

## **ACT and Acceptance**

Many traditional therapeutic approaches focus on changing or altering unwanted or troublesome thoughts and feelings. ACT is different in that it works to change how you relate to these events rather than to change them directly. The aim is to become more open to, and accepting of, your thoughts and feelings instead of battling against them.

ACT takes the approach because research carried out over the last 20 years or so indicates that people have much less control over their thoughts and feelings than they often think they do.

For example, while you can choose to think about different things, such as a red car or a polar bear, you can't sustain these thoughts for anything other than short periods before your attention moves on to something else. And if you try your best not to think about something, then the opposite happens, and you end up thinking about it even more. These findings (and what does your own experience tell you?) mean that your efforts to control, minimize or avoid your thoughts can only ever have marginal success.

A similar situation exists with your emotions. What you feel depends on what's happened to you, and this means that you can't change how you feel at any one point in time without first changing your past. Of course, that's impossible, and so attempts to manage or change your feelings in the present won't be successful.

The aim of ACT is to help people live open and fulfilling lives, which is difficult to do if they're spending lots of their time trying to change, control, or avoid things that can't be easily changed, controlled, or avoided. For this reason, acceptance is so important. When faced with things you can't change, your best option is usually to accept them.

Acceptance provides an alternative to experiential avoidance as a way to engage with life. In practicing acceptance, you create the space to do the things that really matter to you rather than waste your time and energy on trying to control the uncontrollable.

This doesn't mean that everything you do will be successful. Some things you do will work out and others won't, but at least you're now doing the things that are important to you rather than trying to control or avoid the things you don't like. At the end of each day, you can then rest your head on the pillow and fall asleep knowing you've lived according to your values.

And something else happens when you practice acceptance: life becomes less scary and less focused on the negatives. It transpires that your unpleasant thoughts and feelings aren't as bad as you think they are. Sure, they're not very nice, but they aren't something you need to unduly worry about much of the time. And they certainly aren't things to which you need to devote significant energy trying to avoid or control.