

ACT for Chronic Pain and Mental Wellness

Chronic Pain and Mental Health Conference
UHN Centre for Mental Health



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Land Acknowledgment

UHN exists on land that is the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River since time immemorial.

Today, this land is home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We are so fortunate to be able to work and live on this sacred land.



Presenter Disclosure

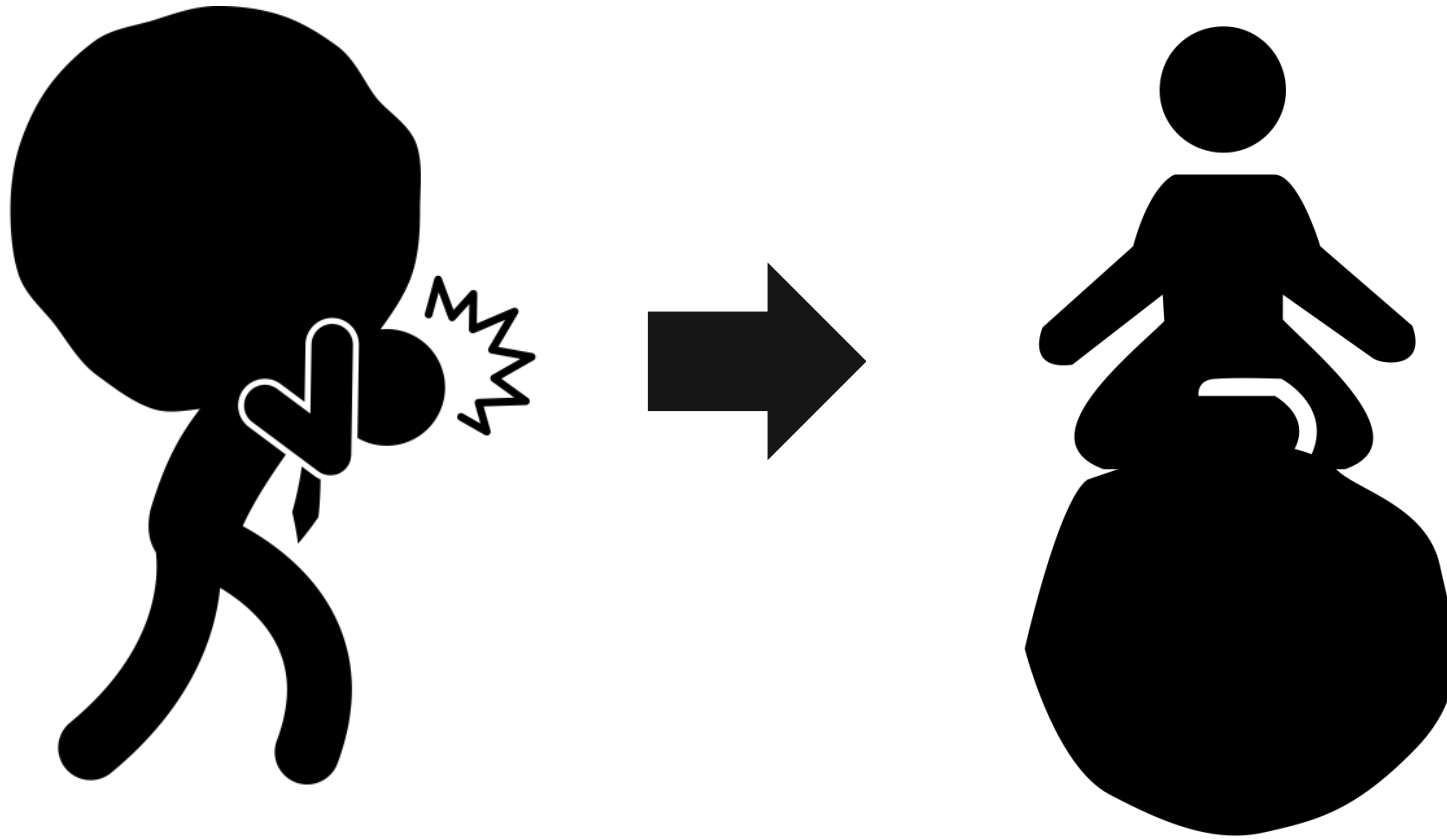
- Faculty: Katy Curtis
- Relationships with financial sponsors:
 - Grants/Research Support: Not applicable
 - Speakers Bureau/Honoraria: Not applicable
 - Consulting Fees: Not applicable
 - Patents: Not applicable
 - Other: Employee of the University Health Network

Learning Objectives

- Understand the theory of ACT & application for chronic pain
 - Key ideas, hexaflex, 6 processes, & application to chronic pain
- Integrate ACT techniques into regular practice
 - ACT Matrix for special populations
 - Engagement in meaningful behaviours in service of valued living
- ACT resources for practitioners and patients



Why Choose ACT for Chronic Pain?



Evidence for ACT

- Overview of Systematic Reviews with Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials (Martinez-Calderon et al., 2024)
 - Included 9 SR with MA evaluating individuals with CP who received ACT
 - The SR with MA were deemed of critically low quality (AMSTAR tool)
 - Main outcomes:
 - **Pain intensity, Pain-related functioning, Quality of life:**
 - Inconsistent results post-tx
 - **Pain catastrophizing, Pain Acceptance, Psychological Flexibility, Depression, Anxiety, and Mindfulness:**
 - Positive results post-tx
- Authors conclude that “ACT could improve pain-related functioning, psychological factors, and QoL at different time points”



INTRODUCTION TO ACT

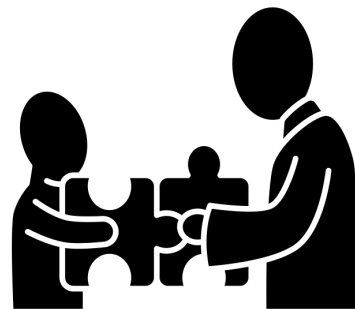
What is ACT?

- Process-based, third-wave, cognitive behavioral therapy
- Fosters openness, awareness, and engagement
- Grounded in Relational Frame Theory
- Functional and contextual framework
- Combination of cognitive, acceptance, mindfulness, experiential, metaphor-based, values-oriented and behavioural change methods
- Transdiagnostic model

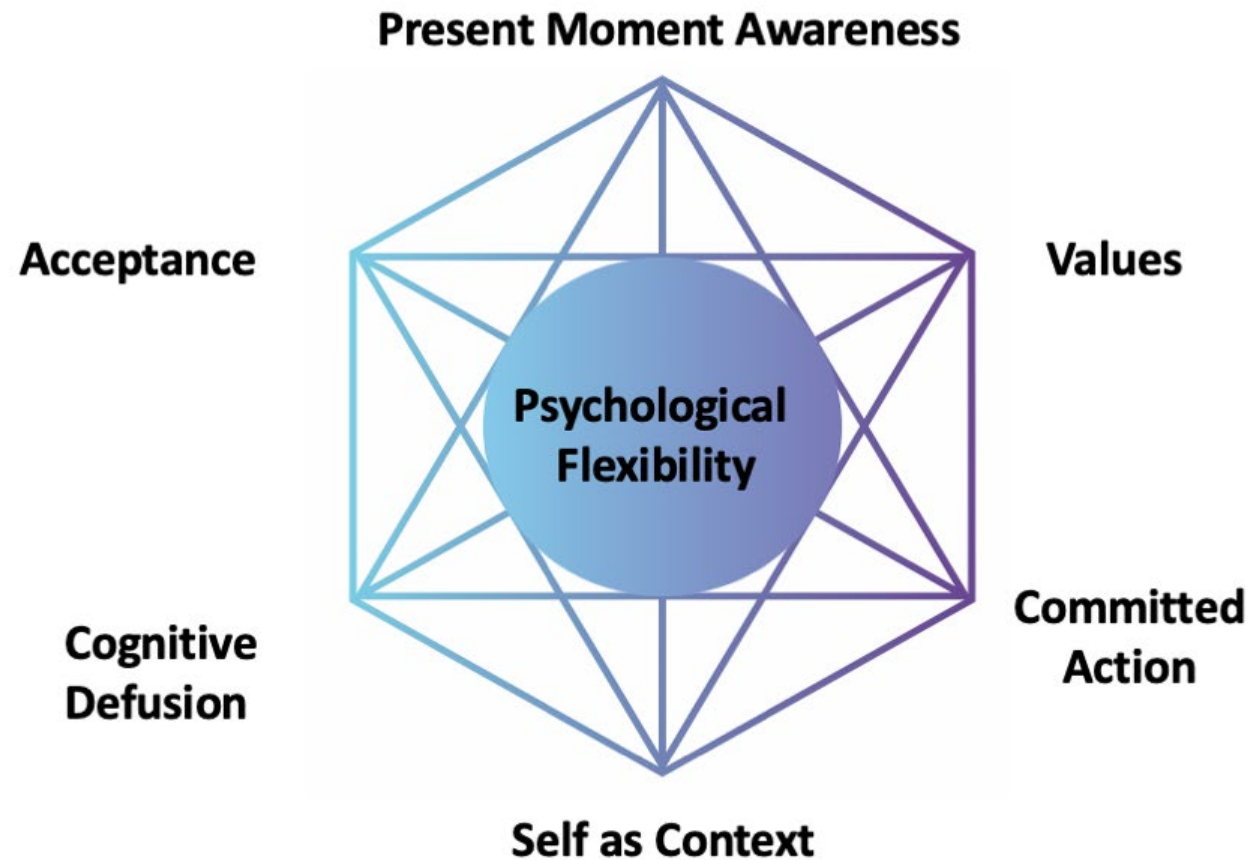


ACT Therapeutic Stance

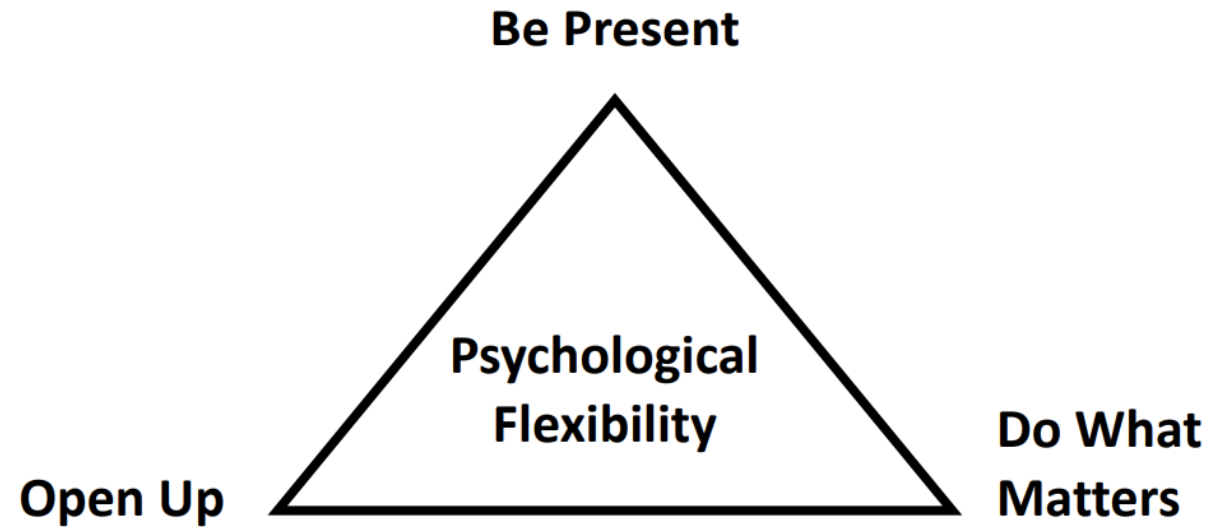
- Embodies the model
- Equal, vulnerable, compassionate, genuine, and respectful
- Fits and tailors methods and exercises to the needs of the patient
- Accepts challenging content (e.g., difficult feelings) without fixing
- Uses exercises, metaphor, and de-emphasizes literal sense
- Brings emphasis back to client's experience
- Does not lecture or attempt to convince



Six Key Processes of ACT



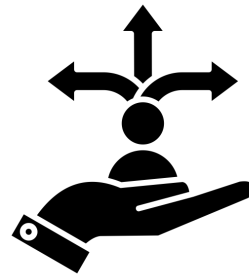
The Simplified Triflex



KEY CONCEPTS

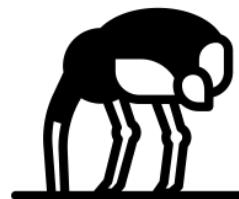
Psychological Flexibility

- **Psychological Flexibility:** Ability to be open, aware, and engaged in both cognitive and sensory experience and select behaviours to serve valued ends



Experiential Avoidance

- Experiential Avoidance:
 - Unwillingness to remain in contact with difficult internal experience
 - An attempt to escape, avoid, control, or suppress
- Avoidance behaviours lead to immediate relief
- What we resist, persists
- Long term consequence of EA are distress and difficulty making progress toward goals
- Validation that pain is an inherently difficult experience



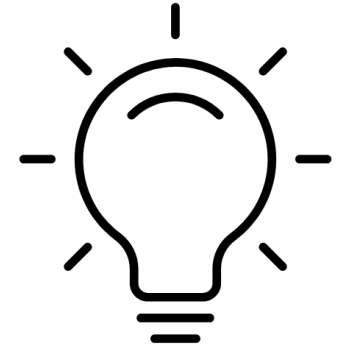
Unworkability of Control

- Attempts to control and eliminate pain / unwanted experience
- The hunt for the pain elixir can take over → endless time, energy and resources are dedicated to the pursuit
- Encouragement to notice the impact of this exclusionary focus:
 - Does life become:
 - Free, liberated, bigger
 - Restricted, dominated
- Examine the effectiveness of attempts at control
- Does not mean giving up on pain management



Creative Hopelessness

- Suffering is a part of life and shared by all humanity
- We can't eliminate suffering but we can amplify it
- Attempts to control inner experience
 - Hope of attaining peace & happiness
 - Trapped, distress, exhausted
- Hopelessness: the unworkability of control / old way
 - Catalyst for transformation
- Creative: new possibilities



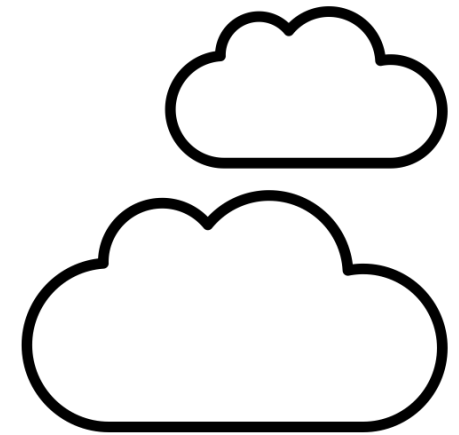
(Pain) Willingness

- Openness to experience the present without judgement or defenses
- Entering an agreement to be neutral to all aspects of experience, including pain and unpleasant sensations
- **Willingness is a choice:**
 - Making a selection simply because it's possible, even amongst limited options.
- **Willingness is an action:**
 - Willingness is not a feeling. Willingness is a mental process of leaning into and opening to difficult experience.

THE SIX PROCESSES

Cognitive Defusion

- Involves creating space, distancing, disconnecting from, and observing thoughts
- Thoughts as mental events in the mind
- Interventions
 - The clipboard exercise
 - Thoughts that hook exercise
 - Metaphor
 - Mindfulness of thoughts



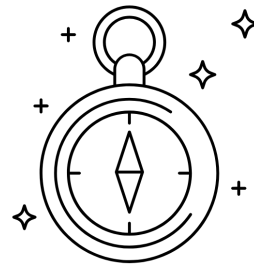
Sensations Vs. Mental Experiencing Hand-out



Sensations	Mental Reactions	Values
Burning	“When will it end?”	“I can’t do what I love.”
Aching	“This pain is terrible/awful. I hate it.”	“I have lost all my hobbies.”
Stabbing	“I used to be able to do so much more.”	“No one understands what it takes.”

Vital Spark of Values

- Values: fundamental areas of life deemed most important
- Heart of values work is to construct a vision of a life with integrity, depth and vitality
- Values work is about defining what is most important when avoidance, fusion, and escape are no longer fueling behaviour
- Provides motivation for behaviour change
- Values imbue presence and a feeling of being alive, bright, and awake
- “Values pain” → plants seeds for acceptance
- Interventions: ACT Matrix, values identification exercises, and values card sort



Committed Action

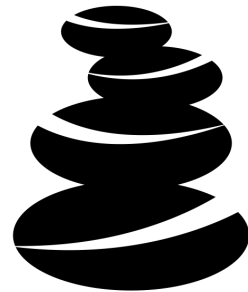
- Committed action is inherently responsible, in the sense that it is based on the view that there is always an *ability to respond* → not idealistic
- Values provide the blueprint and committed action involves the ability to link a behaviour to a value in any situation
- The specific form of committed action needed depends on the situation and what action would be most effective
- Interventions: ACT Matrix, behavioural activation, pacing

Committed Action

Pain Intensity	Value	Committed Action
3/10	Spending time with family	Cook a simple meal together
5/10	Spending time with family	Order take out and eat together
7/10	Spending time with family	Watch a movie together

Present-Minded Process

- Ongoing non-judgmental contact with inner and outer experience
- Life is always lived in the here and now
- Nothing else can be directly experienced than the present moment
- Present moment awareness results in:
 - Responsive and flexible attention
 - Ability to contact new possibilities and learning
- Interventions: Coming to the present moment, inside-world/outside-world, mindfulness



What is Acceptance?

- Acceptance is openly, mindfully and directly experiencing all thoughts, emotions and sensations even when it is uncomfortable
- Emotional processing of changes in identity, life roles, activities
- Dropping the struggle associated with attempts to control pain
- Flexibly adapting to the needs of one's body and modifying plans based on what is possible at specific pain level
- Interventions: Lotus exercise, mindfulness, passengers on the bus, meaning making re: changes in identity due to pain



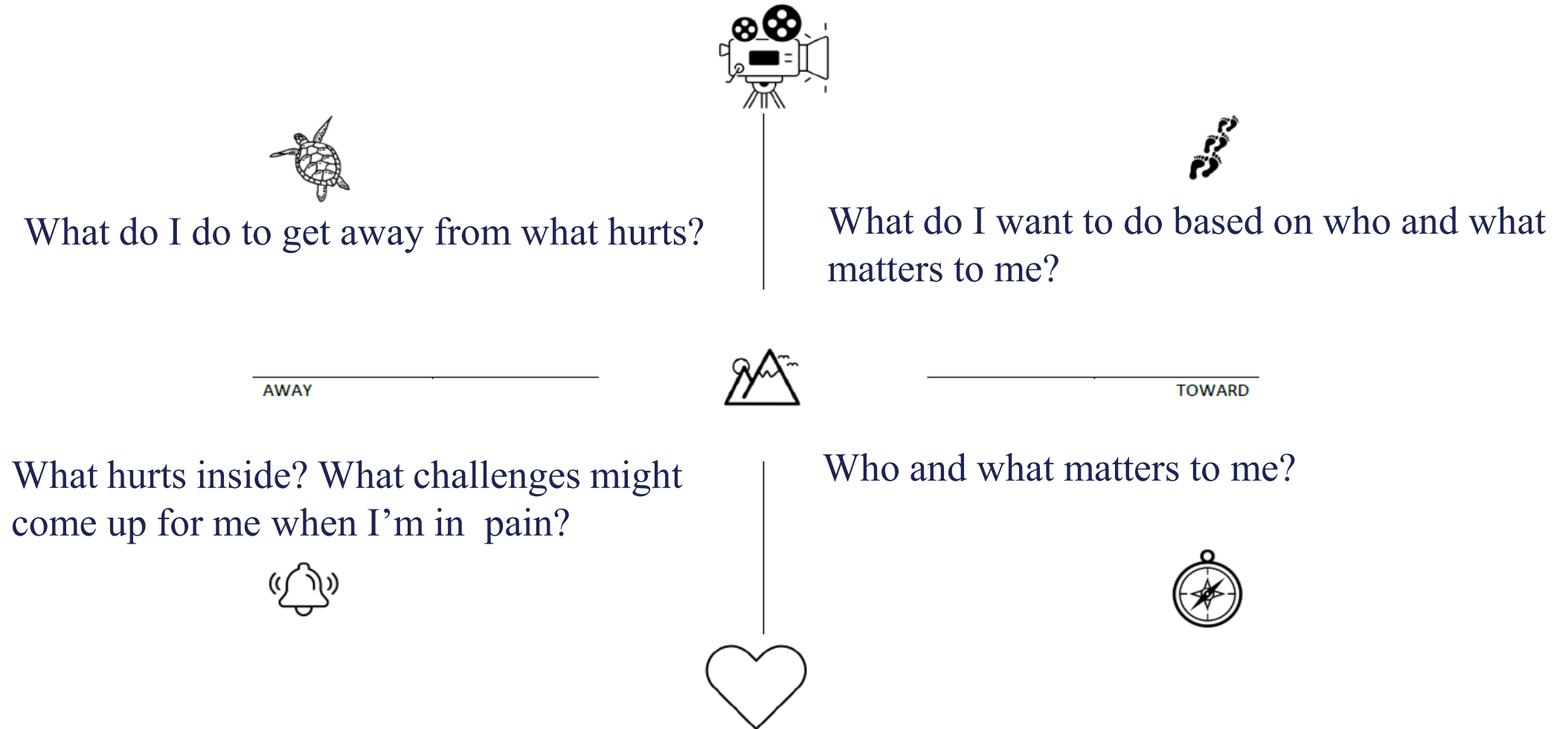
Self-As-Context

- Mindful observation of experience from a deep sense of self rather than from conceptualized identity and belief systems
- Sense of self is transcendent, challenging to quantify, subtle, and abstract
- Element of spirituality and mindfulness to it → conscious awareness
- A context / arena that holds all aspects of experience, and yet is not any one of them
- Interventions: Facets of identity, chessboard metaphor, mindfulness

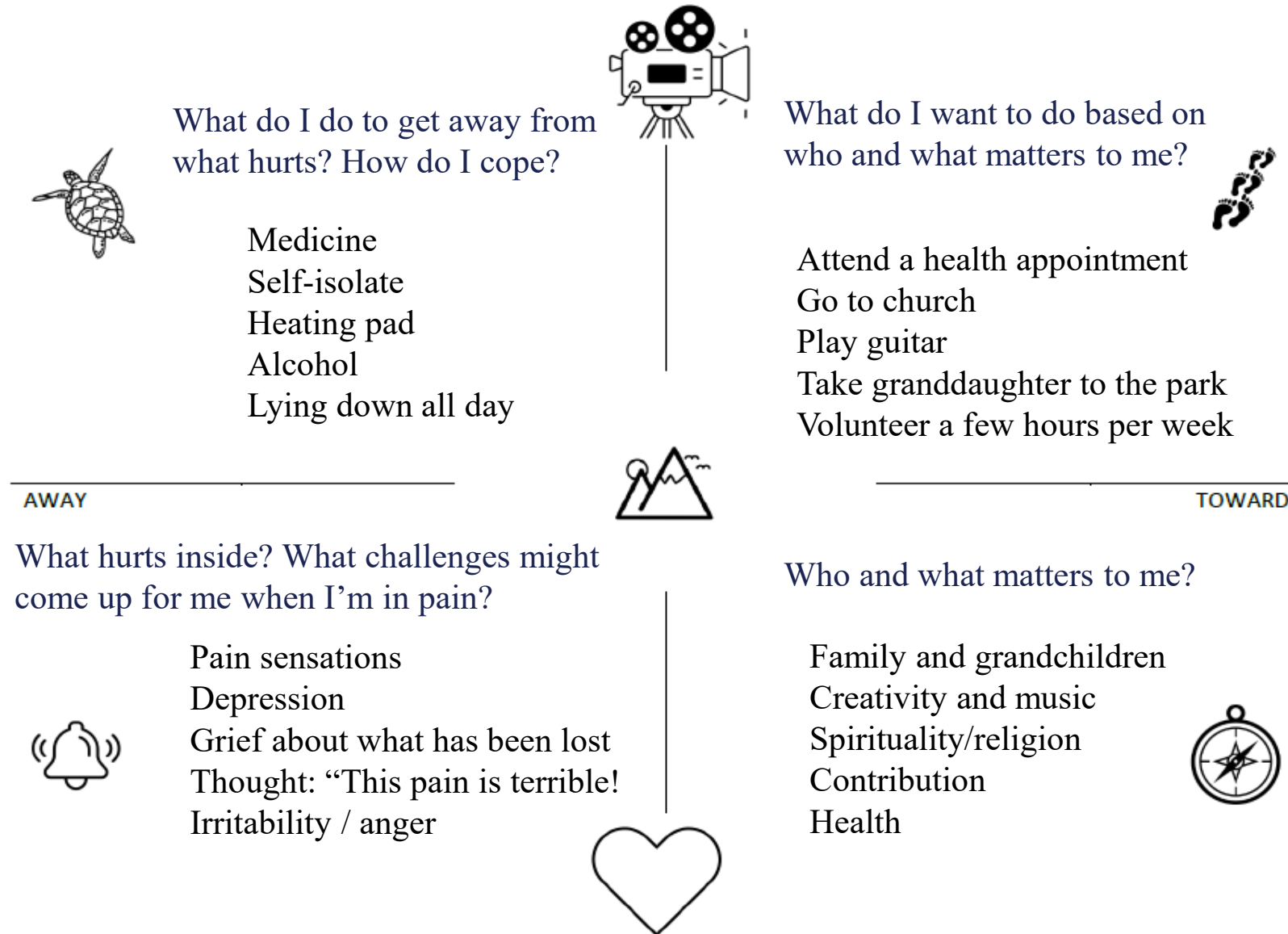


INTERACTIVE: TOOLS AND HANDOUTS

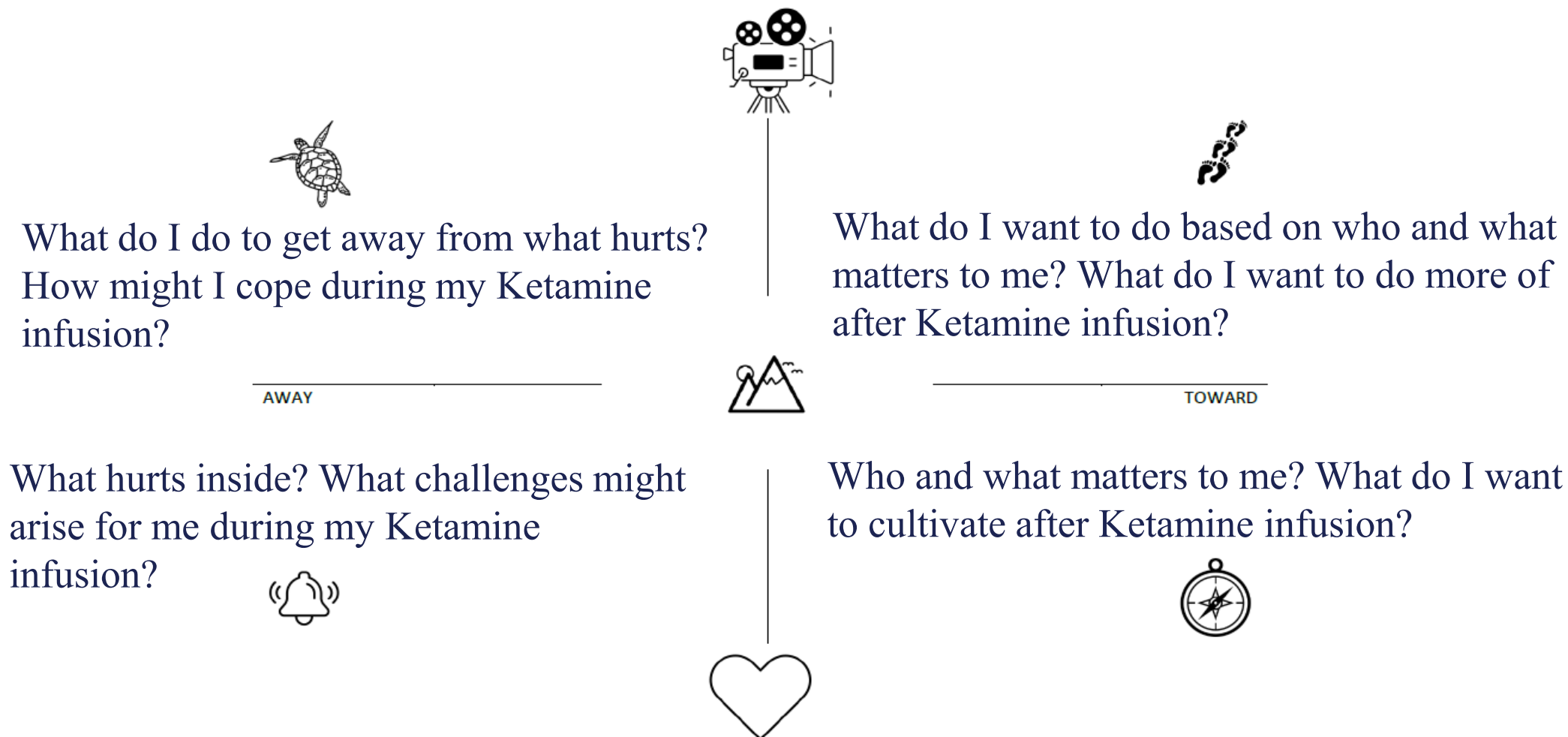
The ACT Matrix



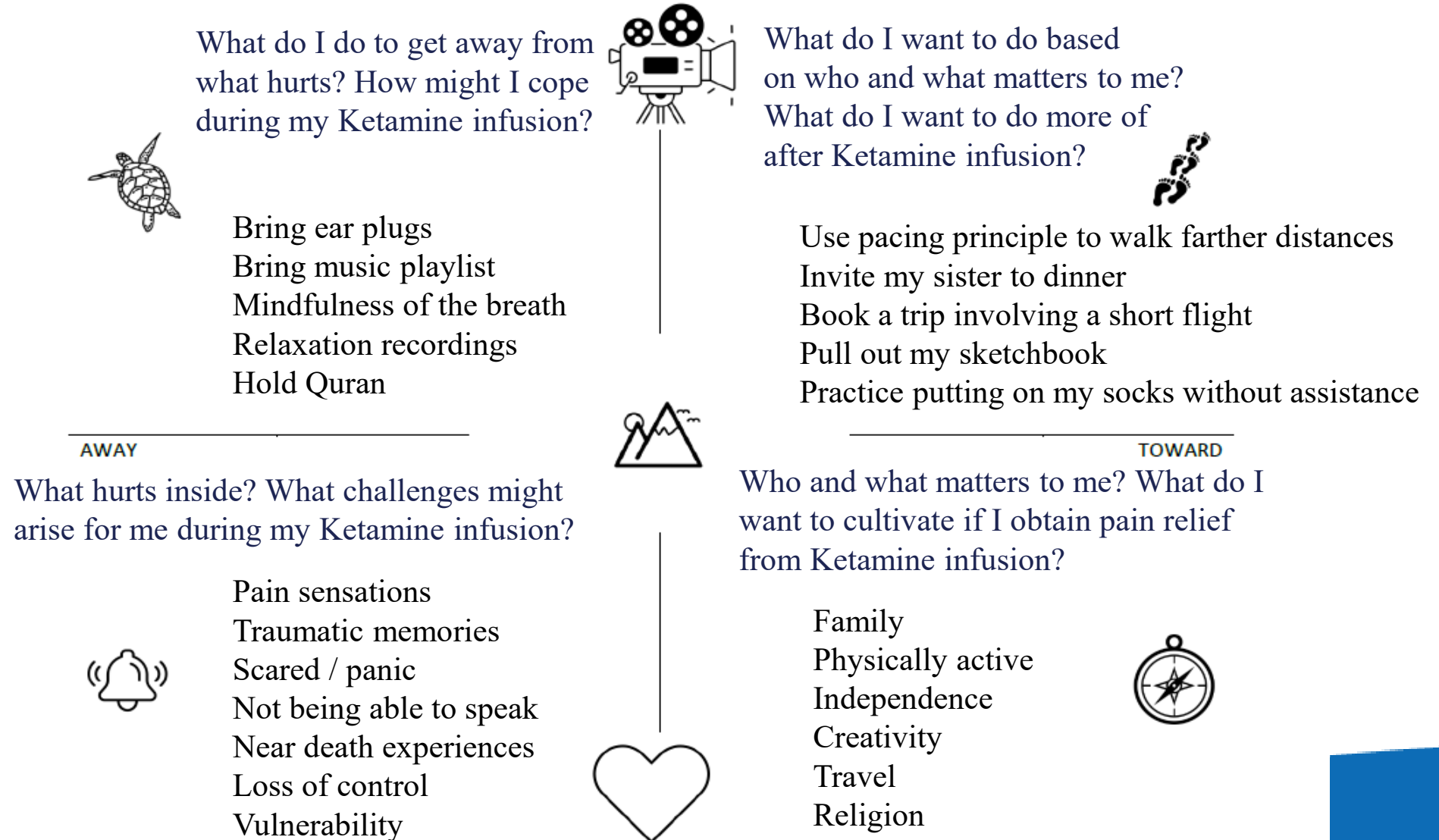
The ACT Matrix



The ACT Matrix



The ACT Matrix



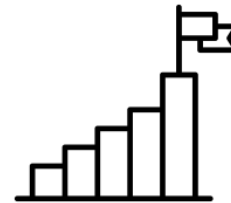
Goal Vs. Value

- A **goal** can be completed (going for a walk)
- A **value** is a process that involves many actions over time and is not something to be ticked off a list (cultivating health)
- Focus on process of living rather than the outcomes of actions
- Goals are helpful:
 - Provide information about a tangible marker
 - Must be held lightly, as a pathway for valued action and not as an end unto themselves
- Engage in goals as part of a bigger, more fluid and experiential process



Goals and Committed Action

- Goals represent the daily movement towards values
- Goals should be framed as moving towards what matters, rather than avoiding what's hard
- Willingness and committed action are deeply intertwined
 - 1) Willingness is a precursor to engagement
 - 2) Taking steps to realize a value can trigger sadness and disappointment
- Coping style should be addressed and pacing introduced
 - Boom-Bust Cycle
 - Avoidance and/or Stuck Cycle



Values and Goals: Handout in CIPP ACT Group

HOMEWORK: PERSONAL VALUE, GOAL, and COMMITTED ACTION

Identify one value, goal, and committed action that relates to your pain and health that you can focus on for the duration of these 6 weeks. Remember, the value is the path, the goal is the post that tells you you're moving along in the right direction, and the committed action is the step that you take to walk on the path.

Each week, please track the committed action that you engage in to cultivate the value.



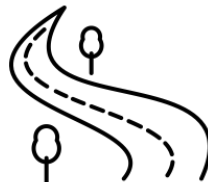
VALUE: (e.g., mind-body health as a pain management strategy):

GOAL: (e.g., increase mind-body skills):

COMMITTED ACTION: (e.g., practice mindfulness every day):

Values and Goals: Handout

- **VALUE:** e.g., mind-body health as a pain management strategy
- **GOAL:** e.g., increase mind-body skills
- **COMMITTED ACTION:** e.g., practice mindfulness daily
 - Weekly tracking over the group
 - Reviewed at the last session



Take Home Tools

HOMEWORK: PERSONAL VALUE, GOAL, and COMMITTED ACTION

Identify one value, goal, and committed action that relates to your pain and health that you can focus on for the duration of these 6 weeks. Remember, the value is the path, the goal is the post that tells you you're moving along in the right direction, and the committed action is the step that you take to walk on the path.

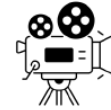
Each week, please track the committed action that you engage in to cultivate the value.



VALUE: (e.g., mind-body health as a pain management strategy): _____

GOAL: (e.g., increase mind-body skills): _____

COMMITTED ACTION: (e.g., practice mindfulness every day): _____



AWAY



TOWARD



Resources

Associations, Trainings, Books

1) Association for Contextual and Behavioural Science

<https://contextualscience.org/acbs>

ACBS is an international community of scholars, researchers, educators, practitioners

2) Contextual Psychology Institute

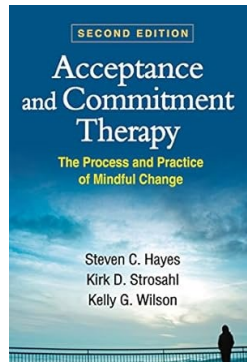
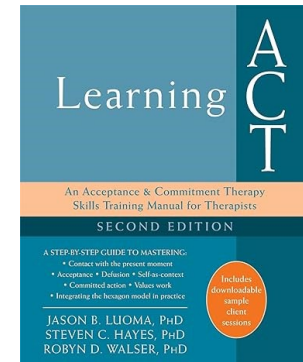
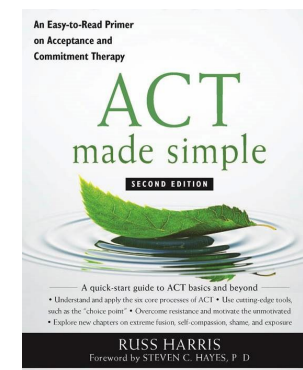
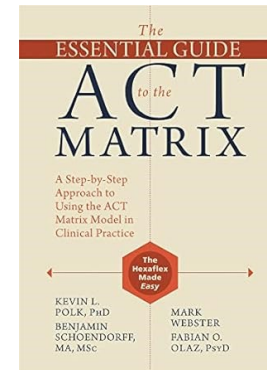
<https://contextpsy.com/en/>

Clinical services and training opportunities

3) ACT Mindfully

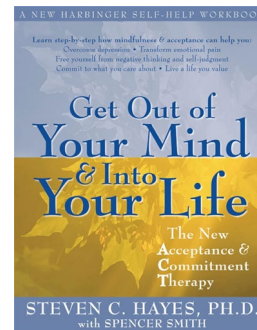
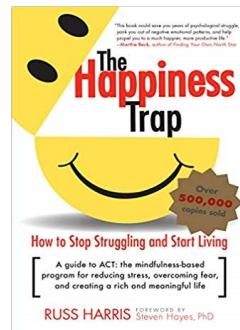
<https://www.actmindfully.com.au>

Workshops with Dr. Russ Harris



Resources for Patients

- **Books:**
 - **Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life**
By Steven Hayes
 - **The Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living**
By Russ Harris
- **Apps:**
 - **The ACT Companion: The Happiness Trap**
 - Interactive exercises and tools based on Dr Harris' book



Question and Answer

Thank you!

CLIPBOARD EXERCISE

CLIPBOARD EXERCISE

Please choose one pain thought.

Choose a thought that comes up a lot for you when you're experiencing pain.

Write it out in really big letters so that it takes up a lot of the page.





Created by Luis Prado
from Noun Project

Created by Luis Prado
from Noun Project



Created by iconfield
from Noun Project

Conceptualized Self

- Scripts, templates and schemas for understanding the self, relationships, and the world broadly are developed early in life.
- Conceptualized self: Forms a sense of identity.
- Includes:
 - Roles: e.g. Student, mother, uncle, or friend
 - Qualities: e.g. I'm funny, or I'm giving.
- Helpful → Sense of self, function in a society
- Less helpful → Mental rigidity, less focus on experience

