

The “Four A’s” of Acceptance

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In ACT, we think of acceptance in terms of the “four A’s”: Acknowledge, Allow, Accommodate & Appreciate. Here we explore each of these steps involved in the process of acceptance.

In ACT, acceptance is short for “experiential acceptance” - that is, accepting your inner experiences: thoughts, images, emotions, urges, memories, sensations, and so on. We can think of acceptance in terms of the “four As”: *Acknowledge, Allow, Accommodate & Appreciate*.

Let’s explore these through a metaphor. Suppose one day your doorbell rings, and you open it—only to find, to your great surprise, it’s your Uncle Tim. He’s an intensely annoying (but totally harmless) relative. Your first step is to acknowledge that he’s there: “Oh! Hi Uncle Tim! “Now you don’t like Uncle Tim; you sure as hell didn’t invite him—but hey, here he is. So, you decide to allow him inside: “Come on in, Uncle Tim.” Your next step is to accommodate him; you take him to the kitchen, offer him a chair, give him a cup of tea. Now Uncle Tim starts doing all his usual annoying stuff—telling jokes you hate and stories you find boring, and at first, you’re not really listening. But suddenly you remember—you’ve been struggling with this big problem, and Uncle Tim just happens to be an expert in that area. So, you ask him about it, and you wait attentively, and you listen carefully ... and lo and behold ... he starts giving you golden information about how to address this big problem, valuable insights you can apply to good effect. So now, you’re starting to appreciate Uncle Tim.

In any ACT textbook or training, you’ll likely notice the four As of acceptance—*acknowledge, allow, accommodate, appreciate*—cropping up repeatedly. And although we don’t have to follow them in that order, as it happens, a lot of the time we do. With unwanted painful emotions, we first acknowledge them - i.e., we mindfully notice and name them - and we allow them to be present. Then we go a step further, to accommodate them: opening up and making plenty of room for them. And then we go on to *appreciate them for their help and guidance*. Did I say “appreciate”?! Yes, I sure did. That doesn’t mean liking them or wanting

them. You've probably heard the classic ACT saying: "Your pain is your ally." That's what I mean by "appreciate" - see your emotion as an ally and appreciate what it has to offer you. This is a radically different perspective for most people, who typically see painful emotions as the enemy. So brief psychoeducation about the positive benefits of "negative" emotions is essential. I put "negative" in quotes because ACT generally steers away from this terminology. In many models, emotions that feel unpleasant are labeled "negative," while those that feel pleasant are labeled "positive." But in ACT, we're primarily interested in the functions of an emotion: the effects it has on behavior. So-called "negative" emotions (e.g., anxiety, sadness, guilt) have evolved over eons because in certain situations they offer significant survival advantages. In other words, in some contexts, "negative" emotions have positive functions: life-enhancing effects on behavior. These positive functions fall into three main classes: *motivation*, *illumination*, and *communication*. Our emotions *motivate* us to behave in particular ways, *illuminate* what is important, and help us to *communicate* with others. For example, consider sadness *motivates* us to slow down, withdraw, and rest; communicates "I've lost something important," and illuminates the importance of rest and recuperation after a loss. Another aspect of *appreciation* is tuning into our emotions and extracting their wisdom. For example, we may ask: "What does this emotion tell you that you really care about? What does it suggest we need to face up to, or need to do differently?" Exploring our emotions in this way usually connects us with values, goals and needs - which in turn points the way to committed action. In addition, we can sometimes "harness" the energy of an emotion. For example, at times we can channel the energy of anger into a constructive fight for justice, or the energy of anxiety into our performance. Other emotions, such as sadness, have more of a "slowing down" effect, lowering our energy levels; we may be able to channel this into restful mindfulness practices, or creative or self-soothing activities.

The take home message: there are many facets to acceptance. Your first gentle steps in acceptance are acknowledge and allow.