



Moving Toward Your Goals, Even When You Feel Anxious

Some ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) strategies and principles to keep in mind:

1. **The mind and body are connected.** Physical sensations of anxiety such as rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, sweaty palms, etc. can be triggered by worrisome thoughts, disturbing mental images, painful memories, and anxious feelings. In reverse, uncomfortable physical sensations can also trigger anxious mental activity.
2. **Your mind is a tool for you to use.** Sometimes the anxious activity of your mind can feel like torture. As you observe your mind's activity, you can decide to distance yourself from anxious thoughts that are not useful to you; you can also choose to focus upon thoughts that support and honor your values (i.e. who you are or who you want to become).

If you are building a house, you will need to put some tools down and pick others up, depending upon your goals in construction. Different tools are helpful for different jobs. Just because you see a tool on the top of your tool box, it does not mean that you should use it.



3. **When you avoid or fight anxiety, it can tend to grow.** Your attempts to avoid, control or eliminate the stressful things going on in your head will likely backfire and make you more anxious. The mind's job is to be active. Minds are very busy. If you try to stop the flow of activity in your mind, you will become exhausted and anxious. Sometimes the best thing to do is do nothing but observe.

If you were to fall into some quicksand and then flail around and struggle to get out, you would be sucked in even further; better to stay calm and be open to another form of escape.

4. **Observe the mind without judgment.** TIMES is an acronym that stands for Thoughts, Images, Memories, Emotions and Sensations. These five summarize the range of activities in your mind. Notice and be curious about that inner activity without becoming too attached to it.



You can think of your Self as the blue sky, while the drifting clouds in that sky are the like the inner activities of your mind. It does not work to try to eliminate the clouds from the sky or try to contain them. Instead, observe them and then let them pass on by.

5. **Come back to the present and scan your mind and body throughout the day.** Practice observing the TIMES right here and right now without trying to change them. Pick at least one time each day to check in with your mind and body.

Think about how the act of breathing is always occurring now, again and again. It is not enough to breath only once each day; instead you have to keep up the practice over and over and over, one breath at a time.

6. **Your thoughts are your creations; they are not rigid facts.** Remember that you do not have to feel stuck in your anxious thoughts. You have the power to change them.

Instead of believing the thought, "I am going to fail" as if it is a concrete fact, practice saying "I'm having the thought that I'm going to fail." This may help you to remember that there are many alternative thoughts you could choose to focus upon.

7. **Accept what you cannot change and have the courage to change the things you can.** Control tactics that might work to change the outside world don't always work as well to change your inner world.

If there is snow in your driveway, you can remove it with a shovel; however, if you try to "dig" your way out of a problem by obsessing over it, you will tend to get more anxious.

8. **Take time to plot your course.** Ask yourself who you want to be. What is important to you? What do you want your purpose to be each day? Identify and remember what you value. Spend some time thinking about what you really want in your life, as opposed to focusing upon what you don't want or what you don't have.



A GPS can only help you get where you want to go if you set it with a destination in mind. You might find that the GPS prompts you to adjust your course on the way to your destination, and you can decide to listen to it or not.

9. **Anxiety is not necessarily an obstacle to meeting your goals; in fact, it can be an indicator that you are on the right track.** Having anxious feelings may indicate that you are invested in your goals. Some anxiety is normal and may even be helpful. Too little might indicate boredom; too much can be paralyzing.

Additional ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) Resources:

Hayes, Ph.D., Stephen C. with Spencer Smith. *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life: The New Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.* New Harbinger Publications, 2005.

Lejeune, Ph.D., Chad. *The Worry Trap: How to Free Yourself from Worry & Anxiety Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.* New Harbinger Publications, 2007.



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