

CONTACTING AND CONSTRUCTING VALUES

As we have hopefully communicated throughout the book, the values-based work found in ACT interventions is central to the whole approach. In fact, as is evident in the definition of psychological flexibility, ACT is ultimately oriented toward helping people build expanding patterns of action that are consistent with their personally chosen values.

Helping people clarify or define their values can be challenging when delivering ACT in groups and in relatively brief formats. The process may at first look fairly straightforward – defining personal values, and using those values as the primary guide to goal-setting and action planning in different areas of one’s life. However, from the outset of our training, we find that it is not uncommon for participants to be confused by what we mean by values-based action and the process of valuing. Many of us live in goal-oriented cultures – at school, college, and then in the workplace we are trained to focus on achieving targets, meeting objectives, and securing tangible outcomes. While focusing on goals has a number of well-known benefits, it is not unusual for people to lose sight of the meaning, purpose, or direction in the goals and actions they pursue.

Perhaps a simple experiential exercise will help us illustrate this:

Take a moment to reflect on why you are browsing this website and perhaps interested in this book. What is your purpose?

*Browsing this website is a **specific action** – one among many actions you will perform today. This action is in all likelihood linked to some much broader **purpose** in your personal or professional life. And when thinking about that purpose, you can look beyond some specific future goal(s), such as achieving a degree or having a new therapeutic approach to use with your clients. What is the longer term purpose or direction? Is it to help your fellow human beings? Is it about pursuing continuing personal or professional development? Is it simple curiosity about the human condition? Perhaps it is part of wanting to make an impact or contribution in some area of your life?*

*Take this moment to connect the simple action of reading this handout, of perusing this website, with some broader life purpose. This specific action says something about **what you want your life to be about**.*

How did you find this brief exercise? When we do a similar exercise in the workplace (perhaps including the above instructions as part of a mindfulness practise), people often report contacting a sense of meaning underpinning certain actions. Contacting values can remind us about why we choose to engage in certain types of behaviour, and also why we engage in those activities in the way that we do.

There is another very common reaction to this type of exercise: people often comment on how infrequently they do this. In our busy lives, we just don’t seem to have the time to reflect on the overarching purpose, meaning, or direction in our actions and goals. Hence, the values work in our program is designed to give people the time and opportunity to do this important work.

Communicating the essence of values

Given the confusion that can be elicited by values, we tend to describe values in our workshops in fairly simple terms. We might present values as the “personal strengths or qualities we most want to express in our actions”; or “our personally chosen guide to behaviour”.

It is important to communicate that values are always about action. In fact, the verb *valuing* captures this behavioural process extremely well. So, I may learn to pause occasionally to ask myself: “To what extent have I been *valuing* this past week?” – in other words, have I been bringing my values to life in the actions I’ve been taking? Has my behaviour been values-consistent?

Similarly, before entering a classroom, meeting, or training event, we might pause to ask ourselves, “What is this particular activity *about* for me? Why am I here? What do I want to *stand for* in this area of my life?...” Such questions help us to keep values psychologically present, allowing them to function as a prominent guide to behaviour.

It is useful to employ journeying metaphors when communicating the essence of valuing. In the book, we outline the *compass metaphor* that is well-known to ACT practitioners. We describe the metaphor in the book in a fairly formal way, but (depending on the time available) we might integrate this metaphor into our ongoing dialogue as we introduce the values-based action part of the training. This metaphor can be particularly useful; it allows the trainer to emphasise that values-based action is as much about the journey as the destination. Hence, aiming for goals in the distance is useful - *as long as* we use goal-setting as a strategy to orient ourselves along a personally valued path. The meaning and vitality that can be obtained from valuing is most likely to come from learning to be mindful of the everyday value-guided steps that we take in the service of a value.

Values tools

When first introducing values, we would strongly recommend using freely available values tools, such as a values card sort. We tend to make use of the cards developed for the Survey of Life Principles (Joseph Ciarrochi and Ann Bailey, 2008 – and see Joseph Ciarrochi’s personal website: <http://www.acceptandchange.com/>). When using these cards, we omit those that are less useful for our purposes. We remove all those that indicate experiential control and avoidance (‘experiencing positive mood states’; ‘feeling good about myself’; and ‘leading a stress free life’). We also remove ‘being sexually desirable’; ‘being wealthy’; ‘being sexually active’; and ‘being sexually desirable’. Apart from that, we conduct the card sort pretty much as outlined by Ciarrochi and Bailey – asking our participants to sort the cards into three piles, until they choose their 5 or 6 most important life principles. It is helpful that the SLP resource includes some blank cards so participants can add additional personal values to the pile.

In addition to the SLP cards, there are other similar values resources available to ACT practitioners. For example, Louise Hayes has produced some excellent values cards with pictures that capture the essence of a range of core values. For a small donation, these picture cards are available through the ACBS website (<http://contextualscience.org/>) – follow the links to resources for clinicians.

Once an initial values card sort has been completed, we invite our workplace participants to share their experiences of performing the task. The group discussions that ensue are typically very helpful for highlighting key features and functions of personal values. We invite participants to brainstorm a series of small actions that would help to bring one or more of their most important values to life over the next week. Then, for home practice, we invite participants to engage in three of those actions mindfully – noticing what thoughts, feelings, sensations and/ or urges show up before, during, and after performing the value-guided actions; noticing any consequences of performing (or not performing) valued actions; and so on. It is particularly useful if participants notice thoughts or feelings potentially or actually “hijacking” their behaviour.

Another useful values-oriented tool that we use in our training (not mentioned in the book) is the values questionnaire presented by Russ Harris (available in his book ‘The Confidence Gap’ and free to download from his website: <http://www.actmindfully.com.au/>). In some of our recent ACT workshops in British organisations, have used the SLP cards in session 1, and then this values questionnaire in session 3 – presenting them as different tools that have a similar function of helping to clarifying values. Our participants will often find commonalities across the two tools, which further helps the values-clarification process.

Writing exercise for constructing value statements

In addition to the above tools, we often invite our participants to engage in a writing exercise that encourages them to work on “constructing” values for different areas of their lives. This type of exercise can be supported by the Define Your Values sheet (handout 1) that can be accessed through this website. The exercise encourages participants to begin by building a longer statement about the strengths or personal qualities they would most like to express and pursue in five life areas (health; relationships; work and career; leisure time; and personal growth). Once a more detailed value statement has been constructed, participants are encouraged to identify a handful of reminder words that will help to keep values present as they go about their daily lives. As with the card sort, these key values word can be written on small cards and kept in one’s wallet or purse as a regular reminder.

This type of written values exercise can at first be more challenging, particularly if participants have found it difficult to grasp the nature of values, or have struggled to identify the behavioural qualities they most want to pursue. Hence, a detailed written exercise can sometimes work better later in the training (e.g., session 3), once participants have had the opportunity to contact values through the card sort or values questionnaire mentioned above. It is up to the trainer to get a sense of which exercises will work best, given the context and the size and composition of the group being trained.

Summary

Whichever tools or handouts are used, the values work in our workplace training programs tends to proceed through the following key steps:

- STEP 1: Help participants contact and/ or construct core values
- STEP2: Use those values as a guide to goal-setting and action planning
- STEP 3: Invite participants to engage in personally valued actions between the sessions and to notice what happens when they do so

As a natural part of facilitating these interventions, the trainer has the opportunity to highlight the nature, function, and benefits of the valuing process. What is critically important is that participants are given the opportunity and guidance for *experiential* learning – that is, identifying a series of value-guided actions, engaging in those actions, raising awareness of thoughts, feelings, urges, and sensations that arise during the process, and being aware of any consequences of deliberately and consciously bringing values to life.

By supporting employees through the valuing process in every session, we often see the ACT model coming to life. Our participants often report contacting a renewed sense of meaning, purpose, or life vitality that can be elicited by defining values and then deliberately engaging in values-consistent action. Also, when participants do *not* engage in chosen actions, the values work is designed to help raise awareness of thoughts or other internal states that are having an excessive (and perhaps unhelpful) influence over behaviour.