

CHAPTER 1

Introducing *Experiencing ACT from the Inside Out*

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999, 2012) is designed from the ground up to bring our best understanding of behavioral science to the problem of human suffering. Through a range of evidence-based techniques ACT emphasizes mindful behavior change and movement toward valued aims as core principles (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). Over the last 20 years, a substantial body of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of ACT interventions across a range of human psychological and medical problems (Hooper & Larsson, 2015).

During that same time, research has demonstrated that psychotherapists' self-practice and self-reflection (SP/SR) training can have a positive impact on therapist development across every experience level (Bennett-Levy & Lee, 2014; Bennett-Levy, Thwaites, Haarhoff, & Perry, 2015). Accordingly, this book is designed to *apply SP/SR methods to the training of ACT therapists*. Essentially, you can use this workbook as an experiential immersion in the foundational elements of ACT. This means that experienced ACT therapists can work through these exercises and concepts, alone or in a group, to sharpen and deepen their ACT practice. Furthermore, the workbook can serve as an “inside-out” introductory text for beginning ACT therapists.

Not too long ago, the five of us set off on our own ACT SP/SR journey, encountering the methods and processes with which you will be working. It was a transformational experience for each of us. Even though we were all experienced ACT therapists, facing our own problems through ACT SP/SR involved vulnerability and radical honesty. During the time that it took to work through ACT SP/SR and to write this book, we faced some of the most challenging events in our lives. Together we encountered a range of life experiences—traumatic losses and new beginnings, serious illnesses and dramatic recoveries, professional stressors and personal leaps forward—the spectrum of human challenges that Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013) refers to in *Full Catastrophe Living*. During this time, our ACT SP/SR work and our relationships with one another provided us with strength, enhanced perspective, and support.

As a result of our own meaningful experiences practicing ACT from the inside out, we decided that we would use our own problem formulations and observations, rather than use composite characters or fictionalized examples in this book. We are aiming to “walk the walk” here, by introducing you to the reality of our own struggles and our own aspirations. We hope that this creates a context of openness, compassion, and connection as you set off to face similar challenges and opportunities to those we approached.

By engaging in these self-training practices, we hope you will cultivate greater reflective capacity, psychotherapy skills, and a deeper understanding of ACT. Rather than this solely being a book about acquiring knowledge, we have worked to provide a systematic series of exercises and reflections that can facilitate growth in both personal and professional areas of life. Our hope is that this will contribute to your well-being and to the growth and wellness of your clients.

We begin by providing an introduction to the essential rationale of ACT and SP/SR. We then provide some basic guidelines for how to approach this book. Chapters 2–4 provide further foundational material for you on your journey through experiencing ACT from the inside out.

The Aim of ACT SP/SR: Being Open, Centered, and Engaged

ACT is grounded in an appreciation of how we humans are set up for suffering and dissatisfaction by the very nature of human existence and by the dynamic processes embedded in human language and cognition. For example, even under the best of circumstances, much of our day-to-day behavior can seem guided by an “autopilot” mode of action. As we go about our daily tasks, perhaps checking things off our “to-do” list, repeating our habitual patterns of behavior, things might not feel very driven by purpose. If we wish to lose weight, we still might cave in to our urges and eat that second (third?) piece of pizza. Though we desperately long for deeper connections with our friends and family, we still avoid sending that email or planning a weekend together. Sometimes, our behavioral rigidity involves much darker and more painful dimensions. We can’t stop ourselves from descending into opiate addiction or finding other escape routes to push away our feelings. We may stay in bed for days due to the weight of our depression, living smaller lives. The momentum of our behavior seems to carry us, unaware, to the next day’s actions, like a wave inexorably heading toward the shore. ACT provides us with mindfulness-based interventions that can help us to “wake up” from this autopilot mode of operating. Mindfulness can provide us the space to choose new directions, possibly breaking chains of behavioral rigidity. ACT SP/SR can help us to learn how to feel “centered” in mindful awareness, grounded in this very moment, and ready to take action.

Beyond the routine and inflexible patterns of our actions, our thoughts themselves can also give us a lot of trouble. A great deal of our time can be spent in struggles with emotional pain and negative thoughts. We listen to our inner critic recite the litany of our failures as we distractedly go about our business. We worry about all of the things that could go wrong, imagining potential financial disasters, relationship breakups, or problems within our families. When these imaginary disasters and scolding inner voices

show up, we feel them as though they were all too real. Images of failure and tragedy can set our hearts racing. Ironically, the more we try to suppress this kind of thinking, the worse it tends to get, and our efforts to avoid these thoughts only lead us to more intense spirals of feeling threatened and inadequate (Hooper, Saunders, & McHugh, 2010). But it doesn't have to be this way. We don't have to live robotically, and our minds don't need to feel like minefields. ACT involves methods for seeing thoughts and mental events clearly, as what they are and *not what they say they are* (Hayes et al., 1999). By training ourselves to know the difference between real-world situations and the demands of our minds, we may become better able to face the actual challenges and opportunities of life (Deacon, 2011). ACT SP/SR involves training in how to remain "open" to mental events, and how to thereby free ourselves from their excessive influence.

From a foundation of mindful awareness, noticing and accepting the flow of mental events that constantly pulls at our attention, ACT invites us to become the author of valued directions in our lives (Dahl, Plumb, Stewart, & Lundgren, 2009). When we have woken up to the moment, shaken off the cobwebs of mental projections, and set a course for valued living, we may be able to dedicate ourselves to living with greater purpose and meaning. What is it like when we feel that our lives are focused on what matters most? How do we feel when we know that our struggles are a part of moving toward a life that is worth working for, worth suffering for?

Beneath our patterns of automatic responding and our battles within ourselves we can envision some qualities of "doing" or "being" that we wish to bring into the world more fully. We wish to know meaning. We wish to stand for something. If we allow ourselves to quiet the mind and slow the body, turning in kindness to what matters most in this lifetime, we can envision living with purpose and vitality. For example, we might want to be more caring parents. At times, we might hope to become a better partner, or a more responsive friend. Some of us might feel driven to create great art. Establishing financial security might serve as a "true north" compass point for many of us. For those on a more contemplative or spiritual path, daily actions might be guided by the pursuit of personal awakening. Some of us might work to approach our relationships as the Bible tells us Jesus Christ would, aiming to extend love even to those who would seek to harm us. Perhaps we earnestly hope to develop more discipline in our approach to exercise. The range of values that we might carry with us and aspire to realize is as diverse as we are. Whatever your freely chosen values may be, ACT SP/SR involves methods to train ourselves to be "engaged" in our lives, with a commitment to becoming the version of ourselves we most wish to be.

The qualities of being open, centered, and engaged are not just clever ideas in ACT SP/SR. These three "pillars" of our ACT SP/SR practice reflect evidence-based processes and procedures that we can use with our clients in experiential psychotherapy (Hayes et al., 2012). They also represent core processes that we can activate in our personal and professional development, which is one of the goals of the program we share with you in this book. Taken together, being open, centered, and engaged is described as "psychological flexibility." Research has established that cultivating psychological flexibility is key to overcoming a range of psychological problems and to establishing greater well-being (Powers, Zum Vorde Sive Vörding, & Emmelkamp, 2009; Ruiz,

2010). Developing greater psychological flexibility through ACT SP/SR is at the heart of our journey together.

What Is ACT SP/SR?

Consistent with the ACT model, this book focuses on how therapists can breathe life into the pursuit of their valued aims with greater flexibility, compassion, and courage through a systematic and evidence-based SP/SR approach. ACT SP/SR is a structured, experiential training method that involves using ACT techniques on ourselves through self-practice (SP) and of reflecting on that experience through written self-reflection (SR). Through ACT SP/SR, we apply our psychotherapy approach to our own challenges in our personal and professional lives. Of course, any ACT training will involve time focusing on ourselves. Indeed, a great deal of foundational ACT workshop-based training involves experiencing ACT processes in ourselves. ACT SP/SR invites us to devote some time and attention to specifically and methodically deepening our ACT practice by using ACT techniques on ourselves.

Through ACT SP/SR we become our own therapist, sometimes in the company of trusted and caring colleagues who are sharing this journey. In order to structure and organize the inner work undertaken with this workbook, *we are asking you to choose a specific problem or domain of action to focus on during your work in this ACT SP/SR program*. This can be a problem in your professional or personal life, or perhaps an issue that spans both of these aspects of your world. After engaging in each period of ACT SP, you will take time to engage in SR about your work and lived experience. These reflections appear to be more meaningful and impactful if they are written down, rather than just articulated out loud or even spoken “in our heads” (Bennett-Levy & Lee, 2014; Bennett-Levy, Lee, Travers, Pohlman, & Hamernik, 2003). These reflections involve many levels of application, doing, and being. For example, after practicing radical acceptance techniques around a distressing emotion, we might reflect upon the meaning of our experience for ourselves, for our work with clients, or even what implications our insights might have for ACT theory and practice.

ACT SP/SR work can be done as an individual practice. Indeed, readers of this book will likely more often be practicing on their own, working through these techniques as a part of their ongoing education and inner work. Importantly, SP/SR work can also take place in a group. Much of the research on SP/SR work took place in a group context (Bennett-Levy, McManus, Westling, & Fennell, 2009)—we formed just such a group as we developed this approach. In this context, we weren’t serving as a support group or therapy group or providing therapy to one another—rather, we were working on ourselves in the context of a supportive and trusted community of friends. The research tells us that SP/SR participants have often reported a “deeper sense of knowing the therapy” (Bennett-Levy et al., 2015; Thwaites et al., 2015). We also shared this observation during a meaningful period of work. Candidly, this work lifted us up during some difficult times, and it helped us know our work and ourselves better while learning ACT from the inside out.

Why ACT SP/SR?

In a sense, the SP/SR method and the development of ACT are both extensions of a seismic change in the zeitgeist of the cognitive-behavioral tradition, sometimes described as a “third wave” (Hayes, 2004). This shift of emphasis away from mechanistic models and toward methods that embraced experiential and reflective practice began near the end of the 20th century and has continued into the first decades of the 21st century (Tirch, Silberstein, & Kolts, 2015). While early cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) training did not involve much explicit emphasis on the exploration of the therapist’s own process, SP/SR method developer James Bennett-Levy (personal communication, August 13, 2018) has noted that a significant trend toward appreciation of interpersonal process and self-exploration emerged within CBT in the mid-1990s, contributing to the development of the SP/SR approach. SP/SR was designed as a training strategy to enhance the development of therapists’ skills through practicing therapy techniques on themselves and engaging in SR from both a personal and professional perspective (Bennett-Levy et al., 2001).

The SP/SR approach became a part of a growing body of research within traditional CBT that emphasized and examined self-experience and SR. During roughly this time period, ACT and the contextual movement within the behavioral sciences also flourished and spread rapidly. With an emphasis on mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion, ACT naturally emphasized self-exploration, though using a different series of techniques. Accordingly, you are likely to find that integrating an SP/SR approach into ACT can be a much smoother transition than you might expect.

The growing body of SP/SR research demonstrates that this form of training allows us to develop greater attunement in the interpersonal dimension of the psychotherapy relationship (Gale & Schröder, 2014; Thwaites et al., 2015). Therapists who have completed SP/SR training have reported growth in important dimensions of the therapy relationship, including empathic understanding, therapeutic presence, and compassion (Gale & Schröder, 2014; Spindel & Butler, 2016; Thwaites et al., 2015). These SP/SR research findings have been found across countries, groups, and levels of experience (Bennett-Levy, 2019). Additionally, psychotherapists have reported greater self-confidence and confidence in their therapy approach after training in SP/SR (Gale & Schröder, 2014). This has involved therapists reporting an enhancement of both their conceptual skills and technical skills after taking part in SP/SR training.

Pakenham (2015) has repeatedly explored the value of self-care and ACT SP, with a particular emphasis on dealing with the impact of stress during graduate training. While this research does not follow a manualized SP/SR protocol, it has pioneered the use of the ACT model for personal practice. Based on a review of the literature, Pakenham and Stafford-Brown (2012) note that high levels of stress and potential burnout among clinicians have not been adequately addressed by current training models. Their group has put forward a call to arms for the field, suggesting the implementation of mindfulness- and acceptance-based methods consistent with our ACT SP/SR approach (Stafford-Brown & Pakenham, 2012). Using a “self-as-laboratory” approach, Pakenham and his colleagues examined the impact of ACT training and SP in several studies

involving clinical psychology trainees. Their research reported that participants had significant improvements in mindfulness, specific therapist skills, increased psychological flexibility, and decreased personal distress. Thus far, research in the ACT work has mirrored the findings of research using SP/SR among CBT practitioners and suggests the value of learning ACT from the inside out, in the way we elaborate in this workbook.

Orientation to *Experiencing ACT from the Inside Out*

This book is divided into two parts. The first main section includes the foundational chapters that explain our approach and help you prepare to engage in the practical work that follows throughout our ACT SP/SR method. We suggest that everyone using this book should read Chapters 1–3. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the theoretical orientation and conceptual foundation for ACT SP/SR. Some of you who are more familiar with the underlying philosophy of science, theory of cognition, and therapy method involved in ACT might find these two earlier chapters to be a review. *Nonetheless, we invite you to return to this material with fresh eyes and a “beginner’s mind” as much as you can as you begin your ACT SP/SR journey.* If you can, put yourself in the place of your client or an early career therapist and begin to engage with this material from a fresh perspective.

One of the central concerns in the ACT community involves approaching ACT as a model of applied contextual behavioral science rather than as a toolbox of psychotherapy techniques. ACT was never intended to be adopted merely as a therapy protocol, but was designed and developed as a scalable model for cultivating well-being grounded in evidence-based processes and principles. Understanding the underlying philosophy and conceptual model that supports ACT is *the key* to using ACT techniques effectively. For this reason, we highly suggest working with the material in the introductory chapters and responding to the reflective questions that are included. The best ACT therapists we know use their mastery of basic behavioral principles to improvise and develop new interventions that are sensitive to real-time contingencies that they encounter with their clients. Our hope is that your review and engagement with this material will help you hone these skills through your SP/SR journey.

Chapter 3 provides guidelines and suggestions for any person participating in an ACT SP/SR group. This chapter will help you consider practical considerations, such as whether it will be best to practice on your own or with a group. The chapter offers suggestions about how you might identify and understand the problem you are choosing to work on as you use this ACT SP/SR workbook. Additionally, the chapter provides further information about how to best approach SR and how to bridge among our personal practice, reflection, and application.

Chapter 3 also prepares you to use the practice-based components of the book that are organized as “modules.” The modules each reflect the processes that interact to bring forth and enhance psychological flexibility. Furthermore, the modules build on the psychological flexibility model to help us bring greater mindfulness and self-compassion

into our work with ourselves as psychotherapeutic instruments. While it might seem easy, and even tempting, to breeze through the modules by giving them a quick read, and maybe taking a technique or two out for a “test drive,” you will clearly get the most out of this ACT SP/SR program by deeply engaging with the material and the practices provided. We suggest taking at least 2–3 hours for each module, and possibly more time if some of the experiential exercises expand to become a part of a daily personal practice. Furthermore, several of the modules directly ask you to devote time to daily practice over the course of a week or more and to reflect upon the sum of that work in your SR questions or group discussions.

Chapter 4 is designed to help those of you who wish to facilitate ACT SP/SR groups. As such, much of this chapter might be less relevant for the solo practitioner or group member. Consider this an “optional” chapter, unless you are thinking about bringing together a group as a facilitator. If you are planning to organize and facilitate a group, the chapter walks you through the steps needed to get a group together and helps you anticipate some of the ups and downs you might run into as the group proceeds.

The second part of the book walks you through a series of modules that provide experiential SP exercises and a series of SR questions. These practices are organized around the psychological flexibility model and they provide an opportunity for you to cultivate specific capacities. Training the mind in psychological flexibility has broad empirical support throughout several scalable levels of intervention (Hooper & Larsson, 2015; Powers et al., 2009; Ruiz, 2010). Our aim is to provide you with an opportunity to use ACT SP/SR to develop evidence-supported processes leading to personal transformation. As a result, most of this workbook does not follow the format of a technical manual or narrative journey. The second section of this book is a “hands-on” guide for your own ACT SP/SR journey.

We wish you well on this shared path of personal and professional growth. As we become available to our own mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom, we are better able to share these resources with those who suffer. A path like this requires self-direction, discipline, and dedication. We wish all of these for you, as well as an openness to the help available through our communities of clinicians and fellow travelers. We are all in this together, and the prevention and alleviation of human suffering is a cause worth dedicating ourselves to with an open heart and determined commitment.

Note: The contextual behavioral science (CBS) community appreciates that gender involves behaviors that can be viewed as a performative spectrum, and that the arbitrary application of binary gender constructs can be limiting and even stigmatizing to many. As a result, we have chosen to use the singular “they” pronoun wherever possible throughout this text. This flexibility in our working with the fluid rules of grammar and style, in response to context, is consistent with the psychological flexibility model and our aims in CBS. We hope this will work for all our readers, and thank you for coming along for the ride.