Advancing Skills in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT): A 2-Day Intermediate Workshop

Presented by:
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(**some slides courtesy of the generous ACT community)

ACT at Duke

Rhonda Merwin, PhD

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"To accept that pain is inherent and to live our lives from this understanding is to create the causes and conditions of happiness." -Suzuki Roshi

What's Happening

In 2015-2016

Never miss out! Register with *ACT at Duke* to receive updates about our upcoming trainings, and current and new research studies!

Register

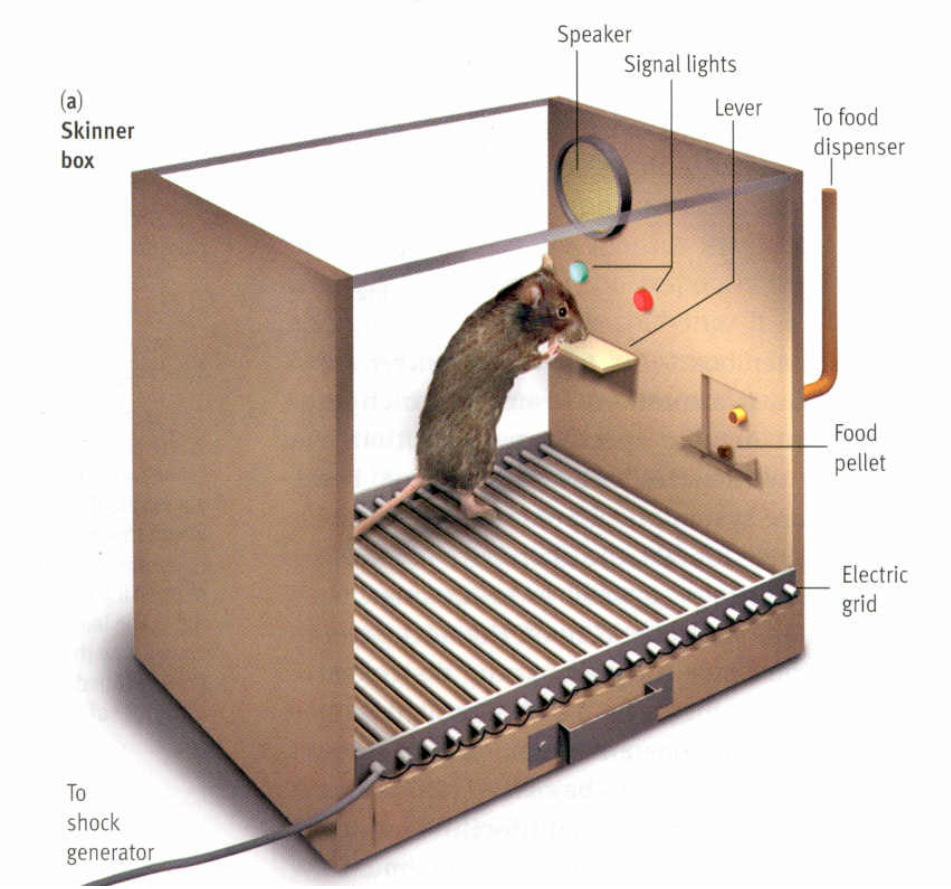
Other Resources

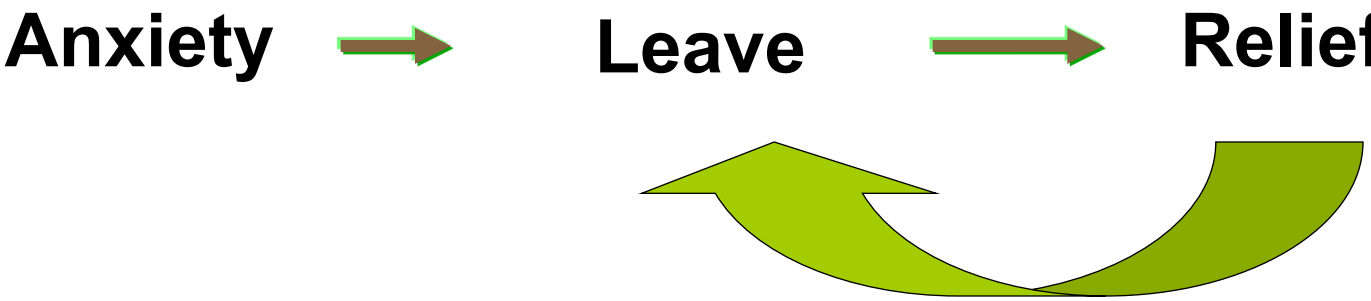
- www.contextualscience.org
- http://www.actmindfully.com.au
- You Tube – Steve Hayes, Kelly Wilson, Kevin Polk, Russ Harris
- *ACT 2nd ed.* (Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson)
- *ACT Made Simple* (Harris)
- *Learning ACT* (Luoma) or *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life* (Hayes)
- *Mindfulness for Two* (Wilson)
- *A Practical Guide to ACT* (Hayes, edited)

Set an Intention

- What are you going to be about over the next 2 days? How much of yourself will you bring? How much willingness and for what?

- Contextual Behavioral Science


(a)
Skinner box
Speaker
Signal lights
Lever
To food dispenser
Food pellet
Electric grid
To shock generator



Negative Reinforcement

- Impact of aversives on behavioral variability (it narrows us, flexibility is the goal)

- Language (or symbolic behavior) and a culture of control.

- Responding not just to the world, but also our verbal formulations of the world.

- “Push the button slowly to win points…”

- As we become more verbal, we begin to live more in the verbal construction of the world and less in the actual world
- We listen to our minds, rather than to our experience
- The solution is to

Awaken

worries
deadlines
things to fix

- Not only do we start living in a dream, but language also creates unique suffering in human beings.
- It's like this: We are reinforced for treating words like the events that they represent

“Apple”

“Where’s the Apple?”

- Words “stand in”
- Some of the psychological functions of events are present in the words about them (ex. Car)
  - Highly adaptive on the savannah

You are not enough.

- … means we can “experience” things Anytime. Anywhere.
  - Right now
  - Trauma
- We can’t control pain by controlling the environment, so we try to control our thoughts and feelings.

Amplified by our culture that teaches us

- The natural state of the human is not only the absence of pain (including painful thoughts and feelings), but also the presence of positive feelings.
- Humans are meant to be happy and we should strive for happiness.

- Control works well sometimes.
- It also fails miserably.

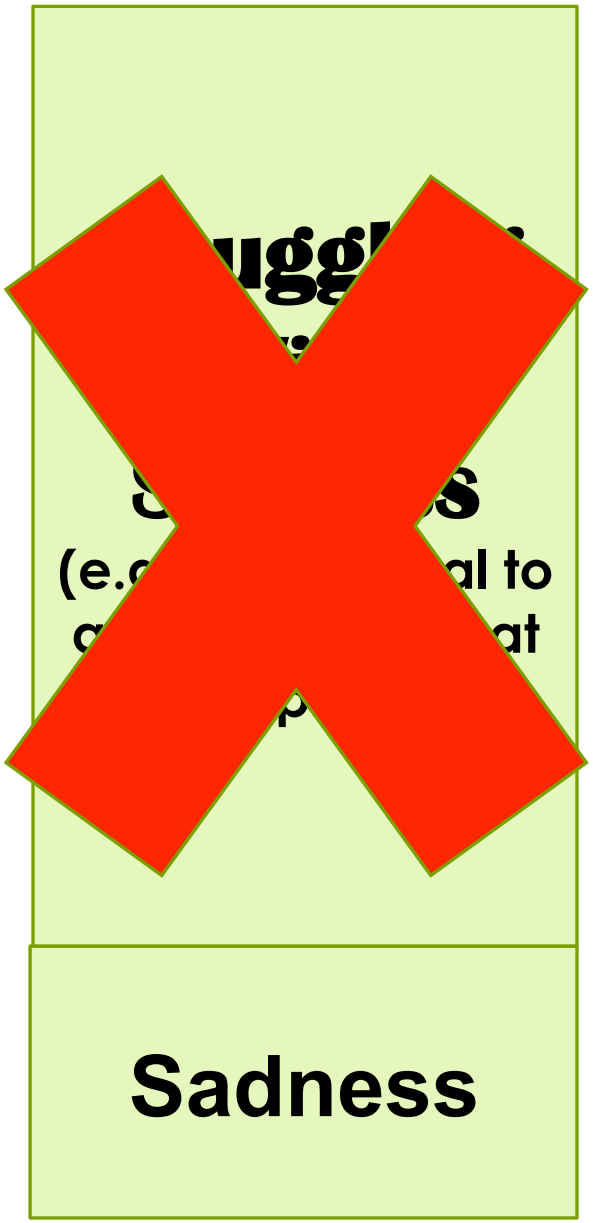
- Working to control our feelings, we lose control over our lives.
- We invest needless energy that would be better spent elsewhere.
- We avoid things we care about because of the potential for painful feelings.

EMOTIONAL
AVOIDANCE
DETOUR
nerg

- In what area of life are you on an emotional avoidance detour?

- Thoughts and feelings themselves are not pathogenic.
- Our culture of control is the cancer.
- What if bad feelings are not themselves problems to be solved? What if we are not problems to be solved?

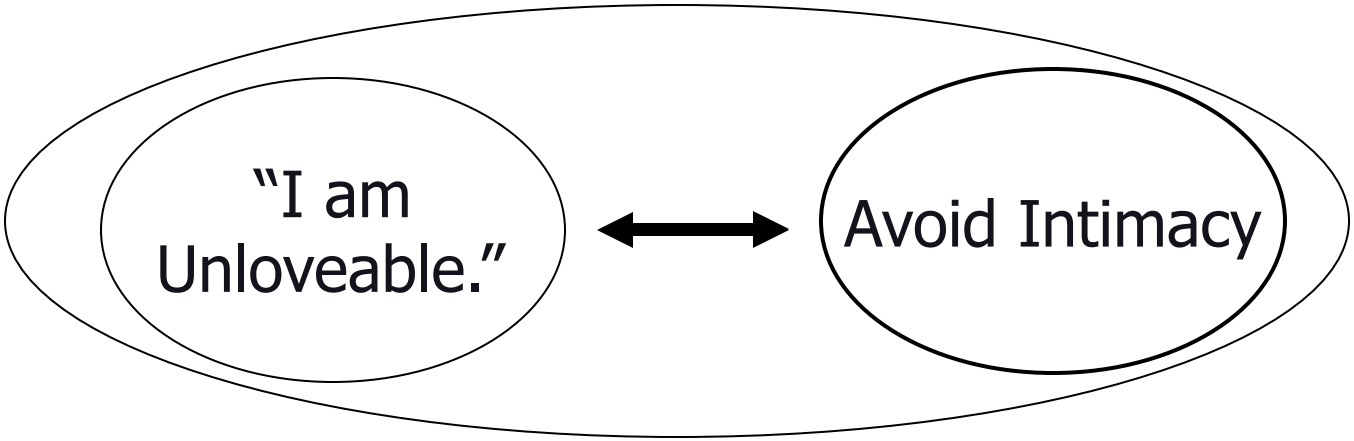
Life will turn on the pain switch.



- Consider diagnostic syndromes
  - It is emotion + struggle with emotion = MDD, Anxiety disorders, etc.

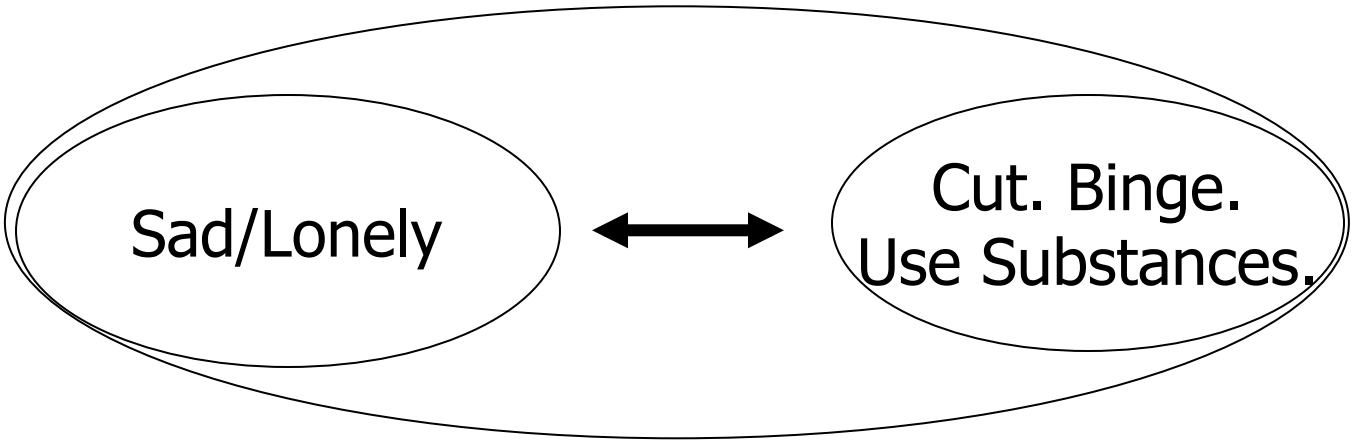
- The way out is in.. Into willingness
  - Finger traps and quicksand

- ACT changes how we *relate to* thoughts and feelings, rather than changing the thoughts and feelings themselves



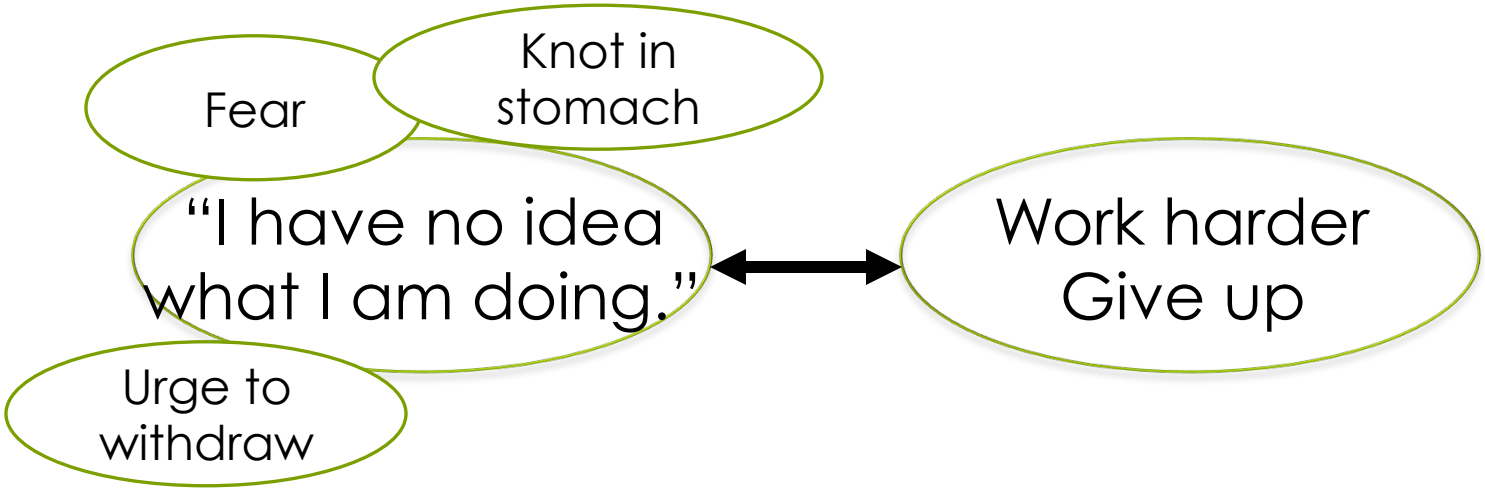
Fusion/literality

- What it sounds like
- Sample



Emotional Control

- What it sounds like
- Sample


Fear
Knot in stomach
"I have no idea what I am doing."
Urge to withdraw
Work harder
Give up

- So that behavior can be flexible and effective -- The goal is *flexibility* in the presence of difficult or compelling thoughts and feelings
- Stay present, sensitive and connected to values
  - Not *just* or *must*

definitions

- ACT targets **cognitive fusion** (i.e., overattachment to the content of mental activity) and **experiential avoidance** (i.e., attempts to avoid, suppress, attenuate unwanted internal experiences when doing so causes psychological harm)
- that interferes with individuals behaving in ways that are effective for the situation and consistent with **deeply held, personal values**.

Or psychological inflexibility.

Psychological flexibility

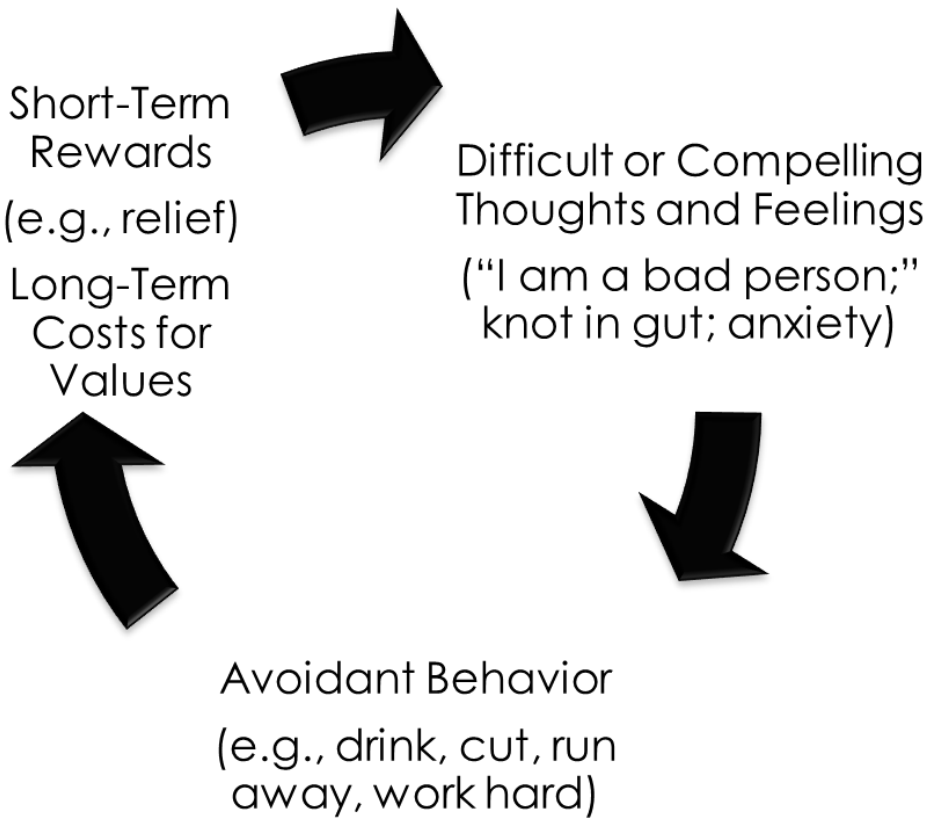
- The ability to contact the present moment, fully and without defense, and cease or persist in behavior based on our values and what would be most effective in the situation

Engaging 6 Core Processes

- With **defusion** (decreasing attachment to the content of mental activity)
- With **acceptance** (increasing willingness to experience unwanted thoughts/feelings)
- With **contact with the present moment** (practicing flexible attention to events as they occur)
- With **self-as context** (strengthening the observer self perspective)
- With **values** (articulating what is most meaningful)
- With **committed action** (aligning activity with those values)

Case formulation/Treatment planning

- Start with functional assessment (timelines, diary cards, chain analyses, CRBs etc.)
- Use diagnosis as starting point for avoidant repertoire


Short-Term Rewards
(e.g., relief)
Long-Term Costs for Values
Difficult or Compelling Thoughts and Feelings
("I am a bad person;" knot in gut; anxiety)
Avoidant Behavior
(e.g., drink, cut, run away, work hard)

This is also intervention.

- Avoidance/control has deep roots.
- Tilling the soil to prepare for something new.
- Guided exploration of the workability of actions: “and how has that gone…”
- “So, let me see if I am hearing this right, the situation is something like this…”

Contact with the Present Moment

Dominance of the conceptualized feared future & regretted past

Values

Lack of values clarity; Dominance of pliance and avoidant tracking; values avoidance; values as burden

Acceptance

Experiential avoidance

Cognitive fusion

Defusion

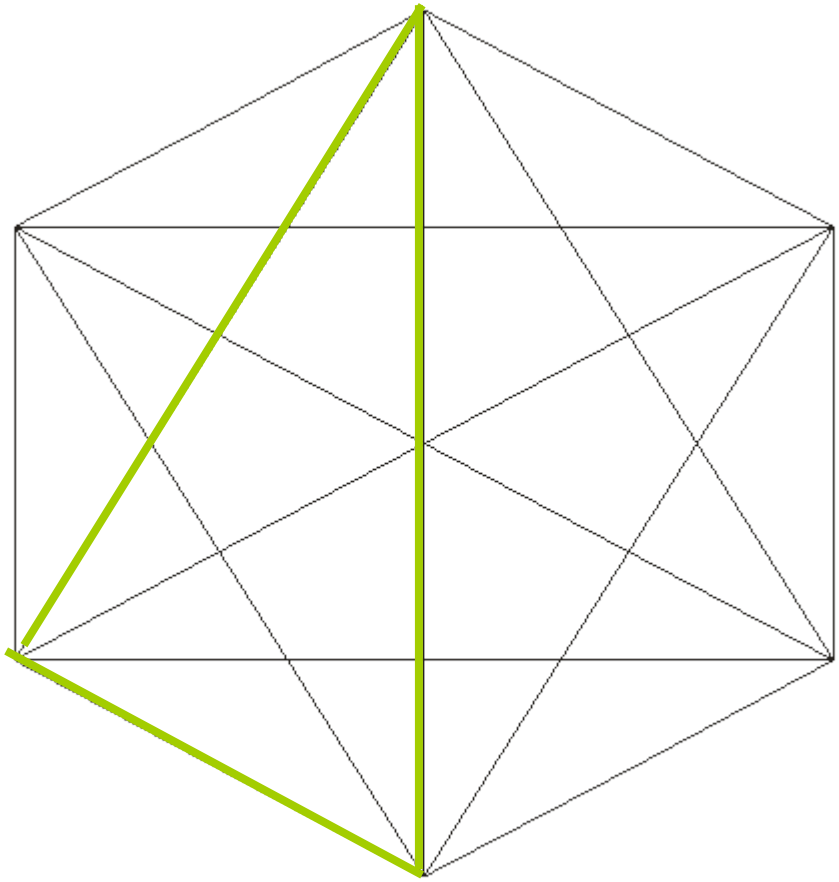
Inaction, impulsivity, or avoidant persistence

Committed Action

Attachment to conceptualized self; Impoverished sense of self

Self as Context

Contact with the Present Moment

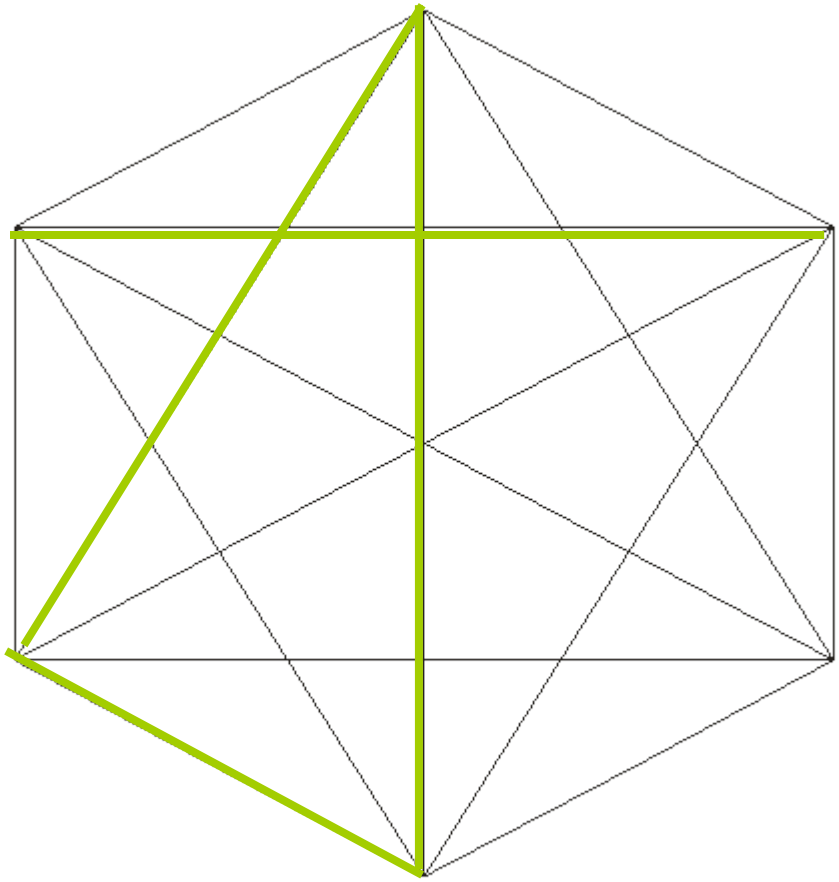


Fusion

Self-as-context

Contact with the Present Moment

Experiential Avoidance



Values

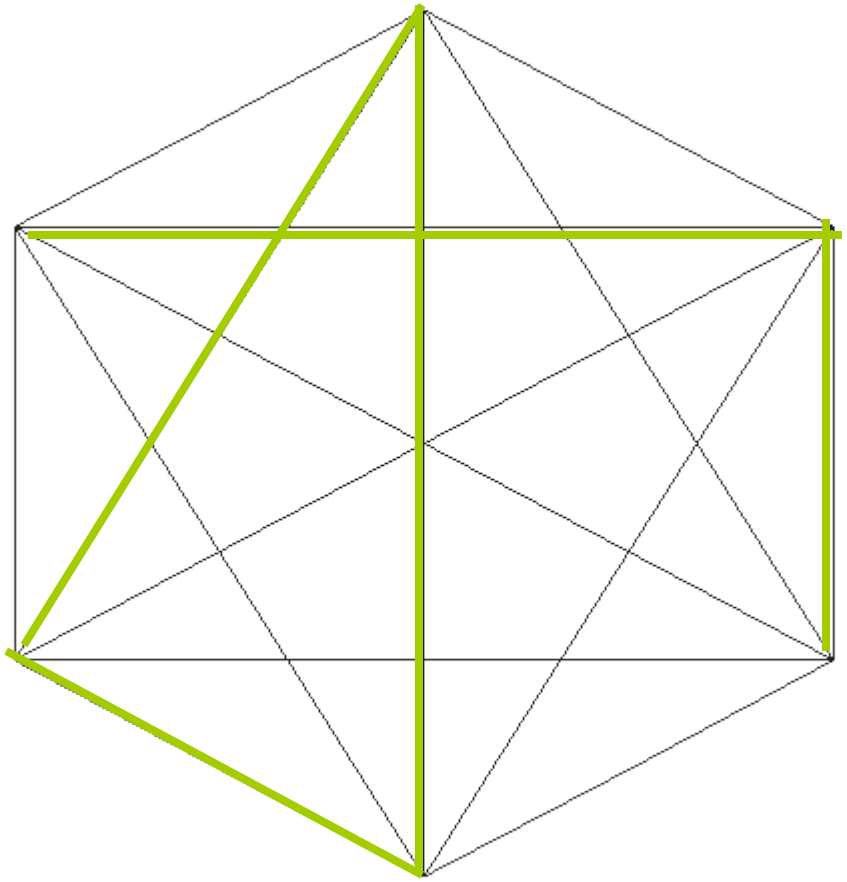
Fusion

Self-as-context

Contact with the Present Moment

Experiential Avoidance

Values

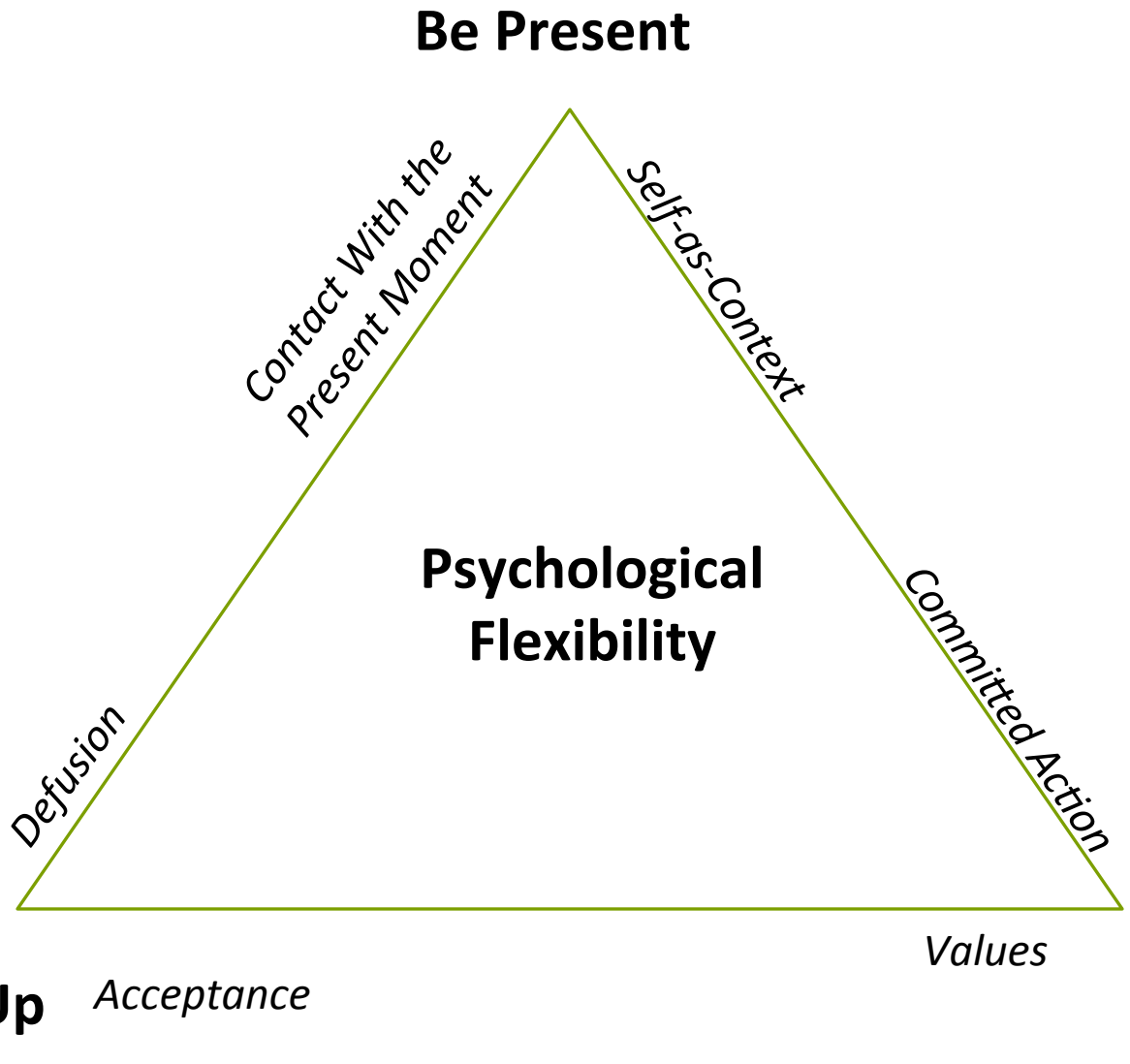


Fusion

Committed Action

Self-as-context

- Move from listening to thoughts to listening to experience (WORKABILITY)
- Move from fighting with feelings to embracing feelings (WILLINGNESS)


Be Present
Contact With the Present Moment
Self-as-Context
Psychological Flexibility
Defusion
Committed Action
Values
Open Up
Acceptance
Do What Matters

Nonacceptance

- Ignoring, suppressing or denying feelings
- Resignation, giving in or giving up, secretly hoping for change
- Organizing life to avoid feelings

Acceptance

- Openness to feelings as they arise
- An active choice to embrace feelings
- Approaching situations that may be uncomfortable

YOU CAN'T GET RID OF YOUR FEARS...
BUT YOU CAN LEARN TO LIVE WITH THEM
more tea?

Fusion

- Being entangled (or lost in) in one's thoughts
- Fighting with one's thoughts
- Trying to decide if (or convince that) thoughts are true or not true
- Listening or buying into thoughts despite unworkability

Defusion

- Watching thoughts
- Holding thoughts lightly as one feature of an internal landscape
- Appreciating other aspects of experience, not just what the mind says
- Behaving in ways that are contrary to thoughts sometimes

- Really exists on a continuum.
- Can track between and across sessions.

- Values are distinguished from goals
- Values are offered as an alternative to "listening to thoughts" or "running from feelings"
- Provide direction when we feel "lost"
  - like a compass or lighthouse, leading the way

- Values also dignify the pain inherent in living (recontextualize pain)
  - What if there is something important in that?
  - Mule in the well

Identifying Valued Directions (a "What for")

- Many people will be clear about what they have lost in the struggle

- And if you know what is painful, you probably know what they care about
  - What is your worst fear? What is most important to you? Are they related?
- Sweet spot
- What if X was gone?

1

Valued Direction

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

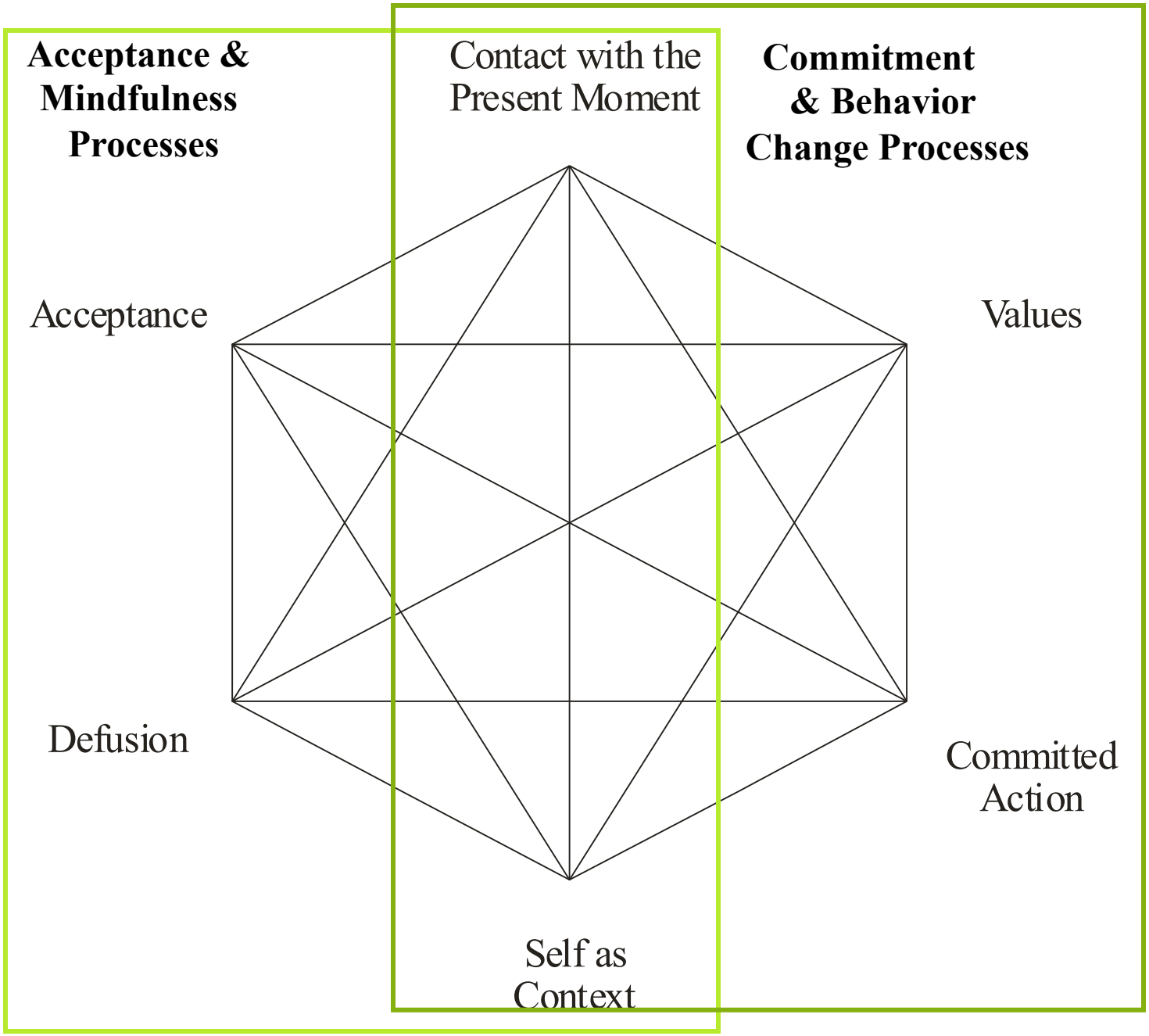
2

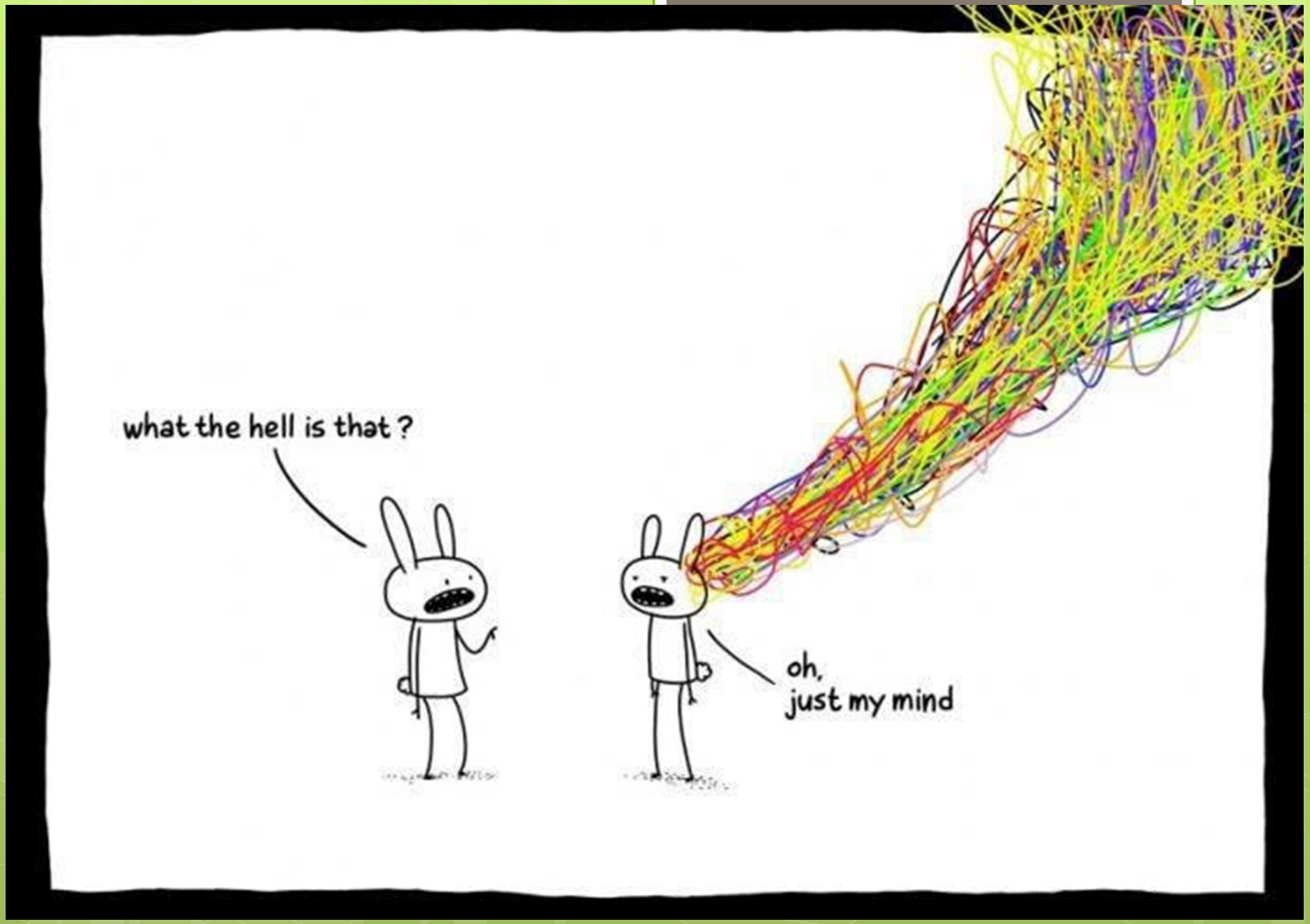
Behavioral Trajectory

3

EXPOSURE
DEFUSION
ACCEPTANCE
MINDFULNESS

UGLY MEMORIES
SELF DOUBT
ANXIETY
UNCERTAINTY
VALUED DIRECTION


Acceptance & Mindfulness Processes
Contact with the Present Moment
Commitment & Behavior Change Processes
Acceptance
Values
Defusion
Committed Action
Self as Context


what the hell is that ?
oh,
just my mind

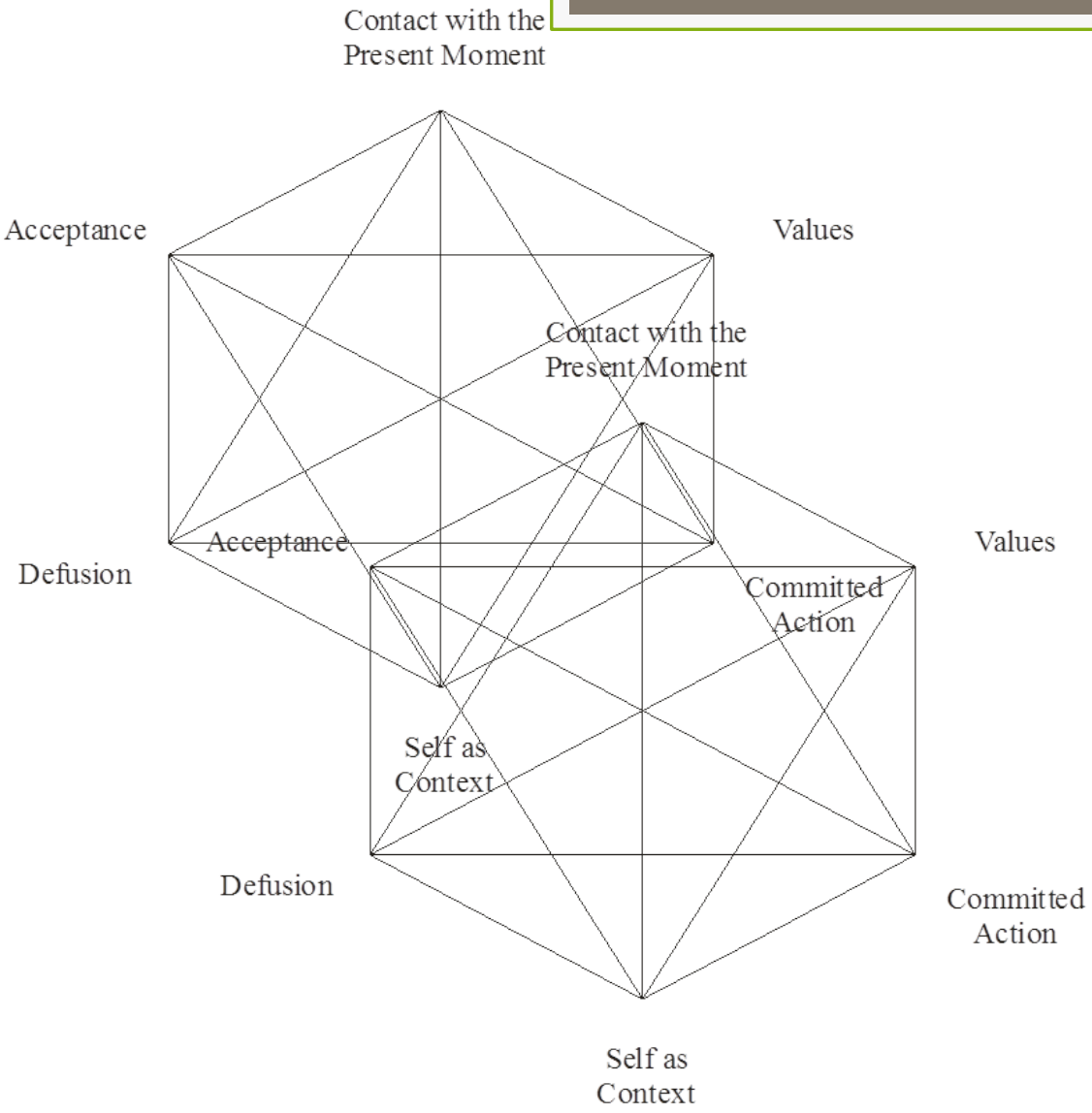
Detecting Openness

- New, fresh, clear
- Me, here and now
- A sense of choice, decisiveness
- Focus on being effective
- Feels vital, meaningful
- Might be expansive
- Behavior is appropriately variable and sensitive to feedback

Parallel Process

It applies to us too.

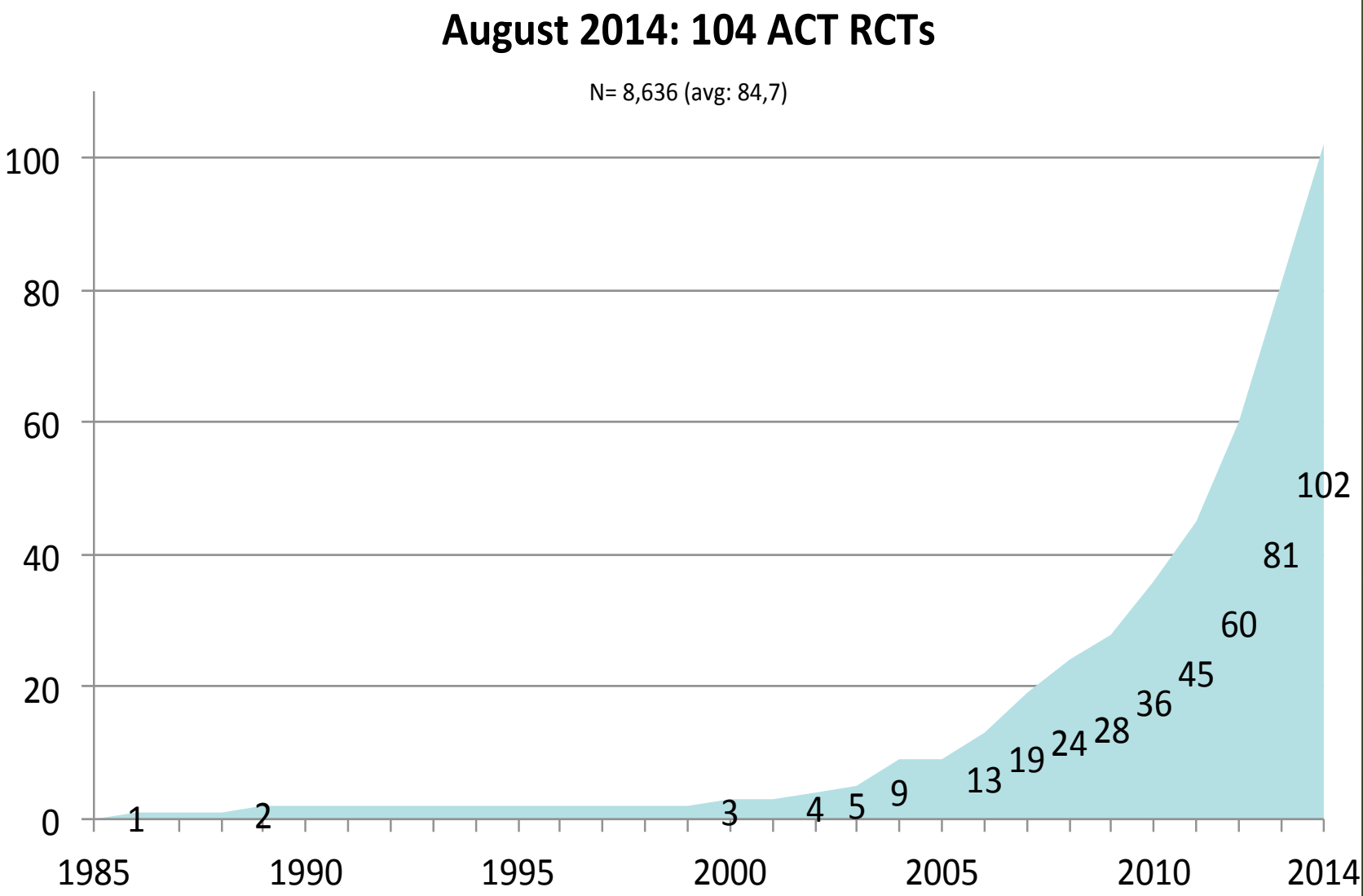
- ACT is a model of human functioning and adaptability, not a model of psychopathology.
- It applies to us too. (mountain climbing)


Contact with the Present Moment
Acceptance
Values
Contact with the Present Moment
Acceptance
Values
Defusion
Committed Action
Self as Context
Defusion
Committed Action
Self as Context

Evidence Based Practice

- APA Division 12 / Society of Clinical Psychology (http://www.div12.org/psychological-treatments/) lists ACT as a research supported treatment for:
  - Chronic Pain
  - Depression
  - Mixed Anxiety
  - Psychosis

- SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidenced Based Programs and Practices (NREEP) http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=191 lists ACT as an evidence based practice treatment for:
  - OCD
  - Depression Symptoms
  - Rehospitalization
  - General Mental Health


August 2014: 104 ACT RCTs
N= 8,636 (avg: 84,7)
100
80
60
40
20
0
1985
1990
1995
2000
2005
2010
2014
1
2
3
4
5
9
13
19
24
28
36
45
60
81
102

ACT RCTs as of August 2014

Pain	16
Depression	13
Stress	11
Anxiety	8
Various	7
Weight Loss	6
Substance Abuse	5
Smoking	5
Cancer	4
Eating Disorders	4
Social Anxiety	4
Psychosis	3
Epilepsy	2
Borderline Personality Disorder	2
Diabetes	2
Tinnitus	2
Parenting	2
Stigma	2
Trichotillomania	1
OCD	1
Prevention	1

Extra 6 Process Slides (some content overlaps)

Acceptance

Active embrace of internal experience (difficult thoughts, feelings, body sensations, urges, memories)

Acceptance/Willingness

- Opening up to uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, body sensations, urges, memories etc.
- Letting go of the struggle so that we can live more freely and consistently with our values
- You don't have to like it, want it, approve of it, in order to accept it

- Acceptance is not resignation
- It is not "giving in" or "giving up"
- It is also not "gritting your teeth & bearing it"
- It is ACTIVE not PASSIVE
- It is a CHOICE to stop fighting feelings
  - to be willing to let them come or go as they will
  - to be willing to go into hard spaces b/c there might be something important about that

- Deep roots

Building acceptance or willingness

- If you aren't willing to have it, you got it
  - White bear, polygraph
- You can keep it away for a while, but it takes effort
  - Closet full of stuff, pushing against something, tug-of-war with a monster, throwing balls/cards, uninvited guest
- Costs accumulate (pain of absence)
  - Card file exercise

A counter-intuitive solution

- The way out is in
  - Chinese finger trap, quicksand
  - Notice the freedom in that
- We don't have control over the pain switch, only the struggle switch

- Goal: Create a context of emotional willingness/disrupt the context of emotional control, build out a broad and flexible repertoire of relating
- Anything other than avoidance is good ☺

- Recontextualizing with values
  - Mule in the well
  - I could take away pain, but then you lose X
- Metaphor that pulls for kindness/ compassion/gentleness
  - Baby, gift, precious gem
- Competing repertoire
  - Scientist, witness
  - Object (curiosity, you have objects, they don't have you)

- Unexpected reactions
- Using an object to observe how the client is relating to a thought/feeling, and practice relating differently (e.g., cards)

- Experiential exercise

Defusion

Decreasing overattachment to the content of mental activity

- Recognize when listening to our mind is and is not helpful
- **Workability** is the metric
  - What happens if you take the advice that thought would give?
  - Does it get you where you want to go?
  - (sidestep truth, logic etc., it's irrelevant)

- Metaphors that highlight the nature of "mind" and its limits
  - Sensitive car alarm, bad news radio, worlds greatest story teller, a masterful salesman
  - Instruct nonverbal or sensory based experience
- Active language that separate the client and mind (and highlight client as response-able)
  - Thank your mind, who's talking here….
  - Pushed around, buying, hooked, listening

- Metaphors that pull for an observer stance (observing the dynamic process of thinking)
  - Parade, passing cars, leaves on a stream, ticker tape, baggage claim
- Experiential observation

- Changing the auditory cue
  - Sing it, say it fast or slow, etc.
- Metaphors that label fusion
  - Story, chapter, book, familiar script

Present Moment

The future and past are true illusions. The only thing that exists is this moment.

Virabhadrasana II
(Warrior II)

Here there is nothing to fight
Except willfulness.
Some lean too far
Into the past.
Others stretch way out
Into the future.
The true warrior
Stays in the moment,
Burning deeper
Into whatever comes,
Or sometimes with
Even more difficulty,
What doesn't.

- Strong past or future orientation
- Fixed or inattention

- Experiential exercise
  - You have arrived.

Self-as-Context

The observer self

Self-as-Context/Observer Self (Distinguished from Self-as-Content or the Conceptualized self)

- Our language encourages fusion between ourselves and our thoughts, feelings, roles, content, etc.
  - I am ____
  - Hard to deviate from self-story, threatened by the presence or absence of content
- Need variation but not overattachment – might build out content, but all held lightly

- Metaphors of “bigger than”
  - Sea floor, chessboard, sky with clouds, house with furniture
- Experiencing that you are the observer of so you mustn’t be those experiences
  - Observer self exercise
  - Noticing
  - Stage show
- Meditations
  - Kabat Zinn – Mountain Meditation
- All defusion has SAC

Values

If you are not going to be guided by momentary thoughts and feelings, what are you going to be about?

What will guide you?

- Metaphors that highlight values as showing the way when we are lost (in thoughts or feeling)
  - Compass, lighthouse

- What do you want your life to stand for?
  - Tombstone, epitaph, eulogy, 80th bday
  - What if no one knew?

- Enter through vulnerability
  - What is your worst fear?
  - There must be a pony.

- Enter through memory
  - Recall a sweet moment, a moment where you felt most connected, where there was a sense of vitality (not necessarily joy or happiness but vitality)

- Imagine if/Magic wand
  - If I could take ___ away, the what?
  - Imagine ___ is no longer and issue, what would you want to be doing? What would you want to be about?

- Structure a conversation
  - Values Inventories
    - Family
    - Parenting
    - Intimate/Marriage/Partnership
    - Friendships
    - Citizenship/Community/Environment
    - Spirituality
    - Health
    - Personal Growth
    - Leisure
- I want to be a person who…
- Rate importance, consistency

- Tools to look at consistency in behavior
  - Recording cards
  - Bulls eye exercise
  - Cups and beans/time allocation

Process, not outcome

- It's the process of behaving consistently with values, not the outcome
  - Example of holding the door open
  - Skiing metaphor
- You might do with reasons, but not for reasons.

Not about believing or feeling, but behaving

- You can think and feel other ways and still chose value consistent action
- Chosen qualities of purposeful action
  - Love vs. behaving lovingly
  - Argyle socks

Coming back

- Not about being perfect – it's about **taking a stand**
- Noticing when we are sideways, coming back, and recommitting
  - In what area of your life are most consistent? Least? What is showing up that is pulling you off course?

Values and WILLINGNESS

- What do you want to be about? Reasons, beliefs, avoiding pain… THE CHOICE

You can toss one,
but not without getting rid of the other.