

# Living with Purpose:

## *A Simple Guide to ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy)*

A guide on ACT and Its core principles



# Welcome!

## ⚠ Disclaimer

This guide is for educational purposes only. It does not constitute psychological treatment or establish a therapeutic relationship with Dr. Olson Madden. If you are struggling with anxiety, burnout, or emotional distress, please seek professional support from a licensed provider.

This guide was created to introduce you to the foundations of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Whether you are simply curious about how ACT works or considering therapy, you'll find practical explanations, real-world examples, and simple exercises you can try on your own. The intention is to give you tools and perspectives that help reduce the struggle with difficult thoughts and feelings while pointing you toward living with greater meaning and purpose. Think of this as a starting point—a friendly map to the terrain of ACT that you can explore and practice at your own pace.



# Introduction

## Introduction to ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy)

### What is ACT?

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is an evidence-based approach to mental health that helps people build a more flexible, values-driven life. Instead of focusing on getting rid of painful thoughts and feelings, ACT teaches skills to handle them differently—so they have less power over you.

The goal of ACT is **psychological flexibility**: the ability to stay present, open up to inner experiences, and choose actions guided by what truly matters to you.

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### The ACT Hexaflex

ACT is often represented by the hexaflex, a model that illustrates six interrelated core processes:

- Acceptance – making space for uncomfortable feelings.
- Cognitive Defusion – stepping back from unhelpful thoughts.
- Being Present – bringing attention to the here and now.
- Self-as-Context – recognizing you are more than your thoughts and emotions.
- Values – clarifying what matters most.
- Committed Action – taking purposeful steps aligned with your values.

Each process supports the others, creating a flexible skill set you can use to face challenges while moving toward a meaningful life.

# Introduction



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## Why ACT?

Life naturally brings stress, anxiety, loss, and change. Many people get caught in cycles of avoidance, overthinking, or striving for control—which can actually make suffering worse. ACT provides another way:

- Instead of control, choose acceptance.
- Instead of avoidance, choose values-based action.
- Instead of fusion with thoughts, choose mindful presence.



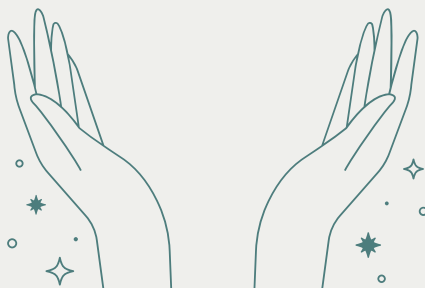
# 1. Acceptance

Definition: Making space for difficult thoughts, feelings, and sensations instead of trying to fight, avoid, or control them.

Vignette: Maya notices a wave of anxiety before a work presentation. Instead of pushing it away, she reminds herself: “Anxiety is here—I can still show up and do this presentation.”

Exercise/Action Step:

- Try saying: “I’m noticing anxiety is here” instead of “I have to stop feeling anxious.”
- Practice 2 minutes of mindful breathing while allowing sensations to come and go like waves.



## 2. Cognitive Defusion

Definition: Learning to step back from thoughts so they have less control over your actions.

Vignette: David thinks, "I'm going to fail this project." Instead of fusing with the thought, he says, "I'm having the thought that I might fail." This creates space between him and the thought.

Exercise/Action Step:

- Write down a recurring negative thought.
- In front of it, add: "I'm having the thought that..." Repeat until the thought feels lighter.



## 3. Being Present (Mindfulness)

Definition: Staying engaged in the here and now with openness and curiosity, rather than being stuck in the past or future.

Vignette: Sofia often replays yesterday's argument while missing dinner with her family. When she notices this, she gently brings her attention back to her meal and her kids' laughter.

Exercise/Action Step:

- Try a 5-senses check: Notice 1 thing you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel.
- Use this anytime you feel pulled out of the present moment.





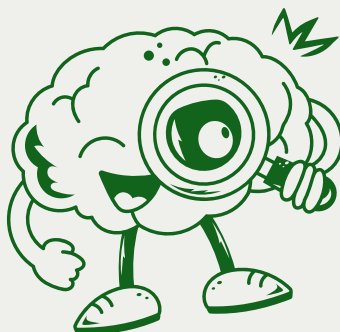
## 4. Self-as-Context

Definition: Recognizing that you are more than your thoughts, feelings, or roles—you are the **observing self** who notices experiences.

Vignette: Jamal feels depressed and thinks, “I’m broken.” In therapy, he practices noticing that he is not the depression—he is the person noticing depression.

Exercise/Action Step:

- Imagine your thoughts and feelings are leaves floating down a stream.
- You are not the leaves—you are the one watching them flow by.



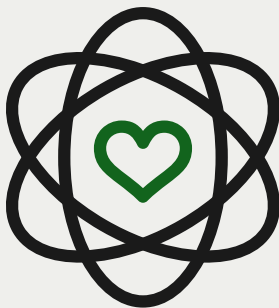
## 5. Values

Definition: Deeply held life directions that give meaning and purpose. Values are not goals; they are ongoing qualities of living.

Vignette: Elena values connection. Even when she feels tired, she chooses to spend time with her friend because it aligns with her value of caring relationships.

Exercise/Action Step:

- Ask yourself: "What kind of person do I want to be in this situation?"
- Try the "Legacy Question": If someone gave a speech about your life 20 years from now, what would you want them to say?



## 6. Committed Action

Definition: Taking meaningful steps guided by your values, even in the presence of discomfort.

Vignette: Marcus values growth. Even though he feels nervous, he signs up for a night class to advance his career.

Exercise/Action Step:

- Choose one small step today that aligns with your values.
- Example: If you value health, commit to a 10-minute walk after dinner.



## Notes

# Bringing it All Together



ACT is not about eliminating difficult thoughts or feelings. It's about learning new ways to relate to them, so you can live a life that feels guided by your deepest values.

When you practice the six core processes together, you begin to develop psychological flexibility—the ability to respond to life's challenges with openness, awareness, and intentional choice.

In practice, this means you may still experience anxiety, stress, or sadness, but you won't be defined or controlled by them. Instead, you can notice what shows up internally and still take actions that move you toward the relationships, goals, and personal growth that matter most to you.

Over time, these small choices accumulate, helping you build a life that feels more authentic, resilient, and fulfilling.



## *About the Author*



Dr. Jennifer Olson-Madden is a licensed psychologist and expert in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), dedicated to helping clients achieve purposeful and successful outcomes through inspired and committed action. With over 15 years of licensure in Denver, CO, and more than two decades of experience in anxiety and chronic stress. She not only practices ACT professionally but also integrates its principles into her own life daily. For more resources, check out her series of blogs on [www.drolsonmadden.com](http://www.drolsonmadden.com).

