

# CHOICES

Vancouver Island Counselling  
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## Building *Cognitive Flexibility* in a Rigid World

In a world that constantly pulls us into reaction, outrage, distraction, and comparison, our greatest mental strength isn't control, it's **cognitive flexibility**.

At the heart of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is one central goal: **psychological flexibility**. This is the ability to stay present, open, and committed to what matters, even when thoughts and emotions get loud.

Rather than fighting your inner world, ACT teaches you how to move with it.

Here's how the six core processes of ACT build cognitive flexibility.



### March 2026 Edition

#### 1. Cognitive Defusion

**You are not your thoughts.**

Cognitive fusion happens when we get tangled in our thoughts:

- "I'm a failure."
- "This will never work."
- "They're against me."

When fused, thoughts feel like facts.

**Defusion** teaches us to step back and observe thoughts as mental events, not truths. Instead of "I'm a failure," we learn to say: "I'm noticing I'm having the thought that I'm a failure."

That small shift creates space and space creates flexibility.



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## 2. Acceptance

**Make room for discomfort instead of fighting it.**

Avoidance narrows life. The more we try to suppress anger, grief, fear, or shame, the more rigid we become.

Acceptance doesn't mean liking pain. It means allowing emotions to exist without letting them dictate behavior.

Cognitive flexibility grows when we stop spending energy on emotional resistance and start investing energy in meaningful action.

## 3. Contact with the Present Moment

**Flexibility requires awareness.**

When we're stuck in regret (past) or anxiety (future), we react automatically. Present-moment awareness interrupts this autopilot and helps us respond instead of reacting.

Simple practices like mindful breathing, noticing sensations, or grounding in your environment strengthen this muscle daily.

## 4. Self-as-Context

**You are the observer, not the story.**

We all carry narratives:

- "I'm the angry one."
- "I'm the anxious one."
- "I'm the one who always gets hurt."

ACT introduces a powerful idea: *there is a part of you that notices all of this*. The observing self is steady. Thoughts change. emotions change, and roles change. **But awareness remains.**

## 5. Values

**What actually matters to you?**

Flexibility is not random adaptation. It's movement in the direction of what you care about. Values are chosen qualities of action:

- Integrity
- Compassion
- Courage
- Community
- Growth

When we act from values instead of emotional impulse, we become less reactive and more intentional. Here is a list of values to help you choose your top 5-8 and help be a guiding compass.

### Values

|                |                |              |                 |              |
|----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Fairness       | Mercy          | Generosity   | Resourcefulness | Open-minded  |
| Trust          | Happiness      | Independence | Simplicity      | Authenticity |
| Growth         | Autonomy       | Reliability  | Creativity      | Playfulness  |
| Safety         | Respect        | Integrity    | Duty            | Courtesy     |
| Dignity        | Liberty        | Love         | Curiosity       | Insight      |
| Adventure      | Equity         | Belonging    | Justice         | Loyalty      |
| Success        | Excellence     | Honesty      | Order           | Forgiveness  |
| Kindness       | Self-knowledge | Empathy      | Understanding   | Patience     |
| Humour         | Risk           | Stability    | Supportiveness  | Self-control |
| Public Service | Inclusion      | Compassion   | Openness        | Credibility  |
| Humility       | Nurture        | Candour      | Determination   |              |

## 6. Committed Action

### Flexibility in motion.

This is where ACT becomes practical.

Committed action means:

- Taking small, values-based steps
- Even when discomfort shows up
- Even when doubt is loud

Cognitive flexibility isn't passive, it's behavioral.

It asks: *"Given this thought, this feeling, this moment, what action moves me toward the life I want?"*



### Why Cognitive Flexibility Matters Now

We live in environments that reward outrage, certainty, and emotional reactivity. Rigid thinking spreads quickly and nuance moves slowly.

Psychological flexibility is protective. Research consistently shows it's associated with:

- Lower anxiety and depression
- Greater resilience
- Improved relationships
- Better stress management
- Increased life satisfaction

Flexibility does not mean weakness. It means you are adaptable without losing your direction.

## A Simple Daily ACT Practice

Try this 3-step check-in:

1. **Notice** – What am I thinking and feeling right now?
2. **Name** – "I'm noticing the thought that..."
3. **Choose** – What action aligns with my values in this moment?

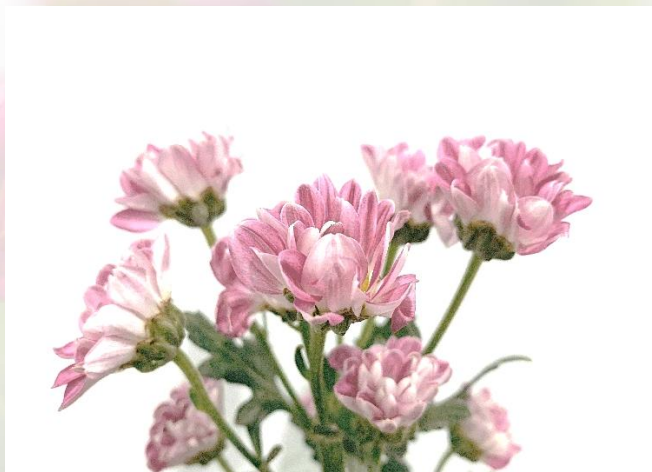
That pause is cognitive flexibility in action.

The goal of ACT is *not to eliminate* anger, sadness, fear, or doubt.

The goal is to *build a mind that can*:

- Hold those experiences
- Move through them
- And still choose a meaningful path

Flexibility is not about bending to everything. It's about staying grounded while life moves around you. And in a rigid world, that may be one of the strongest skills we can develop.



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