where the discomfort resides and what it feels like (aching, burning, heavy, fluttery, etc.).
3. **Breathe into it:** Now, imagine that as you inhale, you're directing your breath to that area. For example, if you feel anxiety as tightness in your chest, breathe in and imagine the air flowing right into your chest around that tightness. As you exhale, imagine you're creating more room around the sensation. You might picture the tight knot loosening just a little, or space opening up around that heavy feeling in your gut. Continue breathing slowly, with an attitude of gentleness. You're not trying to force the feeling away, you're **making space** for it.
4. **Release resistance:** See if you can allow the sensation to just be there, even to *actively* let it be. You might say to yourself on each exhale, *"It's okay. Let it be."* or *"I consent to this feeling."* If it helps, use a phrase like *"I give you permission to stay as long as you need to, feeling."* Notice any urge to tense up or make the feeling go away, and see if you can let go of that urge just for now. You might relax your muscles around the area or unclench your jaw, as a way of physically signaling acceptance.
5. **Observe and allow:** Spend a few minutes in this state of willingness. Notice that you are **observing** the emotion and the sensations it brings. They may change – perhaps the tightness moves or the heat in your face cools a bit, or maybe the feeling oscillates. It might even intensify at first as you pay attention (that's okay, stick with it gently). Treat yourself kindly if you start to feel overwhelmed; you can always return to focusing on your breath. Remember, you're not trapped by this feeling – you are *making room* for it, like expanding a container so the pressure is less concentrated.
6. **Closing:** When you're ready, slowly shift your focus back to the room. Wiggle your fingers and toes, open your eyes. Take a moment to acknowledge what you just did: instead of running from a bad feeling, you turned toward it. That's brave and counter-intuitive, and it's a step toward healing.

After doing this exercise, you might feel a sense of relief or calm, or you might still feel the emotion. The goal wasn't to eliminate it (though sometimes it does reduce in intensity after acceptance). The

goal was to **practice willingness** – to demonstrate to yourself that “I can have this feeling and still be okay.” If you felt even a tiny bit more peaceful or the feeling felt less threatening, that’s wonderful. If not, that’s okay too – it might take a few tries. It’s important not to judge yourself (“I must be doing it wrong if I still feel bad”). Remember, acceptance is not a one-time switch, it’s a process and a stance you cultivate over time.

One more tip: Some people find it helpful to use an image or metaphor during this exercise. You can try imagining your emotion as an object or creature that you are holding or caring for. For instance, some imagine their anxiety as a scared child or a trembling puppy – something vulnerable that actually needs compassion. This can awaken a nurturing attitude in you rather than an adversarial one. Or you might imagine your sadness as a heavy object you carry – you let it rest in your arms instead of fighting its weight, just holding it kindly. Use any image that fosters an attitude of *allowing and caring* toward your own emotions.

Living with Feelings Instead of Fighting Them

Practicing acceptance doesn’t mean you won’t feel pain. You will – life will give us all joys and sorrows. The change is in how you handle those feelings when they come. By dropping the inner fight, you conserve your strength for what matters. Think about what you could do with the energy you usually spend on *worrying about worry, being angry at yourself for being angry, or feeling sad about being sad*. What if you could redirect that energy? This is where acceptance opens the door for you to engage more in life.

In the coming week, try this approach whenever a smaller wave of emotion hits. For example, if you wake up anxious, before distracting yourself with your phone, take a minute to acknowledge “Anxiety is here, I feel it in my body.” Breathe, let it be, maybe say “I’m allowed to feel anxious.” Then proceed with your day, bringing the feeling along rather than letting it paralyze you. Or if you feel down and notice you’re withdrawing, check in with that sadness – perhaps sit and allow yourself a few moments of feeling it fully (maybe even have a gentle cry). Paradoxically, allowing yourself to feel sad often *clears the skies* a bit afterward, compared to holding it in all day.

Acceptance is a skill of **self-compassion** as well. Instead of bullying yourself for feeling bad, you respond with understanding. You might remind yourself: “*It makes sense that I feel this way; it’s a human reaction. May I give myself permission to feel it without self-judgment.*” Treat yourself as you would treat a dear friend who was hurting – you wouldn’t tell them to “just get over it” or call them weak for feeling it. You might sit with them and offer a hug. Do the equivalent for yourself emotionally.

Key Takeaways from Module 3

- **Fighting feelings often amplifies them:** Resisting or avoiding an emotion can give it more power (like pulling against a Chinese finger trap). The more you tell yourself “I shouldn’t feel this,” the more intense or persistent the feeling can become.
- **Acceptance = allowing what you feel without struggle:** It’s about *willingness* to experience emotions as they are, not as you wish them to be. This doesn’t mean you want the feeling, only that you’re not going to waste energy running from it. You let it in, so you can eventually let it out.
- **You are bigger than your feelings:** No matter how strong an emotion is, it is only a part of you and it will pass. By breathing and creating space for the feeling (like we did in the exercise), you tap into the perspective that you can carry that feeling, instead of it carrying you.
- **Acceptance is not resignation:** You’re not saying you’ll be miserable forever or that you like the pain. You’re saying, “This is what I’m feeling right now. I accept its presence, and I will still move toward what’s important to me.” Ironically, when you stop demanding that the feeling go away, it often becomes less debilitating.
- **Practice with compassion:** Each time you allow a feeling to just be, you build emotional resilience. Use the breathing exercise or other methods to sit with emotions for a few minutes at a time. Be kind to yourself in the process. Over time, you’ll develop confidence that “*I can handle what I feel.*”

With acceptance of feelings and defusion of thoughts, you’re developing a powerful ability: to experience life’s ups and downs without getting stuck in them. You’re learning that you can feel fear and still do what matters, feel sadness and still continue on. In ACT, this flexibility is key to a fulfilling life. In Module 4, we’ll explore a concept that ties these skills together – your observing self – which can further help you not get lost in thoughts and feelings. Keep practicing the willingness skill this week, and see you in the next module!