

Six Acceptance and Commitment Training Conversations

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Psychological flexibility skills for study and life

JULIAN MCNALLY AND MICHAEL SWADLING

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In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture it is respectful to formally womin djeka (welcome) people to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander country or land.

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'Luwaytini' by Mark Cleaver, Palawa.

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About this Resource

This Open Education Resource is an adaptation of 6 ACT* Conversations by Julian McNally for the RMIT University Counselling Service, © 2006 RMIT University.

The original Six Acceptance and Commitment Training (**ACT**) Conversations were written and recorded by Counselling Psychologist Julian McNally, as part of the RMIT Student Counselling Service (now Counselling & Psychological Services). As part of RMIT Mental Wellbeing Initiatives (now Wellbeing & Psychosocial Safety) and RMIT Counselling & Psychological Services, Clinical Psychologist Michael Swadling has transcribed, revised, reworked, and updated content.

Six ACT Conversations was originally created as an audio resource for RMIT University students in 2006. Our intention in creating this Open Education Resource version is to provide new opportunities to access these resources, as well as the option of accessing the content as text or audio.

If you choose to access the audio content, you might occasionally find dated references due to the time since initial recording. Where possible, we have updated the text version of the content – so if something is unclear in the audio, the text might provide additional clarity.

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Cover design

Artwork created using AI in Adobe Firefly using the prompt “a university student, illustration; their head/face is divided into 6 sections, each in a different style of art. each sections has a different colour palette. the sections represent 6 different aspects of wellbeing”

Design: Ian Kolk

Introduction

Six Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) Conversations

Listen to the introduction, or read below.

Introduction – a recording of Julian McNally (4:30 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=4#audio-4-1>

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This audio e-learning program aims to provide RMIT University students with the psychological skills to support them in:

- completing study assessment tasks in an organised and stress-free manner
- starting and sustaining enjoyable relationships with their peers and friends
- conducting a meaningful and valued life while studying at University
- participating in group assessment projects in a fulfilling and confident manner
- living a balanced and enjoyable life!

The program uses concepts from **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**, but is not meant to take the place of counselling, psychotherapy or a mental health service.

The program includes six conversations, which take between 15 and 50 minutes to complete. Each conversation includes mini-lectures and several practical exercises. For each page of a conversation, you can either listen to the audio, read the text version, or combine the two.

The program is written in a sequence, but you can start with any of the six conversations depending on your interests and needs. Some conversation refer to material covered in other conversations, but we have tried to keep that to minimum. Each conversation deals with a single concept, but the concepts in **Acceptance and Commitment Training** are all closely related and work together.

This is an **experiential**, capability-building program. Completing the program is not about learning information but about developing new awareness, perceptions and behaviours. It is about knowing *how*, not knowing *that*. There is no endpoint to learning these skills – however much you practise them, you can always improve. So to get the most you can out of the program, you must practise the exercises.

You will find that you might get an immediate and obvious benefit from doing some exercises just once and won't need to do them again. With others though, especially the mindfulness exercises in Conversation 4: Mindfulness & Being Present, you may wish to make them a regular habit – just as you would with a physical exercise regime. Doing these practises is really the most important part of what **Acceptance and Commitment Training** has to offer – so if you have to choose between doing the exercises and listening to the rest of the recording in these sections, do the exercises.

The six conversations are:

1 – Language creates Conflict.

In this conversation, we will show how language and thought – the very tools of your academic success – can undermine your ability to respond effectively in important areas of your life.

2 – Action & Experience versus Thought & Emotion.

We will propose that although language and thoughts create obstacles to your success, the solution to this problem is not to fix, avoid, replace, or get rid of problem thoughts, and that getting nearer to a solution requires you to pay attention to something quite different.

3 – Acceptance & Willingness.

You'll work here on developing the attentional and emotional skills that provide a foundation for effective responses in demanding situations.

4 – Mindfulness & Being Present.

The exercises in this conversation give you further opportunities to practise skills to enhance your moment-to-moment effectiveness.

5 – Your Values & Direction.

Being more capable requires a purpose that is served by that capability. In this conversation we will work on identifying your values, which will form the basis for your purpose and direction.

6 – Committed Action.

The purpose and direction you identified in Conversation 5 will determine the actions you need to undertake. In this final conversation, we will provide you with practical tools and psychological skills to select and complete timely and appropriate actions in support of your valued direction.

Accessibility

Accessibility statement

RMIT University supports the creation of free, open, and accessible educational resources. We are actively committed to increasing the accessibility and usability of the textbooks and support resources we produce.

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The web version of this resource has been designed with accessibility in mind and incorporates the following features:

- It has been optimised for people who use screen reading technology.
 - All content can be navigated using a keyboard.
 - Links, headings, and tables are formatted to work with screen readers.
 - Images have text alternatives.
- Information is not conveyed by colour alone.

Other file formats available

In addition to the web version, this book is available in a number of file formats, including:

- **Print PDF** (the format you should select if you plan to make a printed, physical copy of your book. This file meets the requirements of printers and print-on-demand services.)
- **Digital PDF** (useful if you want to distribute your book as a digital file, but do not intend to print the file. Digital PDFs are optimised for accessibility, contain hyperlinks for easier navigation, and can be used online.)
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Accessibility improvements

While we strive to ensure that this resource is as accessible and usable as possible, we might not always get it right. We are always looking for ways to make our resources more accessible. If you have problems accessing this resource, please email us to let us know so we can fix the issue.

CONVERSATION 1: LANGUAGE CREATES CONFLICT

Your Mind and You

Listen to this section as audio, or read below.

Your Mind and You – a recording of Julian McNally (6:01 min)



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Before we start on the topic I have called **Language Creates Conflict**, I’d like you to think of a particular barrier or obstacle you have in your life.

What I mean by a **barrier** or **obstacle** is anything that stops you achieving a goal, outcome or quality that you care about or is important to you.

Ideally, the obstacle should be something that you have struggled with repeatedly or for some time, and that you believe should be under your influence.

Good examples might be

- “I always leave assignments until the week they’re due, then afterwards I regret it because I know I could have done better with more time”,
- “I take too long to make decisions about what courses I’m going to do”,
- “I worry too much” or
- “I lack confidence in situations where I have to present my work to colleagues or teachers”.

Keep this obstacle in mind as you work through this program, because I’ll be asking you at times to reflect on it and to do exercises which hopefully will help you in dealing with it. In fact, it will be impossible for you to do some of the exercises if you haven’t identified a genuine obstacle.



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Exercise 1: Noticing Your Mind

How did you choose that obstacle or barrier just now?

Did you read the list and think

“Yes, decision-making, that one is definitely me”?

Did you know straight away by remembering that *one thing* that you so often have thought:

- “If only I could do X, or stop doing X” or
- “I wish I was more [fill in your favourite adjective here – fit, smart, good looking, patient, confident, brave, considerate, flexible, etc.]”?

Did you go through a brief dialogue with yourself something like this:

“Hmm. What’s an outcome I really care about? That’s easy; it would have to be passing that Statistics course I failed last semester. What’s the obstacle, then? Well, partly it was that that tutor was so bad at explaining things, but

I can't change him, and if I'm honest with myself I just don't like the maths aspect of our program. I've never liked maths, so I don't put in much effort. Yes, that's the main obstacle, not trying consistently."

If you went through anything like the processes I have just described, you have been using what I am going to call **your mind**.

What I mean by **your mind** is the part of you that engages in a process of relating one phenomenon to another verbally.

For example, if you had the thought "*I wish I was more confident*", you related the verbal description of one phenomenon – **how confident I usually am** – to another – **how confident I wish I was**. So you compared your **ideal self** – confident and capable – to your **perception of yourself** now, or in the past.

Exercise 2: Your Mind at Work

Now rather than ask you to accept my definition, I want you to actually experience this **mind** that I'm talking about. So I'm going to ask you to stop reading for a few moments and during this silence I'd like you to just listen to your mind. Set a timer on your phone for 25 seconds, and stop reading until it's done.

[PAUSE – 25 seconds]

Okay. What did you notice? Did you have thoughts like "*Listen to my mind? What does he mean?*" or "*Okay, but what am I supposed to be getting out of this?*" or "*I think I'll just fast-forward to the next bit. This is boring.*"

Whatever thoughts you had, that is your mind at work – busy producing thoughts.

If you think you didn't have thoughts during that silence, how do you know that now?

The only way to know now that you had no thoughts then would be to somehow LOOK at the past experience of silence, compare it to another experience you've had of having thoughts and conclude, "*No thoughts that time*". However each of those three steps involve thoughts – so to know you've had no thoughts you have to have a thought about that! Just to reiterate the point more clearly, now try NOT thinking about the obstacle or barrier I asked you to choose earlier. Just don't think about that barrier for 10 seconds.

[PAUSE – 10 seconds]

Could you do it? For ten whole seconds? Not once? And if you did, how did you know you did? Most people find that they have to have a thought to be able to say they didn't have one!

Now in this conversation, and several other parts of this program, instead of just accepting the thoughts our minds offer us, we're going to be looking at those thoughts through a particular lens or filter. And the filter I'm asking you to use is "*What's most important to me? What is effective right now?*"

While we're at it, I'm going to ask you to listen to what I'm saying in a particular way. Without either blindly accepting what I say as true, or eagerly seeking to disprove it, can you just test what I say against your own experience? So not only do I not want you take the thoughts your mind gives you as the truth, I don't want you to take the thoughts my mind gives you as the truth either.

If I suggest anything or say anything here that doesn't correspond with your experience, just skip that part and move on to the next section. You can return to this section later – perhaps with further practise of the other exercises in this program, things will become clearer.

Reviewing

So far, I hope we've established that

- you have a mind
- it produces thoughts, and
- seemingly, you can't stop that from happening

Also remember, I've asked you to

- put your trust in your experience rather than in the thoughts your mind or my mind may give you, and
- listen to what I'm saying through the filter of "What's *important or useful to me?*" or "What is *effective right now?*"

Your Mind's Evolution

Listen to this section as audio, or read below.

Your Mind's Evolution – a recording of Julian McNally (5:31 min)



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"So what does this have to do with improving my academic performance, or making me more successful at relationships, or balancing study, work and the rest of my life?"

Remember the barrier you identified earlier. Have you ever found yourself having thoughts about that barrier? Did having those thoughts get rid of or fix the barrier? Or after all the thoughts were you still stuck with the barrier?

As you had those thoughts about the barrier, did you also have thoughts about how if you could just think the right thoughts, or smarter thoughts, or more creative thoughts, then you could solve the problem?

Has it been the case with this barrier or others like it, that the more thoughts you had, the further it seemed you got from a solution? That doesn't make sense, does it? Usually if you think long enough, hard enough or smart enough about a problem, you can solve it.

Exercise 3: Thinking as a Tool

As an example of that kind of problem, stop reading and try this brain-teaser.

Whether or not you solved that problem, you probably went through a process of making images of people's names, matched with hair or clothing colours, then comparing these 'composites' to the information provided and checking that they matched that information. Or, you may have, as I had to do, written down a matrix of names, hair and dress colours and replaced one or other of the names or colours until the combinations matched the information provided.

What you did was try something and if it didn't work, you kept trying other things until it did work. So why isn't that working with your barrier? To explain why this is so, we need to do a detour into the evolution of the human species and its mind.

When you compare human beings to every other species on the planet, it's hard not to conclude that in the game of surviving and flourishing we are the champions. One hundred thousand years ago, it is estimated there were fewer than one million human beings on the planet, perhaps as few as 10,000. We reached our first billion individuals in 1804 CE, and our population now stands at almost 8 billion. No other species has achieved that kind of growth sustained over such a long period.

Usually, through natural selection, a species develops a new technology for defence, reproduction or feeding and then displaces competing species. Then its population will increase until it fills its environmental 'niche'. At that point its numbers will stabilise until another more efficient species displaces it. That has not happened with humans however. The rate of increase of our population has accelerated consistently over the past 100,000 years. I am not saying that is necessarily a good thing. But even if we fill our environmental 'niche', planet Earth, that isn't necessarily the end of the story for humans.

We've already shown that we can live in the polar regions, underwater, and with some limits, in space. So it's conceivable that we could travel to other planets and live on them or even build artificial planets to live on. And we may have to if we don't look after this one. Other organisms will only be living on those planets if we take them with us. So what is the survival technology that



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separates us so starkly from these other species? It's the same tool I asked you to employ in solving the 'kindergarten' brainteaser – cognition or thinking, and language.

Early human beings could use language to communicate, for instance, that a tiger was nearby, that a particular fruit was poisonous or that they could catch game more easily by setting a trap. With thought and language together they could plan how to build a trap to catch the game or a fence to protect everyone in the tribe from the tiger. With the additional linguistic technology of writing or symbols they could even place a warning on the path near where the trap was hidden so that anyone coming by would not be harmed. This refinement to language meant you not only didn't have to see the trap being built to know where it was, you didn't even have to know the person who had built the trap to be protected by them. Not so lucky for the tiger or deer caught in the trap – they either missed out on lunch or became lunch, unlike the humans.

Once we started working together in these ways to ensure each other's survival, comfort and safety, we then had to apply our linguistic technology to social relationships. After all it was through establishing and maintaining those relationships that we were able to develop and build ingenious survival tools like game traps and protective fences. What this has meant for human beings is that, compared to other species, we have become very attentive to and skilful at interpreting subtle emotional cues such as changes in body language, eye gaze, facial expressions, tone of voice and so on. So far so good. By harnessing our linguistic, cognitive and social technologies, we can find food and water, protect ourselves from predators and weather, even pass on useful knowledge to each other such as the medicinal or toxic qualities of specific plants.

Where's the problem then?

Paradox

Listen to this section as audio, or read below.

Paradox – a recording of Julian McNally (5:44 min)



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Think about what survival has meant for the kinds of thought processes that nature has selected for. Here’s a typical Stone Age scenario:

Example: Grok and Lunk

Two cavemen, Grok and Lunk, are out in a grassy field eating nuts and berries.

Grok: “Hey, Lunk, I thought I saw something moving in the grass over there. Could be a tiger. I’m going back to the cave. Are you coming?”

Lunk: “Nah. It’s probably just a rabbit. These berries are too tasty to leave. I’ll see you later.”

Grok goes back to the cave. Lunk eats his fill of nuts and berries and goes to sleep under a tree. Next day, same thing.

Grok: “Lunk, there’s something moving in the grass. I’m going back to the cave. You should come too.”

Lunk: “And leave these delicious nuts to the birds! You go. I’ll be fine.”

Grok goes back to the cave, but he can’t stop thinking about his friend. Lunk falls asleep under a tree, and... **gets eaten by the tiger.**

Now who would you say had the more relaxed personality and who was the anxious one?

Obviously, Grok is the worrier. His friend, Lunk, has a relaxed “*she’ll be right*”/“*it’ll be fine*” attitude. On the first day, Grok’s worrying costs him some tasty berries and restful sleep. But on the second day, Lunk’s blasé approach costs him his life and of course any future reproductive opportunities!

Can you see why humans tend to worry so much? By becoming worried we occasionally missed out on lunch, but we also ultimately missed out on becoming someone else’s lunch, and so we passed our tendency to worry on to our children. We were **evolutionarily selected** to have a mind that is **extremely inventive**, but also **extremely alert to potential dangers**. Combine those two abilities and you can even invent things to worry about that are probably never going to happen. Have you ever done anything like that?

Mark Twain captured the essence of this very human flaw when he said: “*I’ve seen many troubles in my time, only half of which ever came true.*”

So our ability to plan and make decisions using thinking and language is a **double-edged sword**. It has brought us more economic resources and physical security, but **the cost is our peace of mind**.

Now before we close this detour into the evolution of the human mind, there’s one other point we need to consider to help us appreciate how our minds work against us.

How our minds work against us

I spoke earlier about how, as a species, we had become very good at paying attention to and interpreting social and emotional information about those around us, and how this skill was essential so that we could carry out highly coordinated tasks like building large structures or capturing and killing large game – not to mention more sophisticated socially coordinated survival tasks like farming, trading and tracking kinship ties to prevent inbreeding.

When we apply our highly predictive and danger-sensitive thinking apparatus to this *social* and *emotional* information, we have a whole new domain to worry and make disastrous predictions about. Predictions like:

- “Oh! The boss seemed distracted when I was telling her about my new idea. She’s not going to give me that chance I need.” or
- “He stopped smiling when I moved closer to him. He doesn’t like me after all.” or
- “Everyone’s looking at me. I just know I’m not going to talk as smoothly and confidently as the others just did. I’m the worst on the team.”

Have you ever had worries or thoughts like those? You compare what you want to experience (or not experience) in your **internal world** to what appears to be currently happening.

Usually, you then try to problem-solve how you might bridge the gap between what you desire and reality. So if we thought someone had stopped smiling, then we might propose solutions to ourselves like (depending on the circumstances):

- “I will stop talking to him”
- “I will withdraw”
- “I won’t ask him out”
- “I will ask him how he feels”
- “I will speak to a friend and get their perspective.”

And yet, when the problem that we’re trying to change or avoid is an uncomfortable feeling inside us – a thought, feeling, memory, or sensation – we can’t run, hide, or fight from it in the way we might run, hide, or fight a danger that’s occurring outside of our body.

No matter how hard we run or hide or fight, that internal experience may reappear at any time – we can never escape them in a way that they might never return. And even if the solution we decide on seems to change things in the outside world (like someone acting differently towards us), it often doesn’t change what we’re experiencing on the inside.

If we look again at the barrier or obstacle that you chose at the beginning of this section, I’d suggest to you that the reason you haven’t been able to **solve this problem** yet is that you’re trying to solve a problem that occurs in an internal domain – *your emotions and motivation* – with a set of tools that are well-evolved to solve problems in a separate and mostly unrelated outside domain – *the physical world outside your skin*.

Intelligent, capable people like you and me, people who would never dream of trying to cook their dinner with a bicycle or ride to work on an oven make this mistake all the time. In fact, we can’t not make this mistake, because isn’t it true that it’s *your mind* that notices when you have a problem, then gets busy trying to solve, then evaluates how well it was solved?

And isn’t it also true that when the problem hasn’t been solved, your mind simply recommences this very process that it just proved didn’t work? And then if your problem is somehow resolved, escaped or avoided, does your mind then say “*That’s great! Good work! Now you can have a break from thinking and worrying about the future.*” If it does, I bet it’s not for long!

I don’t want you to just accept my word for any of this, but I do ask that you remain open to this proposition and test it against your experience, not what your mind tells you.

And now so that you can become more familiar through experience with the concepts discussed in this section, I’d like you to try some experiential games or exercises. With most of these the purpose is not to change or fix anything, simply to observe what happens and notice what you learn by doing them. If, when you do it, a particular exercise seems not to make sense – or you don’t notice anything happening – that’s fine. Just leave it and do one of the others – you can always come back to it again!



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Suppressing & Noticing Thoughts

Listen to this section as audio, or read below.

Suppressing and Noticing Thoughts – a recording of Julian McNally (14:16 min)



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The next two exercises are modelled on those in **Steve Hayes' ACT** self-help book, *Get Out Of Your Mind and Into Your Life*.

Exercise 4: Thought suppression

For these exercises you will need a watch, a sheet of paper and a pencil or pen.

Think about a *red tennis ball*. See it in your mind. See the lines around it, and the red fuzzy surface.

Now, write down how many times in the last two days you had thoughts about a red tennis ball.

Now, using the watch to keep time, sit for three minutes and don't think about a red tennis ball. Do your best to make sure you don't have even one thought about a red tennis ball. Start now.

[PAUSE – 3 minutes]

Okay that's three minutes. Now write down as accurately as you can, the number of times you had a thought about a red tennis ball during that 3-minute period.

Okay. Now spend three minutes just thinking about whatever comes to mind. Just let your thoughts flow in an unforced manner. Start now.

[PAUSE – 3 minutes].

Now write down the number of thoughts you had about a red tennis ball in that 3-minute period.

Compare the three numbers. In non-numeric terms, most people's responses for the three sampling periods are "*none at all*", then "*lots, I couldn't stop thinking about that damn ball*", and lastly "*a few*" or "*lots at first, but then it got less*".

So what's the point of this exercise? Just this – **you cannot control your thoughts**.

And if one of your strategies for solving your problems has been to try really, really hard to control your thoughts or feelings, it's not your fault that you've failed. It's not that you're not smart enough or creative enough or hard working enough.

Could it be that the strategy simply doesn't work for this kind of problem?

If you're still having the thought that controlling your thoughts will help with the problem, you can try this exercise – it's similar to the thought suppression exercise.

Exercise 4.5: Thought Suppression in Action

First think of a thought that comes up a lot when you're dealing with the barrier or obstacle you've chosen.

Write that thought down – or at least a word or prompt to remind you of it.

Estimate how many times you have had that thought in the last two days, and write that too.

Now, spend 3 minutes doing your best to avoid having that thought. Start now.

[PAUSE 3 minutes].

Okay – write down how many times you had that thought over those 3 minutes.

Now take another 3 minutes, and just let yourself think about anything else. Start now.

[PAUSE 3 minutes].

Write down how many times you had the thought in that 3 minutes.

Did you find as you tried not thinking about the thought that it became less important, lighter and less central?

Or did it become more significant, more compelling, perhaps even more frightening or unwelcome?

Many people find that the thoughts that are most strongly associated with their problems are the ones they are usually trying hardest to suppress.

Understandably of course, because the thought usually reminds them of unpleasant experiences with the problem.

Occasionally they're successful at getting rid of the thought, temporarily at least, but strangely the problem is never actually solved.

Later, in *Conversation 3: Acceptance & Willingness*, we'll look closely at an alternative to suppression and avoidance, but next in **Conversation 2: Action & Experience versus Thought & Emotion**, we'll provide you with something you can do with the thoughts and feelings you have been trying to control, suppress or avoid.

CONVERSATION 2: ACTION & EXPERIENCE VERSUS THOUGHT & EMOTION

Introducing Defusion

Listen to this introduction as audio, or read below.

Introducing Defusion – a recording of Julian McNally (2:07 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=302#audio-302-1>

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Welcome to Conversation 2 of Six **ACT** Conversations – a program from RMIT University designed to help you live a balanced and fulfilling life while completing your program of study.

The program uses concepts from **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy** – or ACT for short. But it is not meant to take the place of counselling, psychotherapy or mental health treatment. Although you can use the program in any sequence you wish, you should read the about this resource section before starting.

This conversation, we'll look at **Experience versus Thought**, which continues logically from where we finished in **Conversation 1: Language creates Conflict**. Of course, you don't have to listen to that conversation to get some benefits from this one. However, if you find you are struggling to make sense of the exercises, or especially why I am asking you to do some of the exercises, you may find it helpful to listen to or revise that section.

In this conversation we will introduce you to an alternative to trying to gain control of your thoughts and feelings. For the sake of consistency, we'll call this alternative approach **defusion**, but the process is recognised by other names. Before I encountered **ACT**, I would have called it *inclusion*. Dr Russ Harris refers to it in his book, *The Happiness Trap*, as *expansion*. Rather than provide a lot of theoretical description of it though, this conversation will mostly ask you to practise specific defusion exercises – that way you'll learn what defusion is and how you might use it through first-hand experience.

In this conversation of the program, we'll do five defusion exercises. You can replay these segments of the program any time you want to practise defusion. After the five exercises, I'll describe some other defusion exercises you can practise without a recording. These exercises will be available as handouts. You can also find many similar defusion exercises in the two ACT self-help books I've referred to: *Get Out Of Your Mind and Into Your Life* by Steven Hayes, and *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris.



Photo by Thought Catalogue on Unsplash

Words Fuse Thoughts

Listen to this section as audio, or read below.

Words Fuse Thoughts – a recording of Julian McNally (9:05 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=62#audio-62-1>

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The first exercise is called "Milk".

Exercise 1: Milk

Think of a glass of cold white milk.

Imagine holding it in your hand, freshly poured from the carton or bottle. You can see a few droplets that have splashed onto the side of the glass.

Now imagine raising the glass up to your lips, tilting it towards your mouth.

Now imagine feeling the cool milk on your lips and tongue.

Okay, are you salivating yet? Most people find that that's what happens. They don't just have the thought 'milk', they also have a version of the experience of 'milk'. This is what we call **fusion**.

The word and the experience have become so fused that the word appears to function not only as a label for the object or event; it actually produces some aspects of experiencing the event. In the next part of the exercise, we'll see if you can defuse to some degree from the word 'milk'. The process of doing this is very simple.

Repeat the word 'milk' very quickly for around 30 seconds. Say it as fast as you can, only pausing to take a breath when needed.

['milk' – 30 seconds]

What did you find?

Most people find when they do this that they're suddenly very aware of how strange they sound, how hard it is to pronounce the word rapidly and accurately and that the sound of the word 'milk' soon becomes almost meaningless.

Certainly it loses most of the connotations it had when I talked about the experience in detail.



Photo by Anthony Tori on Unsplash

Exercise 1.5: Applying the Milk exercise to Thoughts

Now I invite you to try the same exercise with something a little more personal and emotionally involving. Ideally you should choose a single word, although a short two or three word phrase may be alright. This should be a word that is strongly associated for you with the barrier or obstacle I asked you to identify at the start of Conversation 1. That is, something you've struggled with for some time that stops you achieving a goal (or a quality) that is important to you. When you have identified the word or phrase, we can start the exercise. If the word can be one that you or others have used to evaluate you or your performance – for example, if you say to yourself “I’m just so lazy”, then “lazy” would be the word we’d use as a target. Or you might recall someone laughing at you and saying “you’re just so thick”, then “thick” would be the word.

A word of warning before we start though – don’t choose a traumatic experience or something related to mental health condition that you are or should be seeking treatment for. Examples of these might be conditions such as psychosis or obsessive-compulsive thoughts/behaviours, or experiences of physical or sexual abuse or natural disasters that you haven’t yet recovered from. These require a more personal, flexible and structured approach that only proper treatment can provide. Instead, choose something relatively ‘safe’ like a difficulty with concentration, time management or social skills.

Now I want you to imagine or remember an experience of dealing with this barrier and use the word or phrase you’ve chosen as a target to remind you of it. So you might recall a time you handed something in late, how you were penalised for it, perhaps had to explain to classmates or parents that you lost marks for lateness and recall the feelings you had at the time, all the while thinking ‘late’. Now let yourself fully experience the feelings that happened at the time.

[PAUSE – 20 seconds]

Now on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 – with 0 being no distress, and 10 being unbearable distress – just write down how distressed you felt just now as you imagined or remembered this experience and applied this word to yourself. Now also on a scale of 0 to 10 – with 0 being not believable at all, and 10 being completely convincing – rate how much you believed this thought as you did the exercise.

Now repeat the process we carried out before with the word ‘milk’. That is, for thirty seconds say the target word out loud, as fast as you can without stopping.

[PAUSE – 30 seconds]

Okay. Now immediately rate the level of distress and the level of believability on the same 10-point scale as before.

As with the ‘milk’ exercise, most people find that this repetition reduces both the level of distress they feel and how believable the word is. In effect, they begin to see, and I hope you do too, that a word is just a word; a thought is just a thought.

The next exercise is Finish The Sentence.

Exercise 2: Finish The Sentence

I’m now going to say some incomplete phrases or sentences. If you grew up in Australia, you’ll probably be familiar with many, if not all of these phrases. Your task is to simply say the final word or words that complete the phrase or sentence. Ready? Let’s start:

Sticks and stones may break my ____

Goldilocks and the three ____

Once upon a ____

And they all lived happily ____

Advance Australia ____

Did you find that the words came to mind automatically, with no effort on the part of your mind? This is simply because of your conditioned verbal history. You're used to hearing fairy tales that begin with '*once upon a time*' and end with '*and they all lived happily ever after*'. It took many repetitions for you to learn to expect that final word. But now it's so well-drilled that you have to effortfully work to come up with something else. Now try finishing these sentences:

I think I'm too ____

I wish I wasn't so ____

I could be truly happy if ____

You probably found those sentences pretty easy to finish too. And I'm sure you didn't come up with sentences like "*I think I'm too fabulous*", or "*I wish I wasn't so lovable and smart*". No, chances are your sentences indicated a negative evaluation of you and your qualities. Again this is relatively automatic for the same reason that your mind gives you '*once upon a time*' instead of '*once upon a pancake*'. It's what you've rehearsed and repeated many times.

Now, if I told you that tomorrow I'm coming round to your place with a thousand dollars in cash to give to you as long you say '*pancake*' after I say to you "*Once upon a*", do you think you'd be able to change what you say? I bet you would.

I bet you'd stay up all night practising the '*milk*' exercise but with '*once upon a pancake*'!

So, for a thousand dollars, you're willing to see '*time*' and '*pancake*' as just words – and in the context of getting a thousand dollars, one is suddenly more valuable than the other and you're willing to defuse from '*once upon a time*'.

Now be careful with this. My point is not to get you to simply change from automatically saying '*I wish I wasn't so lazy*' to automatically saying '*I wish I wasn't so clever*'.

My aim is not change what your mind tells you, nor to change the automaticity of it. Rather, I want you to have the experience of choosing whether or not you go along with each thought your mind automatically brings you. These automatic thoughts and beliefs tend to just appear – immediate, fully-formed and with lots of credibility.

The next few exercises are designed to give you the time to see this mind of yours in operation mid-flight so that you can have a choice about how you respond to them.

Thoughts On The Highway

Listen to this section as audio, or read below.

Thoughts on the Highway – a recording of Julian McNally (8:43 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=64#audio-64-1>

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This exercise takes about ten minutes and is best done with your eyes closed and in a peaceful place – so you may wish to locate yourself somewhere quiet where you won't be interrupted.

Exercise 3: Thoughts On The Highway

Take a deep slow breath. If you're reading along, you won't be able to close your eyes, so instead relax your gaze as much as you can without impairing your ability to read the instructions.

You might notice as you sit there that you are aware of the sounds around you.

Take another deep slow breath.

In a moment I'm going to ask you to pay attention to something that is there all the time, and that normally you might not have noticed.

I'm going to stop giving instructions in a moment, and I'd like you to notice that when I'm silent, your mind isn't – there are thoughts there.

[PAUSE – 30 seconds]

There are thoughts there like "Yeah, he's right. There are thoughts there." or "Yeah, I know about that. My mind is always thinking something", or "What's he talking about? I'm not having any thoughts."

Those are your thoughts.

Maybe the thoughts you had were more visual like an image, or it may have been more of a feeling that drew your attention. Those are your thoughts too.

Now what I'd like you to do is imagine that you're standing at the side of a big eight-lane freeway.

You're off to the side, safe behind a barrier, and there's a few vehicles driving past you on the freeway – cars, buses, trucks, motorcycles.

And with the next thought that you have – whether it's a word, image or feeling – I'd like you to place it on the next vehicle that comes along.

And then watch that thought go onto that vehicle and disappear off into the distance.

[PAUSE – 10 seconds]

And no doubt you're having another thought or thoughts. So take that next thought and place it on the next vehicle that comes by. And watch that disappear off into the distance

[PAUSE – 5 seconds]



Photo by JD Mason on Unsplash

And you can do this with the next thought that comes along. So just place it on the next vehicle that comes past.

[PAUSE – 5 seconds]

And as many thoughts as you have, you can place them on the next vehicle that comes by. Just watch them slide off into the distance.

You might even see some of the thoughts that you've seen before reappearing. That's okay. You can place each one on one of these vehicles and watch it disappear.

And some of the thoughts could be trivial or important, predictable or unexpected. It doesn't matter. With everyone there's a vehicle that can take them away from you.

Now, try this with an emotion. It could be something you're feeling right now, something you felt in the last few days or perhaps some time ago. It doesn't have to be an intense feeling as long as you can be aware of that feeling right now. And place that emotion on the next vehicle that comes past. You're not losing it forever – it can always come back – but you're just letting it go for now.

[7 seconds]

And try it with another one. There may be some emotion you've been struggling with for a while. Something that confuses you or something that you don't enjoy having. Just let that feeling be placed on the next vehicle that comes past, and watch it drive off into the distance.

[PAUSE – 7 seconds]

And you can do this any number of times – for any thoughts and feelings.

You might even get to the point at some stage where you're not even aware of having any thoughts and feelings.

[PAUSE – 10 seconds]

If you do, that doesn't mean anything – and if there are more thoughts and feelings, just place them on the vehicles as they're coming past.

Now as you're standing there on the side of the freeway, you might begin to be curious about a question about "*who is that is there on the side of the freeway, if your feelings and thoughts can be taken away so easily?*" If you can let go of those thoughts and feelings, who is there watching that happen?

So, you're obviously not those thoughts and feelings – they seem to come and go. Perhaps are you that person on the side of the freeway watching that? Or are you the person listening to my voice now and following my instructions? And if any of this is confusing or boring or upsetting, that's another feeling or thought that you can place on a vehicle and let it slide off into the distance.

[PAUSE – 10 seconds]

So you might begin to notice that there's you that's been there throughout your whole life, observing any of the feelings and any of the thoughts that you've had. You actually weren't those thoughts and feelings... or they'd still be here, but they seem to disappear into your experience and into history. So who's always there? It's the 'you' that's always observing this experience of yours, and isn't actually attached or fixed to any of these thoughts or feelings. So it has them, but it can let them go.

[PAUSE – 7 seconds]

And you might want to decide, as you listen to this right now, that you'll try this exercise at another time.

There might be a useful time when this exercise could be of lasting value to you.

Or maybe you'll just enjoy the experience you're having right now as you have it.

[PAUSE – 10 seconds]

So now I'd like you to take a deep slow breath, and whenever you're ready you can continue with the part of this conversation.

[PAUSE – 10 seconds]

Notice your Thoughts

Listen to this section as audio, or read below.

Notice your Thoughts – a recording of Julian McNally (2:32 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=66#audio-66-1>

(“Notice your Thoughts” by RMIT Counselling and Psychological Services, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The fourth exercise is simply called Notice Your Thoughts.

Exercise 4: Notice Your Thoughts

Take a moment to identify a thought that you’re having right now.

[PAUSE – 10 seconds]

If you can, put that thought into words like a phrase or sentence.

Now add the following phrase before that phrase, “*I’m having the thought that...*”. If you were thinking, “*when I finish this, I have to call Mum*“, then just say to yourself, “*I’m having the thought that when I finish this, I have to call Mum*“.

Now, try it again on your own with the next thought that you have.

[PAUSE – 15 seconds]

You can also do this with feelings, visual images and memories. Try identifying a feeling that you’re having now or one that you’ve felt strongly in the past day or two.

[PAUSE – 10 seconds]

Now say to yourself, “*I’m having the feeling of ...*” – then name that feeling.

Notice whether you find that first time around you feel the feeling more strongly than when you simply name the feeling.

One way of enhancing this ‘distancing’ effect with this exercise is to become aware of the fact that it’s you that is having the thought, feeling, memory or image. You can do this by preceding the labelling phrase “*I’m having the feeling/ thought...*” with the additional phrase “*I notice that...*”. So it will sound like this: “*I notice that I’m having the feeling of irritation*“, or “*I notice that I’m having the thought that I should clean up the kitchen now*“.

Try that a few times with different thoughts and feelings.

As you continue to practise these defusion techniques, you may find that you can start to experience thoughts as ‘*just thoughts*’ and feelings as ‘*just feelings*’. Remember though, that we’re **not aiming to stop the thoughts or feelings** from happening – **or to get rid of them**.

Thank your Mind

Listen to this section as audio, or read below.

Thank your Mind – a recording of Julian McNally (4:27 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=68#audio-68-1>

(“Thank your Mind” by RMIT Counselling and Psychological Services, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The fifth exercise is called Thank your Mind.

Exercise 5: Thank Your Mind

This is simply the process of thanking your mind for its thoughts.

As soon as you recognise a thought, you just say to yourself, “Thank you, Mind.”

Of course you can say it out loud if you wish, but since you’re talking with your mind, there’s no real need to.

It’s time for you to practise this one. Let yourself have thoughts and Thank Your Mind for each one.

[PAUSE – 1 minute]

Were you able to do that?



Photo by Anthony Tori on Unsplash

Many people find this easier than the more intense and focused exercises like Thoughts On The Highway.

This exercise is especially useful for what I call **fishhook thoughts**. Fishhook thoughts are thoughts that pop into your mind like those annoying advertisements on some websites. They look like they won’t go away until you click on them. Like a fat juicy worm on a baited fishhook, they are just begging you to take them in and digest them – to obsess over them, worry about them or fantasise about them.

An example would be when you’re sitting down to study and turn off your phone so you won’t be disturbed – and then 20 minutes later the thought pops up, “Hey, I wonder what Kim’s doing tonight? I’ll just send a quick text and see what’s up.”

Once you have that thought, it seems to demand that you turn on the phone and send that text.

Instead, try thanking your mind and returning to the study.

When I suggested that just now, did your mind say, “*That won’t work! That thought will just keep coming back.*”?

Yes, it probably will.

Anyone who’s done some fishing knows you don’t just give up and go home the first time a fish ignores your bait – your mind will keep tempting you to pay attention to what it thinks is important.

If you’ve completed Conversation 1 – where I asked you to not think about the obstacle – just like that, your mind is going to continue to present that thought to you.

Each time that happens, if you gently *Thank Your Mind* and return your attention to what you consider important – guess what?

You get to swim away to wherever you want to go, rather than being stuck struggling on the end of a line with a hook in your mouth.

Practising Defusion

Most people find some of the following benefits when they practise defusion:

- Troubling or compelling thoughts become less troubling or compelling, or less believable or important
- Difficult feelings seem to be easier to accept or seem to occur less often. Or sometimes they occur even more often, but seem less intense or have a weaker connection to the self.
- In situations where the person previously felt they had no alternatives for how they responded, they often experience a sense of choice or freedom and can actually take different actions.

Hopefully you've practised these defusion exercises as we've gone through this conversation. If you have, there are some other defusion exercises you can download and try out in this handout. If you haven't, take a moment now to see what comes up – what thought or feeling – as soon as I suggest that you need to do these exercises. That may be the very thing you need to defuse from. But if you feel reluctant to even face that thought or feeling and would rather continue struggling to avoid it or control it, then it could be time to look at willingness and acceptance. And that's what we'll do in Conversation 3 of Six ACT Conversations, **Acceptance & Willingness**.

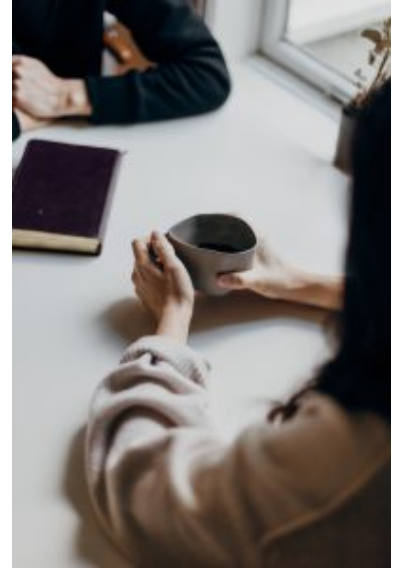


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CONVERSATION 3: ACCEPTANCE & WILLINGNESS

Introducing Willingness

Introducing Willingness – a recording of Julian McNally (2:09 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=311#audio-311-1>

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Welcome to Conversation 3 of Six **ACT** Conversations – a program from RMIT University designed to help you live a balanced and fulfilling life while completing your program of study.

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In this conversation, **Willingness & Acceptance**, we'll ask you to learn and practise skills of emotional acceptance.

This will be in contrast to the usual approaches to difficult or unpleasant emotions which are to simply control, avoid or get rid of them. If you want to understand why we're asking you to practise acceptance and willingness instead, you can visit Conversation 1: Language creates Conflict, and also try exercise 2 from Conversation 2 of Six ACT Conversations.

Choosing your Actions

Choosing your Actions – a recording of Julian McNally (6:13 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=75#audio-75-1>

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Who do you know that never has difficult or unpleasant feelings?

Anyone?

Of course, you may know people that you might describe as calm, serene or perhaps you have a more derogatory description for people who don't seem to show much emotion: ‘cold fish’, ‘space cadet’, ‘iceman’ or ‘snow queen’. But the point is that although those people don't seem to show much emotion, that doesn't mean they don't feel any. In my experience counselling many people, I usually find that those who seem to display little feeling fall into one of two categories.

The first are those who are somewhat out of touch with their feelings, they often don't know what they're feeling, but you can see from their behaviour, especially once you get to know them, that they are feeling something.

The second category is those who definitely have strong feelings but are reluctant to express them or to admit to having them.



Photo by Daiga Ellaby on Unsplash

It seems that for all of us – admittedly some more than others – suffering and dealing with difficult or unpleasant feelings is an unavoidable part of life. But do they have to stop you being effective?

If you've finished them, you might remember that I asked you in Conversation 1 and Conversation 2 of Six ACT Conversations to answer these questions based on **your experience**, not on what your mind or your thoughts or even common sense may be telling you?

The question is “Do uncomfortable or unpleasant thoughts or feelings **have to stop you** from doing what is important to you?”

So now a few experiential exercises or games to give you the chance to answer this question from your experience.

Exercise 1: Sit or Stand

Firstly, if you're currently sitting or lying down right now stand up – and if you're currently standing up, instead sit or lie down. Don't question it, just do it.

Okay, before I asked you to stand, if you were sitting, or to sit, if you were standing, did you already have the impulse to do what I asked you? If you did, that's amazing timing on my part. More likely what happened is you chose to stand (or sit).

Now what your mind may tell you about this is “No. You said ‘stand up’ and I thought, ‘okay, I'll do that and see what happens’. So I stood up because I had the feeling of curiosity. Otherwise, I wouldn't have done it.”

Note for now that it's **your mind** that's telling you that – and I'm asking you to observe and pay attention to **your experience**.

Or your mind may tell you, “Well. I've been standing for a while now. And when you said to sit, I thought, ‘oh, good. That's what I feel like doing actually.’ So I sat down because I felt tired and it seemed like a good idea.”

Again, take a close look at what happened and I think you'll find that your mind is actually getting involved in this process of recalling what happened and actually telling you how it is rather than you simply discovering what happened.

So I'm going to ask you to do this exercise several more times, because your mind is very fast and wants to take control because, according to it, it alone is essential to your survival and safety.

Exercise 2: Choosing

Try sitting down right now whether or not you feel like it, and as you do, watch yourself choosing to sit down.

Good.

Now whether or not you feel like it right now, stand up and watch as you choose to stand up.

Did you notice, that as you're doing this choosing to sit and choosing to stand, your mind just doesn't shut up?

It's like, "Okay, I'm sitting down like you told me. Where's this 'choosing' you're going on about?"

In Conversation 1 and Conversation 2 of Six ACT Conversations, we saw how it is impossible to turn off this language machine called thinking, and how in fact in the Thought Suppression exercise, the harder you try to stop it, the more thoughts it produces.

Stick with me for two or three more turns.

If you're standing right now, let yourself choose to sit down.

Notice your mind is active as you do that, but try to catch yourself in the act of making the choice to sit down.

And now, ready or not, stand up – same thing, look for the choice point.

Exercise 3: Half-squat

Okay this time, whether or not you feel like it... continue standing.

If you were expecting or wanting to sit, notice that you can continue to stand even though that unfulfilled want or expectation is still there. Very good.

Now very slowly, start to sit down – and stop when you're halfway down to your chair.

So you should now be in a half-squat position – with your legs bent at the knee, and halfway down to sitting in your chair.

But don't sit just yet. Just hold that posture for the next 60 seconds and observe what your experience is.

Of course, if you know this is bad for you because of joint or blood pressure problems, then don't do this exercise.

But otherwise, just watch what your mind does as the physical discomfort increases.

[PAUSE – 45 seconds]

Most people find that when they get to this point, about 45 seconds, they're feeling some pain. And it's at that point that the mind starts to say, "okay that's enough! You can stop now."

[continue until 60 seconds]

And you can stop now, because that is about 60 seconds since we started.

Choosing Willingly

Choosing Willingly – a recording of Julian McNally (2:34 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
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Okay, when your legs have recovered, I'd like you to try that exercise again.

When I said that just now, did your mind say something like “Oh, no! Not again. I don't want to do that. It hurts. What's the point of this silly exercise anyway?”

So if your mind does this, Thank Your Mind, which is an exercise from Conversation 2: Action & Experience versus Thought & Emotion, and remember why we're doing this.

We want an answer to the question, “Do unpleasant thoughts and feelings stop you being effective?” Because, if you can be effective even when you don't feel enthusiastic or motivated, how useful would that be?

See if you're waiting for enthusiasm, motivation and inspiration to strike, well... I don't know about you, but I find that when I need it, it's hardly ever there and then when it is there, I probably take it for granted.

So if you could do what you need to do – regardless of the direction your thoughts and feelings are pulling you, would your actions be more effective and productive? And would your quality of living improve?

So we'll do the exercise again, and this time as you do it I'm going to talk you through an enhancement to the exercise that Dr Russ Harris in the book *The Happiness Trap* calls **expansion**.

If you want to time yourself and see how long you can stay in that uncomfortable posture, as a measure of effectiveness, you can. But remember we're not trying to get you to stay longer in a half-squat position, rather to see if you can choose your actions in the presence of unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings and thoughts.

By the way, if you're listening to this somewhere now where it's not physically possible for you to do this exercise, I'd suggest skipping forward to the next part and trying this exercise when you can.



Photo by Oliver Paaske on Unsplash

Exercise 4: Half-squat with expansion

Okay, we'll start now.

So from a standing position with your feet nearly shoulder-width apart, keeping your back straight, just sink gently down until your legs make almost a ninety-degree or right angle.

Depending on your height, this should mean dropping almost 12 inches or 30 centimetres from the standing position.

Now, take a deep slow breath in...

[PAUSE – 5 seconds]

and breathe out...

[PAUSE – 5 seconds]

and as you breathe out, just push a little more air out on that outbreath.

Good, now let the air back in.

And pay attention to the sensations you are starting to feel in your legs.

Whatever those sensations are... and however they are right now... let them be that way and just notice them.

[PAUSE – 5 seconds]

At the same time, when thoughts about the sensations appear, just acknowledge them and bring your focus back to the physical sensations you're having right now.

[PAUSE – 5 seconds].

See if you can just watch these sensations like a curious scientist who has never seen this before.

Keep breathing. And as you breathe, see if you can breathe around the sensations, expanding to make space for them to be there just as they are.

Allow the feelings and thoughts that you're having to come and go, to change and shift as you continue to give them your full attention.

[PAUSE – 5 seconds]

Even if you find yourself distracted by a thought or an impulse, keep bringing your attention to the experience you're having... and continue to willingly grant it permission to be – just as it is.

Alright, now that's about two minutes, so you can stop now or continue if you wish.

Either way, continue to observe your sensations and thoughts in response to that choice.

Expansion Explained

Expansion Explained– a recording of Julian McNally (3:14 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=79#audio-79-1>

(“Expansion Explained” by RMIT Counselling and Psychological Services, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Meanwhile I’ll explain a little about the skill we’ve just practised.

It is called **expansion** because you aim to expand yourself to include the difficult feeling or thought. This is the alternative I promised in Conversation 2, to ignoring, suppressing, avoiding, getting rid of or controlling thoughts and feelings.

Of course, if any of those methods are working for you consistently and in the long term, by all means, continue to use them. I would be the first to admit that what I am offering you here is not easy – not usually anyway. Simple, yes; easy no. But if you’ve found, as we discussed in Conversations 1 and 2, that there are some problems that these conventional methods just never deal with satisfactorily, then you may care to try this alternative that I call willingness, acceptance, choosing, including, permitting, allowing etc.

By the way, the reason I have to give it so many names is because the names are a label for the experience, they aren’t the experience. In the same way that you can’t get home by walking on a map, and you can’t feed yourself with just a menu, you can’t use much of what I’m saying by just hearing it, reading it or understanding it intellectually. You need to experience it – which is why I urge you to practise these exercises.

Key Takeaways

So when you practise expansion, there are three simple steps. They are Observe, Breathe, and Allow.

Firstly, you **observe** the feeling or thought that you are struggling with, paying attention to its characteristics: How does it feel or look? What size is it? How fast is it? What temperature does it have?

Secondly, you **breathe** in and around the feeling or thought, trying to get yourself as close to it as you can and at the same time using the breath to expand the sense of space around the feeling.

Thirdly, you **allow** it to be where it is, the way it is for as long as it is. For many people this is the most challenging part of this process. They feel they can’t do anything but struggle with or run away from the feeling when it’s there. Allowing or including is simply a choice that you make.

Hopefully, if you’ve done the standing and sitting exercise earlier in this conversation, you have found that you can choose to do something you don’t want to and can delay or prevent yourself doing something you do want to.

This is the kind of choosing I spoke about earlier when you were choosing to sit or choosing to stand.

And I’ll remind you again that we are not trying to change our level of enjoyment or motivation about what we are doing, rather to change what we do in the presence of difficult feelings.

I said before that willingness and acceptance is simple, but not easy. Given that it’s hard to do, the question comes to mind “Why do all this work?” In **Conversation 5: Your Values & Direction** of Six ACT Conversations, we’ll be working together to find an answer to that question. Before going on to that though, I recommend you practise the exercises in **Conversation 4: Mindfulness & Being Present**.

CONVERSATION 4: MINDFULNESS & BEING PRESENT

Introducing Being Present

Introduction to Being Present– a recording of **Julian McNally** (1:14 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=317#audio-317-1>

(“Introduction to Being Present” by RMIT Counselling and Psychological Services, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Welcome to Conversation 4 of Six **ACT** Conversations – a program from RMIT University Counselling Service designed to help you live a balanced and fulfilling life while completing your program of study.

The program uses concepts from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy – or ACT for short. But it is not meant to take the place of counselling, psychotherapy or mental health treatment. Although you can use the program in any sequence you wish, you should read the about this resource section before starting.

This part, **Mindfulness & Being Present**, will have the smallest amount of discussion material of any of the six part. And the reason for that is simple – mindfulness is something to do, rather than something to understand – so for most of this conversation I will be asking you to practise exercises in real time.

At the start or the end of each exercise, I'll say a little about how, when and why you should practise each one. As I've mentioned so often in the other conversations of this program, it's more important that you do and experience these skills and exercises than that you just know about or understand them.



Photo by Nick Page on Unsplash

What is Mindfulness?

What is Mindfulness? – a recording of Julian McNally (2:52 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=83#audio-83-1>

(“What is Mindfulness?” by RMIT Counselling and Psychological Services, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Jon-Kabat Zinn, author of *Coming to our senses: Healing ourselves and the world through mindfulness*, says “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

So when you are being **mindful**, you are **purposefully and deliberately using your attention**, right now and without evaluating anyone or anything.

That’s very different to the way minds are used to working, as we have discussed in Conversation 1 and Conversation 2 of Six ACT Conversations, and that’s why the practise of mindfulness can be difficult: *Your mind just isn’t used to it.*

So then, why practise mindfulness? Over the last twenty or so years, psychologists such as Kabat-Zinn, Zindel Segal, Marsha Linehan, and Steven Hayes have developed new forms of psychotherapy that incorporate the practise of mindfulness. These new approaches to psychotherapy are getting very good results in treating people with depression, anxiety, chronic pain, eating disorders and even personality disorders.

So mindfulness appears to help people with mental health problems. However, many people who aren’t seeking psychological help practise mindfulness simply as a way of meditating, or of resting or focusing the mind. Within Acceptance and Commitment Training, mindfulness will help you to be aware of emotions and thoughts that you normally want to avoid, and it will help you get in touch with and hold onto the values and ideals that are most important to you.

Being mindful of your feelings and thoughts is also the first step in two important processes that are part of ACT – **defusion** and **acceptance**. Defusion is used with troublesome thoughts and is discussed in Conversation 2. Acceptance is used with difficult feelings and emotions and is discussed in Conversation 3.

For you to achieve noticeable and worthwhile results with mindfulness, you will need to practise – and if you’ve explored the other conversation in this program, you’ve no doubt read me say it before – trust your experience and learn from it. And to learn from your experience, you’ve first got to have one.

That is why I am advising you to practise these exercises daily – so that you get plenty of experiences.

When you do, the other components of this program will make much more sense and you’ll be able to practise the exercises from those other sections more beneficially.

In this conversation, we’ll do five mindfulness exercises. You can replay these segments of the program any time you want to practise mindfulness. After the five exercises, I’ll describe some other exercises you can practise without a recording and also where to find even more mindfulness exercises.



Photo by Mohamed Nohassi on Unsplash

Exercise 1: Awareness

Exercise 1: Awareness – a recording of Julian McNally (7:18 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=85#audio-85-1>

(“Exercise 1: Awareness” by RMIT Counselling and Psychological Services, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The first exercise is called awareness of breathing. This exercise is quite brief and is a good introduction to mindfulness practise. Like most of these exercises, it is best done in a quiet private place, with eyes closed, and in a comfortable seated position.

Exercise 1: Awareness of Breathing

As your eyes are closed, your awareness may shift from the outside world, the world in the room you're in, the building you're in, to your own body.

And no doubt you become more aware of sounds.

And so as you sit there and hear my voice, I'd like you to focus your attention on your breathing.

First of all, slowly take a deep slow breath in... and out...

And again, take a deep slow breath in... and out...

And on your next breath, pay attention to the feeling of the air coming into your body, through your nostrils or your mouth.

Just feel the sensation of air coming in and going out of your body as it leaves you.

And notice, if you can, the movement of your belly/ribs/back/upper chest perhaps? What parts of your body move as you breathe?

Perhaps you may notice your arms or forearms moving against your body or against your legs or the chair – so just sit there continuing to breathe in and out and observing this process, the sensations and the feelings of just breathing.

You may feel an urge or some curiosity about breathing faster or slower, or longer or harder. Just let that urge, or that pull towards that curiosity, come and go – and bring your attention back to the physical process and sensations of breathing.

And notice that you can continue to allow the breathing to happen, as you feel and are aware of the physical sensations that go along with that process.

And if your mind starts to wander – wants to take an interest in something outside this experience – just gently bring your attention back to many or all of those physical sensations:

- Air through your nostrils, to the top of the roof of your mouth from the back of your throat, down into your chest;
- The rise and fall of your stomach;
- Expanding and collapsing of the ribs;
- And any other movements that happen in your body as you breathe in and breathe out.

And if your mind has anything to say about this process – wants to draw you away to thoughts or feelings – just acknowledge your mind for being there, and put your attention back on the process of breathing.

And notice that there is nothing that you need to do about this breathing, it simply happens and you simply sit there noticing it happening.

And so, if you wish, you can continue to sit there, observing your breath – and whenever you're ready, you can stop this exercise and have a break.

Exercise 2: Thought

Exercise 2: Thought – a recording of Julian McNally (7:29 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=87#audio-87-1>

(“Exercise 2: Thought” by RMIT Counselling and Psychological Services, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The second exercise is called mindfulness of thoughts, and is useful when you feel your mind won’t “sit still”, or when you have a sequence of thoughts that keeps recurring in your mind.

Exercise 2: Mindfulness of Thoughts

First of all, find yourself a comfortable position where you can sit with your back straight and your shoulders loose and relaxed. Take a moment to take a deep breath. Close your eyes and let yourself breathe out. If you prefer to have your eyes open, just find a spot on the wall that you can concentrate on.

And again, take another deep breath, and let go of any tension in your body. For the next few minutes, there is nothing else you have to do, nowhere else you have to be, and no one you have to please. There is no way to do this that’s wrong. This time is for you to purely and simply be present – here and now, and to notice what is happening.

And so – as much as you can – allow yourself to have an attitude of openness and curiosity.

Now pay attention to your breathing. Follow the air going in and out of your lungs.

Notice the rise and fall of your rib cage. Notice your abdomen as it rises and falls. Feel the air moving in and out of your nostrils.

And now choose one of these areas – the rib cage, the abdomen, or the nose – to pay particular attention to. It doesn’t matter which one you choose. And just notice and follow the rise and fall of the breath in that one area, just attending to that rhythm.

And as you do that, you can have thoughts and feelings that come and go. And when they do, just acknowledge their presence, and bring your attention back to your breath. And if you find you’re evaluating your performance, just recognise “that’s a thought”, and let that thought go as well. And bring your attention back to your breath.

And before we move on, just remember that if you want to spend a little bit more time paying attention to any one aspect of your awareness during this exercise, you can always pause this recording, and press play again when you’re ready to continue.

So now take your attention away from your breath and bring it to your thoughts. Just take a few moments to watch your thoughts coming and going, like clouds drifting across the sky. Some are fast and some are slow. Some might be light and fleeting. Some might be heavy.

Just let thoughts come and go in their own time, without any need to be hooked into them.

And just notice how they change, and when they don’t change. Notice how they stay the same until they do change.

So just continue to observe them, and let them come and go.

You might notice that some thoughts are interesting and some are boring. Some are challenging, some are positive, some are negative, some are emotional, some are neutral. And they’re all just thoughts.

You might notice that some want to hook you in – to drag you along with them. If this happens, just acknowledge that it’s happened, notice what the thought was about, and then step back and keep watching.

Just like someone standing on the side of a freeway watching the traffic go past, or watching boats go past on a river. They come into view one way and they disappear another way, and then another comes into view and disappears. Maybe some of them reappear.

And remember that the aim is not to stop the thoughts or to change them, or avoid them. Simply to notice them.

So if at any time you get hooked into changing them or avoiding them, just unhook yourself, and go back to observing them.

And whenever you're ready, bring yourself back into the room and open your eyes.

Exercise 3: Eating a Raisin

Exercise 3: Eating a Raisin – a recording of Julian McNally (8:24 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=89#audio-89-1>

(“Exercise 3: Eating a Raisin” by RMIT University Counselling Service, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The third exercise is called Eating a Raisin, and you might be surprised to hear requires you to eat a raisin. So before starting the exercise, you’ll need to obtain a raisin, or if you don’t like raisins, a sultana, a dried apricot, or another small piece of fruit (but sorry, no chocolate allowed). When you have your piece of fruit, we can start.

Exercise 3: Eating a Raisin

We’ll start this exercise with your eyes open.

So take your raisin or other piece of fruit – and don’t eat it just yet!

First of all, I’d like you to take a good long look at the raisin. Hold it up to the light. See how translucent it is? Notice the changes in colour across the surface of it. See the wrinkles and folds in the skin of the raisin.

As you hold it in your hand, feel the different textures. Just hold it lightly. Roll it around between your finger and thumb, and feel the moistness or dryness of the surface. See if you can feel every little point where the raisin contacts your fingers.

Now place it in your other hand, and just feel the stickiness left behind on your fingers, and at the same time feel the weight of the raisin in your other hand.

What you’re doing is paying specific, focused attention to this particular raisin.

Now pick it up in your fingers again and slowly bring it up towards your nose. Try to find the first point where you start to notice the smell of this piece of fruit – so very slowly, and perhaps with your eyes closed.

As that smell hits your nostrils, see if you can break down the different fragrances and smells within that smell of this particular fruit. Is it sweet? Is it spicy? Is it sour-smelling? Remember, smell is about 80% of your taste, so most of the information you’re going to get in terms of taste will come before you even put the raisin in your mouth.

Okay now, perhaps we’re ready to eat.

Very slowly bring the raisin in contact with your lips. Again, feel the texture, the temperature of it, the stickiness of it.

And perhaps notice any response you might have to this. You may be salivating already. Or you may have a craving or urge to just pop the raisin in your mouth and gulp it down. If so, just be aware of that impulse, and continue to do as I say.

Now put the raisin on your tongue, and pay attention to the sudden change in sensation in your taste buds as you do that.

And bring the raisin slowly into your mouth – so now it’s completely covered in saliva and the taste is dispersing through your mouth. Notice that change? Where or when did that change in taste peak?

And move the raisin backwards and forwards on your tongue – see if there are changes in the taste you get as you do this.

Could you see that the taste buds at the front of your tongue have a different function to the ones in the middle, which

have a different function to the ones at the back of your tongue? So you might get different flavours as you move the raisin around.

And after you've tasted all those different flavours, bring the raisin onto your teeth and take one slow, soft bite.

And again, feel the juice come out of the raisin. The different flavours that are exuded from it. Notice how, again, that taste intensifies and then gradually fades.

And now take a second bite, and again, notice any changes and notice also that you have that urge again, perhaps to keep chewing – but don't do that just yet.

Feel if you can, where the raisin has started to break down. Perhaps there's more than one piece there in your mouth?

Now eat the raisin slowly and consciously, taking your time to pay attention to each chew, each swallow, each movement of your tongue.

And before you finally swallow the raisin, notice the feeling of it now that it's completely fallen apart.

And anytime now, if you wish, you can swallow the rest of that raisin, and again, notice the feeling of that going down your throat.

Notice any changes in flavour that have happened at the back of your throat. Pay attention to any changes in your tongue as you do that. And again, just see if there are any urges, cravings, desires.

Perhaps you're even missing your raisin?

That's the end of the eating the raisin exercise.

Reflections

- How did you find this exercise?
- How hard was it to restrain yourself from eating faster?
- Was it a struggle to resist urges?
- Was it easy – or difficult – for you to focus on one tiny piece of food like that?
- What feelings or thoughts appeared as you tried to focus on the sensation of eating?
- What was your experience of time while you were doing this?

Many people report that when they practise everyday activities mindfully, time seems to stretch.

Think about how you eat normally in your daily life. Do you really pay attention to what you're eating while you're eating it? Or is it a case of get it into your body so you can get on with the next important task?

Many people spend more time enjoying the anticipation of food than they do in enjoying the actual present moment experience of it, but the goal of all these mindfulness exercises is to put you in touch with your present moment experiences rather than your anticipation of the future or your memories of the past.

Exercise 4: Walking

Exercise 4: Walking – a recording of Julian McNally (6:06 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=91#audio-91-1>

(“Exercise 4: Walking” by RMIT Counselling and Psychological Services, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The fourth exercise is simply called walking. You can download a copy of the instructions to take on a walk with you by clicking on this link.

Exercise 4: Walking

You can do this anywhere, but the ideal place is somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed. A hall is best because you can practise in any weather, but outdoors is fine. If the only place you can find to practise is noisy, that is just another challenge, not a reason to avoid practising.

Similar to the eating a raisin exercise, the purpose of this exercise is to walk mindfully. Unlike the eating a raisin exercise, though, you don't have to listen to this recording segment to do the exercise.

In fact, I suggest you use this segment to set up the exercise and then do it in your own time.

So here are the instructions, which can also be downloaded at the top of the page. So if you prefer, you can download them and print them to take them with you.

Part 1: Begin your walk by acknowledging that you are beginning it.

You can do this by saying to yourself “this is my walk”, “I am now starting my walk”, or just “start”. Or, you can take note of a particular landmark or point on your walk – for example, a curb, lamppost, or a floorboard – and acknowledge the start of your walk as you pass that point.

Part 2: As you walk, pay attention to the sensations in your body. Feel the contact your feet make with the ground.

Which part of your foot leaves the ground last at the end of each step? Which part strikes the ground first? At the beginning of each step?

Notice the pivoting of your ankle as you walk. Feel the bend in your knee.

And each step that you take, notice the alternating flexing and contracting of muscles in your calves, and in your thighs. How are your hips moving?

Now pay attention to your back and chest. How much are your arms swinging? Are they swinging from your elbow, from your shoulder?

Without changing anything about the way you walk, just notice any differences between the right and left sides of your body. Do you move one hip or shoulder or arm more than the other? Is one foot turned out more than the other?

Has your breathing changed while you've been making these observations?

Part 3: Now, I'd like you to shift your attention away from your body, to your environment. But I want you to attend to your environment in a specific way.

Let me explain – sometimes as I walk around the university campus where I work, I cross paths with a colleague or student I know well enough to recognise, but not really well enough to engage in conversation. What do you do in such situations?

Well, I'm sure many people would have a different answer to mine, but generally I simply acknowledge the person nonverbally by, say, nodding my head in their direction, making eye contact and raising an eyebrow, or by a simple wave of the hand. In a non verbal way, I'm saying "I see you, Joe" or "I remember you, Anne". I'm communicating with the person but not conversing with them. I'm acknowledging them, but not engaging with them.

This distinction is important because it's what I want you to do in the second part of your walk. Walk around for another 5 minutes or so, and simply acknowledge any experience that arises.

This may be a sensation, such as noticing the temperature of the wind or feeling the ground change under foot, or a thought such as "is the 5 minutes up yet?" Or it may be a feeling such as boredom, contentment or annoyance.

As each experience appears in your awareness, simply acknowledge it without engaging with it, and let it go by. It may help you to do this if you think of yourself figuratively nodding your head or waving to the experience. Or if you simply say to yourself "there's boredom" or "I'm now observing the temperature".

Part 4: You can stop your walk whenever you wish.

Of course, your mindful walking may be part of a journey that you actually need to make, such as your walk to work or school. Still, try to end your walk in the same way you began by acknowledging a particular place or time, or by simply saying to yourself "I'm now stopping my walk", or just "stop".

Once you have some experience in walking mindfully, you might like to try applying mindfulness to other activities in your daily life. At the end of this section, I'll suggest a few activities to you.

In the meantime, why not take a few moments to write down some activities you routinely take part in that you could apply mindfulness to?

Exercise 5: Just Sitting

Exercise 5: Just Sitting – a recording of Julian McNally (3:42 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=93#audio-93-1>

(“Exercise 5: Just Sitting” by RMIT Counselling and Psychological Services, Six ACT* Conversations, RMIT University is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The 5th exercise is sitting or, as we usually call it, “just sitting”. Again, you can download printable instructions at this link.

The reason we call it just sitting is to make it clear that when you do this exercise, sitting is all you do. Not sitting in thinking, not sitting in meditating, not sitting and making your mind go blank? No, just sitting.

Exercise 5: Just Sitting

So, as with the walking exercise, find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed.

If you don't have access to such a place, do the best you can with what you have – ask your family or house mates to respect your time, or practise at a time when they're asleep or not around.

You can sit on the floor if you wish, or in a chair if that is more comfortable.

The important things to remember if you're using a chair are that you keep your spine upright, legs uncrossed, feet flat on the floor, thighs parallel to the floor. Don't rest your back against the back of the chair, nor your arms on the armrests.

If you're sitting on the floor, it's fine to cross your legs, and in fact, if you're flexible enough, you may prefer a Lotus or half Lotus position, but again, most importantly, keep your spine upright.

Throughout the sitting period, keep as still as possible. This is probably difficult if you haven't done anything like this before.

Many people notice immediately after they start sitting, especially the first few times, that they develop an itch or an urge to go to the toilet, or a sudden concern about having left the stove on or the car unlocked.

Acknowledge these urges when they arise and continue sitting – unless you are the kind of person who leaves the stove on. If so, check it and restart your sitting – but make a note that in future you'll check this before you practise.

As you sit, your posture may gradually slouch. If you notice this happening, gently realign your spine until it is upright once more.

As much as possible, relax any muscles that aren't involved in keeping your posture upright and your body still.

And that's all there is to it.

Now, just sit.

Aim to practise just sitting every day. Start with a small commitment, even as small as 5 minutes a day is a worthwhile start.

As we've stressed so often before, small efforts consistently made will reward you.

If you miss a day, don't punish yourself, but forgive yourself your slip and recommit to practise again tomorrow.

If the only time you get a chance to practise is on a noisy bus or train ride on the way home, that is still better than skipping practise completely.

After all, you're going to be sitting there, so why not **just sit** there?

One Final Note

One Final Note –a recording of Julian McNally (3:01 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

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Remember that, as with most of the exercises we’ve developed for Six ACT Conversations, these are not meant to be practised once and then abandoned.

You don’t maintain dental hygiene by brushing your teeth for a whole hour but only once a month.

Likewise, you don’t derive benefits from acceptance and commitment training by practising these exercises in a haphazard or occasional manner, but rather, by making many small investments of time and attention.

I would therefore ask you to commit to practising one or more of the mindfulness exercises at least four times a week – for a minimum of six weeks.

If at the end of that time you’re certain that you’re deriving no benefit, then by all means quit or try one of the other exercises for a similar amount of time until you find one that works for you.

Remember, before you quit something worthwhile, you must first earn the right to quit. So constant practise is essential.

Anything less is “trying” – and we will see in Conversation 6 how useless trying is.

I asked at the end of the segment on walking if you could think of some other everyday activities you could apply mindfulness to. Did you think of any? Here are some more:



Photo by Delphine Beausoleil on Unsplash

Other Mindfulness Opportunities

- Getting ready for bed or when you’re getting up from bed.
- When you’re showering or bathing.
- When you’re commuting or driving to work or school.
- Doing household tasks such as cooking, cleaning or washing up.
- Or when you’re spending time with loved ones, such as playing with your children or younger brothers and sisters, talking to your parents.
- Visiting your partner or just chatting with friends.

You can apply mindfulness to anything, and for that matter, everything that you do. Indeed, those who do mindfulness as a spiritual practise actually aim for 24/7 complete awareness. Our purpose is a little different though.

Key Takeaways

We are aiming for you to get used to being present to your experiences – as opposed to avoiding your experiences, ignoring them, suppressing them, or pretending they're not happening.

This applies to the physical experience components of eating, walking, and sitting, but also to the cognitive and emotional experience components of having thoughts, images, memories and feelings.

In the same way that walking mindfully lets you see walking fully as walking, experiencing your thoughts and emotions mindfully allows you to see them for what they really are – not for what they claim themselves to be.

In **Conversation 5: Your Values & Direction**, your ability to be mindful of experiences will be brought to bear on a couple of important questions: “What is most important to you?” and “Where are you going?”

CONVERSATION 5: YOUR VALUES & DIRECTION

Introducing Values

Introducing Values – a recording of Julian McNally (1:00 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=370#audio-370-1>

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Welcome to Conversation 5 of Six **ACT** Conversations – a program from RMIT University Counselling Service designed to help you live a balanced and fulfilling life while completing your program of study.

The program uses concepts from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy – or ACT for short. But it is not meant to take the place of counselling, psychotherapy or mental health treatment. Although you can use the program in any sequence you wish, you should read the about this resource section before starting.

In this conversation, **Values & Direction**, we'll explore the why of what you do.

You'll be asked to examine the purposes of your actions – then we'll ask you to use those purposes as a context for doing what needs to be done and choosing what it is you do.

We'll also suggest using those purposes as a context for feelings and thoughts you struggle or suffer with.

Motivation: More than a Feeling

Motivation: More than a Feeling – a recording of Julian McNally (5:35 min)



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Now what I’ve just said is somewhat contrary to conventional understanding, which has it that

1. You carry out actions simply to attain goals or achieve objectives, and
2. That if you are suffering and that is preventing or obstructing goal achievement, you need to get yourself fixed or somehow get rid of or get control of the feelings or thoughts that obstruct you.

In particular, when it comes to motivation for achieving your goals, if you don’t already have it, you are somehow supposed to just get it from somewhere.

Have you ever wondered how you’re supposed to do that? Well, there’s a paradox in there. You won’t get motivated until you feel like it. In other words, you have to be motivated in order to get motivated. It’s a chicken and egg situation.

We discussed in Conversation 1 that the problem with the strategy of trying to escape or avoid uncomfortable feelings is not with you and your poor ability to implement the strategy, but rather with the strategy itself. The same thing applies with the conventional approach to motivation. As the sports slogan says, *when you’re hot, you’re hot*. Well, good if you are.

But if you’re not, now what? This is the point where many people give up. They just stopped working or making an effort until something external to them forces them into action.

To me this situation seems like sitting in the cold and refusing to start your fire until you feel warm enough to get up. Warmth will arrive as a result of your actions, not your wishes or feelings. Likewise with what most people call motivation.

There’s a statement I’d like you to test against your experience: *Motivation follows action consistently. Action only follows motivation haphazardly.*

Or if you prefer the brief version, *motivation follows action.*

Now let’s try this out.



Photo by Alex Gruber on Unsplash

Exercise 1: Motivation Follows Action

What’s a regular task you go out of your way to avoid – the one you’re always putting off and telling yourself you must get around to? Making your bed, putting your clothes away, filing, ironing, washing the dog, the car or the dishes?

Actually, that last one’s mine, so we’ll use that for the sake of this exercise, but you can swap it for the one that you usually avoid.

Depending on what task you plan to work on in this exercise, you may need to play this audio so that you’ll have both hands free.

Step 1: Go to the place where the job needs to be done.

So, go to the kitchen for example.

Step 2: Get close to the current situation.

Take a look at the dishes there, piled in the sink, or on the draining board. Look at the caked-on food, the tea and coffee stains, and take a moment to breathe in the state of this situation.

Let yourself feel the emotional reaction you have to this sight and smell, if that's part of it.

Now, if you've done the expansion exercises from Conversation 3, you may care to do one of those. Just let the feelings you have be there right now.

Step 3: Take the first two steps. Carry out the first two actions that comprise this task.

So for example, I would put on the rubber gloves and fill the sink. Yours might be to fill the tub and catch the dog, or clear the desk and pile up all the letters and bills next to the filing cabinet.

Now, stand there for a moment with your feelings and thoughts – taking in the current situation.

Okay, now walk away.

Stop.

What did you feel just then when I told you to walk away? Was there a little twinge of disappointment, a little pang of sadness?

This thing I've been avoiding – at last I'm ready to do it, and now you ask me to walk away?

Just before the thrill and excitement of being told you're now free to go off and watch television or surf the net.

Were you feeling perhaps a sense of relief that finally you were going to do this thing?

That pang of sadness that I mentioned is what happens when you act contrary to your valued direction.

The valued direction that you have when you're standing at the sink with your gloves, on a sink full of hot, soapy water and dishes to clean, is usually (not always, mind you) going to be in the direction of cleaning up rather than walking away.

If you walk away at this point, a quiet little part of you is going to hurt. That's your values speaking.

(An exception might be if you smelled smoke, then you'd probably go and check because in the context of the house potentially burning down, ensuring you can safely continue cleaning the dishes is an effective response.)

I hope this exercise has given you a small, albeit brief, contact with a value. You might label this value *order* or *completeness* or *respect for myself* or *integrity*. The name doesn't matter. What's more important is that through practise, you learn to honour it when your environment offers you opportunities to do so.

In the *House on fire* scenario, the environment offers you an opportunity to honour a value of preserving life, perhaps of caring for your loved ones. For the most part, though, your daily life provides you with a great number of admittedly less dramatic situations in which to express your values.

So that's what I'd like you to do next!

What Really Matters to You?

What Really Matters to You? – a recording of Julian McNally (2:42 min)



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Next is an exercise in which you can start to identify what those actions and values are.

Exercise 2: Values Inquiry

Before you continue, you should complete the Values Inquiry worksheet. Once you've done that, continue.

Now before we move to the next step, we just need to troubleshoot your values a little. This is important because everything that you do in life is based on your values.

If you've completed the values inquiry sheet, you'll know that what I mean when I say **value** is not the conventional meaning. A value is not what your society, religion, family, community or your mind expects or demands of you – although sometimes it may be the same.

A value won't necessarily have you seen as a good person. Your values are not your morals or ethics – although being true to your values is inherently ethical. Values are not your goals or your mission in life. A mission, after all, is simply a goal that takes a lifetime to achieve.

A value is your purpose or direction in life.

A useful metaphor for understanding the distinction between a **value** and a **mission or goal** is that of **travel**. You might choose west as a direction to travel, but you'll never arrive there. From here in Melbourne, you could go to Melton, or Horsham, or Adelaide, or Perth. In all these instances, you would be staying true to the value or direction of West. Those places might be goals or objectives on an endless westward journey. Once you've travelled some distance West, you can continue to do so.

Exercise 3: Achievements, Actions and Values

Once you've honoured a value by achieving a goal consistent with it, you can still continue to honour that value. So, if you're having difficulty identifying a value, try looking at your achievements and habits and determine what values underlie them.

You can do this with the Achievements, Actions and Values worksheet.

A value is fundamental. There is nothing beyond or underneath it.

And sometimes that's a good question to ask: **What is the purpose of having that purpose?** Or, **What is the value of having that value?**

When you cannot specify an answer to those questions, you have reached the true value or purpose.

Exercise 4: At Your Funeral – The Party of Your Life

Another way of determining your true values is to imagine your funeral or a significant event in your future when you might be commemorated.

What would you want people to be saying about you once you had lived your life?

To help you answer this question, complete the At Your Funeral – The Party of Your Life worksheet.

Values: More Choices

Values: More Choices– a recording of Julian McNally (2:30 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/6-act-conversations/?p=108#audio-108-1>

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Now, once you have identified your values and purposes, the next thing to do is to **commit** to them. For the most part, this commitment is demonstrated by the actions you take that move you towards the goals that are instances of your values.

We will work on goals and the actions that achieve them in the final conversation of Six **ACT** Conversations.

For now, though, we may need to do a little more troubleshooting on values. The reason for this is that sometimes when a person writes their values down, sees them in print, or states them out loud, they may feel awkward or embarrassed.

This usually occurs because the emotional contact with their own values reminds them of unfulfilled commitments, lost opportunities, broken promises, or insincere efforts on their part. Emotional contact with these disappointments is painful.

As we saw in Conversation 1 and Conversation 2 of Six ACT Conversations, it is natural but ultimately futile to try to escape, avoid or control these emotions.

Nonetheless, at times like this, a common mistake is to deny that one has or cares about the value, or to bargain with oneself regarding times when the value was honoured. However, you will find that if you have discerned a true value of yours, it cannot be denied or bargained with.

Just as in the unpleasant task exercise that we started with, you are going to be continually confronted with many small moments where you must choose “**Do I do what is valued and important to me, or don’t I?**”

Some people think they can avoid this by not choosing in these moments – distracting themselves from the choice and pretending the outcome was an accident.

But not choosing is itself a choice. If you use your feelings or your thoughts as an excuse for not honouring your values, then you have chosen to have your life run by them rather than by what is important to you. The problem with this is not a moral one, so please take this as a criticism – you should be true to your values. Rather, consider against your own experience:



Photo by JESHOOOTS.COM on Unsplash

- **What is life like when you live according to your values?**

and

- **What is it like when you don’t?**

In the light of those answers, choose your actions.

How to stay with those actions once you’ve chosen them is the subject of **Conversation 6: Committed Action**.

CONVERSATION 6: COMMITTED ACTION

Introducing Committed Action

Introducing Committed Action– a recording of Julian McNally (2:52 min)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
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Welcome to Conversation 6 of Six **ACT** Conversations – a program from RMIT University designed to help you live a balanced and fulfilling life while completing your program of study.

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In this final conversation, **Committed Action**, I’m going to ask you, finally, to stop listening and take action.

While you can use this program in any sequence you wish, my recommendation is that if you’ve come to this section of Six ACT Conversations first, you complete **Conversation 2: Action & Experience versus Thought & Emotion** and **Conversation 5: Values & Direction** – the exercises and material in them will be very relevant to what we discuss and do in this section. However, if all you’re looking for from this program is tips on goal-setting and action-planning, I hope this is helpful with that.

Unlike the other conversations that make up Six ACT Conversations, this one requires you to do a considerable amount of thinking and writing using the worksheets. These worksheets are designed to develop your goal-setting and action-planning skills. For you to increase your skills in these areas, you may need to practise them many times. Like anything else, the more you practise, the more skillful you become and the more these practises become ingrained habits that you don’t need to think about.

In **Conversation 5: Values & Direction** we determined that there is a link between your achievements and habits on the one hand, and your values on the other. We did this by examining your past. Now it’s time to work on your future. Also in Conversation 5, we said that goals are not your purpose in life, but rather they are like mileposts on your journey – and like mileposts, they tell you 2 essential things:

1. **How far you’ve travelled**, and
2. Even more importantly, they remind **you that you are headed in the right direction**.

Think about that – it doesn’t matter if you’re 200 kilometres from where you started, if you’re heading the wrong way!

In this analogy, the direction of your journey – that is your life – is your value or values. The reason you set goals is to get feedback from the environment – the world you live in – that you’re acting consistently with your values. Just like marking a physical journey by mileposts.



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Values & Goals

Values & Goals – a recording of Julian McNally (2:44 min)



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Exercise 1: Linking Goals to Values

Before you commit to any actions, you need to ensure that

1. those actions are consistent with your values, and
2. they progress you towards goals that are consistent with your values.

So here’s your first task for this Conversation: complete this Value & Goals worksheet.

To do this, you take one of the values you identified in Conversation 5, determine a domain of life in which you wish to express that value, and then set goals for various timeframes of your life.

A domain of life is simply an area of life in which you can take action. This could be your career, the community you live in, your family or your physical wellbeing, for example.

It’s important to set goals for the long term timeframe of your lifetime. Doing this provides you with a mission or purpose to your life in the domain you’ve chosen.

Notice if you feel somewhat awkward, pretentious, ashamed, or embarrassed while you’re doing this. Later this conversation, we’ll remind you of how to deal with this, but for now keep in mind that you’re doing this to enhance your life, not someone else’s – so you don’t have to impress anybody or meet other people’s expectations!

As important as having a lifetime goal is, it is even more important to **set a goal for today**. If you’ve completed **Conversation 1: Language creates Conflict** you’ll remember that I asked you to name an obstacle or barrier to you achieving a goal, outcome or quality that mattered to you. For many of you, the obstacle could be stated on the worksheet. “If only I didn’t do or have X in my life, then I could achieve or be Y”.

But then as we experienced in **Conversation 3: Willingness & Acceptance**, you are able to do things when your mind says you cannot.

With the value & goals worksheet, I’m asking you to nominate an action you can take today – or better yet, right this minute – that is consistent with a value that matters to you.

You see, for now, for this moment, you only need to do one thing. In fact, when you look at it in one moment, all you can ever do is just one thing.

A favourite saying of mine that comes from the *Tao Te Ching* (道德經) by Laozi (老子): “The journey of 1000 miles starts with a single footstep.”

What he forgot to say was “and it continues with another footstep.”

So, you see, you only ever have to take one step at a time.

But the journey will never happen if you don’t take that first one.

And the next one.

And the next.

Setting Goals

Setting Goals– a recording of Julian McNally (2:03 min)



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Exercise 2: Goal-setting

Your next task is to identify and connect up all the actions that move you towards a goal. You can do this with the same Value & Goals worksheet, now that you’ve completed it.

Take a goal that you’ve identified with the Values and Goals worksheet and write down the actions you need to take to achieve that goal.

For the purpose of this exercise, you may find choosing a 1-week or 1-month goal is easier to start with. The goal should be something that an objective observer could agree had been achieved. For example, “*Make more friends*” would not qualify as a goal by this definition, because an objective observer would need to know what your definition of a *friend* was, *how many friends* you meant, and *by when* it was going to happen.

Stating your goal as “*By June, I aim to make one new friend at the Tennis Club, who I meet up with outside the club at least once a month*” gives you something that you will know you either have or haven’t achieved.

If you could feel yourself getting a little nervous when I stated the goal that second time, don’t worry, that’s normal. Whenever you declare a commitment in a way that makes it sound like you mean business, it’s natural that your fears and anxieties show up. Vague goals, on the other hand, get you off that hook. In a few moments, we’ll show you how to deal with those anxieties.

When you come to writing down the actions, they need to be written as observable actions – in other words, something that we could record on video. So for example, “*be nice to my little brother*” wouldn’t qualify, “*apologise to my little brother*” would be better and, “*tell my little brother I’m sorry I lost his mobile phone and I’ll replace it this month*” would fit the bill. Notice that that last one sounds like an action you’re committing to – and it means you’re going to do it whether or not you feel like it.

What can you do when you declare a goal or a commitment, but then feel frightened or anxious about starting it? Let’s find out.

Barriers & Counter-Strategies

Barriers & Counter-Strategies – a recording of Julian McNally (3:04 min)



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There is a great temptation at times like this to use the bad feeling – whether it is nervousness, shyness or embarrassment, lack of confidence – as an excuse not to start at all.

Sometimes people bring themselves to the brink of action and then withdraw. Knowing they’ve done that usually results in guilt, shame, disappointment and a reluctance to make commitments or have expectations of oneself in future.

Other people don’t even go close to starting on the promised action. Instead, they distract themselves from their promise, frequently denying that they care about the value underlying the goal. They devote energy to avoiding anything that reminds them of their values. That kind of avoidance usually starts with a feeling like the twinge of fear I referred to when I stated that “making friends” goal in a specific form.

So here are three things you can do when difficult feelings show up, just as you’re getting started on your goal-directed actions.



Photo by Connor Luddy on Unsplash

1. **Remind yourself that the unpleasant feeling is a sign that you’re attempting something that both matters to you and provides the opportunity to fail.** After all, if it were easy and totally risk free, you would have already done it, wouldn’t you?
2. **Take the feeling with you.**

In **Conversation 5, Values & Direction**, I spoke about the futility of waiting to feel warm before you light a fire. If you wait for the anxiety to go away before you get started, you may never start. On the other hand, if you start even when you’re not emotionally ready, who knows. The confidence may follow, or it may not, but at least you will have achieved some progress. This is why I asked you to make the action specific and observable – you won’t have any uncertainty about whether or not you’ve done them. Taking the feeling with you means you do the action because it’s consistent with your values, not because it’s consistent with feeling good.

3. **Practise the Expansion exercise from Conversation 3.**

Focus on the feeling of fear or embarrassment. Acknowledge it and give it room to be there. You may find that the feeling reduces or disappears altogether.

Of course, many times it won’t. But as we established in **Conversation 3: Acceptance & Willingness**, that needn’t stop you from taking actions that you say are important to you.

Exercise 3: Barriers & Counter-strategies

Nothing in life always goes smoothly – you’ve probably already learned that – so you can expect that you will meet with barriers or obstacles to your progress.

What are you going to do when that happens? Rather than be surprised or ambushed by barriers, you can prepare for them.

The Barriers and Counter-strategies worksheet is designed to help you do that.

Completing this worksheet requires you to think of all the possible barriers that might stop or slow you down. Once you've done that, you brainstorm strategies for overcoming, avoiding, or accommodating those barriers.

"Yes, but..."

Yes but... – a recording of Julian McNally (2:30 min)



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Now, you've planned for barriers that you might be able to predict will happen, and if the counter-strategies you prepared are effective in overcoming them, all well and good.

But what if you get ambushed by a barrier you couldn't have predicted?

Or what if old habits of avoidance reappear?

What if your mind tells you you're too weak, too unreliable, too anxious, or too tired to do the actions you committed to?

And then suppose that rather than expanding to include that thought as we practised in chapter three, you buy into it and stop or give up.

Or what if you find yourself overwhelmed by uncontrollable feelings so that you can't think straight and don't even remember any of the strategies from Six ACT Conversations, just at the very time you need to use them?

Well, surely that would mean only one of two things, either Six ACT Conversations is a failure, or you are.

Let's just stop for a moment and notice what just happened.

Did you find it easy to go along with the problem-laden scenario I've just outlined? Perhaps you had already foreseen some of the potential problems I mentioned.



Photo by Dmitrii Ko on Unsplash

This is what your mind does all the time. If you've completed Conversation 1, this will be familiar. Your mind is a problem solving machine. So when someone (i.e. me) comes along with a possible solution (i.e. Six ACT Conversations), your mind tries to determine all the possible new problems that could be part of that solution.

Your mind isn't going to drop its problem solving function just because the solution appears, especially one like acceptance and commitment training that is so counterintuitive. Rather, your mind will look for problems – even when there aren't any – in order to protect you from the risk of future problems.

So when you have these sorts of thoughts, it doesn't mean you're stupid, naive, or cynical. I'm mentioning this apparent flaw in reasoning, finding problems whenever a solution is offered, not to belittle you or your commitment or your intellectual capacity, but rather to demonstrate how strongly-embedded in normal human cognition the habit of inventing potential problems is.

The examples I've given of having to deal with intense feelings or of being tired are real possibilities, so we do need to have a way of dealing with them. I'll offer you two strategies, but by no means should they be seen as the last word. The last thing I would want to do is to place limits on your ingenuity or creativity.

So if these strategies don't work, by all means feel free to try anything else you come

up with.

Troubleshooting

Troubleshooting – a recording of Julian McNally (3:19 min)



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The first solution to these unforeseeable barriers is simply further practise of *acceptance* and *commitment*. In other words, the exercises you’ve already learned and practised from the previous conversations.

Now, this may sound a little simplistic to you, like someone saying if at first you don’t succeed, try try again. But I don’t mean that you should just try harder again, doing more of what already hasn’t worked.

The six phases of Acceptance and Commitment Training that we’ve covered here can provide a comprehensive solution to the kinds of struggles you’ve brought to this programme – but within the confines of this format, and a duration of less than three hours, we can’t possibly teach every possible strategy that ACT has to offer.

If the strategies you’ve learned here haven’t worked yet, then you could either continue applying them or learn some new ones. A good place to start doing that is with the two books I mentioned – *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life* by Steve Hayes, and *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris. Within those books, and also in this program, you’ll find other sources for further ACT-style exercises.

The second solution may be something you weren’t expecting to hear: Forgive yourself.

This program is designed for human beings and human beings make mistakes. I’m sure you’ve noticed yourself making some every now and then.

The kind of mistake I’m referring to here is when you fail to complete or start an action you committed to. As we mentioned in **Conversation 5: Values & Direction**, when this happens, it’s very natural and easy to slip into despondency, hopelessness, guilt, or self punishment.

When you find yourself doing this, ask this question: *How is this helping?*

If beating up on yourself works to make your life rich, purposeful and effective, then be my guest!

My observation – for what it’s worth though – is that these feelings of hopelessness or guilt are usually accompanied by constant thoughts of a despairing, blaming, or self critical nature.

The purpose of forgiving yourself your mistakes and failings is not to put a stop to these feelings and thoughts – though that may be a fortunate occasional side effect of forgiveness. Its purpose is to liberate you from their hold on you so that you can act effectively even in their presence.

In any case, we saw in the first two conversations how ineffective and counterproductive it can be to try to control or avoid your own feelings and thoughts.

Fortunately, to practise forgiving yourself requires only the application of three skills we’ve already practised in the earlier conversations.

Here are the three steps:



Photo by Neil Thomas on Unsplash

Exercise 4: Practising Forgiving Yourself

1. **Defuse** from thoughts of self punishment or blame – to do this, use the techniques we practised in Conversation 2.

2. Practise **expansion** from Conversation 3 and **acceptance of feelings** from Conversation 4, so that these unpleasant feelings have permission to be there.

3. Take **actions** consistent with your **values**, as we've discussed in Conversation 5 and this conversation.

That's the end of Six ACT Conversations – I hope this program can contribute to building a more satisfying and productive life! Of course, please feel free to revisit any of the conversations that might be of use to you in future.