

ACT CASE FORMULATION FORM

ACT Case formulation is informed by the client's historical and current life context and in-session behavior. Tools for formulation may include symptom timelines (outlining time course and situational factors of symptom onset, exacerbation or remission), recording cards, FUBA-type forms, chain analyses and direct observation of clinically relevant behaviors (CRBs). The goal is to observe patterns of behavior to identify (1) antecedents - internal experiences that are unwanted/intolerable, (2) avoidant behaviors and (3) long-term costs or consequences for individual's personally meaningful values.

A. Functional Classes

1. Avoided Events

- Thoughts, feelings, body sensations, urges, or memories that are evaluated as negative, unwanted, intolerable, feared and functionally related to problem behaviors.
- For ego-syntonic conditions (like anorexia nervosa), it may be useful to flip the positives or benefits of the symptoms (for example, if symptoms of anorexia nervosa (AN) provide a sense of mastery or pride, this might suggest that symptoms function to alleviate feelings of ineffectiveness or failure).

**It may be helpful to identify reasons, evaluations, judgments, etc. that the individual is attached to - and consider the feelings that are connected with "believing" or violating these ideas. These feelings are often part of the functional class of avoided events.

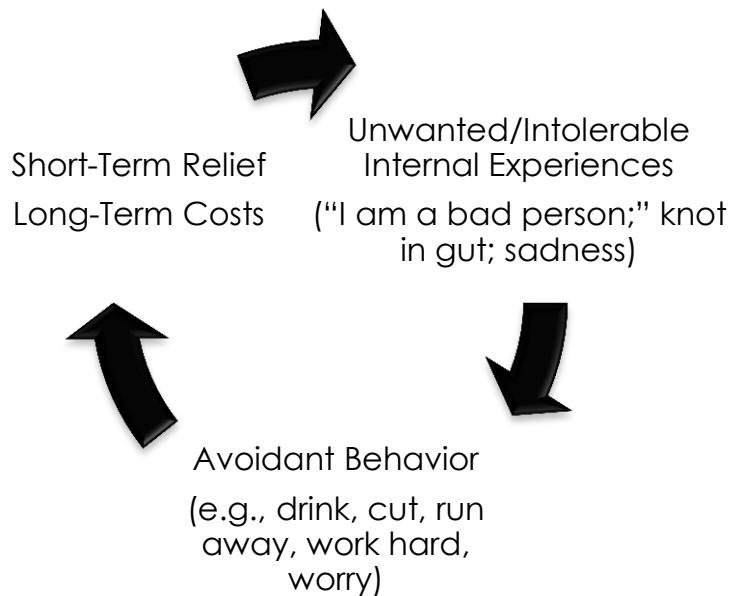
2. Avoidant Repertoire

- Behaviors that the individual engages in that change the form, frequency or situational sensitivity of unwanted internal experiences. Begin with core "symptoms" or presenting problem (e.g., AN: calorie or nutrient restriction, excessive exercise, purging, excessive weighing, body checking, fat talk etc.), and then broaden to include other behaviors that differ in topography but are functionally equivalent.
- Include avoidance of people, places, situations that co-occur with uncomfortable feelings (e.g., avoiding restaurants, avoiding expressing opinions).

- Include overt (e.g., hand washing, list making) as well as covert behaviors (e.g., planning, intellectualizing) that allow the individual to avoid or escape uncomfortable feelings.
- Remember that inaction is action (e.g., avoidance can be complete neglect of an area of life).

3. Costs

- Things that the client has lost b/c of avoidance and control.
- Things that the client has not had the opportunity for b/c of avoidance and control
- Energy expended in avoidance/control that could be invested in meaningful life activity



B. Conceptualize in Terms of 6 Core ACT Process Domains

- Acceptance
 - In what way is non-acceptance of internal experience contributing to the client's problem? What thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, memories, or urges are preventing the client from moving forward?

- Defusion
 - In what way is fusion (over-attachment to the content of mental activity: beliefs, reasons, rules, evaluations, judgments) contributing to the client's problem? Include specific thoughts that the individual is attached to. Include limiting self-descriptions, "I am a ___ person") as well as cognitive "activities," such as blaming, ruminating, worrying, or fantasizing. **Content recorded here will overlap some with present moment and self-as-context domains.

- Present Moment Awareness
 - In what way are difficulties being the in the present moment contributing to the client's problems? Are their deficits in the client's ability to read cues or to flexibly attend to aspects of experience (e.g., choosing to focus attention internally, e.g., breath, or externally, e.g., surroundings)? Is the individual spending a great deal of time in the regretted past or feared future?

- Self-as-Context
 - In what way are stories or formulations about who the person is contributing to the client's problem (self-judgments, who I am, what I can do)? Are their issues of impoverished self-ing (lack of "I ____" statements, difficulty "choosing," lack of awareness of preferences or opinions) or limited self-content (a self-concept that is narrowly defined or attachment to only one aspect of self, such as one's role as a mother)?

- Values
 - In what way are difficulties with values authorship or clarification contributing to the client's problem? Is the client adopting the values of others or "shoulds"? What values are confused, neglected or violated due to avoidance or fusion?

- Committed Action
 - In what way is impulsivity, inaction, or unhelpful persistence contributing to the client's problem? What client actions are detrimental to valued living?

**For each domain, also consider the client's strengths (e.g., a history of accepting difficult feelings, observing thoughts, being present and fully engaged, having a rich and varied self-narrative, being able to act inconsistently with a self-story when doing so would be effective, being clear about something that is important and the capacity to pursue things that are meaningful, even when uncomfortable).

Now, complete the same formulation exercise with yourself as the therapist in the room.

A QUICK GUIDE TO ACT CASE CONCEPTUALIZATION

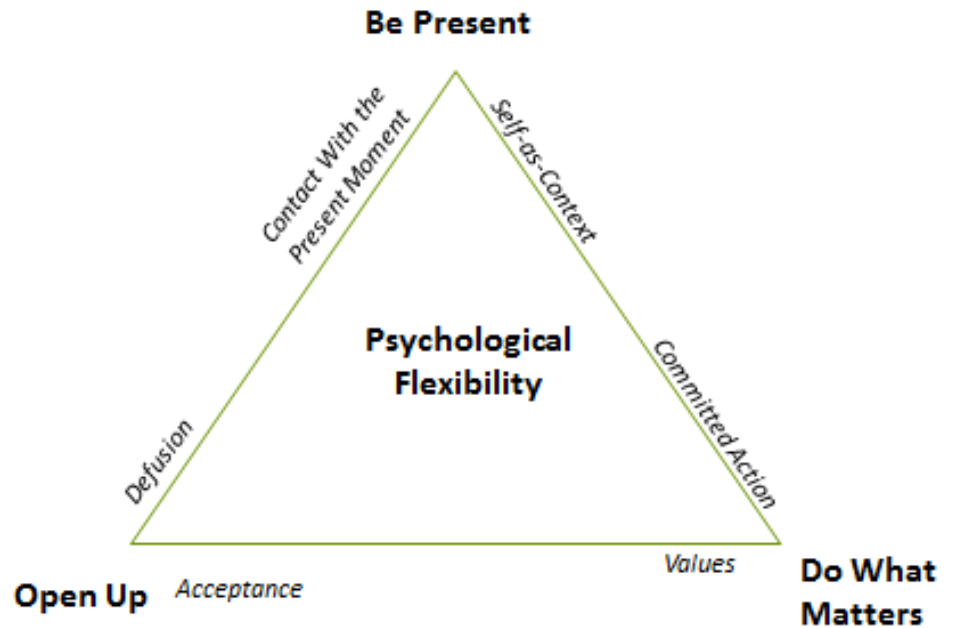
(Harris, 2009)

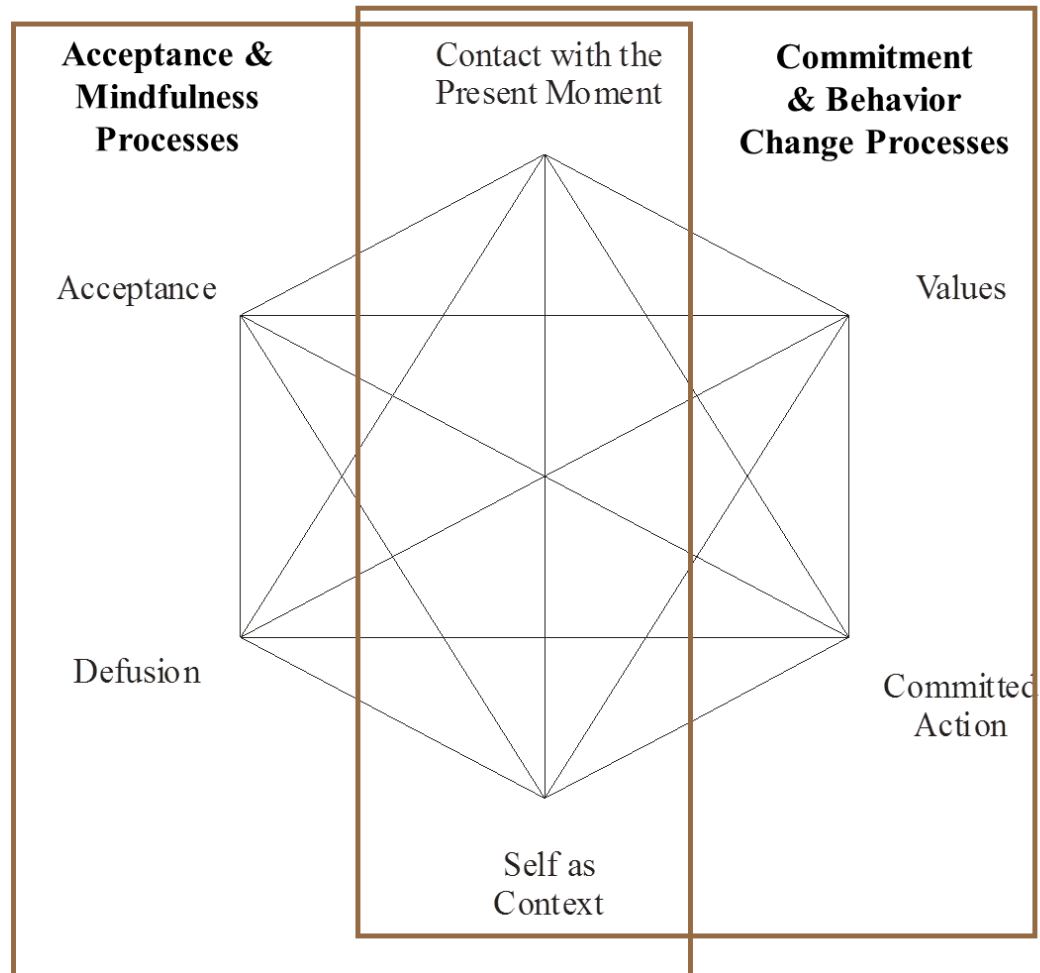
1. What valued direction does the client want to move in?
2. What stands in the client's way?

a) What is he fusing with? (Identify problematic fusion, including reasons, rules, judgments, past, future, and self-description.)

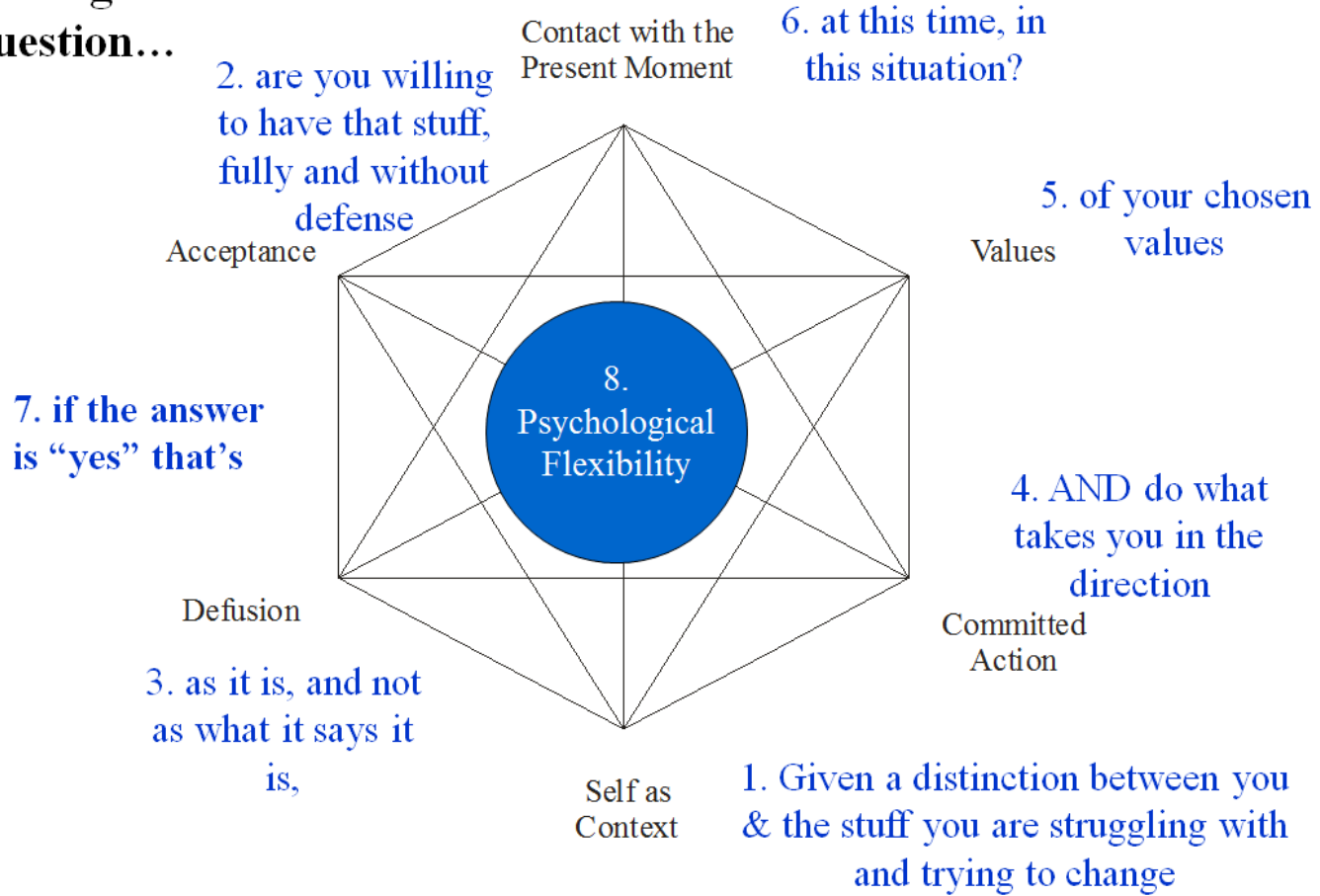
b) What is she avoiding? (Identify thoughts, feelings, memories, urges, sensations, and emotions that this client is trying to avoid or get rid of.)

c) What unworkable actions is he taking? (What is the client doing that makes his life worse or keeps him stuck?)





**Willingness
question...**



2
Behavioral Trajectory



Negative thoughts, emotions, bodily states,
memories, competing behavioral
predispositions,
lack of motivation, confusion, ambiguity

1
Valued Direction

3
**EXPOSURE
DEFUSION
ACCEPTANCE
MINDFULNESS**

Building Acceptance (or Willingness)

Contacting costs	What the individual has given up or not had because of emotional avoidance? (this is sometimes described as the “pain of absence”).
Highlighting ineffectiveness of avoidance and control	If you stretch out in time, the pain actually doesn’t go away, it is just postponed or attenuated for the moment
Highlighting the effort involved	A closet packed full of stuff Cards or balls thrown Pushing against hands or a clipboard Tug-of-war
Contacting paradoxical effects of purposeful control	Don’t think about a white bear Don’t be anxious Fall in love
Fighting feelings increases our suffering	Struggle switch Quicksand Person in a hole (Digging actually creates bigger holes)
The way out is in	Chinese finger trap If we can be with painful experience, we can go anywhere (it frees us)
Recontextualize with values	Pain with purpose, for something, your “what for” This is what it is like to be a human who cares about things The mule in the well

	I could take away X (e.g., rejection), but the you lose Y (e.g., the possibility of relationships), because values and vulnerability are often connected
Observing	Watching emotions as waves, observing their rise and fall/dynamic nature Noticing somatic sensations associated with affect (Where do you feel it in your body?) “I am noticing that I am having the feeling X”
Allowing	Breathe into it Soften around it Make space Make room Allow it to be there Release muscles – not holding in or holding out You don’t have to like it or want it to be there
Welcoming	Like an old friend A guest in your home Joe the bum or your aunt flo
Kind touch	Hand over where you feel it (heart, gut)
Metaphor that pulls for a curious, open, descriptive stance	A scientist A reporter A witness
Making feelings thing-like (pulls for a repertoire of observation and separates from the self)	Physicalizing – giving a feeling shape, color, weight, texture etc.

Unexpected reactions to expressions of negative affect	Like a sunset Honor Lovely to see you
Metaphor that pulls for kindness, compassion, holding it gently	A precious gem A gift A baby
Practice relating differently	Using a notecard (or object) to represent a feeling. Practicing relating to it in different ways (e.g., put on lap, rather than hide)

Homework (or Between-Session Practice) Examples

1. Clean vs. Dirty Suffering Diary – Practice differentiating the primary emotion from the additional suffering generated from struggling with emotion (sadness vs. guilt for being sad)
2. Meditation exercise – Practice watching emotions like waves or maintaining an open posture to feeling (“welcome”)
3. Approach tasks – Practice approaching activities that generate affect. “Breathe into” rather than fight experience.
4. Journaling (as a way to honor and respect emotion, not to make it go away)

Defusion Techniques

Workability or pragmatism	Letting that thought dictate what you do, does work in the long run? What about for your values? Does it get you where you want to go?
Responding in unexpected ways – offering curiosity, interest, etc. recontextualizing thoughts/shaping responses other than literal	<p>“That is an interesting thought”</p> <p>“Beautiful!”</p> <p>“Minds are like that, aren’t they?!”</p>
Metaphors and exercises that pull for an observer stance	<p>Passing cars</p> <p>Leaves on a stream</p> <p>Ticker tape in Times Square</p> <p>Baggage claim</p> <p>Parade</p> <p>Meditative exercise - noticing the dynamic nature of thoughts (speed, movement)</p> <p>“I notice that I am having the thought that....”</p>
Highlighting the nature of mind and its limitations with metaphor, discussion or exercises	<p>Your mind is like...</p> <p>A word machine</p> <p>A “don’t get killed” machine</p> <p>A sensitive car alarm</p> <p>A radio set to bad news</p> <p>A masterful salesman</p> <p>A dictator</p> <p>A cruel parent</p> <p>A judgment factory</p> <p>A great story teller</p> <p>Our mind’s job is to keep us safe - for example, by evaluating situations and warning us about</p>

	<p>potential danger and observing sources of pain in order to stop it. It evolved for this purpose – and so it predicts, judges, evaluates, problem-solves, tells stories about what happened. Our job is to notice when what the mind is doing is helpful and when it is not... Consider what happens if you take your mind’s advice.</p> <p>Try to instruct nonverbal behavior or something sensory based (Tell me how to walk. Tell me what a daisy smells like. Tell me what red looks like.). Words fall short of experience. In many cases, words disrupt performance (dancing, eating, making love).</p>
Active language that highlights individual choice/response-ability	“Pushed around” by that thought, “buying” that thought, “hooked by” that thought, “listening” to that thought
Changing the auditory cue (diminishes the literal quality of an evocative thought)	<p>Say it in a silly voice</p> <p>Sing it</p> <p>Say it very slowly</p> <p>Repeat it over and over</p>
Highlighting the mind (or thoughts) as separate from the self	<p>Thank your mind</p> <p>Having the thought that...</p> <p>Who’s talking here, you or your mind?</p> <p>Noticing that I am having the thought</p> <p>Physicalizing (giving a thought form – observing it like an object that you might be curious about)</p>
Observing the impact of fusion with thoughts on ability to move in the direction of values	Using hands or a clipboard to illustrate how the individual is relating to thoughts and how it blocks the broader view
Metaphors that label fusion	Name the story, chapter, or book

	A familiar script The Mind
Metaphors and exercises for behaving effectively/value guided in the presence of thoughts	Thoughts written on cards to illustrate how the individual is relating to thoughts and a physical metaphor for “taking your thoughts with you” into effective action Passengers on the bus

Homework (or Between-Session Practice) Examples

1. Recording cards identifying thoughts and exploring workability for the actions they suggest
2. Practicing noticing “mind” and labeling its activity (e.g., judging, rather than its content)
3. Meditation or mindfulness exercise (traditional, or something like “leaves on a stream”)
4. Writing a movie script, a radio show etc. with mind as the author: “Coming to you live, it’s all the ways that sandy sucks!...”

Values

If your life could have stood for anything, what would you want it to be?	Writing a Eulogy Epitaph Letter to yourself (for younger: bumper stickers, hashtags, cover photos, Instagram)
Take out pliance	What if no one knew?
Values and vulnerability	What does your pain tell you about what is important to you? What is your worst fear(s) – what matters to you most? (are these connected?) What is hard for you in others?
Differentiating values from goals	If you achieved that goal, then what would you do, what would be different in your life? What is that goal about, in the deepest sense, what would achieving that mean to you? Going north vs. going to Wisconsin If you can check it off a list, it's a goal (not a value)
Magic wand	Imagine this magically goes away then what would you be doing? How would life be different?
Sweet spot	Recall a time that felt valued, vital etc. Look around in that memory? What was important about that?
Missing out	What do you feel like you have been missing out on as a result of avoidance and control?
Metaphors that highlight how values can	Compass

provide direction when we are “lost” in thoughts and feelings	Lighthouse
Inventories	Values living questionnaire List of common values
Activities that assess whether individuals are behaving consistent with their values	Bulls eye
Time as a proxy	How are you spending your time? What do you want to be doing?
Committing to action aligned with values	Identify behaviors consistent with values Identify different expressions of values in different contexts/situations It’s not about believing It’s about behaving It’s taking a stand
Pitting avoidance and control and valued living	Choice 1: I could remove your pain and you never have to feel X. but if I do that you also have to give up Y (because these things are connected). Or Choice 2: You keep your pain (you feel anxious sometimes, really anxious), but in doing that, you also get the possibility of Y. It makes it possible for you to go places and do things that while anxiety provoking, are also meaningful...

Homework (or Between-Session Practice) Examples

1. Writing your eulogy
2. Completing an valued living assessment – what do I value, what is the relative importance, how consistent is my behavior
3. Daily diary monitoring life vitality or engagement
4. Commitment to engage in a specific value-guided activity

Nonacceptance	Acceptance
Ignoring, suppressing or denying feelings (verbally, with problem behavior, or in body language, e.g., constricted posture that holds feelings in or keeps things out)	Openness to feelings as they arise
Resignation, giving in or giving up, or secretly hoping for change	Actively choosing to embrace feelings for something
Organizing life to avoid particular feelings	Approaching situations that might be uncomfortable
**We can also fuse with feelings. Fusing with affect looks like “latching onto feelings and collapsing under their weight” or “mood dependent behavior.”	

Fusion	Defusion
Being entangled with (or lost in) one’s thoughts	Watching thoughts
Fighting with one’s thoughts	Holding thoughts lightly as one feature of an internal landscape
Trying to decide if (or convince that) thoughts are true or not true	Appreciating all aspects of experience, rather than just what the mind says
Listening or “buying into” thoughts despite unworkability/ineffectiveness	Behaving in ways that are contrary to thoughts sometimes
** We push away from painful thoughts (ignoring, suppressing, avoiding situations in which they are likely to arise) in the same way that we do feelings.	

Detecting “Mind”

Old, familiar, lifeless
Full of comparison and evaluation
Busy, complex
“Buts” and “shoulds”
Strong past or future orientation
(Some other time, some other place)
Lots of warnings

**Behavior (including the content, rate and tone of speech, body language) lacks variability (e.g., is constricted) or is excessively variable (e.g., lots of movement). Behavior is insensitive or highly sensitive to the environment.

Detecting Openness

New, fresh, clear
Me, here and now
A sense of choice, decisiveness
Focus on being effective
Feels vital, meaningful

**Behavior (including the content, rate and tone of speech) is appropriately variable. Body posture tends to be more open and relaxed and occupying of space. The individual engages in free operants readily and responds to feedback from the environment.

Example of Process Continuum				
1	2	3	4	5
Often attempts to change experience (e.g., talking themselves out of feelings, active suppression of responses, in session a constricted, upright posture or fidgeting that if relaxed would lead to more emotional experiencing)	←————→			Attempts to change experience are rare
Often denies feelings (e.g., directly via verbal denial, or indirectly such as the case of displaying incongruent affect, e.g., describing something upsetting without expression or while smiling)	←————→			Rarely denies feelings; expresses feelings in words and with appropriate emotional displays (e.g., reports being sad, cries)
Latches onto feelings and seems to collapse under their weight	←————→			Holds feelings lightly as one aspect of private experience; <i>has</i> feelings, rather than feelings <i>having them</i>
Often displays mood dependent behavior	←————→			Integrates emotional information with other experiences; behavior is guided by individual values and effectiveness

Therapist Exercise

Part 1

1. Imagine your most difficult client. Drop inside a moment in therapy with this person.
 2. What thoughts, feelings, urges, memories and so forth emerge?
 3. What behaviors do you engage in to manage these thoughts and feelings?
 4. What are the costs for the client, your relationship and your broader values?

Part 2

1. What is the clinical presentation or client behavior is most difficult for you?
2. What is it about this presentation that is hard? What does it cue up in your personal history or push against in your belief system (if the latter, what is this belief system grounded in, in terms of personal history)?
3. What would it be like to practice willingness around this issue? Are there other places where this shows up and impacts your life in profound ways?

Part 3

1. Consider what is most important to you. How are you investing your time? Does it line up?
2. In what ways are you behaving consistently with your values and in what way are you sideways (out of sync, ignoring, neglecting or violating your values)?
3. What would you have to accept or let go of in order to be more consistent with your personally chosen values?