**ACT Worry Group Protocol Outline**

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Adapted from

Boone, M. S., & Canicci, J. (2013). Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) in groups. J. Pistorello, *Mindfulness & acceptance for counseling college students: Theory and practical applications for intervention, prevention & outreach.* Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Fleming, J. E., & Kocovski, N. L. (2014). *Mindfulness and Acceptance-Based Group Therapy for Social Anxiety Disorder: A Treatment Manual* (2nd ed.). Retrieved from https://contextualscience.org/mindfulness\_and\_acceptancebased\_group\_therapy\_for\_1

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Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K., & Wilson, K. G. (2012). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Second Edition: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change*. New York: Guilford Press.

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This protocol was developed for a treatment study conducted at Utah State University, beginning Fall 2018. The study is testing group acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) combined with the use of a prototype mobile app called ACT Daily (Levin, Haeger, & Cruz, 2018) for the treatment of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). The group consists of six two-hour sessions, outlined below. This protocol is highly abbreviated and assumes an intermediate to advanced level of familiarity with the theory and practice of ACT.

**Therapist orientation**

This protocol lays out a series of procedures that are designed to target theoretically important processes in ACT. However, ACT is not defined by a set of procedures. ACT is rooted in a moment-by-moment analysis of behavior. In order to deliver this treatment in an ACT-consistent manner, the therapist(s) must be attentive to ongoing behavior in the group and its function, as well as the functions of their own actions. For example, if a procedure in this manual is intended to target acceptance, but the client becomes less accepting after it is used, this should be addressed and explored in a flexible manner, and other procedures may be necessary in order to increase acceptance. To achieve treatment fidelity, therapist(s) should follow this basic outline and use these procedures or functionally similar ones. However, the therapist(s) should be flexible in responding to what is present. This may include targeting different ACT processes as needed or using different exercises and metaphors to support core skill development.

ACT also involves a specific therapeutic stance (see Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson for a detailed discussion). ACT is collaborative and the ultimate criterion for success is developing workability in relation to the client’s values, based on the client’s experience. This means that hearing and respecting the experiences of clients is essential. The ACT therapist works from a place of equality, understanding that the processes that contribute to suffering in our clients are the same ones that contribute to suffering in our own lives. The ACT therapist models psychological flexibility, and this process often involves noticing, acknowledging, and changing our own psychologically inflexible behaviors. ACT therapists are also sensitive to the effects of language and prioritize experiential learning over didactic learning.

**Overall notes for facilitation**

**Present-moment processes:**

Previous acceptance-based treatment of GAD (e.g., Hayes-Skelton, Roemer, & Orsillo, 2013; Roemer & Orsillo, 2007; Roemer, Orsillo, & Salters-Pedneault, 2008) has emphasized mindfulness training in particular. In this treatment, mindful attending is conceptualized as an alternative to worry that can break the cycle of worry as an avoidance strategy (Roemer & Orsillo, 2007). This protocol involves a large number of experiential exercises expected to increase present-moment awareness. These skills can be consolidated by bringing the group’s attention to the impact of attending in this way, and by frequently coaching the group to attend to their ongoing experience in a nonjudgmental way. This can be done many ways, including by asking questions (e.g., “What emotions or sensations are showing up for you now, as you start to think about what you want in life?”), making process comments (e.g., “I’m noticing some confusion as I look around”) or modeling present-moment awareness (e.g., “I felt like my mind got really busy when we did that.”)

**Essential components**:

In the outline below, a \* marks components that were viewed as relatively essential. Components not marked with a \* are the ones we recommend omitting if short on time.

**Session 1 – Introduction**

**Materials needed: group expectations handout, app handout/slides, CEQ**

\*Welcome and confidentiality

\*Introductions and group expectations (confidentiality, attendance, homework, cell phones, eating/drinking) - provide a group expectations handout

\*Describe session structure

\*Informed consent to ACT – about, dirty glass, two mountains

\*Psychoeducation about GAD

Brief mindfulness

Explore values briefly

\*Identify control attempts and how well they have worked to reduce worry & to do what matters

\*Creative hopelessness metaphor - fire

\*Control is normal, expected, useful at times, we don’t have as much as we would like - ex. turn lights on/off, anxiety on/off

Briefly explore acceptance in service of values as an alternative

\*Discussion/take questions

\*Introduce the app and how to use it

\*Assign homework - monitoring struggle vs. opening up. Have them use the app but note that skills will make more sense after we’ve covered them in the group.

\*Credibility/expectancy questionnaire

*1. Welcome and confidentiality*

Introduce yourself and have the clients introduce themselves briefly.

Describe again the structure of the group and the study, and make sure that each participant understands the expectations. The sessions will each be two hours and take place weekly over the next five weeks. The sessions will teach skills that may help with anxiety and worry. Clients are expected to attend each session and to notify the group leader(s) if they’re going to miss a session. They will also be asked to use a mobile app regularly for the next ten weeks, which will help with practicing the skills they are learning. Participants will be asked to complete one online assessment when the groups wrap up and a final online assessment four weeks after that.

Explain what confidentiality is and steps that you are taking to protect confidentiality. Explain limits of confidentiality to therapy in general (risk of harm, child/elder abuse, required by USU/state/federal officials). Explain that sessions will be recorded, and the tape may be watched for training or by researchers to evaluate treatment integrity. Ask that they keep personal information, and what others share to themselves—note they can discuss their experiences of the group. Explain limits of group confidentiality (can’t guarantee others will keep things to themselves) and that each client can decide what they are and aren’t willing to share. Discuss privacy--what leaders will do when we see clients other places, and what clients would like to do for each other.

*2. Group expectations*

Pass out group expectations handout. Describe expectations regarding attendance, homework. Discuss group expectations and preferences regarding cell phones, breaks, and eating/drinking.

*3. Describe the session structure*

Therapist: Each session will focus on a different skill, but they will all be related to each other and build on each other. We will ask you to pick something to practice at the end of one session, and we’ll start the next one by reviewing that and having some time for questions. Then we’ll work on a skill with some exercises, metaphors, and discussion. We’ll ask you to get pretty interactive sometimes. You can always decide how much you are willing to participate, but we’d encourage you to really go with it to get the most out of the group.

*4. Informed consent to ACT*

Therapist: This group is using an approach called acceptance and commitment therapy, or ACT. ACT is a bit different from some other types of therapy. Many other types of therapy focus on helping you win the fight against what you’re struggling with, like worry. However, ACT is based on the idea that rather than helping you win that struggle, it might be better to step out of that struggle entirely. In very broad terms, skills we will work on here are skills to help step out of that struggle, by changing how you relate to your experiences so that you are more able to have what you have without struggling with it, and to do what matters to you in your life.

This approach can get into pretty deep, fundamental things. It’s a bit like cleaning a out **a dirty glass with sludge in the bottom**: the only way to do it is to stir up the dirt. So some stuff might get stirred up, like anxiety, frustration, boredom, and so on, and for a while, things may look worse before they look better. It is not that it is overwhelming, or that everyone has this experience - it is just that you should be prepared to let show up whatever comes up.

Because of this, it might sometimes feel like we’re going backward, when we’re going forward. So, we’d like to ask you to commit to really engaging in this for the next ten weeks. We don’t expect a blank check—if we’re making progress in here, you will see it in your life improving. But, it may take some time for that pattern to become clear. And because what we’re doing builds on itself, you might notice more progress towards the end of our time together than right at the start. And of course, you can decide you don’t want to continue at any point, and that’s completely up to you. But we’d like to ask you to commit, just to yourself, to sticking with this for the next six weeks and doing it in a wholehearted way. That way, you’ll really know if this is something that is useful to you or not.

We also wanted to talk a bit about how we see our roles in this. We have some experience with ACT, and doing this type of work. We are committed to doing what we can to help you live the kind of lives that are meaningful and vital to you, and we think that the skills we’ll work on together are a good way to do that. But, we’re not the experts in your lives, or in your experiences.

You can kind of think of it like this. It’s like you’re in the process of climbing up a big mountain that has lots of dangerous places on it. My job is to watch out for you and shout out directions if I can see places you might slip or hurt yourself. But I’m not able to do this because I’m standing at the top of your mountain, looking down at you. If I’m able to help you climb your mountain, it’s because **I’m on my own mountain**, just across a valley. I don’t have to know anything about exactly what it feels like to climb your mountain to see where you are about to step, and what might be a better path for you to take.

I can tell you, we’re both very much in the middle of climbing our own mountains. Our mountains might not be exactly the same as yours, but we’ve definitely slipped, taken the wrong path, and gotten stuck a lot of times. And that’s something pretty big that, I’m guessing, we all share, since we’re all human.

*\*5. Psychoeducation about GAD (APA, 2013; Roemer & Orsillo, 2014)*

“This group is focused on generalized anxiety disorder, or GAD. GAD is characterized by very high levels of anxiety and worry, about many different areas of life, for at least 6 months, as well as difficulty controlling the worry, and other symptoms like restlessness, fatigue, trouble concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, and trouble sleeping. About 3% of adults in the US are estimated to have GAD over one year—about 10 million people. Often, people with GAD struggle with anxiety and worry over a long time, and those experiences might grow or shrink a bit, but feel like they’re always there.”

“We know a few things about how GAD develops. Over time, people with GAD develop the habit of worrying about possible negative outcomes. [*Elicit examples*] Much of the time, the things they worry about don’t happen, and people often feel less physical anxiety after worrying a lot. So in a weird way, worrying kind of brings relief. These kinds of consequences can lead people to worry more and more over time. However, people with GAD also tend to consider worry and anxiety as bad things, leading to self-judgment and to worry about having worry. Over time, their attention focuses more and more on negative possibilities, which perpetuates this cycles. [*Check with group’s experience]*. People with GAD also tend to engage in things that provide short-term relief from anxiety, but interfere with living, like avoiding situations or procrastinating. You might not feel like all of that applies to you, and that’s normal, but consider if there are some pieces that fit with your experience. With that in mind, our goals for this group are to help you to notice these patterns, what happens in your life specifically, and to give you skills to interrupt those patterns and get back into living.”

*6. Brief mindfulness*

Lead a brief, ~3 minute mindfulness exercise (e.g., mindfulness of sounds) to help clients get centered before engaging in more personal work for the rest of the group.

*7. Explore values briefly*

“What we care about most is helping each of you live the kind of life you’d like to live, where you’re doing things that matter to you each day. So, we’d like to know a little bit about what’s most important to you, because that can tell us something about the direction you’d want to go in. So, take a minute to think over what’s most important in your life…what are the things and people that matter most to you? [*Make a list of examples*]” “How much have worry and anxiety gotten in the way of those things?”

*\*8. Identify control attempts and how well they have worked*

“Now, we’d like to ask you to take a look at what you’ve done so far to control worry and anxiety, to make it go away or get smaller. It could be something you’ve done a lot or a little. What have you tried so far?” Make a list of examples, and ask for reactions to the list. If participants don’t bring up worrying, ask if worrying itself could be one of the strategies. Ask participants how well these things have worked to control anxiety in the short term, to control anxiety in the long term, and to do what matters. Explore their responses and reactions with curiosity and respect, and keep the focus on the clients’ experience rather than attempting to persuade or lecture. Highlight the effort that has been put into control, and validate that attempting to control feelings is the rational thing to do. Summarize the experiences of the group with control.

*9. Control is the problem metaphor - fire*

“I wonder if it’s something a bit like this. One day, a small fire starts in your yard. You’re not sure how it happened, but you know you need to fix it. You pour water on the fire, you try to cover it with a tarp, you try to stamp it out—you do every sensible thing. But the fire just gets bigger. You throw everything you can at it, you use your fire extinguisher, you get the fire department out to come help—but everything you do, the fire just gets bigger. It’s like everything you add to it—even water—just acts like more fuel.”

Check in with the group if they have had this experience – that trying to get rid of anxiety and worry actually makes it bigger – and elicit examples. Highlight the paradoxical nature of this – “Maybe it’s not just that these specific strategies aren’t working. Maybe the whole agenda, trying to figure it out, and fix it, isn’t working and is making life harder.”

*\*10. Control is normal, and control is the problem*

Validate that control strategies are normal and common. It may be helpful for group facilitators to give examples from their own lives. Explore some of the context that supports control, eliciting examples from the audience. Some common themes are: control seems to work for other people, our minds say control is necessary, our society suggests that control is good or necessary, control works in the short-term or in specific situations.

ACT postulates that one reason people engage in control is an overextension of a verbal rule that works well outside of the skin – “If you don’t like it, change it.” As a demonstration, ask the group to turn the lights off. Then ask the group to turn anxiety off. Explore reactions to this exercise, and note the difference between these two contexts.

Summarize – “Trying to control how we feel is normal, and rational, and may be useful at times, like in the short term. But in general, we don’t have nearly as much control as we’d like, and trying to control how we feel can keep us stuck and cost us in other ways.”

*11. Briefly explore acceptance in service of values as an alternative*

Ask participants to briefly consider, if control is not working in general, what they might do instead. It may be useful to return to the fire metaphor—“If you keep trying to put out the fire, and it’s not working, what might you do instead?” You can briefly note that you will be teaching them skills to make room for anxiety and worry, without getting caught up in them. If needed, draw attention to the fact that, attempting to accept things they don’t want in order to get rid of them is “more of the same” – another control strategy.

*\*12. Discussion/take questions*

Ask for general reactions to what you’ve covered, any questions they have. You can use this as an opportunity to shape present-moment awareness in particular and ACT skills in general. If participants note confusion, hopelessness, etc., validate their experiences and encourage acceptance and defusion briefly. For example, “What is that confusion telling you to do? How has that worked before? Would you be willing to carry that confusion around for a bit, in service of making life better in the long term?”

*\*13. Introduce the app and how to use it*

Describe the purpose of the app – to help practice skills as you go about your lives, day to day. To provide reminders about what we’re working on. To help give you a larger set of specific skills you can use. Explain that the app gives tailored skills based on what you say you’re struggling with most.

Walk through how to use it – We’ll send you a link 2x/week, it’s a personalized link so please make sure to use your own one. Show pre assessment questions, and how they can choose between a “quick skill” and “depth skill.” Quick skill is probably like 1-5 minutes, depth skill might be more like 5-10 minutes, but it really depends on how they decide to use it. Show an example of a quick skill and a depth skill for acceptance. Show the post assessment, explain it’s for our research but also to help them notice what’s working for them.

Explain expectations – we’d suggest aiming to use it once a day, but it’s up to you. It’s difficult to remember to do something like this on your own – ask them for ideas on how they might remember to use the app. If they mention calendar/phone/write it down type things, encourage them to implement it now.

*\*14. Assign homework*

Ask them to notice when they are trying to control how they feel to a bigger or smaller degree. They can do this using the app, and that would be a good way to get started. Let them know they can test out the skills, but we’ll be covering how to open up more next time, so they might seem confusing or feel a little difficult to use, and that’s okay.

*\*15. Credibility/expectancy questionnaire (for research protocol only)*

Administer questionnaire. Have them place it in a large envelope when they’re done to minimize socially desirable responding.

**Session 2 – Acceptance**

**Materials needed: 4x6 cards**

Review reactions to first session

\*Review homework - discuss common control strategies

\*Review fire metaphor

\*Butterfly exercise (Boone Cornell protocol)

Mindful acceptance exercise - noticing with curiosity (in ACT Made Simple)

Distinction between pain and suffering - how pain turns into suffering through struggle

\*Bold moves - identify what people could do to practice acceptance that would be worthwhile

\*Discussion

\*Homework - practicing skills on the app (especially when fighting w/ feelings) and making one bold move

*1. Review reactions to first session*

Ask the clients if they had reactions to the last session, or if any questions came up. Respect the clients’ experience and do not attempt to persuade the clients to all see things one way.

*\*2. Review homework*

Ask what the clients noticed when they were trying to track how much they attempt to control feelings. You may ask for examples of control strategies as well as how well they worked. You can also support awareness by asking about how easy or hard it was to notice, and if that changed over time.

*\*3. Review fire metaphor*

Ask clients to connect their experiences back to the fire metaphor. What did they do to try to put out the fire? What happened? Were there times when they let the fire burn? What happened then?

*\*4. Butterfly exercise*

Ask the clients, if they are willing, to try an exercise to explore these ideas more. Lead the “Butterfly exercise” from Boone & Canicci’s Cornell group protocol.

Hand participants a 4 x 6 card. Ask them to write a word or symbol to represent an internal experience that 1) they are struggling with 2) they are willing to have other people see and 3) they are willing to do something a bit playful with. The group facilitators should both write something down as well, and participate in the exercise (both together or one pairing up if there are an odd number of clients).

Divide the group into pairs – one will use their card (the “volunteer”), and the other will not (the “helper”). Instruct everyone to stand up, and the volunteer and helper to face each other. Keep the pace slow throughout this exercise and instruct participants to check in with their experience—what it’s like, how effortful it is, where their attention is, and if the card is gone. Ask the helper to take the card, and hold it up, and the volunteer to push back against it.

Next, have the volunteer take the card and try to crumple it up as small as they can.

Then, have the helper hold up the card again. Ask the volunteer to try whatever, within reason, they can to get away from it, and the helper to bring the card closer to the volunteer.

Finally, ask the volunteer and helper to face each other again. Have the volunteer hold open their hands, and receive the card very gently. Ask them to hold it like something precious, like a butterfly. Have them look around and notice what it’s like to see other people doing this, and what this feels like. Ask what doing this is like—help them to notice that the card is still there, but their stance has changed. Have participants sit down and ask for any other reactions, ideas, etc.

*5. Mindful acceptance exercise*

Introduce this as an opportunity to practice this different stance with their experiences as they’re happening. Ask them to use anxiety that they currently have, or to take a few minutes to call anxiety to mind by thinking of something moderately anxiety-provoking. Have participants settle and close their eyes. Take a minute to focus attention on sound again to begin developing flexible focus. Let them know they don’t have to push thoughts away, just to keep coming back to the focus on sound.

Guide them to get in contact with their anxiety, and to observe it like a curious scientist (see Harris, 2009). Encourage them to allow that feeling to be there, without making attempts to change it. Finish the exercise by expanding their awareness back out to the sounds around them.

Ask for the group’s reactions, experiences, challenges, and questions.

*6. Distinction between pain and suffering*

First, note that pain is a part of being a human in the world. Ask for examples of the types of pain or uncomfortable experiences that are an inevitable part of being human. Pick an example related to anxiety. Then ask about things you do and experiences you have when you aren’t willing to have that initial experience. Drawing on the board, show how pain expands into suffering when you aren’t willing to have it. Ask for ideas about what might be different when you are willing.

*\*7. Bold moves*

Explain that acceptance also impacts what we can do – when we are willing, we have more options for how we can behave. For example, if you are unwilling to experience fear, you might have to stay away from hikes where you see snakes or spiders, or hikes along cliffs, whereas if you are willing to experience fear, you can go on a hike even if you know you may encounter all of those fear-inducing stimuli.

Ask for ideas about what people could do this week to practice acceptance—thinking about something they often avoid is a good starting place. In particular, ask for examples of situations when a moderately unpleasant feeling is an unavoidable part of doing something important, and where making room for those thoughts and feelings could help them do something different. Ask everyone to pick one thing they are willing to try that week. The group leaders should also make the same type of commitment.

*\*8. Discussion*

Ask for general reactions to what you’ve covered, any questions they have. You can use this as an opportunity to shape present-moment awareness in particular and ACT skills in general. If participants note confusion, hopelessness, etc., validate their experiences and encourage acceptance and defusion briefly. For example, “What is that confusion telling you to do? How has that worked before? Would you be willing to carry that confusion around for a bit, in service of making life better in the long term?”

*\*9. Homework*

Ask clients to keep using the app, particularly to notice and fighting with feelings and try some skills to open up. Ask how using the app went, what helped to remember and actually do it, and what they could try this week. Ask clients to try making one bold move in the next week, where they open up to their experience, and report back.

**Session 3 - Defusion**

Review reactions to previous session

\*Review homework

\*How minds work, why minds do what they do

\*Noticing hooks and how they affect you

\*Alternative way - fallen tree metaphor, not focused on true/false but workability

Replacing **but** with **and**

\*Leaves on a stream exercise

Identify and break some mental rules, in pairs - e.g., “I can’t talk too loud, too soft, I have to sit up straight, I have to sound smart”

\*Discussion

\*Homework - Practicing skills on the app (especially when stuck in thoughts) and make one bx commitment to get unhooked

*1. Review reactions to previous session*

Ask the clients if they had reactions to the last session, or if any questions came up. Respect the clients’ experience and do not attempt to persuade the clients to all see things one way.

*2. Review homework*

Ask the clients if they were able to notice times when they fought against internal experiences and times when they opened up to them. Help shape awareness of how those are different (in both behavior and experienced consequences). Check in about the “bold move” commitments. Reinforce acceptance and help troubleshoot any barriers in a process-focused way.

*3. How minds work, why minds do what they do (adapted from Harris, 2009 and Wilson & Dufrene, 2009)*

“People who worry a lot tend to spend a lot of time in their thoughts. Some of those thoughts might be quite painful or might feel like they push you around a lot. (*Give a personal example of being fused.*) What are some thoughts that tend to bother you a lot, or seem to cause a lot of trouble in your life?” (*Elicit a range of examples*.)

“Today we’re going to take a look at our thoughts and our minds, and we’re going to focus on developing some skills that can help to respond to your mind, and your thoughts, more effectively.”

“First, take a moment and notice what your mind is saying right now.” (*Elicit examples*.) “Right—that’s one of the things about our minds. It seems like they’re always going. Sometimes they’re observing, but a lot of the time they’re judging, evaluating, predicting, and so on.”

Continue by introducing the Bear and the Blackberry Bush story from Wilson and Dufrene (2009).

“What does this suggest about our minds?” (*Elicit responses*). Our minds developed to be constantly on the lookout—particularly for danger, for risk, for pain, etc. In one place it might have been bears, in another place it might have been landslides, and in another place it might just have been isolation. But our minds are built to be on the lookout for all of that. And they don’t stop just because we know there aren’t any bears in here, because they work how they work.

Our minds are amazing tools – not just for keeping us safe, for all sorts of things. But they’re built a specific way, and that means they’re very busy, and they’re very judgmental, and often very negative.”

*4. Noticing hooks and how they affect you*

“Noticing how your mind works is the first step to handling it more effectively. And another big piece is noticing how you respond to your mind. Have you ever gone fishing? Do you know what it looks like when a fish bites on a hook, and gets caught on a fishing line?” (*Elicit responses*). “Sometimes our thoughts are a bit like that—when we bite, when we take the bait, we end up getting pulled around. What are some thoughts that tend to hook you like that?” (*Elicit examples, highlight qualities of being hooked*). “And when you get hooked, what happens next? How does that impact what you do?” (*Elicit examples. Provide your own to help normalize.*) “So that’s one aspect of getting hooked – when we’re hooked, our thoughts have a really big impact on what we do next. They seem to push us around. The good news is, unlike that fish, when we notice we’re hooked we can choose to unhook ourselves.”

*5. Fallen tree metaphor*

“Here’s another perspective on this. Say one day, you’re driving into the canyon, and then up into the mountains. You’re on some steep, winding roads, so you can’t see very far ahead. As you make a turn, you see a fallen tree. It’s a massive pine, and it’s fallen all the way across the road. You turn around, because that’s all you can do—it’s clear you can’t pass. That’s one situation, here’s another one. Say one day, you’re driving into the canyon, and then up into the mountains. You’re on some steep, winding roads, so you can’t see very far ahead. As you make a turn, you see a woman on the side of the road, and she waves you over. You roll down your window. She leans over and tells you—there’s a fallen tree ahead, across the whole road, you’d better turn around.” At that point, you can decide, right? You might choose to listen to her, or you might choose to go ahead and see for yourself. So that’s a different situation.”

“What if our minds play a bit of a trick on us…where we’re in the second situation, but a lot of the time we don’t realize it, and we think we’re in the first?” (*Give a personal example, and elicit examples and reactions from the clients*).

*6. Replacing “but” with “and”*

“One big way that our thoughts hook us is that they put up barriers to acting how we want. For example, we want to make friends, and our minds say, ‘But you never know what to say.’ Or we want to take care of ourselves by making time to sleep, and our minds say, ‘But you have so much to do.’” (*Have each client provide an example of this type of thought*). “When you bite these hooks, what happens? Does it take you towards or away from what you want your life to be about?” (*Process reactions*.) There are some small things in the way we talk that can keep us stuck, so that we bite the hook, and we throw more fuel on the fire. These **buts** are one example. What they say is that these two things are in opposition, as if they are irreconcilable, and you have to choose one or the other. What happens if we change these **buts** to **ands**?” (*Elicit reactions.*) “Both parts of can be true, right? And they aren’t inherently opposed to each other, but they are opposed in how we usually talk about them. When we change **but** to **and**, we notice how our language can keep us stuck, and that we have the choice to do what we wish, to pursue what matters, and to take the **buts** along for the ride.”

*7. Leaves on a stream*

Introduce the Leaves on a stream exercise by explaining that another way to get unhooked from thoughts is to sit back and notice each one. Begin leading the Leaves on a stream meditation, taking a few minutes to help participants settle. Have them visualize a location where they are sitting by a river bank, in fall as the leaves are falling. Each time they have a thought, they are to place the thought on a leaf and let it move down the stream at its own pace. Their job is not to hold onto the leaves, or to push them downstream, just to let them go when they go. Help them notice that they can put each thought into a leaf, even ones about the exercise or about their thoughts, like “This is stupid” or “Why does this keep coming up?” Allow about 10 minutes for the full exercise, and debrief reactions. Explore any difficulties encountered in a process-focused way.

*8. Breaking rules*

“Another way to unhook from your thoughts that can be really powerful is to identify and break some of the rules that you have about how things work. For example, when you’re in a group like this, you probably have some rules about how you have to act.” Provide an example and elicit at least one from each participant. Some examples might be: I can’t talk too loud, too soft, I have to sit up straight, I have to sound smart, I have to make eye contact, etc. Then, have them break into pairs and have a conversation about something (like their weekend plans, or what classes they’re taking) while breaking those rules. Ask them to notice what their mind does when they break a rule, what feelings come up, and to continue breaking it. Allow 5-10 minutes for this, and then explore what came up and what it was like to go against their mind.

*9. Discussion*

Ask for general reactions to what you’ve covered, any questions they have. You can use this as an opportunity to shape present-moment awareness in particular and ACT skills in general. If participants note confusion, hopelessness, etc., validate their experiences and encourage acceptance and defusion briefly. For example, “What is that confusion telling you to do? How has that worked before? Would you be willing to carry that confusion around for a bit, in service of making life better in the long term?”

*10. Homework*

Ask participants to use the mobile app, and particularly to focus on noticing when they are stuck in thoughts. Continue with problem-solving any barriers encountered in using the app and setting concrete, feasible goals to remember and use it. Ask each participant to also choose a time to practice getting unhooked – preferably for a particular situation or type of thought. You can remind them of ways to do so (noticing they’re hooked, asking if this is a fallen tree or a person saying there’s a fallen tree, changing but to and, placing it on a leaf).

**Session 4 - Present moment/SAC**

Review reactions to previous session

\*Review homework

\*Time machine mind metaphor (in ACT Made Simple)

Things you miss when you’re not present

\*Mindfulness of your hand exercise (in ACT Made Simple)

Label parade (Boone Cornell protocol)

\*Chessboard metaphor

\*Discussion

\*Homework - practice skills on the app (especially when running on autopilot) and make a commitment to staying present for something

*1. Review reactions to previous session*

Ask the clients if they had reactions to the last session, or if any questions came up. Respect the clients’ experience and do not attempt to persuade the clients to all see things one way.

*2. Review homework*

Check in on app usage, how it has worked for them, and any barriers encountered. Ask the clients if they were able to notice times when they got hooked, if they were able to get unhooked, and if so how. Review challenges as well – times when they were not able to unhook themselves, or didn’t notice that they were hooked in the moment. Reinforce awareness, defusion, and acceptance.

*3. Time machine mind metaphor* (adapted from Harris, 2009)

Explain to group how the mind functions like a time machine, allowing us to jump into the past and the future in a very vivid way. Elicit examples and note times when this may be helpful or unhelpful. Explore the degree of control we have over our “time machines.” Wrap up by suggesting that spending more time in the present may be helpful, because we may miss out on things when we aren’t present, and the present is when we get to choose what we do.

*4. Things you miss when you aren’t present*

Give examples of times when you missed out on something by not being present with it—for example, spacing out in class or during an important conversation, thinking about what to say during a party and missing opportunities to really be involved. Elicit other examples from the group.

*5. Mindfulness of your hand exercise* (Harris, 2009)

Lead participants in the “mindfulness of your hand exercise.” Debrief by asking participants what it was like to pay that type of attention, what they noticed, and what it might be like to bring that degree of attention to other parts of their life.

*6. Label parade*

Lead participants in the “Label parade” exercise from Boone & Canicci, modified from Walser and Westrup (2007).

In brief, participants pair off and interview each other about challenging situations in their lives. Whenever the “speaker” names an internal experience, the “listener” writes it on a nametag-type label and hands it to the “speaker,” who puts it on. You can post signs around the room with valued domains, and have individuals practice walking towards them (or engage in another activity that helps them practice contacting values while wearing their labels.”)

Model this exercise first between the group leaders, so that participants understand what they’re being asked to do. This is also a nice opportunity to model openness. Since this exercise requires vulnerability, attend to the group dynamics and consider modifying it if you have any concerns about asking participants to disclose challenging experiences to one another. Encourage listeners to be caring and curious. They can ask questions to better understand the speaker’s experience, but ask them to refrain from problem-solving, providing reassurance, etc. Switch roles after 5-10 minutes.

Debrief with the entire group. It may be helpful to notice what it feels like to have these labels, which ones they try to hold onto or get rid of normally, how they felt wearing their labels and contacting values, and what it was like to share and to listen. You may note how getting flexible with label of “worrier, planner” might be challenging, as this label might feel very close to them.

*7. Chessboard metaphor*

“Much like we get caught up in thoughts about the future or the past, we often get stuck in thoughts about our labels, who we are, and what’s good or bad about us. These thoughts feel incredibly vital and important. Imagine your experience being like a game of chess, where the black pieces are thoughts and judgments you like, that feel good to you. What would be some of those black pieces for you? [*Elicit examples.*] Okay, and the white pieces then are those thoughts and judgments you don’t like—what might some of those be? [*Elicit examples*]. Okay, how does this game play our for you? Do you try to make sure the black pieces win? How has that worked? [*Explore reactions*]. It feels like we are those black and white pieces, like they define us. And maybe that’s why this fight feels so important, like we have to win it, even when experience says we can’t. What if there were another option…what else could you be in this scenario? [*Elicit responses*].”

From there, you can explore what it might be like to be the chessboard, and how it might translate into actions.

*9. Discussion*

Ask for general reactions to what you’ve covered, any questions they have. You can use this as an opportunity to shape present-moment awareness in particular and ACT skills in general.

*10. Homework*

Ask participants to use the mobile app, and particularly to focus on noticing when they are running on autopilot. Continue with problem-solving any barriers encountered in using the app and setting concrete, feasible goals to remember and use it. Ask each participant to also choose a time to practice staying in the present – preferably for a particular situation. You can remind them of ways to do so (tuning into sounds or sensations, focusing on the person they are interacting with, etc.)

Session 5 – Values

Review reactions to previous session

\*Review homework

\*Introduce values - what they’re like, providing direction

Brainstorming values

\*Whole Life Garden experiential exercise (Kelly Wilson)

Discuss – what it’s like to be connected with values/to have your life be about that

Identify barriers to values consistency and choices there

\*Discussion - How they can use skills to pursue values

\*Homework - practice skills on the app (especially when disconnected from values) and make a values-related commitment

*1. Review reactions to previous session*

Ask the clients if they had reactions to the last session, or if any questions came up. Respect the clients’ experience and do not attempt to persuade the clients to all see things one way.

*2. Review homework*

Check in on app usage, how it has worked for them, and any barriers encountered. Follow up on commitment to stay present for something – what they noticed while doing it, anything they found helpful or surprising about it, and any barriers encountered. Reinforce awareness, acceptance, defusion, and self-as-context when they appear, and target any major barriers encountered.

3. *Introduce values + compass metaphor* (adapted from Harris, 2009)

Explain that the focus of the session will be on values: “When we’re struggling with something like worry, we often focus a lot of our attention on it, and sometimes this means we lose focus on things that are really important to us, or enrich our lives. When has that happened to you?” [*Elicit examples or provide one.*] “So, our goal for today is to shift that focus, so we’re really paying attention to what matters to us, and we can consider how to move in that direction whether worry and anxiety are around or not.”

“That means we’re going to spend some time on our values. Values are how we want to act, or what we want our life to be about. In that way, values are kind of like a compass. They show us the directions we’d like to move in. We might also have goals, which are like places we’d like to stop along our journey. But values are bigger than that. If we want to go West, we can always keep heading that direction – we’re never done. A value might be something like creativity, and a goal might be something like finishing a painting. The value’s bigger than the goal.

Another important part of values is that they’re about moving towards something. When we’re using a compass, we’re usually focused on the direction we want to go in. But in our lives, it’s often the other way around. For example, if moving towards something is focusing on our value of education, we’re often trying to move away from something instead – to get done with the semester, to not get a bad grade, and so on. Are there any areas in your life where you notice that happening, focusing on getting away from something you don’t want rather than going towards something that matters?”[*Elicit examples or provide one.*] “And there’s nothing wrong with doing that—sometimes moving away is important. But in the long run, when most of what we’re doing is like that, it tends not to be very satisfying.”

*4. Brainstorming values*

Ask clients to generate a list of things that might be important to them—they can be things they are already doing that give life meaning, or things they want more of or used to do. If any clients seem stuck, you can ask a variety of questions to help brainstorm: “Are there any things you do, that you look back on the next day, or a week later, and you’re glad you did them?” “If anxiety were no longer a problem for you, what would you want to do differently?” If other people thought you were just wonderful, no matter what you did, what would you want to do then?” “Think about the people you really admire—what are they like?”

Pay attention to whether the values listed are really more like goals, or seem to be under more aversive than appetitive control, and encourage the clients to think more flexibly about values when that occurs. For example, you may ask what they would want next if they met that goal, or ask if aversively controlled “values” would be enough to make life worth living.

\**5. Whole Life Garden experiential exercise (from Kelly Wilson)*

This exercise involves getting in more experiential contact with the impact of values. It may be beneficial to slow down your pace as you introduce this. Explain that values are a bit like gardening—in our lives, we get to pick what we really want to grow. And like gardening, we don’t necessarily see our values bloom overnight, but when we keep tending to them, we can see something really impressive growing.

Explain that you’ll be asking them to think about their garden in a few different ways. Provide them with the first image (a world, with a series of values listed). Ask them to take six mindful breaths at the start, then to imagine a world where they had to let go of half of these areas. Have them cross out those areas. Ask them to pause and take six mindful breaths. Next, ask them to imagine they had to let go of half of the areas left (another three), and have them cross those out. Repeat with crossing out one more at a time, until only one is left. Ask them to take six more mindful breaths.

Next, provide them with the second image and explain that you’ll ask them to do something different this time. Explain how sometimes, we end up choosing certain areas without even realizing we are doing it—or sometimes we realize, but we think it’s temporary or that’s how it has to be. Ask them to imagine that they have a pitcher of water each day, and to notice where in their garden they have been pouring that pitcher of water. That water could be time, effort, attention, etc. Ask them to take six mindful breaths, and then label each area in terms of how much they have been pouring their water there—“about right,” “less,” or “more.”

Finally, provide them with the third image. Explain how we often see values as conflicting—as choices we “have” to make. However, values can also feed into each other. Ask them to consider one value that might feed into others, and how it might do so.

Have participants share what they noticed doing these exercises.

*6. Discuss what it’s like to be connected with values*

Ask participants to share times when they were very connected with their values. Help them notice the qualities of connection, such as vitality, flexibility, and intention.

*7. Identify barriers to values consistency*

Ask participants to identify what most often gets in the way of pursuing values. You are likely to get some answers that involve a control agenda—e.g., “I can’t spend time with my family when I feel so stressed out.” Return to their experience with control efforts and workability as needed.

*8.* *Discuss how they can use skills to pursue values*

Ask participants to consider what they have learned so far that might help them with these barriers. You can also ask which ones they feel the most “stuck” on, and identify and target where more psychological flexibility is needed.

*\*9. Homework*

Ask participants to use the mobile app, and particularly to focus on noticing when they are disconnected from values. Continue with problem-solving any barriers encountered in using the app and setting concrete, feasible goals to remember and use it. Ask each participant to make a commitment that would take them in a valued direction. The group leaders should also make a commitment of this type. If time allows, tie in discussion of barriers they might encounter and how to respond flexibly.

Session 6 - Committed action

Review reactions to previous session

\*Review homework

Brief mindfulness

\*Gardening metaphor

Generating actions of different sizes/timeframes for an important value

\*Identifying and planning for barriers - use Willingness and Action Plan

Recap other skills taught, maybe have them self-evaluate with ACT Advisor

Review how they can use other skills to pursue values

\*Make brief individual game plans for the future with relapse prevention - identifying what would tell you you’re off track and how to recommit

\*Time for discussion and feedback

*1. Review reactions to previous session*

Ask the clients if they had reactions to the last session, or if any questions came up. Respect the clients’ experience and do not attempt to persuade the clients to all see things one way.

*\*2. Review homework*

Check in on app usage, how it has worked for them, and any barriers encountered. Follow up on commitment to move in a valued direction. Reinforce psychological flexibility, and target any major barriers encountered.

*3. Brief mindfulness*

Use a brief mindfulness exercise to help increase contact with the present before continuing. Any exercise of around 3-5 minutes will work. You can ask group members if there’s anything they’d like to practice again.

*\*4. Gardening metaphor*

Explain that this section is focused on action, and how it connects to previous sessions. Introduce the idea of developing a life focused on values as being like gardening. Here are some key points you might want to address:

* When we garden, we pick one spot to work in. Once we start, we might think “Ooh, that patch over there looks a little nicer.” Or “Oh I bet the soil is better down the road.” But we have to choose one spot to garden if we want to see it grow over time.
* Gardening takes persistence and consistency. You go out and weed, and water regularly. You might not see the payoff right away – it takes time to see what’s possible.
* When you garden, you don’t necessarily know what’s going to pay off. You might plant broccoli, zucchini, potatoes, and peas, and find that some thrive beyond your wildest expectations, while some hardly grow. You don’t know until you try.
* There’s flexibility with gardening too, though. You might learn what you can grow where. And you can adapt to different environments by choosing the right fertilizer, how often to water, and so on.

Elicit reactions and examples from the group.

*5. Generating actions of different sizes/timeframes for an important value*

Explain how one skill that can help with pursuing values consistently is finding steps of different sizes—sometimes a large step may work really well, but sometimes you might need to take the smallest steps to get started. Have each group member choose an important value, and brainstorm actions that they can take that fit these categories: very large step, large step, medium step, small step, very small step, immediate, short term, long term, and very long term.

*\*6. Identifying and planning for barriers - use Willingness and Action Plan*

Note how everyone encounters barriers to their commitments, both internal and external. Give some examples from your life. Have participants create a plan for pursuing their important value, using the Willingness and Action Plan worksheet created by Russ Harris. Discuss internal and external barriers that might make their commitments difficult. Try problem-solving any particularly difficult ones with the group. Emphasize psychological flexibility skills to help with internal barriers—this is a good opportunity for review and for the group to support one another. For external barriers, skills like using reminders, getting support from others, and changing the activity, its timeframe, and when/where to do it may be helpful.

*\*7. Review other skills taught and create simple, individual plans for relapse prevention*

Ask participants about what they’ve learned and are taking away from the group. It may be helpful to identify areas they are still working on, skills they are using now and want to keep using, skills they want to try more, metaphors that resonated with them, etc.

Lead participants to think about how they want to approach new challenges and changes moving forward. Normalize the difficulty in making change consistent over time. Have each person identify, for themselves: 1) what they will keep or try practicing, 2) what would tell them if they’re getting caught in old patterns or drifting from values, and 3) what they can do then to get unstuck.

*\*8. Time for further discussion and feedback*

Ask for any feedback on the group—the content, the structure, combining the app and the group, what was helpful, what to change next time, etc. Express your appreciation for the group members and their hard work.

**ACT Daily App Components**

Participants complete a brief pre-post check-in for the app. They are assigned to practice skills in one of the ACT processes based on how they rate themselves initially (they can choose a quick or depth skill).

**Defusion**

Depth skills:

Labeling thoughts (audio)

Leaves on a stream (audio)

Practicing flexibility with a thought - label, categorize, picture mind as a bully

Noticing being stuck in thoughts

Watching thoughts pass by like… - ?

Your mind is like… - series of metaphors

Quick skills:

Series of images, questions, metaphors

**Acceptance**

Depth skills:

Sitting with emotions (audio)

Mindfulness of emotions (audio)

Listening to emotions - consider what it’s telling you to do, consider situation, choose effective behavior

Did it work?

Prompts to open up to emotions - series of metaphors, ways to hold the feeling

Identifying away moves

Quick skills:

Metaphors, noticing effectiveness, reflective questions

**Present moment**

Depth skills:

Breathing mindfulness (audio)

Body scan mindfulness (audio)

Noticing the present checklist

Mindfulness in Activities Goal

What Caught Your Attention?

Tracking Your Attention

Quick skills:

Meditation exercises, noticing exercises, dropping anchor, math problems/sunsets

**Values**

Depth skills:

Sweet moment (audio)

Setting a valued goal

Values writing exercise

What do I want to do? - working through values consistency in the moment

Values card sort

Values questions - series of reflective questions

Quick skills:

Include values and CA, some metaphors, lots of reflective questions, some checking in on progress/effectiveness