



# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Top 5 Tips when Working with People in Persistent Pain

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Chelsea and Westminster Hospital  
NHS Foundation Trust



# Chelsea Pain Management Therapy Service



Outpatient Persistent Pain Management

## **Pre-COVID Groups**

7 Session ACT based PMP (35hrs)

## **Peri-COVID Groups**

12 Session ACT based vPMP (24hrs)





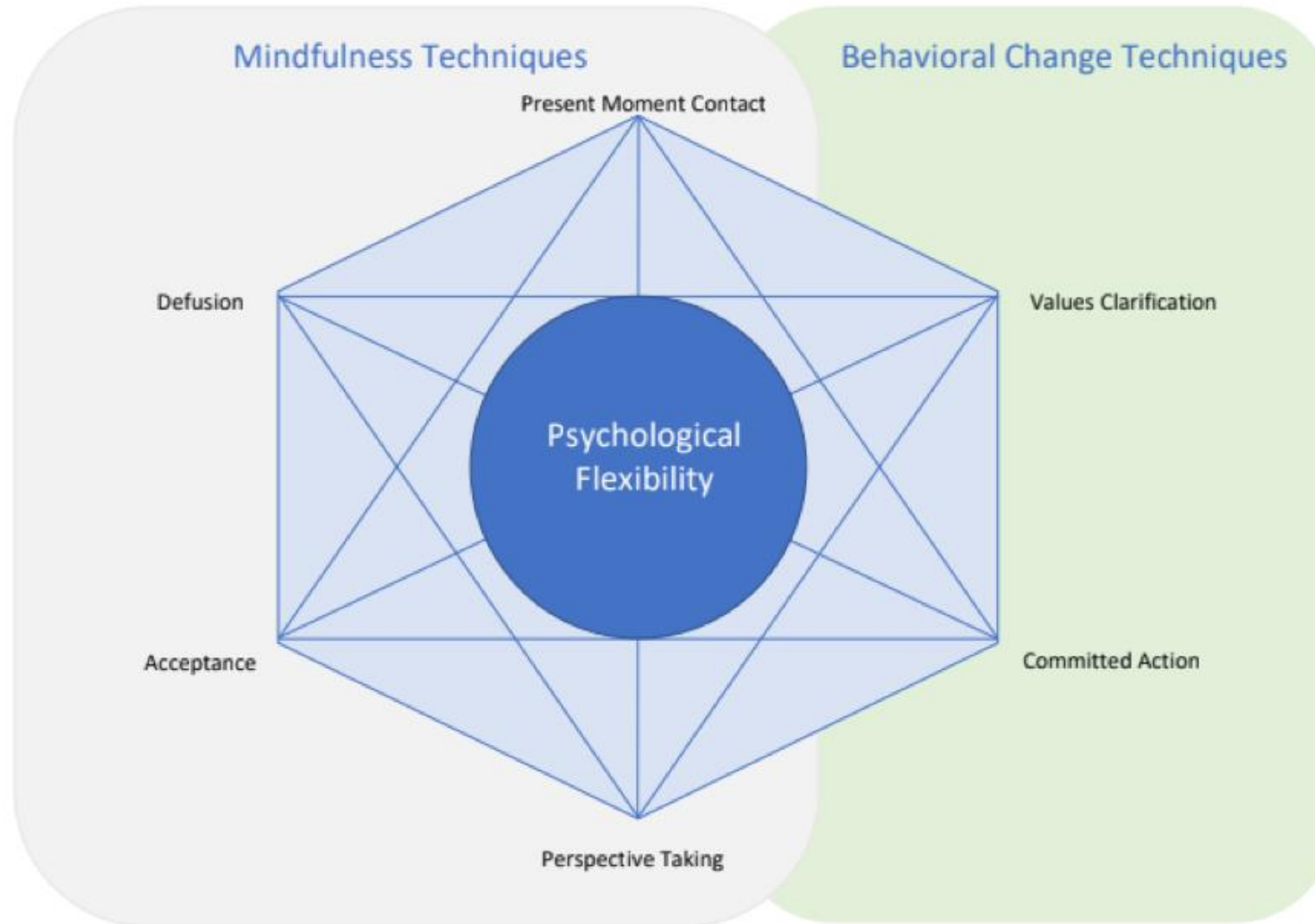
# ACT Fundamentals

- Developed by Steve Hayes in the mid-80s (also by Wilson, Strosahl)
- Psychological therapy drawn from functional contextualism (i.e. interested in thoughts, feelings, actions in context)
- *Third Wave* approach (Mindfulness based approaches, DBT, CFT)
- Used trans-diagnostically to support behaviour change
- Aim: to increase ***psychological flexibility*** to help people manage challenges effectively and move towards a rich meaningful life



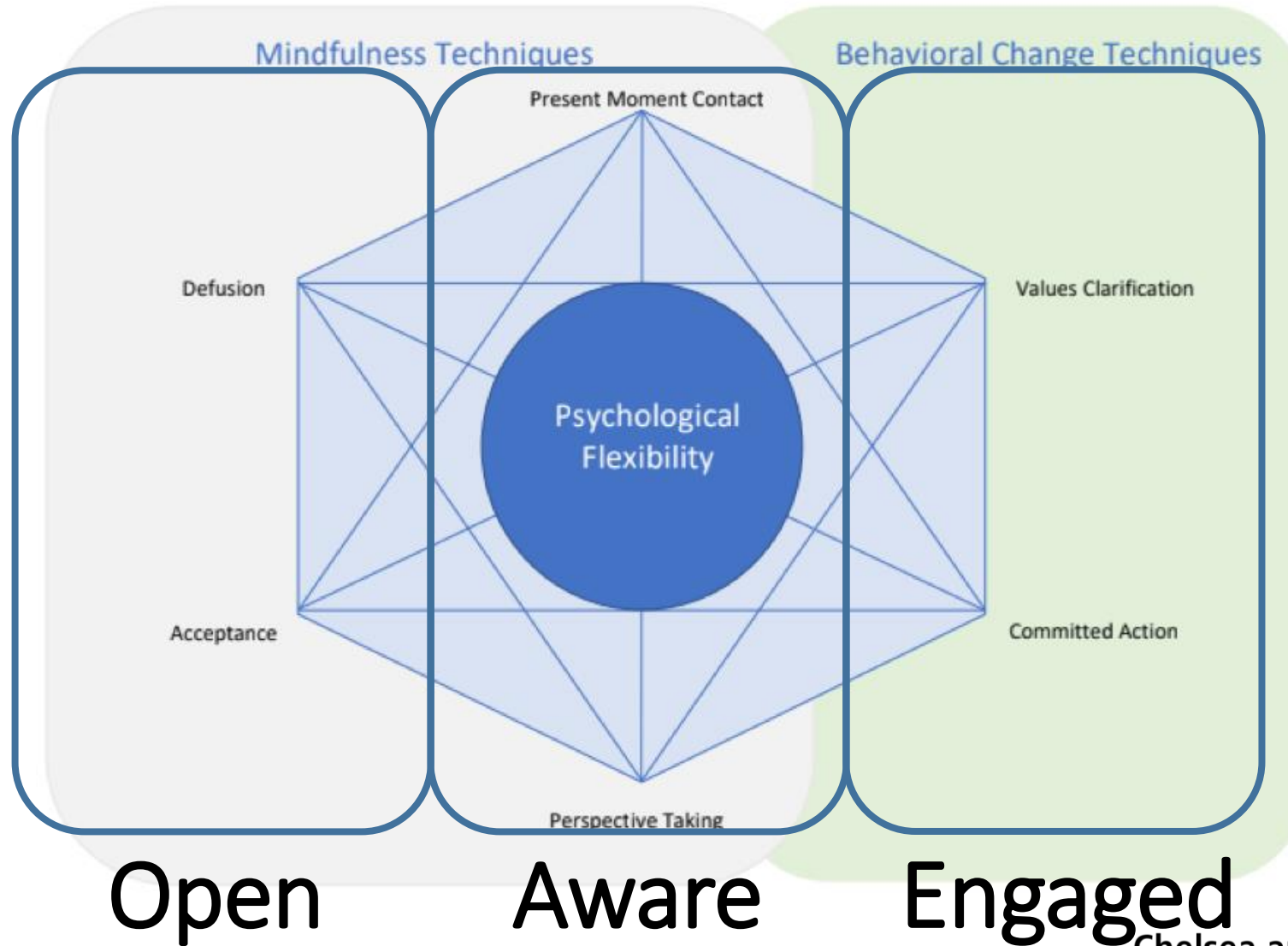


# ACT – Six Core Processes





# ACT – Triflex



Open

Aware

Engaged





# ACT – Triflex

**Aware**

...of the here and now.  
Noticing what's going on in our  
internal and external worlds

**Psych  
Flexibility**

Making room for thoughts,  
feelings and sensations.  
Not letting them dominate  
experience

Knowing what matters and  
doing what it takes to live  
that way in difficult  
circumstances

**Open**

**Engaged**



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# ACT – Triflex

Less  
Aware

Inside one's own head – mind dwelling in past, worried about future; dominated by rules

STUCK

Trying to get rid of unwanted thoughts, feelings sensations;  
Avoiding things

Losing touch with what matters; stuck in unhelpful habits

Closed/Struggling

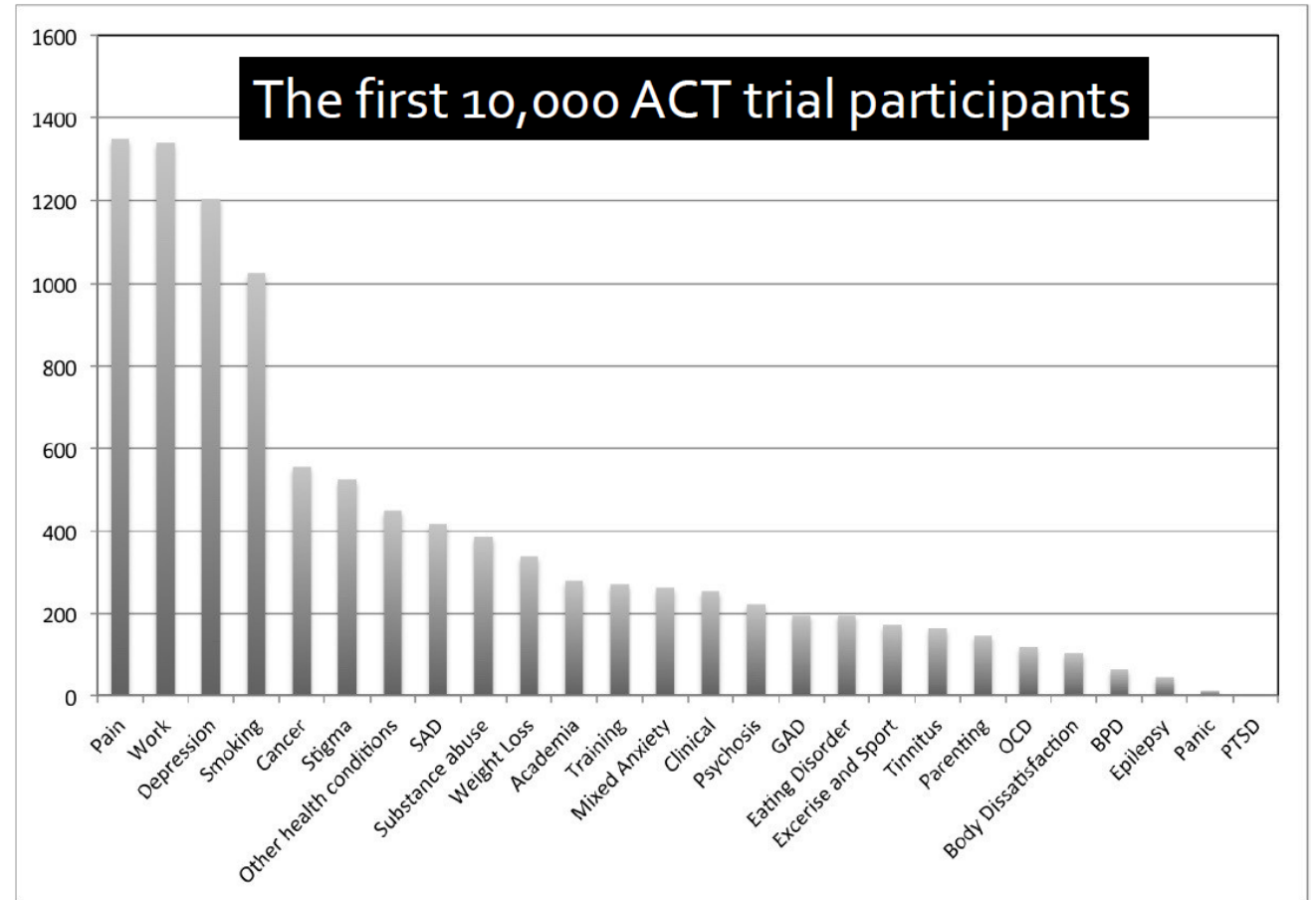
Disengaged





# ACT Evidence Base

- 400+ RCTs since 1986 for a range of issues
- *Strong research support in Chronic Pain (APA, 1998)*
- Focus not on reduction of symptoms but on workable strategies
- No clear evidence it's superior to traditional CBT







# ACT Evidence Base

- Recent Cochrane Review of Psychological Therapies for Management of Chronic Pain in Adults (Williams et al. 2020)
  - Uncertain about benefits or lack of benefits of ACT for adults with chronic pain when measuring pain, disability and distress
  - Too few ACT studies meeting Cochrane's threshold
  - CBT showed small improvement for pain, disability and distress



## PSYCHOLOGY FOR CHRONIC PAIN: DOES IT HELP? WITH DR. AMANDA C DE C WILLIAMS

Welcome back to the Healing Pain Podcast with Dr. Amanda C de C Williams In this episode, we're discussing the different types of psychological...

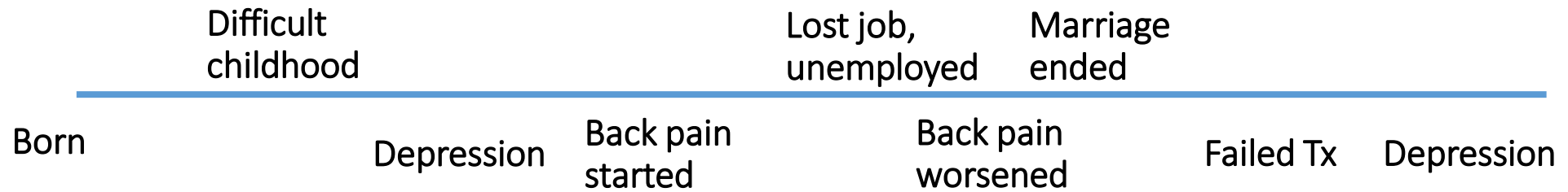
[READ MORE ▶](#)





# ACT Tip 1 – Knowing Your Patient in Context

- Validate and formulate the problem **with** them at assessment
- Timeline



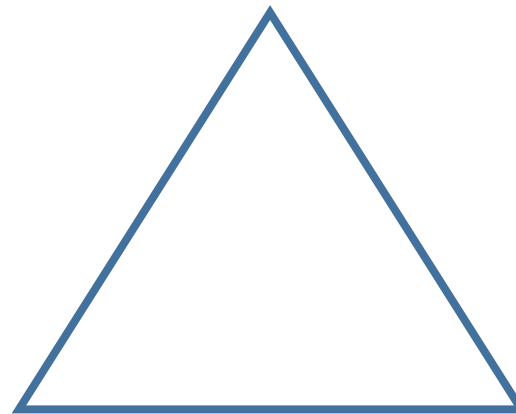


# ACT Tip 1 – Knowing Your Patient in Context

- Validate and formulate the problem **with** them at assessment
- Timeline
- Triflex

“I’m not the person I was before the pain”; “My future is bleak”; “I’ll end up in wheelchair;” “I can’t do...bend/walk/lift/move/anything”

Over-reliance of substances (medication?);  
passive/avoidance strategies



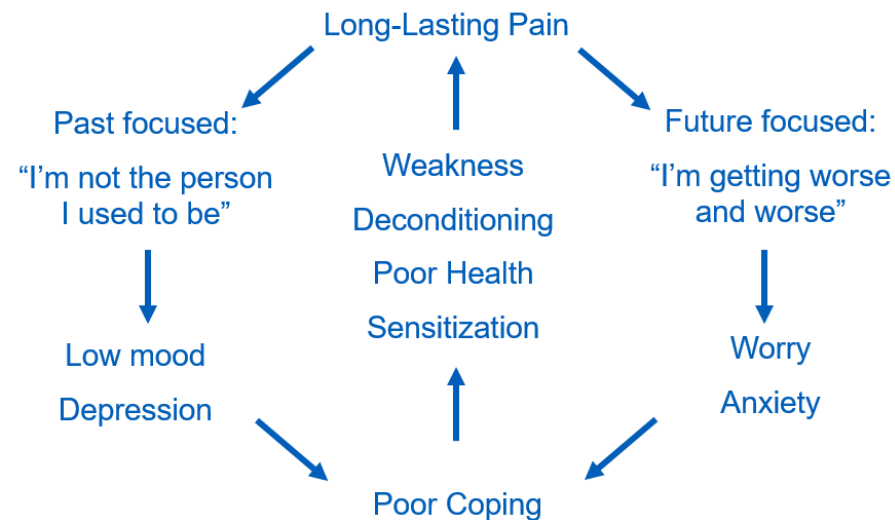
Remoteness from values and important  
actions e.g. not working/parenting/  
socializing





# ACT Tip 1 – Knowing Your Patient in Context

- Validate and formulate the problem **with** them at assessment
- Timeline
- Triflex
- Uncover unhelpful feedback loops and unworkable action





# ACT Tip 1 – Knowing Your Patient in Context

- Validate and formulate the problem ***with*** them at assessment
- Timeline
- Triflex
- Uncover unhelpful feedback loops and unworkable action

*What are you  
doing about  
this?*

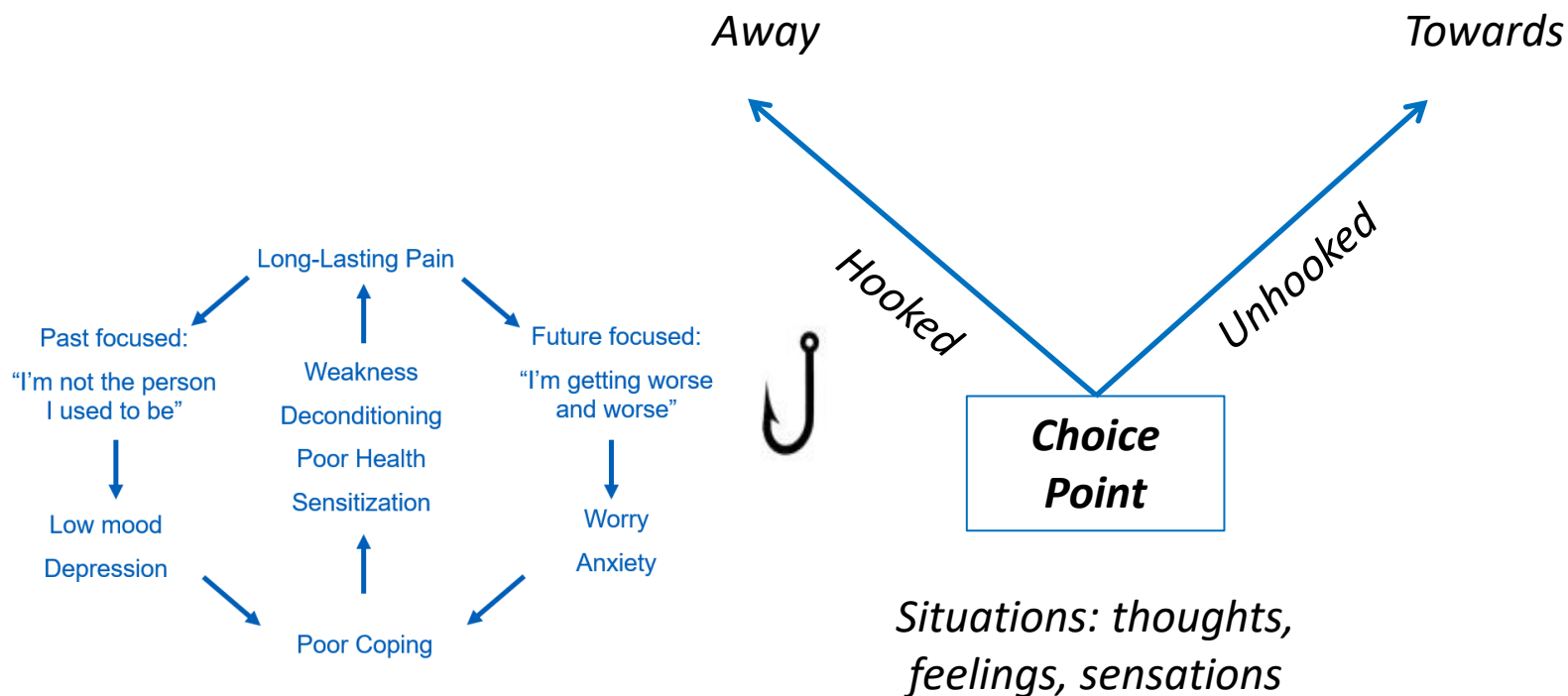
*Is it helping you  
move towards  
the life you  
want?*





# ACT Tip 2 – The Choice Point

- Introduce the Choice Point (Harris, 2017) as a vehicle of change



Engaging in helpful, adaptive behaviour





# ACT Tip 2 – The Choice Point

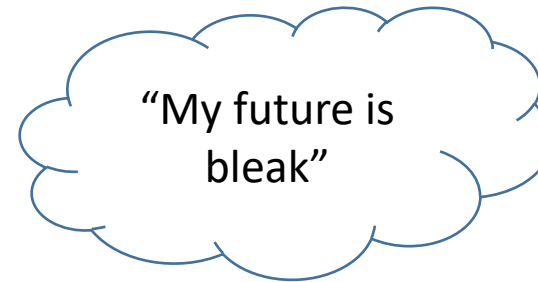
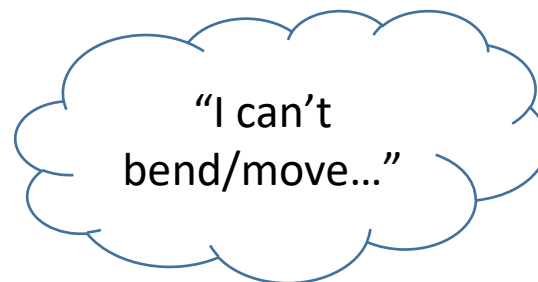
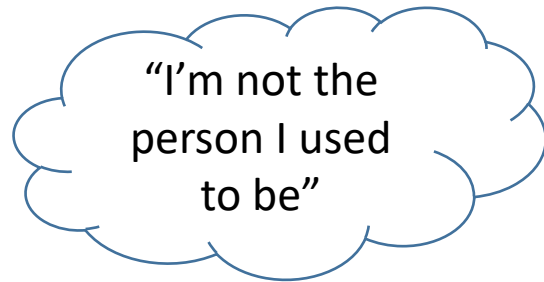
- Choice Point – Russ Harris Clip (Happiness Trap)





# ACT Tip 3 – In-vivo Mindfulness

- Acknowledge that living with pain can often mean having negative thoughts about the past, present and future



- Validate that this can cause distress and lead to Away moves
- Introduce Mindfulness as a tool to increase awareness of and unhook from problematic thoughts/beliefs







# ACT Tip 3 – In-vivo Mindfulness

- Consider starting each session with a Mindful Practice
  - Mindfulness of Breath
  - Mindful Body Scan
  - Mindful Movement
- Don't be afraid to do the practice with your patient
- Encourage Mindfulness exercises as part of home practice
- Consider engaging in your own private practice to notice your own internal world and how it related to your Away moves (Be Mindful Online - <https://www.bemindfulonline.com/>)





# ACT Tip 4 – Values and Actions

- Help people to get in touch with forgotten values



Pain & Me – Tamar Pincus



Michael Jr – Know Your Why





# ACT Tip 4 – Values and Actions

- Help people to get in touch with forgotten values



**Family Relations**

**Education/Personal Growth**

**Marriage/Couples/Intimate Relations**

**Recreation/Fun/Leisure**

**Parenting**

**Spirituality**

**Friendships/Social life**

**Career/Employment**

**Citizenship/Environment/Community**

**Health/Wellbeing**

Valued Living Questionnaire (Wilson, 2008)





# ACT Tip 4 – Values and Actions

- Help people to get in touch with forgotten values
- **SMART** Committed Actions technique:
  - S** Specific
  - M** Meaningful
  - A** Adaptive
  - R** Realistic
  - T** Time-bound





# ACT Tip 4 – Values and Actions

- Help people to get in touch with forgotten values
- **SMART** Committed Actions technique:
- Build-in SMART Graded Functional Goals *towards* Values (**not away** from pain) e.g.
  - Being a playful parent is an important value and pain gets in the way
  - Functional Goal to get on/off the floor
  - SMART Committed Action to move towards this in a graded way





# ACT Tip 5 – Make Room for Away Moves and Distress

- It takes time – Persistent Pain is a LTC
- Stick with Core Processes and with the Patient



**WHAT PEOPLE WANT  
IT TO FEEL LIKE**



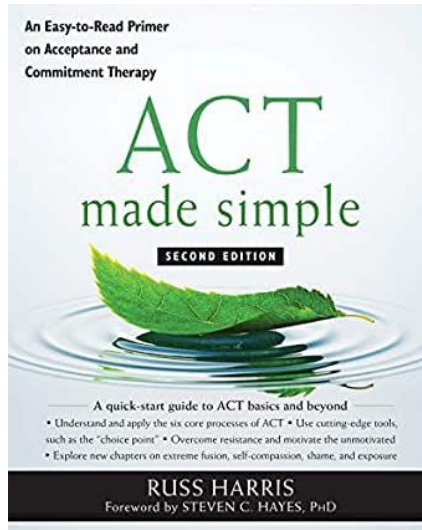
**WHAT IT ACTUALLY  
FEELS LIKE**





# Additional Resources

- Chelsea Pain Clinic YouTube Channel
- ACT Based Literature:



- Contextual Science Website: <https://contextualscience.org/>





Thank You

