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1 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.

1.1 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.

1.2 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!

1.3 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.

1.3.1 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.

1.4 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.

1.4.1 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!**

2 Module 2: Stepping Back from Your Thoughts (Cognitive Defusion)

Now that you have started practicing being present, you've probably noticed how busy and negative the mind can be. In this module, we focus on **thoughts** – especially those unhelpful, critical, or anxious thoughts that often accompany depression and anxiety. Our goal is to change how you relate to these thoughts, so they don't push you around as much.

2.1 When Thoughts Take Over

Have you ever been *absolutely convinced* of something in the moment – only to realize later that your mind had misled you? For example, during a bout of anxiety, you might think, *"I'm going to embarrass myself at this meeting, it will be a disaster."* In the moment, that thought feels like the truth. Later on, perhaps the meeting went fine, and you see that the mind's prediction was exaggerated or false. Or if you're feeling depressed, a thought like *"I'm useless; nothing will ever get better"* can feel overwhelmingly real. We often **fuse** with our thoughts, meaning we get entangled in them and treat them as literal facts or commands we must obey.

When we are fused with thoughts: - **Thoughts seem to be reality.** We forget that thoughts are just words or ideas our mind is generating. Instead, we treat them as accurate descriptions of the world or ourselves (e.g., "I had the thought that I'm a failure" turns into "I *am* a failure"). - **Thoughts control our actions.** If the thought *"Why bother? It's hopeless"* shows up, we might actually stop trying – not because the situation truly is hopeless, but because we believed that thought completely. If the

thought “*I’m too anxious to go out*” appears, we might cancel our plans, giving the thought the final say. - **Thoughts magnify emotions.** Dwelling on scary or upsetting thoughts (like imagining worst-case scenarios or replaying painful memories) can intensify anxiety or sadness. Our body responds as if those imaginings are really happening.

The mind is a *great storyteller*. It constantly narrates our life with opinions, memories, judgments, and predictions. Some stories are helpful, but many are not – especially the doom-and-gloom or self-criticism that comes with anxiety and depression. What can we do about it? Trying to **stop** or **suppress** thoughts doesn’t work well (remember the beach ball effect). If I say “*Don’t think of a pink elephant*,” what pops into your head? Probably a pink elephant! The more we try not to think about something, the more we actually think about it. So instead of struggling to eliminate thoughts, we practice **cognitive defusion**: stepping back and seeing thoughts for what they really are – just *thoughts*, not necessarily truths or threats.

2.2 Defusion: Seeing Thoughts as Thoughts

Cognitive defusion (an ACT skill) means *gaining a bit of distance from your thoughts*, so they have less hold over you. Think of it as putting your thoughts on a mental bulletin board and stepping back to observe them, rather than being inside them. When you defuse from a thought, you recognize, “*This is my mind talking. These are words or pictures in my head, not direct realities.*” You can then choose how to respond, rather than reacting automatically as if the thought were true.

For example, if you have the thought “*I’m going to mess up*” before giving a presentation, a fused response is to believe it completely and maybe panic or avoid presenting. A defused response might be, “*I notice I’m having the thought that I will mess up. That’s my mind trying to protect me from embarrassment. I don’t have to believe it; I can still do what matters.*” The thought can be there without controlling you.

Defusion is not about arguing with your mind or trying to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. It’s more like changing your relationship to the thought – seeing it as just a string of words your brain produced. One simple defusion technique is to add the phrase “**I’m having the thought that...**” in front of the upsetting thought. Notice the difference: - “*I’m useless.*” (fused belief) - “**I’m having the thought that I’m useless.**” (defused observation)

The second phrase creates a bit of space. It reminds you that this is a thought, not an ultimate truth. You might even extend it: “*I notice I’m having the thought that I’m useless.*” Now you are *noticing* the thought rather than being owned by it. This little trick can take the sting out of negative self-talk.

Our minds can be very convincing. They’ll present thoughts with great authority – but remember, the mind’s job is to generate thoughts, *not all of which are accurate or helpful*. In fact, the mind can be

like a worried fortune-teller (predicting disaster) or a harsh judge (criticizing you) without evidence. Through defusion, we teach our brain that we don't have to buy into everything it says.

2.3 Techniques to Unhook from Thoughts

There are many creative exercises to practice cognitive defusion. The key is to *observe* your thoughts rather than getting sucked into them. We will do one core exercise together. Feel free to adapt it or try other methods that accomplish the same goal: seeing thoughts as passing events, not absolute truths.

2.3.1 Exercise: Leaves on a Stream (Watching Your Thoughts)

This classic mindfulness exercise will help you experience defusion. It might feel a little strange at first, but give it a try. It's most effective if you actually do it rather than just read it. You can do this for a few minutes to start:

1. **Get comfortable:** Sit in a relaxed position. You can close your eyes if you're comfortable (or keep a soft gaze toward the floor). Take a couple of slow, deep breaths to center yourself.
2. **Imagine a scene:** Picture in your mind a gentle stream flowing through a forest. The water is moving slowly and steadily. Now imagine there are leaves floating on the surface of this stream, drifting by. (If leaves and streams aren't your thing, you can imagine clouds drifting in the sky, or cars driving by on a road – choose any image of things that pass by and disappear.)
3. **Watch your thoughts:** Now, turn your attention to your mind. Each time a thought pops up – whether it's a word, phrase, worry, image, memory, whatever – imagine placing that thought on a leaf. Place it gently on the leaf and watch it float down the stream. For example, you might think “*This is silly*” – put that “*this is silly*” thought on a little leaf and watch it glide away. If you think “*I have so much to do later,*” put that on a leaf too and let it drift.
4. **Continue for a few minutes:** Your thoughts might speed up – you might have a lot of them. Keep placing each one on a leaf (or a cloud, if you prefer the sky visualization) and let it go. Don't try to force thoughts to come or go, just gently handle whatever arises. If you notice that you've gotten tangled in a thought and forgotten about the exercise (this will happen!), simply note “*Oops, I got caught,*” and gently bring your attention back to the stream and continue.
5. **No judgments or exceptions:** Put *every* type of thought on a leaf – whether it's a neutral thought like what to have for dinner, or a negative self-judgment, or a positive thought. Even if the same thought keeps coming back (e.g., “*I'm not doing this right*”), keep putting each occurrence on a new leaf over and over. The idea is to practice viewing all thoughts the same way: as transient mental events.

6. **Finish up:** After a few minutes (or whenever you feel ready), imagine the stream slowly fading away. Bring your attention back to the room. Wiggle your fingers and toes, and open your eyes if they were closed.

Take a moment to reflect on this exercise. You just practiced watching your thoughts come and go, **without getting hooked into them**. You might have noticed that some thoughts are repetitive, some are random, and none of them stay permanently. Thoughts are a lot like those leaves – they appear, float by, and disappear downstream if we let them. Sometimes during this exercise people feel a bit more calm or find that a thought that felt very urgent at first starts to lose its intensity after placing it on a leaf a few times. Other times, you might still feel anxious during the exercise, and that's okay. The goal here is not to eliminate thoughts or feelings, but to change how you handle them.

Important: Defusion doesn't make thoughts vanish (wouldn't that be nice!). Rather, it changes your *relationship* with the thought. After the exercise, you may still have the anxious or negative thoughts, but you might feel a little more *separated* from them – like, "That's just a thought, not an objective fact I must react to." With practice, this perspective can become more natural in daily life. The next time an upsetting thought shows up, you can remember the leaves on the stream and try mentally putting the thought on a leaf and letting it go on its way.

2.3.2 Other Quick Defusion Techniques

You can't always close your eyes and imagine a stream in the middle of daily activities. Luckily, there are many quick defusion tricks you can use on the fly. Here are a few options – try them out and see which ones resonate with you:

- **Name the Story:** Our minds often replay the same tapes (like "I'm not good enough" or "Something bad will happen"). Give those frequent thought patterns a name, like "*the Not-Good-Enough story*" or "*the Catastrophe script*." Then when it shows up, you can say to yourself, "*Ah, I know this story. My mind is playing the Not-Good-Enough story right now.*" This little naming trick can help you recognize it as a script your mind is running, not ultimate truth.
- **Silly Voice Technique:** Take a distressing thought and repeat it in an unusual way – say it out loud in a cartoon character's voice, or imagine it being announced by a funny narrator (like in a goofy accent). For example, in a high-pitched Mickey Mouse voice: "*I'm going to fail my exam!*" It's hard to take a thought 100% seriously when you hear it in a ridiculous tone. The content doesn't change, but your perception of it does. It's a reminder that the thought is just a collection of words, which you can choose to experience differently.
- **Thank Your Mind:** When your mind throws a worry or criticism at you, try responding with "*Thank you, mind. I see what you're trying to do.*" This might sound odd, but it can be powerful. Your mind often generates worries or self-criticisms as an attempt to protect you (though it

might be misguided). By thanking your mind, you acknowledge the thought without obeying it. *“Thank you, mind, for warning me that I might say something stupid in this meeting. I hear you, but I’m still going to participate.”* This approach is respectful to your mind’s intentions yet keeps you in the driver’s seat.

These techniques all serve the same purpose: **to remind you that you *have* thoughts, but you are *not* your thoughts.** Thoughts are like background chatter – you can learn to listen or not listen at your discretion. Defusion gives you the freedom to choose which thoughts to give energy to and which to simply let pass.

2.4 Moving Forward with Your Thoughts

In the coming days, practice defusion whenever you notice an unpleasant or sticky thought stressing you out. You have a few tools now: you might mentally say, *“I’m having the thought that...”* to defuse, or quickly use one of the above techniques (naming the story, funny voice, thanking your mind). Consider also setting aside a few minutes to redo the **Leaves on a Stream** exercise daily or a few times this week to build the skill – you can do it during a quiet moment, like after waking up or before sleeping.

Remember that defusion is a skill that gets easier with practice. At first, you might still feel very fused with certain thoughts, especially ones that have been around for a long time (like core beliefs about not being good enough). Don’t worry – you are learning to loosen their grip bit by bit. Even a few seconds of recognizing *“hey, that’s just my mind talking!”* is progress.

2.4.1 Key Takeaways from Module 2

- **Thoughts are not facts:** Just because you think something doesn’t make it true. Our minds come up with all sorts of thoughts (some helpful, some bogus). In anxiety and depression, many thoughts are overly negative or catastrophic. You can acknowledge those thoughts without accepting them as reality.
- **Cognitive defusion = stepping back:** It’s the skill of observing thoughts rather than getting entangled in them. By defusing, you give yourself a choice in how to respond to a thought, instead of automatically reacting.
- **Techniques help weaken the spell of thoughts:** Whether it’s imagining thoughts as leaves on a stream, naming your mind’s “story,” using a silly voice, or another method, these exercises train you to see thoughts as just thoughts. This can lessen their emotional impact.
- **You’re in control of your actions, not every thought:** We can’t always control what thought pops up, but we can control what we **do**. Defusion helps you not let negative thoughts boss you around. You can have the thought *“I can’t do this”* and still gently carry on with what you were doing.

- **Keep practicing:** The next time an anxious or downing thought shows up, try one of the defusion techniques. See if it feels different from your usual way of reacting. Over time, your mind's chatter will still be there, but it won't hook you as easily as before.

By changing your relationship with your thoughts, you're already increasing your psychological flexibility – the ability to bend without breaking under mental stress. In Module 3, we'll switch focus to another big part of our inner experience: our feelings. You'll learn how to handle painful emotions in a healthier, more compassionate way. Great job on completing Module 2!

3 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.

3.1 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.

3.2 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.

3.3 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.

3.3.1 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.

3.4 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.

3.4.1 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!

4 Module 4: Discovering the Observing Self (Self-as-Context)

Up to now, we’ve focused on *what* you are experiencing internally – your thoughts and feelings – and ways to handle them differently. In this module, we shift focus to *who* is experiencing those things. There is a part of you that notices your thoughts and feelings, but is distinct from them. In ACT, this

aspect is sometimes called the **observing self** or **self-as-context**. It's a difficult concept at first, but essentially: **you are not the content of your thoughts and feelings; you are the container that holds them**. Another way to say it is *you are the sky, not the passing weather*. If you've ever had a moment of mindful clarity – maybe during the exercises we've done – where you could observe your thought or emotion and realize “Hey, that's not all of me,” then you've already touched on this idea.

4.1 The “Noticing” You vs. the “Thinking” You

We usually identify strongly with our thoughts and roles. You might think of yourself in terms of your job (“*I am a student*”), your traits (“*I'm a shy person*”), or the content of your mind (“*I'm a pessimist*” or “*I'm anxious*”). But these labels are not the whole you. There's a more constant part of you that's been there your entire life – the part that is aware of whatever you happen to think, feel, or do. Consider this: the *you* reading these words right now is the same *you* who experienced childhood memories, the same *you* who was there last week during an emotional moment. Your thoughts, feelings, body, and circumstances have changed so much over time, yet something about you has remained stable: the perspective from which you observe and experience the world.

In ACT, we differentiate between the **thinking self** (the mind that chatters, analyzes, generates thoughts) and the **observing self** (the part of you that simply notices and is aware). We've been training your observing self all along whenever we practiced mindfulness – that part of you that can watch a thought pass by or notice a feeling in your body. Now, by strengthening this perspective, you can further reduce the power of negative thoughts and feelings. If thoughts are like clouds and feelings are like weather, then the observing self is the sky: it contains all weather peacefully. Storms don't break the sky; they only move through it.

Why does this matter? Because when you recognize that “*I am not my thoughts; I am not my feelings; I am the one noticing them,*” a lot of suffering eases up. You realize that a thought like “*I'm worthless*” is something happening *within you*, not the essence of who you are. There's a you that exists, unchanged, even when that thought is present – and that you is not worthless at all. It's the you that has value and can observe this passing mental event. Similarly, if you feel overwhelmed by sadness, you can shift perspective and see: “*A part of me is feeling sadness, but another part of me is here, witnessing it.*” This witnessing self isn't overwhelmed; it's just noticing. Cultivating this perspective creates a sense of stability – an “okayness” deep down, even when the surface is experiencing turmoil.

Many spiritual traditions talk about this idea (sometimes calling it a soul or pure awareness), but you don't need to take on any spiritual belief to find it useful. Think of it as a mental stance or mindset. When you operate from your observing self, you tend to feel more centered and less swept away by any particular thought or feeling.

4.2 Experiencing the Observing Self

This concept can be pretty abstract until you *experience* it. Let's do an exercise to help you notice the difference between "you" and the contents of your life. It will involve using your memory and awareness. Take your time with it, and actually follow the steps in your mind as you read.

4.2.1 Exercise: Noticing the Continuity of You

1. **Recall a distant memory:** Think back to **one of your earliest memories**. It could be something from childhood – perhaps a first day at school, a birthday party, or a simple moment playing. Try to pick a specific scene. Now take a moment to put yourself there. How old were you? What was happening around you? Maybe you can remember what you were wearing or a particular toy or the faces of family members. Importantly, recall how you *felt* and what you *thought* at that age during that memory. (For example, maybe you felt excited, or scared, or curious in that moment.) Spend a few seconds immersing yourself in that memory.
2. **Notice the past "you":** As you remember this event, notice that *you were there*, experiencing it. At that time, those feelings and thoughts you recall were very real to you. The child (or younger person) in that memory is you.
3. **Shift to a recent memory:** Now let that image go. Think of something that happened **within the last week**. Maybe you had lunch with a friend, or you were at work or class, or watched a movie. Pick a specific moment. Take a moment to recall where you were and what you were doing. What were you thinking or feeling in that recent moment? Perhaps you were feeling relaxed, or bored, or anxious about something.
4. **Notice the present "you":** In that recent memory, *you* were there, experiencing it. The thoughts and feelings you had a few days ago were real to you at that time.
5. **Now, notice the observer:** Come back to **right now**. You are here, reading this. You have thoughts in your mind at this very moment (maybe evaluating this exercise, or thinking about how it relates to you). You might have some emotional state right now – maybe curiosity, maybe skepticism, maybe calm.
6. **Connect the dots:** Consider this question – *who* was present in all three scenarios: the distant past, the recent past, and this very moment? The answer is *you*. The child experiencing the early memory, the person in last week's memory, and the person reading now – they are all the same you, viewed at different times. Everything else – your body, your knowledge, your feelings, your likes and dislikes – may be different across those times. But the **perspective** that experiences these events is constant. The one who noticed feeling excited as a child, the one who noticed feeling bored last week, and the one who is noticing your thoughts right now – that is your observing self.

Take a moment to let that sink in. You might have a subtle sense of that continuity – that there’s an unchanging observer within you that’s been present all along. If it’s hard to grasp, that’s okay. Not everyone “feels” a big revelation here. But even intellectually, you can see that you have experienced countless changes and yet there is a thread of identity that persists. In ACT, we highlight this to help you **hold your thoughts and feelings more loosely**. If the real you is the one noticing, then any particular thought or feeling is just an experience passing through; it doesn’t define you or limit you.

Let’s use a metaphor to reinforce this: *You are like the sky, and your thoughts/feelings are the weather*. Imagine a vast blue sky. Sometimes it has clouds, sometimes storms, sometimes bright sun. The weather can be intense – thunderstorms, lightning, heavy rain – and at times the whole sky *looks* dark. But above those storm clouds, the blue sky is still there, unchanged and unharmed by the storm. Eventually, the weather changes and the sky clears again. **You** are like that sky. Depression might be a heavy storm cloud in your sky right now, anxiety might be a fierce wind. Those can’t damage the sky; they only pass through it. Even if for a while your inner sky feels completely overcast, the blue sky (your observing self) is still present behind the clouds. Knowing this is there can give hope and perspective: the storms are temporary, and something in you is bigger and more permanent than those storms.

4.3 Harnessing Perspective in Daily Life

Developing a sense of self-as-context is a bit like learning to step outside of your mental drama and watch it with calm curiosity. In moments of emotional turmoil, you can remind yourself: *“This is an experience I’m having, but it’s not all of who I am.”* This can lessen feelings of entrapment. For instance, instead of “I *am* anxious,” you could say “I *notice* I’m feeling anxiety.” The subtle change in wording reinforces that *you* and the anxiety are not the same; the anxiety is something affecting you, and like any state, it can change.

You’ve already practiced skills that rely on this perspective. When you do the leaves-on-a-stream exercise (Module 2), you are sitting as the observer of your thoughts. When you practice acceptance of feelings (Module 3), you are the one observing and opening up to the feelings. In both cases, you are occupying the role of the observer. Now, in daily life, you can consciously tap into this when you feel overwhelmed. Here are a few tips:

- **Use mindful language:** Literally describe your situation to yourself by separating “you” from what you’re feeling. For example, say “I’m noticing that I’m having the thought that nothing is going right for me,” or “I’m noticing a feeling of anger rising.” It might feel formal, but it really does reinforce the observer mindset. It’s like mentally taking a step back.
- **Check in with the observer:** When feeling swept away, pause for a moment. Take a deep breath and ask, “What am I noticing right now?” Answer it like you’re an observer: “I notice

my heart is pounding, and I have a thought that I can't handle this." The very act of noting that means *the observer part of you is active*. Sometimes I even silently say to myself, "Here I am, noticing this experience." It's a quick reminder that *I* (as the observer) am present and okay, even if the situation is tough.

- **Visualize the sky:** Recall the sky metaphor. When a strong emotion hits, imagine it as a storm cloud. Then take a moment to imagine your mind as the big open sky. Even say to yourself, "I am the sky, this feeling is the weather." This can create a little emotional distance and hope that the feeling will pass.

Strengthening the observing self often leads to a sense of peace or at least *groundedness*. Some people describe it as finding a calm center within. You might not feel that every time (especially not immediately in a crisis), but with practice, you might notice a growing ability to step back and take things in stride. It's like building a muscle: the more you flex your perspective-taking ability, the stronger it becomes.

One caveat: None of this means ignoring problems or becoming detached from life. The goal isn't to dissociate or become a distant witness who doesn't participate. Rather, it's to give you a stable platform (the observing self) to stand on, so you can engage with life's challenges more effectively. When you're not wholly identified with every fear and every self-label, you can act more freely and according to your values.

4.3.1 Key Takeaways from Module 4

- **You are the container, not the content:** The real "you" is the one who experiences thoughts and feelings, not the thoughts and feelings themselves. This observing self has been constant throughout your life, even as everything else changed.
- **Self-as-context gives perspective:** By seeing yourself as the context in which experiences happen (like the sky that holds weather), you realize that no single thought or feeling can sum you up or permanently harm the core of you. This reduces the impact of negative experiences.
- **You are not defined by labels or passing states:** Instead of saying "I am depressed" as if that's your identity, practice phrasing it as "I am noticing feelings of depression" or "I have depression right now." This small change reinforces that *depression is something you have or experience*, not who you are entirely. The same goes for anxiety or any label.
- **Using the observer stance can calm you:** When you step into the role of observer ("I notice X"), you often feel more centered. It creates a moment of mindfulness where you are separate from the storm, even if briefly. This can help you respond more thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively.
- **Practice perspective-taking:** Try the memory exercise again on your own, or simply pause daily to reflect "There's a part of me that's aware of what's happening." Over time, this can

become a natural part of your coping, helping you feel “grounded” in yourself no matter what life throws at you.

You’ve now covered four of the six core skills in ACT: present-moment awareness, defusion, acceptance, and self-as-context. These are all mindfulness and acceptance strategies that help you handle internal struggles. The final two modules will shift towards **what you want to do with your life**: clarifying your values and taking action. These will build on everything you’ve learned, giving you direction and helping you create a fulfilling life even as you manage anxiety or depression. When you’re ready, let’s move on to exploring your values in Module 5.

5 Module 5: Identifying What Truly Matters (Values)

Having learned to handle the painful thoughts and feelings that often come with anxiety and depression, we now turn to a more uplifting and guiding aspect of therapy: your **values**. Values are like your heart’s deepest desires for the kind of person you want to be and the kind of life you want to live. They are the *directions* that you want your life to move in, the qualities you want to embody, and the things that really matter to you in the big picture. In this module, we will clarify what’s truly important to you, because that will become a powerful source of motivation and meaning as you continue forward.

5.1 What Are Values (and Why Should I Care)?

A **value** in ACT is not a goal or a specific outcome – it’s more like a compass direction. For example, “being a caring parent” is a value; you can never finish it like a task, it’s something you choose to do moment by moment. In contrast, “take my child to the park this Saturday” is a goal – a specific achievable action that aligns with the value of being a caring parent. Values are ongoing, guiding principles that you can live by **every day**, whereas goals are things you accomplish or check off. Another example: “health” or “physical wellbeing” is a value, while “lose 10 pounds” or “run a marathon” are specific goals under that value. Goals are great, but without clear values behind them, we can achieve things and still feel empty. Values give our efforts a meaningful purpose.

Why do values matter, especially if you’re struggling with anxiety or depression? Because **values give you a reason to face discomfort and move forward**. When you have a compelling *why*, you can handle the *what*. For instance, if you deeply value helping others, it might give you the courage to push through social anxiety to volunteer or support a friend. If you value learning and growth, it can motivate you to get out of bed on a hard day to attend class or work because that aligns with something important to you. Values are like the fuel that energizes all these ACT skills – they remind you *why* you’re practicing acceptance, *why* you’re defusing from negative thoughts: so you can live a life that matters to you, not just avoid pain. Research shows that having a sense of meaning or purpose in life

is linked to better mental health and resilience. In a way, values are about *building a life worth living*, even if it's not free of anxiety or sadness. They provide a focus on what you want to move *toward*, not just what you want to move away from.

Another important aspect: **Your values are your own.** They're not what your parents, peers, or society necessarily say you "should" care about (though you might share some values with them). This is about what *you* deep down find meaningful. There are no right or wrong values – one person might value adventure and risk-taking, another values safety and stability. One might value creativity, another practicality. What matters is that when you think of a value, it resonates and "lights up" something inside you, even if it also scares you a bit. It's common in anxiety/depression to lose touch with values because we get so caught up in dealing with day-to-day distress. This module is a chance to reconnect with what makes life worth the effort for you.

5.2 Finding Your Values

Discovering or clarifying your values can be a reflective, even enjoyable process. Think of it as uncovering what brings you fulfillment or pride at the end of the day. We'll do a guided imagination exercise to help you identify values. This exercise is a bit like mental time travel to help you see what really matters in the grand scheme of your life.

5.2.1 Exercise: Imagine Your 80th Birthday Celebration

This exercise is adapted from a common values clarification technique. It might feel a little poignant, but it's a powerful way to cut through the noise and find what matters.

1. **Set the scene:** Close your eyes if you're comfortable, and imagine you are much older – say **80 years old**. On this day, imagine there is a big celebration for your 80th birthday. Picture a gathering of the people who love and appreciate you – family, friends, maybe colleagues – everyone who is meaningful in your life.
2. **Who is there and what's happening:** In your mind's eye, see the faces of these people as they celebrate you. The atmosphere is warm and positive. Maybe it's a party, maybe a simple get-together, whatever feels right. You're healthy enough to enjoy this day, and you see everyone interacting happily.
3. **Speeches about you:** Now, imagine that one by one, these important people stand up to give a little speech or toast about *you and your life*. They are sharing what they value about you, the impact you've had, and what kind of person you are. What do you want to hear them say? Think about your spouse or partner (or close family member) speaking about you – what would make you proud to hear? Perhaps they talk about how loving or supportive you were. Then, a dear

friend speaks – what would you love them to highlight about you? Maybe your kindness, your humor, or how adventurous and fun you are. If you have children (or imagine future children), what would you want them to remember about you as a parent or role model? If a coworker or someone from the community is there, what would you like them to say regarding how you contributed or what you stood for?

4. **Listen to the themes:** Spend a few moments generating these imagined speeches. Don't worry about the exact words, just focus on the themes and qualities being described. You might hear things like, “*She was always so **caring** – she was there for anyone in need,*” or “*He lived life with such **integrity** and honesty,*” or “*They brought **creativity** to everything they did,*” or “*We always remember her **courage** and willingness to try new things,*” or “*His **humor** and lightheartedness made difficult times easier,*” etc. Let whatever themes that feel important bubble up.
5. **Reflect and write:** Gently come back to the present. Take a moment to jot down the key qualities or principles that stood out in those imaginary speeches. These are likely reflections of your core values. Try to phrase them as single words or short terms. For example, you might write **Compassion, Family, Adventure, Honesty, Art/Creativity, Service, Personal Growth, Faith/Spirituality, Justice, Humor, Independence, Love, Learning, Courage**, etc. There's no need to have a huge list – even a few words that really resonate with you are great.

Now, look at what you wrote. When you see these words or themes, do they stir up a sense of “*Yes, this is important to me*”? You may even feel a bit emotional – sometimes recognizing a true value can bring tears to your eyes or a swell in your chest, because it's like touching something very dear to you. That's a good sign that you've hit on a genuine value.

If you felt stuck during the visualization, or you find it hard to imagine what people might say, that's okay. Another approach is to think directly about times in your life when you felt really satisfied or proud of yourself. What were you doing, and *why* was it meaningful? Those experiences often involve living out a value. Or you can consider the opposite: times you felt regret – maybe that points to a value you neglected. Lastly, you can consider people you admire: what qualities in them do you admire? Often that reflects what you value (e.g., admiring Gandhi's compassion and courage might indicate you value compassion and courage).

Sometimes it's helpful to see examples to jog your mind. **Examples of common values** include: - **Family & Love:** Nurturing family relationships, being a loving friend or partner. - **Helping/Generosity:** Making a difference in others' lives, helping those in need, being charitable. - **Achievement & Growth:** Pursuing goals, learning, improving yourself, being competent and knowledgeable. - **Creativity:** Expressing yourself through art, music, writing, or innovative problem-solving. - **Adventure:** Seeking excitement, exploring new places, having variety in life. - **Security:** Providing stability for yourself and loved ones, financial security, safety. - **Health & Wellness:** Caring for your physical and mental well-being, staying active. - **Honesty & Integrity:** Being truthful, acting in alignment with your moral principles. - **Justice & Fairness:** Standing up for what's right, equality, helping create a

fair community. - **Spirituality/Faith:** Connecting with something greater, practicing faith or spiritual principles. - **Independence:** Being self-reliant, making your own choices, freedom. - **Humor & Joy:** Bringing joy to others, not taking life too seriously, enjoying the moment.

This is not an exhaustive list – just a sampling. Circle or note any of these that jump out as “Yes, that’s me” or add your own that aren’t listed. You might notice that you resonate with multiple values, which is normal. Humans are complex and care about many things. But to make values workable, it helps to identify a handful (maybe 3 to 5) that feel most central to you right now. You can prioritize or rank them if you like, but it’s not necessary.

5.3 Using Your Values as a Compass

Okay, so you have some idea of what matters to you. How does this help? Think of your values as a compass pointing north – they give you direction when you’re deciding how to spend your time and energy. They also give you strength when the journey is tough. For example, if one of your top values is **Compassion**, and you’re feeling depressed, volunteering at an animal shelter or reaching out to check on a friend might be hard to initiate, but doing it likely brings a sense of purpose and lifts your mood a bit because it’s aligned with your values. Or if you value **Adventure**, pushing yourself to sign up for that hiking group despite your anxiety might lead to an experience that makes you feel alive and accomplished. Values can help you **prioritize**: when you’re torn between staying in comfort (but stagnating) versus taking a step that’s scary but meaningful, remembering your values can tip you towards the meaningful action.

It’s also worthwhile to compare how you’re living currently to your values. Often in therapy, people realize there’s a gap. For instance, you might value “family,” but due to depression, you’ve been withdrawing from loved ones. Or you value “honesty,” but anxiety has led you to avoid addressing a conflict directly. Noticing such gaps isn’t meant to make you feel guilty; it’s an opportunity to adjust course. Just as a compass helps a hiker correct their path if they drift east of north, your values can help you gently realign your life choices with what truly matters to you.

The beautiful thing about values is that you can live them in small ways every day. Even if “making a difference in the world” is a core value and you’re not in a place to do grand actions, you can still do small kind acts that express that value (like helping a neighbor, or contributing creatively to something). Every time you act on a value, it’s like strengthening a muscle – you feel more authentic and often more fulfilled. It also creates positive momentum to lift you out of the paralysis that anxiety and depression can cause.

5.3.1 Key Takeaways from Module 5

- **Values are your guiding stars:** They represent who you want to be and what you find meaningful in life. Unlike a goal, a value is never “completed” – it’s lived out continuously. For example, you don’t “finish” being a loving friend; you *keep choosing* to be loving whenever possible.
- **Personal and motivating:** Your values are chosen by you. They can energize you by providing a compelling reason to step out of your comfort zone. When you know you’re acting in service of something you deeply care about, even hard tasks can feel worthwhile.
- **Not about “shoulds”:** Don’t choose values because you think you “ought to.” Focus on what genuinely matters to you. There is no external grading; the payoff is an internal sense of purpose and alignment with yourself.
- **Values vs. feelings:** Don’t wait until you “feel good” to start living your values. Often, taking action on values comes *before* the positive feelings, not after. You might not feel motivated or confident at first – that’s okay. Values-based action can gradually lead to a more meaningful and satisfying life, which in turn can improve your emotional state.
- **Bridge to action:** Knowing your values is powerful, but it’s only the beginning. The next step is to translate those values into concrete actions and habits. In the final module, we’ll focus on **committed action** – setting goals and taking steps guided by your values. This is how you’ll build the life you want, one small step at a time.

Take a moment to congratulate yourself for digging deep and identifying what matters to you. Keep your notes on your values handy – maybe write them on a card or in a note on your phone. They will be your north star as we move into making real-life changes. Whenever you’re ready, let’s proceed to the final module, where we put it all together and start **taking action** towards the life you envision.

6 Module 6: Taking Meaningful Action (Committed Action)

You’ve clarified what’s important to you – now it’s time to start **living it**. In this final module, we focus on turning values into reality through **committed action**. “Committed” means you pledge to carry out these actions guided by your values, even when it’s hard. This is where the rubber meets the road. Up until now, we’ve largely worked on your inner world (thoughts, feelings, perspective). Now we’re going to work on the *outer* world – your behaviors and life choices – which is ultimately how you build a fulfilling life.

6.1 From Intention to Action

It’s common with anxiety or depression to get stuck in inaction. You might *intend* to do a lot of things, but never quite get to them because of fear, low energy, or lack of motivation. Committed action

means **taking initiative** to do what matters, *despite* those internal obstacles. It's about making your values manifest in concrete ways. Another way to think of it is "values in motion." For example, if one of your values is **learning**, a committed action might be enrolling in a course or reading a book for 30 minutes each evening. If a value is **friendship**, a committed action might be calling one friend every weekend to catch up. These are actions you can choose and commit to.

When we say "commit," don't worry – it's not a contract that you'll never break. It's more like a sincere intention that you keep working at, even if you slip up. Committed action is flexible, not rigid. If one approach doesn't work, or life throws you a curveball, you *adjust* and continue, rather than giving up entirely. Think of a committed relationship – it doesn't mean things are always perfect, it means you keep working on it. Similarly, you're committing to your path forward.

Taking action has a remarkable effect: it creates momentum. In depression, especially, doing anything can feel daunting. But when you take even a tiny step, you often start to feel a bit more alive or purposeful, which then fuels more action. This is similar to a concept in behavioral activation therapy (for depression) – that **action precedes motivation**. We often wait to feel motivated or confident before we do something. But many times, especially in recovery, you have to *do first*, and then the motivation and confidence will gradually follow as a result of your action. Keep that in mind if you find yourself thinking, "I just don't feel like doing anything." That feeling is a real part of your experience, but you now have the tools to make room for it (acceptance) and not let it dictate your choices (defusion from the thought "why bother," etc.).

6.2 Making a Plan and Overcoming Barriers

To increase your chances of success, it helps to have a clear plan. Vague intentions like "I'll try to be healthier" often fall flat. A concrete plan would be "I will go for a 15-minute walk after dinner on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday this week." Specific plans can be tracked and more easily executed. We will go through a step-by-step exercise to create a *commitment plan* for one of your values. You can repeat this process for multiple values or goals later, but let's start with one to keep it manageable.

Before we dive into the exercise, let's talk about obstacles. It's almost guaranteed that when you try to change your behavior, you'll encounter some challenges. There are **external barriers** (like lack of time, money, resources, or other responsibilities) and **internal barriers** (like fear, self-doubt, lack of confidence, inertia). Part of committed action is being **prepared to handle these obstacles**, using both problem-solving and the ACT skills you've learned. If an external barrier is "I'm too busy," maybe the solution is to schedule the activity in your calendar or wake up 20 minutes earlier for it. If an internal barrier is "I'm anxious about doing it," the solution might be to practice acceptance of that anxiety (like letting your heart race but doing it anyway) or defusion from thoughts like "I can't do it" (acknowledge the thought and still take action). We don't have to eliminate obstacles; we just need strategies to not let them stop us.

6.2.1 Exercise: Committed Action Plan

Let's create a simple action plan step by step. Take out a notebook or a document to write this down if possible.

1. Choose a Value to Focus On: Look at the values you identified in Module 5. Pick **one** value that you want to work on first. Ideally, choose something that feels important and also has some area of your life you'd like to improve. For example, maybe you chose "Health" as a value and you know you've been neglecting exercise, or "Connection" as a value and you've been isolated. Selecting one value helps focus your efforts.

2. Pick a Specific Action (Goal): Now think of a **concrete action** that represents a small step toward living that value. It should be something you can realistically do in the next week or two. Use the SMART idea – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant (to your value), Time-bound. For instance, if your value is Health, your action might be "Go for a 20-minute jog on Tuesday morning." If your value is Connection/friendship, your action could be "Call my friend Alex on Saturday afternoon to catch up." If your value is Learning, maybe "Spend 15 minutes tonight learning Spanish on a language app." Make sure it's specific (who/what/when/where) and not too huge. We're aiming for a **baby step** that is challenging but doable. You can build up later.

3. Identify Potential Obstacles: Ask yourself: "What might prevent me from doing this action?" List both external and internal obstacles. External might be things like "It might rain during my jogging time" or "What if my friend is busy when I call?" Internal obstacles might be "I'll probably feel too tired" or "I'm anxious I'll be awkward on the phone." It's important to anticipate these, because then you can plan for them.

4. Plan Solutions for Each Obstacle: Next to each obstacle you listed, write a possible solution or workaround. External obstacle examples:

- If it rains, I will do an indoor workout video for 20 minutes instead.
- If my friend is busy, I will send a text suggesting a few alternate times to talk, so we can reschedule.

Internal obstacle examples:

- If I feel too tired after work to jog, I will still put on my running shoes and commit to at least 5 minutes. (Often starting is the hardest part, and I might continue once I start.)
- If I feel anxious about calling, I'll acknowledge "I'm having the thought that this will be awkward," remind myself of the value (why this call matters to me), maybe do a 5-minute breathing exercise beforehand, and make the call anyway. I can even jot down a couple of talking points to feel more at ease.

These solutions are essentially **if-then plans**: "*If X happens, then I will do Y.*" This way, when the moment comes, you're not derailed, because you've already decided how to handle it.

5. Commit in Writing (and/or Share): Now write down your final action plan as a clear statement.

For example: *“I commit to walking for 20 minutes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 7am before work. If I feel like snoozing my alarm, I will remind myself I just need to do 5 minutes to start; if the weather is bad, I’ll do a yoga video instead.”* That’s a solid committed action plan. Sign it or mark it somehow as your commitment. If possible, tell someone about your plan – someone supportive. For instance, you might mention to your partner or a friend, “Hey, I’m trying to exercise three times this week. Can you give me a nudge or ask me about it to keep me accountable?” Sometimes sharing a goal increases our sense of accountability. If you prefer not to share, that’s okay – you can still hold yourself accountable by tracking it (e.g., ticking off each day you do it on a calendar).

6. Follow Through and Evaluate: When the planned time comes, treat this action as an appointment with yourself. Use your mindfulness skills to show up for it – you might not *feel* like it, but recall your commitment. After you complete the action (or at the end of the week), take a moment to reflect: How did it go? If you succeeded, congratulate yourself! Notice how it felt to do something aligned with your value – perhaps you felt a sense of accomplishment, or maybe it was hard but you’re glad you did it. If you didn’t fully succeed, avoid harsh judgment. Instead, get curious: What got in the way? Did an obstacle arise that you weren’t prepared for? Use that information to adjust your plan and try again. Committed action is about learning from experience and iterating, not expecting perfection.

To illustrate, let’s walk through a quick example. **Value:** Creativity. **Chosen action:** “This Sunday at 3 PM, I will spend one hour painting a canvas.” **Obstacles:** “I might procrastinate or say I’m not in the mood; I might judge my art as not good.” **Solutions:** “If I start procrastinating, I’ll set a 10-minute timer just to set up my paints and tell myself I can stop after that if I want. Once I start, I’ll likely continue. If I have self-critical thoughts, I’ll practice defusion (like noticing ‘here’s my perfectionist mind acting up’) and focus on the process rather than the result. I’ll remind myself this is about enjoyment and self-expression, not creating a masterpiece.” **Commitment:** The person writes this plan down and maybe tells their partner, “Don’t let me make excuses on Sunday afternoon – I really want to do this.” When Sunday 3 PM arrives, they feel a bit lazy, but they recall their commitment, set up the paints for 10 minutes, and end up painting for an hour. Afterward, they feel calmer and proud that they followed through, and they have a painting to show for it (regardless of whether it’s great art or not!).

6.3 Staying on Track and Moving Forward

Once you achieve one small goal, it’s time to set the next one. Committed action is an ongoing practice. Over time, these small steps add up to significant life changes. There will be victories and setbacks. Expect that. The key is to **stay in touch with your values** and keep resetting your compass toward them, even if you wander off course now and then (which we all do).

A few tips for staying on track: - **Regularly revisit your values:** Maybe each week, reflect on your core values and ask “What’s one thing I can do in the coming days that would express this value?” This keeps your actions aligned with what matters. - **Use your ACT skills when facing challenges:**

All the previous modules come into play here. Anxiety before a new action? Use defusion to unhook from the anxious thoughts (“I can’t do this”). Fear of failure? Use acceptance to allow that fear to be present without quitting. Feeling lazy or unmotivated? Use mindfulness to focus on the present action one step at a time, rather than getting lost in thoughts about it. Remember self-as-context – you are not your fear or fatigue, you are the one carrying them *and* you can still move forward. - **Reward and celebrate successes:** Even small wins deserve acknowledgment. Did you accomplish your action for the week? Give yourself credit! Perhaps treat yourself to something enjoyable (preferably something aligned with your values, like relaxing with a good book if you value learning, or taking a bath for self-care). Positive reinforcement helps solidify new habits. - **Adjust goals to be realistic:** If you find you consistently can’t meet a goal, don’t beat yourself up – instead, *adapt*. Maybe the goal was too ambitious or not specific enough. It’s perfectly fine to scale back. A 5-minute walk is infinitely better than a 0-minute walk. Consistency is more important than intensity at first. You can gradually increase challenges as your confidence builds. - **Stay kind to yourself:** This is a journey, and you’re human. Life will sometimes interfere – illness, emergencies, or just bad days. If you lapse for a while (stop doing the exercises, abandon goals for a week), resist the urge to call yourself a failure. That’s a perfect moment to practice compassion: “I had a rough week and got off track. It’s okay. What’s one small step I can take to get back toward my values now?” The door is always open to recommit.

6.3.1 Key Takeaways from Module 6

- **Committed action = doing what matters, even when it’s hard:** It’s about taking concrete steps guided by your values. You won’t always feel like it – but you’ve learned that you can make room for those uncomfortable feelings and still act.
- **Start small and specific:** Break your value into a doable goal for the short term. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Small successes build momentum and confidence for bigger challenges ahead.
- **Anticipate obstacles:** By planning for things that might go wrong or inner doubts that might arise, you won’t be caught off guard. Use if-then strategies and your ACT techniques (defusion, acceptance) to handle obstacles rather than avoid them.
- **Consistency and flexibility over perfection:** It’s better to do a little consistently than to overdo it once and burn out. Also, if something isn’t working, you can change your approach – find what works for you while staying true to the value behind it.
- **Action brings change:** As you take more and more value-driven actions, your life story starts to shift. You might find your mood improving, your confidence growing, and your sense of self becoming more positive. But even when external results are slow, you can feel internally satisfied that “Today I lived according to my values,” and that is a win in itself.

6.4 Conclusion and Moving Ahead

Congratulations on completing this self-help program based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy! Over six modules, you've learned to **be present, unhook from unhelpful thoughts, open up to feelings, discover the observing self, clarify your values, and take committed action**. These six core processes of ACT work together to build what we call *psychological flexibility* – the ability to handle life's challenges while staying true to what matters to you. Remember that these skills are like muscles that strengthen with practice. You might revisit certain exercises or modules over time, and that's great. Each time you practice, you reinforce these healthy habits of mind and behavior.

Life will inevitably have ups and downs. Having anxiety or depression doesn't completely vanish overnight. But you now have a toolkit to respond differently. Instead of getting tangled in a web of suffering, you can notice "Ah, my mind is telling that old story" or "I feel that wave of sadness" and respond with mindfulness, acceptance, and action, rather than avoidance or struggle. Over time, those waves and stories lose their hold, and you'll find yourself more focused on living your life than fighting your mind.

As you move forward, keep in mind: - **Be patient and persistent:** Change takes time. You might see some quick improvements, or it might be gradual. Both are okay. Stick with the practices, and don't be discouraged by setbacks. - **Seek support when needed:** You don't have to do this all alone. Share your journey with supportive friends or family. If you find that you're very stuck or things feel overwhelming, consider reaching out to a therapist for additional guidance – ACT is something many professionals can help you with. There's no shame in getting help. - **Adapt ACT to your life:** Ultimately, these techniques are tools to serve you. Feel free to modify exercises to fit your style, mix and match what you need in the moment. ACT is a flexible model; it's all about what helps you be the person you want to be.

Thank you for dedicating time and effort to work on yourself through these modules. That in itself is an act of courage and self-care. Keep honoring your values, one step at a time. With awareness, acceptance, and committed action, you are on the path to a richer, more meaningful life – a life *you* choose, rather than one dictated by fear or sadness. **You've got this!**