



ACT SKILLS · RESILIENCE

# BENDING, NOT BREAKING

Life hands everyone a reality slap sooner or later: a job lost, a diagnosis, a parent aging, your own body changing. Resilience does not mean feeling none of it. These are tools from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), drawn from Russ Harris's *The Happiness Trap* and *The Reality Slap*, for staying steady and moving toward what matters while the hard thing is still happening.

## WHEN REALITY SLAPS

### THE REALITY GAP

- Russ Harris's term for it is a reality slap: a moment when the life you have and the life you wanted split apart, sometimes gradually and sometimes all at once.
- It can be sudden, like a layoff or a diagnosis, or slow, like watching a parent decline or feeling your own body age.
- The pain of that gap is the cost of caring about something you've lost or fear losing, not a sign that you are doing life wrong.
- Resilience is learning to stand in that gap, carry the feeling, and keep living toward what matters to you, rather than closing it by force.

## WHY THE STRUGGLE ADDS WEIGHT

### THE HAPPINESS TRAP

- The instinct is to get rid of the painful feeling first and get on with life afterward. ACT calls this the struggle, and it tends to make the load heavier.
- The harder you fight a feeling, the more it grows. Harris calls it the struggle switch: you're sad about the loss, then anxious about the sadness, then frustrated that you can't just move on.
- This is the happiness trap: the belief that you have to feel okay before you can act, so your energy goes to managing feelings instead of living your life.
- The way through is to drop the fight instead of trying to win it: make room for the feelings, and put your energy where it counts.

## THE THREE MOVES

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Harris boils ACT down to three moves, and the toolkit on the next two pages is organized under them. They run through both The Happiness Trap and The Reality Slap, and every example in this handout uses them. You don't work them in order; reach for whichever one the moment calls for.

### 1 **Be present**


When something knocks you sideways, steady yourself before you try to fix anything. Drop anchor: Acknowledge what you're thinking and feeling, Come back into your body with your feet on the floor and a slow breath, and Engage with what's in front of you. This is the ground you make every other choice from.

### 2 **Open up**

Make room for the storm instead of fighting it. Unhook from the thoughts by putting a few words in front of them, "I'm having the thought that I can't handle this," so a thought stays a thought instead of an order. Let the feelings be there without bracing against them, and put a kind hand where it hurts, speaking to yourself the way you would to someone you love in the same spot. Harris calls that last part self-compassion, and it matters more than most people expect.

### 3 **Do what matters**

Circumstances change; your values hold steady. Get clear on the kind of person you want to be in this, and let that be the compass when the map keeps redrawing itself. Take one small action in that direction. You don't need the whole path to take the next step.



Being present, opening up, and doing what matters, together these are what ACT means by psychological flexibility, its word for resilience.

## THE TOOLKIT: BE PRESENT & OPEN UP

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The specific ACT skills, one per card. These four steady you in the moment and loosen the grip of hard thoughts and feelings. Practice them when things are calm, so they're ready when they're not.

### 1 Drop anchor (ACE)

When you're flooded, run the ACE sequence: Acknowledge what you're thinking and feeling, Come back into your body by pressing your feet down and taking a slow breath, and Engage with what's around you by naming what you can see and hear. It doesn't get rid of the storm; it stops the storm from taking over.

### 2 Unhook from a thought (defusion)

When a painful thought grips you, put a few words in front of it: "I'm having the thought that I can't cope." The thought is still there, and now you can see it as words passing through instead of an order you have to follow. Say it that way out loud with a sticky thought and feel the grip loosen.

### 3 Name the story

When the same cluster of thoughts keeps returning, give it a title: "here's the I'm-not-doing-enough story." Treating it as a familiar story you've heard many times before, rather than the truth of the moment, puts a little space between you and it.

### 4 Make room (expansion)

When a hard feeling arrives, drop the fight with it. Find where it sits in your body, breathe into that spot, and let it be there without pushing it away. A feeling you stop struggling with tends to settle faster than one you brace against.

## THE TOOLKIT: OPEN UP & DO WHAT MATTERS

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Four more, moving from making room for what's hard toward acting on what matters. With the first four, these are your working set.

### 5 Flip the struggle switch

Harris pictures a switch. When it's on, you get feelings about your feelings: sad about the sadness, anxious about the anxiety, and that second layer weighs more than the first. Flipping it off means letting the first feeling be there without a fight, so it can move through on its own.

### 6 Kind hands (self-compassion)

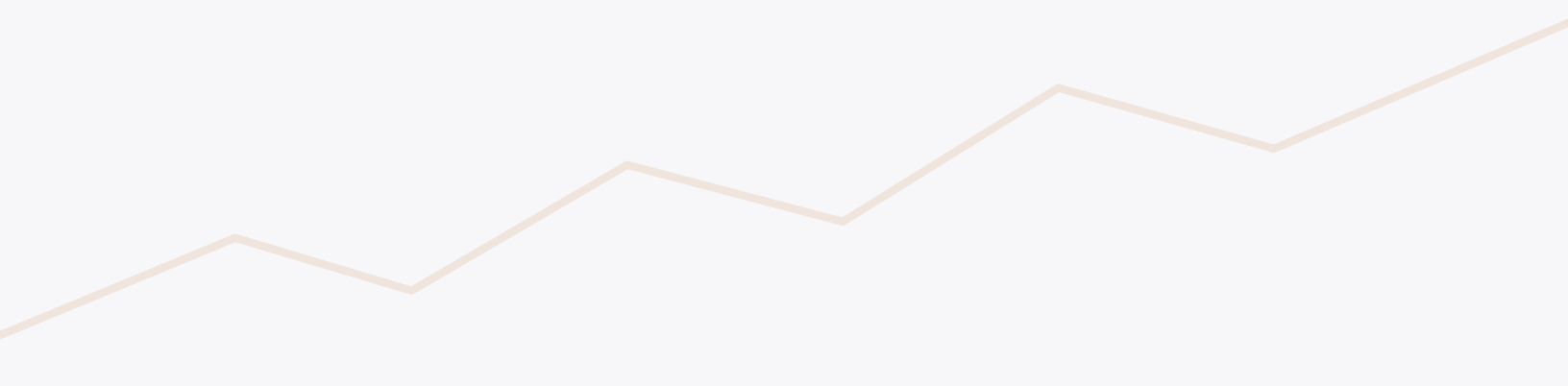
Put a hand where the hurt sits, on your chest or your belly, and offer yourself the words you'd give a friend in the same spot: "this is hard, and I'm here." Hayes and Harris both treat self-compassion as a skill you practice rather than a mood you wait for, and it steadies you far more than self-criticism does.

### 7 Step back to the observing self

A part of you has been watching your whole life: the you that notices thoughts and feelings without being swept away by them. When a feeling claims it will swallow you, step back to that watching part. This is the ACT image of sky and weather: you are the sky, and thoughts and feelings are weather that moves through without harming it.

### 8 Choose a value, take a step

Ask what kind of person you want to be in this part of your life, then pick the smallest action that points that way and do it today. Values give you the direction; committed action is one step in it. You don't have to feel ready, and you don't need the whole staircase, only the next stair.



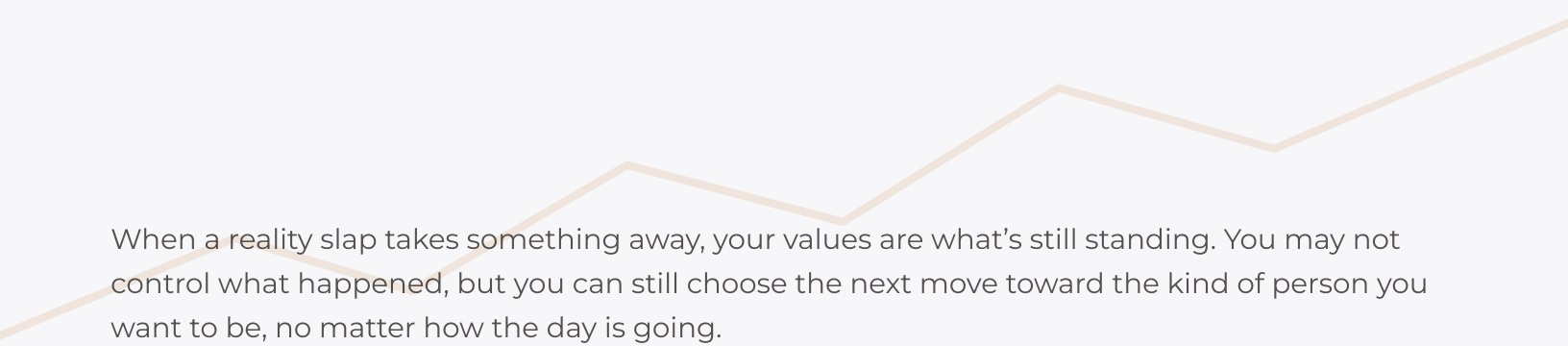


## LIVING BY YOUR VALUES

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Steven Hayes, who developed ACT, describes values as chosen directions rather than goals. A goal is something you can complete and cross off; a value is a direction you keep heading, like west on a compass. There's no finish line for "being a loving parent" or "being honest," just the next small action that points that way. Here is what that can look like on an ordinary day.

- CONNECTION**      Texting one friend to make an actual plan instead of liking their post, or calling a sibling on an ordinary Tuesday for no reason.
- PRESENT AS A PARENT**      Ten minutes on the floor with your kid, phone in another room, following whatever they want to play.
- HONESTY**      Saying the harder true thing in a conversation instead of the smoother version that keeps the peace for now.
- CARING FOR YOUR BODY**      A twenty-minute walk you take because it matters to you, not because a tracker told you to.
- LEARNING AND GROWTH**      Twenty minutes on the skill you keep meaning to build, before the day fills up and swallows it.
- CONTRIBUTION**      An hour given to something outside your own household: a neighbor, a cause, a person who could use a hand.
- REST AND PLAY**      Protecting one evening that isn't for being productive, and letting that be enough.



When a reality slap takes something away, your values are what's still standing. You may not control what happened, but you can still choose the next move toward the kind of person you want to be, no matter how the day is going.

## STAYING STEADY WHEN LIFE KEEPS CHANGING

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A reality slap is one blow; some seasons are just constant change, one thing after another, with no steady ground underfoot. The same skills help you ride a long stretch of it. Here is how they look when the changes keep coming.

- 1 When it shouldn't be this way**

The first move when change lands is to stop fighting the fact that it happened. Fighting reality burns energy you need, and letting the fact be true, even while you dislike it, frees that energy for your next step.
- 2 Find the fixed point**

When roles, plans, and circumstances keep shifting, your values are the part that holds still. Ask what kind of person you want to be through the change, and steer by that, the way a compass points the same direction no matter how the ground moves under you.
- 3 Ask what works, not what's fair**

Change often brings an ongoing argument about whether it's fair. That argument rarely goes anywhere useful. The better question is whether what you're doing right now is working, whether it's moving you toward the life you want, so you can keep what helps and drop what doesn't, even the responses that feel justified.
- 4 Take the smallest next step**

You don't have to see the whole way through a change to move. Pick the smallest action that points where you want to go and take it, and let the next step come into view once you've taken this one. In a season of change, momentum comes from small moves repeated, more than from any single grand plan.
- 5 Turn some patience inward**

In a long stretch of change you'll get tired, frustrated, and knocked off balance more than once. Meet that with the patience you'd offer anyone else going through it. You're adjusting to something genuinely hard, and steadiness comes back faster with kindness than with a lecture.



## THE TOOLS IN REAL LIFE

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Three common reality slaps, and the three moves applied to each. The situations are different, but the moves are the same in every one.

### Losing a job

A layoff hits the gap hard, taking income, identity, and the future you had pictured at the same time.

**BE PRESENT** Before you fire off applications in a panic, drop anchor. Feel your feet, acknowledge the fear, and handle the one thing that belongs to today rather than the whole imagined year ahead.

**OPEN UP** Job loss often carries a story that says you failed. Unhook from it, make room for the grief and fear, and offer yourself some kindness, because losing a job is not a verdict on your worth.

**DO WHAT MATTERS** Ask what kind of person you want to be through this stretch, then take one step that fits: a message to a contact, an hour of learning, an honest conversation with your partner about the plan.

### Being the rock

You're the one who holds everyone together, and you're running closer to empty than the people around you realize.

**BE PRESENT** When everyone's needs arrive at once, drop anchor and come back to your body and the task actually in front of you, instead of the ten you're bracing for.

**OPEN UP** You can love the people you care for and resent the load at the same time. Let the resentment be there without piling guilt on top of it, and give yourself the patience you hand out all day.

**DO WHAT MATTERS** Caring for people is a value worth honoring, and so are you. Take one action that protects a piece of your own life: ask for help with a single task, or keep ten minutes that belong only to you.



## WHEN IT'S ABOUT AGING

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The third slap, and the one that comes for everyone: aging, whether it's a parent's decline or your own.

### Fear of aging

Aging opens a gap between the body and life you had and the one that's coming, for your parents first and eventually for you.

#### BE PRESENT

When the mind time-travels to every future loss, drop anchor and come back to the life that's here today, which is the only place you can live it.

#### OPEN UP

Fear of aging is fear of loss and impermanence, and it's about as human as feelings get. Make room for it instead of arguing it away, and meet it with kindness rather than contempt for a body that's doing what bodies do.

#### DO WHAT MATTERS

Values don't retire. Ask what matters to you now, whether that's time with people you love or work that means something, and put a small piece of it into this week, whatever your age or your parent's.

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**Resilience, in ACT, is a kind of flexibility:** the ability to bend with what comes, feel it fully, and keep moving toward what matters to you. The reality slaps of a life, a loss, an illness, a job, the slow reality of aging or caring for someone who is, are not things you get over so much as things you learn to carry with more room and less struggle. If a slap has knocked the ground out from under you and you can't find it again, that's what therapy is for. Adapted from Russ Harris's *The Happiness Trap* and *The Reality Slap*, and Steven C. Hayes's *A Liberated Mind* and *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life*, all applying Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which Hayes developed. My Mental Climb is not affiliated with or endorsed by Russ Harris, Steven Hayes, or the developers of ACT.

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