

## THE BIG IDEAS

### ACT =

Mindfulness + Acceptance + Values.

### Human Suffering

Is universal.

### Experiential Avoidance

IS NOT A WISE IDEA.

### Acceptance & Willingness

Are very wise ideas.

### Your Own Funeral

Values/virtues and creating a meaningful life.

# Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life

## The New Acceptance & Commitment Therapy

BY STEVEN C. HAYES · NEW HARBINGER PUBLICATIONS © 2005 · 224 PAGES

“People suffer. It’s not just that they have pain—suffering is much more than that. Human beings *struggle* with the forms of psychological pain they have: their difficult emotions and thoughts, their unpleasant memories, and their unwanted urges and sensations. They think about them, worry about them, resent them, anticipate and dread them.

At the same time, human beings demonstrate enormous courage, deep compassion, and a remarkable ability to move ahead even with the most difficult personal histories. Knowing they can be hurt, humans still love others. Knowing they will die, humans still care about the future. Facing the draw of meaninglessness, humans still embrace ideals. At times, humans are fully alive, present, and committed.

This book is about how to move from suffering to engagement with life. Rather than waiting to win the internal struggle with your own self so that your life can begin, this book is about living now and living fully—with (not in spite of) your past, with your memories, with your fears, and with your sadness.

This book is based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT. (‘ACT’ is spoken as a single word, not as separate initials.) This is a new, scientifically based psychotherapeutic modality that is part of what is being called the ‘third wave’ in behavioral and cognitive therapy.”

~ Steven C. Hayes from *Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life*

*“This is not a traditional self-help book. We aren’t going to help you win the war with your own pain by using new theories. We are going to help you leave the battle that is raging inside your own mind, and to begin to live the kind of life you truly want. Now.”*

~ Steven C. Hayes

Steven Hayes is the creator of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or ACT for short. Nearly a decade ago (time flies when you’re having fun!), we featured two books by [Russ Harris](#) on ACT: [The Happiness Trap](#) and [The Confidence Gap](#).

I got this book immediately after finishing my Notes on [Marsha Linehan](#)’s great memoir, [Building a Life Worth Living](#). Marsha, as we discuss in those Notes, is the creator of something called “Dialectical Behavior Therapy” or “DBT” for short. The “dialectic” of her therapy? Simultaneously ACCEPTING your current reality \*while\* COMMITTING TO CHANGE.

As it turns out, that’s pretty much EXACTLY what \*this\* book is about as well. In fact, Marsha could have named her approach “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” while Steven could have named his approach Dialectical Behavior Therapy. The details of their approaches are different, but the essence is nearly identical.

Both ACT and DBT were developed in the 1980s and 1990s and were part of what is known as the “third wave” in cognitive behavior therapy. We’ve featured wisdom from a couple other approaches that fall into that category as well: [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#)’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (see Notes on [Wherever You Go, There You Are](#)) and [Mark Williams](#)’s Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (see Notes on his book called [Mindfulness](#)).

*"We don't assume that left to their own devices, normal human beings are happy and that only an odd history or a broken biology disturbs peace. We assume instead that suffering is normal and it is the unusual person who learns how to create peace of mind. Why this is so is a puzzle; this book is about that puzzle."*

~ Steven C. Hayes

This is a Workbook-style book. It's FANTASTIC. (Get a copy [here](#).)

It's PACKED with both theoretical wisdom \*and\* practical exercises to help us move from Theory to Practice to Mastery. I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

## MINDFULNESS, ACCEPTANCE, AND VALUES

*"ACT is not a set of idiomatic phrases and wise sayings that will lead you toward a personal revelation. Although some of the principles of ACT are as old as history, there is one major component of the therapy that is new. ACT is based on a new model of human cognition. This model underlies specific techniques presented in this book, which are designed to help you change your approach to your problems, and the direction in which your life has been going. These techniques fall into three broad categories: mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based living."*

That's from the Introduction in which we get a quick overview of ACT.

Here's what you need to know...

Hayes was inspired to create ACT in response to the panic attacks he was experiencing as a young man—similar to how Marsha Linehan used her own suicidal behaviors as the catalyst and fuel for her creation of DBT.

He was deeply influenced by both Stoicism and Buddhism in his creation of ACT.

We talked about cognitive behavioral therapy's connection to Stoicism in [Donald Robertson's \*The Philosophy of CBT\*](#) in which we learn how Stoics influenced Aaron Beck.

ACT is a "third wave" extension of CBT, so I asked ChatGPT to let me know how Steven was influenced by Stoicism. It told me that he once said: *"Stoicism has a clear influence on ACT, especially in its focus on accepting what is beyond our control and taking committed action based on our values. Both traditions emphasize the importance of living in accordance with one's values and understanding the limits of what we can change."*

Now... The three categories of ACT include: mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based living.

Regarding mindfulness, Steven tells us: *"Mindfulness is a way of observing your experience that has been practiced in the East through various forms of meditation for centuries. Recent research in Western psychology has proven that practicing mindfulness can have notable psychological benefits."*

And: *"Using specific techniques, you will learn to look at your pain, rather than seeing the world from the vantage point of your pain."*

NOTE: That's a VERY big distinction. We want to LOOK at our pain objectively/mindfully/from an Observer-self perspective RATHER THAN see the world from the vantage point/through the lens of our pain. Helping us do that is a BIG part of this book.

Regarding acceptance, he tells us: *"The 'acceptance' in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is based on the notion that, as a rule, trying to get rid of your pain only amplifies it, entangles you further in it, and transforms it into something traumatic. Meanwhile, living your life is pushed to the side."*

And: *"Acceptance, in the sense it is used here, is not a nihilistic self-defeat; neither is it tolerating and putting up with your pain. It is very, very different than that. Those heavy, sad, dark forms of 'acceptance' are almost the exact opposite of the active, vital embrace of the moment that we mean."*

Regarding commitment and values-based living, he tells us: *"When we are caught in a struggle with psychological problems we often put life on hold, believing that our pain needs to lessen*

*"It is amazing how when we begin to say yes, life seems to present us with just the right challenges: always slightly more or slightly earlier than we might have wished and yet doable-if we are willing."*

~ Steven C. Hayes

before we can really begin to live again. But what if you could have your life be about what you want it to be about right now, starting this moment?"

*"Accept response-ability.*

*There is a slight but important difference between accepting 'responsibility' and accepting 'response-ability.'*

*Accepting 'responsibility' often carries the implication of blame. Blame is what we do when we try to motivate people to change a behavior or do the right thing. But does accepting the thought 'I'm at fault' really motivate anyone to change?"*

~ Steven C. Hayes

## HUMAN SUFFERING IS UNIVERSAL

"Often many people we meet in our daily lives seem to have it all. They seem happy. They look satisfied with their lives. You've probably had the experience of walking down the street when you're having a particularly bad day, and you've looked around and thought, 'Why can't I just be happy like everyone around me? They don't suffer from chronic panic (or depression, or a substance abuse problem). They don't feel as if a dark cloud is always looming over their heads. They don't suffer the way I suffer. Why can't I be like them?'"

Here's the secret: They do and you are. We all have pain. All human beings, if they live long enough, have felt or will feel the devastation of losing someone they love. Every single person has felt or will feel physical pain. Everybody has felt sadness, shame, anxiety, fear, and loss. We all have memories that are embarrassing, humiliating, or shameful. We all carry painful hidden secrets. We tend to put on a shiny, happy face, pretending that everything is okay, and that life is 'all good.' But it isn't and it can't be. To be human is to feel pain in ways that are orders of magnitude more pervasive than what the other creatures on planet Earth feel."

That's from the first chapter called "Human Suffering."

Here's what you need to know...

WE ALL HAVE PAIN.

I know that when I was a teenager struggling with anxiety and a young man struggling with both anxiety and depression (although I never thought to call the experiences by those names), I thought I was the ONLY one experiencing the things I was experiencing.

That didn't help. (Hah.) (I can laugh now.)

Of course, decades and hundreds of (ancient wisdom and modern science) books later, it feels almost silly to type that out, but it's REALLY (!) important that we all REALLY understand the fact that EVERYONE experiences pain and suffering in their lives.

EVERYONE. Without exception. Period.

I will always vividly remember the time I was working with [Steve Chandler](#) over a decade ago when he told me that I was experiencing whatever psychological challenge I was facing at the time: "Not because you're YOU but because you're HUMAN."

Embracing what [Kristin Neff](#) calls our "common humanity" is a critical component to cultivating what she calls "[Self-Compassion](#)."

I repeat: YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

btw. You know how many people around the world are believed to be suffering from anxiety or depression or another mental health challenge?

1 BILLION PEOPLE.

Note: Every time I do my quick AM journaling, I capture the essence of my life's Heroic Mission by writing: "**101 x 1M = 1B => 51|2051.**"

As you know if you've been following along, that's also tattooed to my forearm. It's shorthand for doing my best to help create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051 by helping 1M people get their Soul Force to 101 such that we can hit 1B virtuous targets per year together.

But... Now when I write that "1B" I'm also thinking of the 1 BILLION PEOPLE currently believed to be struggling psychologically as I recommit to doing everything I can to support them.

*"Defining what matters to you and actively choosing to pursue that direction is what this book is ultimately all about. Although the defusion, mindfulness, and acceptance exercises you've explored are useful in themselves, this information is an empty shell if it isn't used in the service of living a meaningful life."*

~ Steven C. Hayes

"If I do not care, I will not be hurt' is how human minds keep values at arm's length.

Unfortunately, this move hurts even more than caring; it's not the biting, alive, occasional hurt of caring and sometimes losing, but the dull, deadening, constant hurt of not living your life in a way that is true to yourself."

~ Steven C. Hayes

P.S. Steven also tells us: "Pain and suffering are very different. We believe that there is a way to change your relationship to pain and to then live a good life, perhaps a great life, even though you are a human being whose memory and verbal skills keep the possibility of pain just an instant away.

The approach we will explore in this book is suggested by the word 'suffering.' The primary root is the Latin *ferry*, which means 'to bear or carry' (the English word 'ferry' comes from the same root). The prefix 'sun' is a version of 'sub' and, in this usage, means 'from below, up (hence) away.' In other words, suffering doesn't just involve having something to carry; it also invokes moving away. The word 'suffer' connotes the idea that there is a burden you are unwilling or unable to carry, perhaps because it seems 'too heavy,' 'too unfair,' or it just seems 'beyond you.' That connotation refers to more than pain alone; in fact, it provides a different way to address the problem of pain."

## EXPERIENTIAL AVOIDANCE

"Language creates suffering in part because it leads to experiential avoidance. *Experiential avoidance* is the process of trying to avoid your own experiences (thoughts, feelings, memories, bodily sensations, behavioral predispositions) even when doing so causes long-term behavioral difficulties (like not going to a party because you're a social phobic, or not exercising because you feel too depressed to get out of bed). Of all the psychological processes known to science, experiential avoidance is one of the worst."

Any time I read a line like...

"Of all the psychological processes known to science, *THIS* is one of the worst"...

I sit up A LOT STRAIGHTER, underline the passage with A LOT more ink and draw A LOT more lines and asterisks around the passage as I fold the page over to MAKE SURE I feature the wisdom as a Big Idea in our Notes. I would encourage YOU to consider (at least metaphorically) sitting up a little straighter right now as well.

### EXPERIENTIAL AVOIDANCE.

It's what scientists describe AVOIDING things you \*know\* are best for you but kinda sorta don't want to do.

And, I repeat...

### IT IS ONE OF THE WORST THINGS YOU CAN DO.

Period.

Steven walks us through how hard we all work to avoid feeling whatever pain we don't like. Then, unfortunately, in the process of avoiding that short-term pain, we make it WORSE over the long run. Eek.

As he says: "Outside the body, the rule may indeed be, 'If you don't like it, figure out how to get rid of it, and then get rid of it.' Inside the body, the rule appears to be very different. It's more like, 'If you aren't willing to have it, you will.' In practical terms, this means for example, that if you aren't willing to feel anxiety as a feeling, you will feel far more anxiety, plus you will begin to live a narrower and more constricted life."

The essence of the book is to ACCEPT the fact that YOU WILL experience psychological pain then COMMIT to doing what you need to do to create a life of meaning and purpose.

We want to APPROACH our challenges rather than AVOID them. Easier said than done, of course. But helping us get REALLY good at this is what it's all about.

Let's look at a couple of practical ways to go about doing that.

"You won't be able to make these techniques a part of your behavioral response patterns without practicing them. You can't just read them passively and hope to 'get it.' Take these skills with you in your life and apply them. Let your experience be your guide. Practice doesn't make perfect, it makes permanent."

~ Steven C. Hayes

## ACCEPTANCE & WILLINGNESS

*"Mindfulness is the defused, nonattached, accepting, nonjudgmental, deliberate awareness of experiential events as they happen in the moment."*

~ Steven C. Hayes

"Accept' comes from the Latin word 'caper' meaning 'take.' Acceptance is the act of receiving or 'taking what is offered.' Sometimes, in English, 'accept' means to 'tolerate or resign yourself' (as in, 'Aw, gee, I guess I have to accept that'), and that is precisely not what is meant here. By 'accept,' we mean something more like 'taking completely, in the moment, without defense.'

We use the word 'willing' as a synonym for 'accepting' to stay true to that meaning of accept. 'Willing' is one of the older words in the English language. It comes from an ancient root meaning 'to choose.' Thus 'acceptance' and 'willingness' can be understood as the answer to this question: 'Will you take me as I am?' Acceptance and willingness are the opposite of effortful control. Remember the dial at the back of the radio in Chapter 3? Now you know it's name: the Willingness dial."

As you know if you've been following along, I'm a bit of an etymology nerd. Steven is as well.

Now... After establishing the meaning of "acceptance" and its synonym "willingness," Steven asks: "Why Willingness?"

He answers that question by telling us: "One reason willingness is worth trying is that it is remarkable how consistently the scientific literature reveals its value and the danger of its flip side—experiential avoidance."

Yikes! There's that danger again: "Experiential avoidance."

Its antidote? Be WILLING to ACCEPT the pain in your life then, rather than do everything in your power to AVOID it at all costs, use the pain as a signal that it's time to APPROACH the challenge instead.

Steven says: "To be willing and accepting means to be able to walk through the swamps of your difficult history when the swamps are directly on the path going in a direction you care about."

[Marsha Linehan](#) talks about "willingness" as a key DBT "skill" we need to develop as well. She tells us: "Radical acceptance is akin to willingness... Willingness is when you allow the world to be what it is. And, no matter what it is, you agree to participate in the world."

When Marsha explains willingness, she likes to say that life is a lot like playing cards. You are dealt a certain set of cards. You may or may not LIKE them, but they are your cards to play. If you are UNWILLING to play them, the game ends. As such... We MUST be *willing* to play whatever hand we have been dealt.

AND... She uses the metaphor of a fire rather than a swamp. Your house is on fire. The only way out is the front door—where the flames are greatest. You feel tempted to find a "safe" place somewhere in the back of the house but you MUST be WILLING (!) to go through the flames.

Check out our Notes on [The Happiness Trap](#) and [The Confidence Gap](#) for some more practical Acceptance and Commitment Therapy tools you can use to cultivate your willingness.

For now, know that the biggest issue is that you are paying WAY too much attention to the voices in your head. You need to learn how to "defuse" from your thoughts and learn how to be willing to act in the presence of the pain you're feeling. Otherwise, as discussed, although you might avoid some short-term pain, you'll create a LOT more long-term pain in the process.

## ATTENDING YOUR OWN FUNERAL

"When people die, what is left behind is what they stood for. Think of someone who is no longer alive but whose life you look up to and admire. Think of your heroes. Now see if it isn't true that *what they stood for* is now, after their passing, most important. What's important is neither their material possessions nor their inner doubts. The values reflected in their lives are what's

*"None of the techniques will work simply by reading about them, any more than reading about physical exercise will build your muscles. The techniques will be of value to you only if you do them, and do them repeatedly. If you have been reading this for understanding, fine. You understand. Now practice."*

~ Steven C. Hayes

important. ...

*"If your value is the compass point by which you can make your life's journey, your goals are the road map that can lead you there. ... Goals give you a practical means to make your values manifest. They also offer you a metric against which you can measure your progress on your valued path. You may know what you want to be about, but without goals, it's unlikely you'll be able to live these values in the real world."*

~ Steven C. Hayes

*"Life is a choice. The choice here is not about whether or not to have pain. It is whether or not to live a valued, meaningful life. You've had enough suffering. Get out of your mind and into your life."*

~ Steven C. Hayes

The way you would want to be remembered once your life is over should give you a very good idea about what you value now. We don't know what anyone would say at your funeral, but we do know that your actions today can make a profound difference in how your life works from here. It is not your thoughts, feelings, or bodily sensations that your loved ones will remember you by, but the choices you make and the actions you take each day of your life. Couldn't that begin today? Couldn't that begin now?"

That's from one of the final chapters called "Choosing Your Values."

After establishing the fact that we ALL experience pain and suffering, then encouraging us to ACCEPT that fact and quit avoiding things that might trigger psychological pain, Steven tells us how to make strong COMMITMENTS in our lives to create a vital life of meaning.

The VERY FIRST EXERCISE he has us do?

It's the same one WE have YOU do when you go through Basic Training in the [Heroic app](#). And, it's the same one our Heroic Coaches have their clients do—which happens to be the same one I did with my very first coaching client over 20 years ago.

Steven has you imagine your own eulogy. So... If you feel so inspired, imagine someone getting up there and talking about YOU at the end of YOUR LIFE.

Note: Steven does a little tweak on my "Quick Trip to Hell" exercise. He has you imagine TWO eulogies—one where the individual talks about your life if you continue on the sub-optimal path you might be on right now and the other based on who you COULD become if you started practicing your philosophy and living in greater integrity with your deepest values.

He also throws in a great, sobering reflection: Imagine what the person REALLY thinks about you. We all very warmly pay our respects for the deceased at a funeral and focus on their positive qualities. But... We **also** know a *lot* of the less savory stuff is left UNSAID. (Right?)

Then, after helping you establish the "values" by which you want to live your life (what we call VIRTUES!), he helps you set specific goals in specific domains and specific behaviors you will engage in to achieve those goals and win the ultimate game of living a values-driven life.

Now... The question is... If we know the virtues by which we want to be remembered and the behaviors we need to engage in to embody those virtues and create a wonderful life...

Isn't TODAY a great day to get to work? Indeed it is. And, know this: We architected THE ENTIRE HEROIC APP with \*this\* wisdom in mind.

With all that in mind... Let's ACCEPT our life as it is and COMMIT to moving from theory to practice to mastery together TODAY.

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**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential*. He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](https://heroic.us).

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you'll probably like...

[Building a Life Worth Living, The Happiness Trap, The Confidence Gap](#)