

The Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) Journal

A 12-week workbook and companion
for creating lasting change in your life

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Week 1: Choosing Wisely

Week commencing:

Welcome to Week 1.

The first few weeks of the journal are going to have a little more content than the later weeks. Our reasoning is that if we give you enough information early on in our journey together then this should lay a strong foundation for what comes after.

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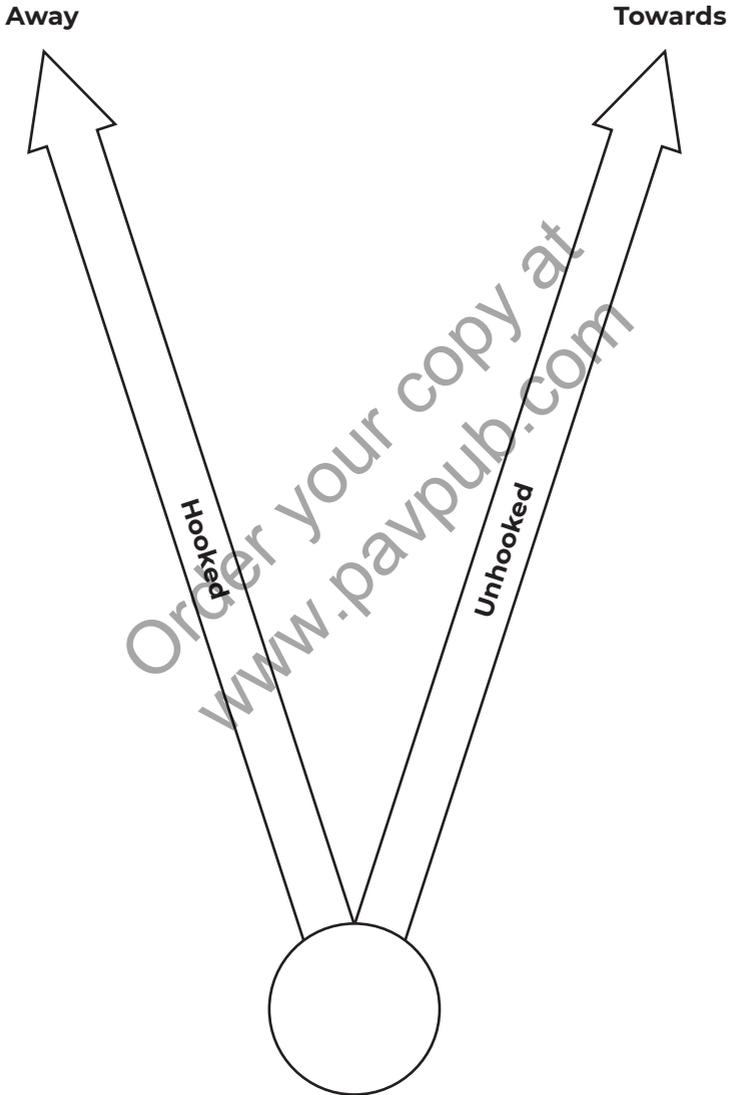
Introducing Your Key Tool For Creating Powerful Change

We're hopeful that you now have a basic understanding of what the ACT model is all about. However, there's a chance that it feels very abstract, or even a little like 'psychobabble'. Therefore, the time has come to make everything more real and more useful by introducing you to your key tool for making powerful changes. It's called *The Choice Point*.

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Week 1: Choosing Wisely

The Choice Point



Situation(s)
Thoughts & Feelings

On the page opposite you can see a diagram representing *The Choice Point*. This is your key tool for creating powerful change in your life. Like *The Triflex*, *The Choice Point* has been taken from the wonderful work of Dr Russ Harris in his landmark book *ACT Made Simple* (2nd edition). Let us talk you through it.

Firstly, direct your attention to the 'towards' arrow. This arrow represents all the things we do in our life that bring us fulfilment or energy. When we make 'towards-moves' we're acting under the influence of what's important to us and being the sort of person we want to be.

Let's give a straightforward example of a towards-move:

Imagine that whilst on our driveway we see a neighbour across the road struggling to take shopping from their car to their house, and that being kind is an important quality for us. A 'towards-move' here would be crossing the road and offering to help carry the shopping.

Towards-moves, therefore, are basically the behaviours that we want to do more of, and they help us to grow. However, in life, there are plenty of times when we make 'away-moves'. You can see these away-moves represented by the 'away' arrow in the diagram. Doing this takes us away from the sort of life we'd like to be living and the sort of person we'd like to be. An away-move in our example might look like this:

Imagine that we saw the neighbour struggling and ignored it. We quickly shuffled into our house hoping that they didn't notice us.

Week 1: Choosing Wisely

Our days are filled with towards-moves and away-moves. When life is going well, the towards-moves are easier to choose. As an example, when our buckets aren't full of the stresses and strains of life, sticking to an exercise regime is a lot easier!

However, often our buckets are not empty. Life is complex, and this means that sometimes, as we move toward the things that are important to us, difficult thoughts and feelings can show up. You can see these represented at the bottom of the diagram. These thoughts and feelings can 'hook' us, and when we're hooked with difficult thoughts and feelings, we're more likely to make away-moves. Our example can help us to understand this idea of being hooked:

Whilst on our driveway, we may feel socially anxious at the thought of approaching the neighbour and our minds may feed us thoughts like, "They'll probably be embarrassed and feel awkward if I go over there" or "I'm busy now, I'll help next time". As a result of these tricky thoughts and feelings we choose not to help our neighbour.

Now, being hooked and then making away-moves doesn't matter too much a lot of the time (for example, the neighbour will probably be ok, and we probably won't feel too bad about it). However, if it happens continually, and in lots of different situations, then we'll have big problems. In fact, most psychological troubles develop because of this process: we get hooked by tricky thoughts and feelings and start making away-moves as a way to try and manage them. This works in the short term (we tend to feel enormous relief), but avoidance makes life smaller in the longer term.

But don't despair – it's possible to 'unhook' from difficult thoughts and feelings. And if we can unhook from them, then we'll be able to get on with doing things that move us towards the sort of life that we want, and towards the sort of person we'd like to be.

So a lot of what ACT is about is using some of the basic skills we mentioned earlier to 'unhook' from difficult thoughts and feelings. If we can manage to develop these skills, then we may be able to make better decisions when we're at a *choice point*. Back to our example:

On our driveway we were at a choice point. Our values were pulling us to make a towards-move, and we had some tricky thoughts and feelings trying to hook us into an away-move.

We have multiple choice points throughout our days. Your ACT Journal will help you to cut back on away-moves, and to make more towards-moves by unhooking from tricky thoughts and feelings. In other words, you'll learn to use ACT to create a space where you can choose a richer, wiser response, especially in challenging situations.

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Week 1: Choosing Wisely

Values

Before we can start to apply the choice point to our lives, we need to have a clearer picture of what a towards-move might look like for us. In other words, we need to figure out what our values are and what directions we want our life to be moving in. This journal is going to give you plenty of opportunity to think about these things, starting right now.

In ACT, values are about *how you want to behave*, moment-by-moment, during your life. In some ways, they describe the sort of person you want to be, or the sort of qualities you'd like to bring to your daily actions.

For example, if the value of *caring* is important to you then what can you do that reflects this value? How can you behave towards yourself, others and the environment in a caring way? Interestingly, in some situations you might actually feel frustrated or impatient, but you can nonetheless choose to behave in a caring way.

We'd like you to get an early impression of which values you hold dear. Therefore, opposite you'll find a list of common values. For now, we'd simply like you to cross out boxes until you have the three most important values left (do this with a pencil so that you can use the list as a reference point for the rest of the journal).

| | | |
|------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Accepting | Encouraging | Loyal |
| Adventurous | Enthusiastic | Open-minded |
| Ambitious | Fairness | Persistent |
| Affectionate | Flexible | Patient |
| Assertive | Forgiving | Respectful |
| Authentic | Friendly | Romantic |
| Caring | Fun | Responsible |
| Challenging | Generous | Self-caring |
| Compassionate | Grateful | Sensual |
| Connected | Honest | Spiritual |
| Competitive | Humble | Supportive |
| Contributing | Humorous | Trusting |
| Courageous | Independent | Write your own |
| Creative | Intimate | Write your own |
| Self disciplined | Kind | Write your own |
| Curious | Loving | Write your own |

Week 1: Choosing Wisely

Now that you have a basic idea of what's meant by the word '*values*' (i.e. qualities that we'd like to bring to our behaviours) we need to tell you something else about them. Specifically, values change depending on the context or the domain, and some domains in our life are important while others are less so. We'd now like you to complete the exercise on the following page, as it will give you a baseline idea of the domains in your life that are most important.

Please note that it's natural for some discomfort to show up during this exercise, especially if you notice a gap between where you are right now and where you want to be, but try to be as honest as possible. Your ACT Journal is tailored to help you bridge any gaps that emerge, and we'll repeat this exercise at the end of the journal to illustrate the progress you've made.

Right, on with the exercise:

- In column 2, rate the importance of the domain in question, on a scale of 1-10.
- In column 3, rate how much time you spend in that domain (i.e. the amount of attention or action you give it), again on a scale of 1-10.
- In column 4, subtract the smaller number from the larger to create a 'concern' score for each domain.

| | 1 = Min; 10 = Max | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Valued domain | Overall Importance (1-10) | Action (1-10) | Concern (1-10) |
| 1. Friends / Social Relationships | | | |
| 2. Family Relationships | | | |
| 3. Intimate Relationships | | | |
| 4. Work / Career / Finance | | | |
| 5. Education / Learning | | | |
| 6. Growth / Self-Development | | | |
| 7. Recreation / Leisure | | | |
| 8. Spirituality | | | |
| 9. Citizenship / Community | | | |
| 10. Health / Physical Well Being | | | |

Week 1: Choosing Wisely

Committed Action

Values mean nothing if you don't bring them to life with your actions. In other words, we need some concrete goals (short-term and long-term) that are in lines with our values, which we commit to act on. An example might be something like this:

If I wanted to bring a value of 'connection' to life, then I may write the following entry into my journal: "On Wednesday morning at 10am, I will send an email to Jane, as I haven't spoken to her for a while and I value my friendship with her."

Committed action is all about setting goals that are in line with values. However, when you set goals, making them SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant/**R**ewarding and **T**ime-based) will increase the chances of you actually completing them:

Specific:

This is about being as precise as possible with regards to what you want to achieve. The more specific your description, the easier it is to know if you achieved it.

Measurable:

This is about setting goals you can measure so that you know when you have achieved them.

Achievable:

Is your goal really achievable? Setting goals that are unrealistic or a long way in the future makes life difficult. If you have a large goal, then it's better to break it down into smaller steps. A good rule of thumb is if you're less than 70% confident you'll act on your values-based goal, break it down into something more manageable.

Relevant:

This is about checking that the goal really reflects your underlying values. It's quite common to set goals that we think we *'should'* do, but deep down we may not really care about them.

Time-based:

This is about being clear when you'll complete your goal. It's important to be precise about this.

Example of a SMART goal:

- S** My goal is to read 3 books about the history of art (specific).
- M** I will read every night for 30 minutes (measurable).
- A** This is possible within my daily routine (achievable).
- R** The goal is important to me because I value learning (relevant).
- T** I will complete this goal within 2 months (time-based).