



ACT WITH LOVE · CONTROL & INFLUENCE

WHAT YOU CAN ACTUALLY CONTROL

When a relationship hurts, the instinct is to try to control your partner: to get them to change, to do more, to do less, to be different. ACT shifts that energy toward what you can actually control, which is your own behavior. This is a worksheet, from Russ Harris's ACT with Love, for telling control apart from influence.

CONTROL VS. INFLUENCE

THE ONE THING YOU CONTROL

- The one thing you fully control is your own behavior: your words, your actions, how you show up. You cannot control your partner, no matter how hard you push. What you have with them is influence, through what you say and do.
- You can influence in workable ways (moves that build a richer, fuller relationship over time) or unworkable ways (moves that keep you stuck or make things worse). Workability is the test: is what you're doing working to build the relationship you want?
- Trying to control a partner, through nagging, criticizing, pressuring, or managing, tends to backfire and cost the relationship over the long run, even when it wins short-term compliance.
- Here's the paradox: when you stop trying to change your partner and put that energy into living by your own values, they often start to shift on their own. You can work on the relationship unilaterally.

A SHORT EXAMPLE



Consider Maya and Brad. Every night Maya reminds Brad about the trash, the dishes, and the cats' meds, three separate reminders, and every night Brad says "I know" and does one of the three before midnight. Maya's control moves (reminding, tracking, escalating tone) win short-term compliance and cost her the warmth she wants when they sit down together later. On Sunday she tried a single clear ask instead: "I'd like the trash out by dinner three nights this week, and I'm going to stop mentioning the other two." Brad missed Monday, made it Tuesday, and by the end of the week they were talking on the couch for the first time in a month.

WHEN THE ASK DOESN'T LAND

The vignette on the previous page shows the tidy version, and it isn't always tidy. When you drop the reminders and your partner still doesn't do the thing, and the mess is falling on you, here is what ACT says next.

WORKABILITY IS DOMAIN-SPECIFIC

- The one-clear-ask move can be workable for the relationship (less nagging, warmth returning) and unworkable for the practical problem (trash still not out, house getting gross). Both truths at once.
- If the material cost is real and rising, that is data that the current strategy needs more, not that the strategy failed.

THE ESCALATION LADDER

- 1 Do it yourself, without keeping score**
If a clean house is your value, live that value whether or not your partner joins in. This is not martyrdom when it is genuinely values-driven, and it becomes martyrdom (and workability-poor) when you are doing it to prove a point or to hoard resentment.
- 2 Let the natural consequence land**
Sometimes the mess needs to pile up so your partner faces the concrete reality of their inaction, not just your report of it. This works best when the mess is more theirs than yours, and when sitting with it for a few days is safe and tolerable.
- 3 A clearer values-anchored ask, with what you will do**
Not a threat, an honest statement of your next move: "When the trash isn't out by Wednesday, I feel like the household load is one-sided, and here is what I am going to do: take it out myself and cross it off my list / stop cooking that night / hire someone." Harris's assertive-communication move is clear, specific, and self-directed.
- 4 A bigger conversation about the pattern**
If your partner consistently disregards a practical ask that matters to you, that is usually about more than trash. Harris frames this as testing whether your partner is willing to engage with what matters to you at all, which is a values-of-the-relationship conversation, not a chore one.

WHAT ACT DOES NOT ASK OF YOU

Acceptance is not condoning. You can accept "my partner may not do this even when I ask well" without giving up on yourself or the relationship. What ACT does not ask is that you absorb the cost forever. If you keep doing everything unilaterally and burning out, that is not acceptance, that is self-erasure dressed as acceptance. Workability includes what it costs you.



HOW I TRY TO CONTROL MY PARTNER

Pick one recurring example, something that comes up again and again, and work down the rows honestly. This is about seeing clearly what your control moves do over time, and what a workable alternative might be, not about judging yourself.

What my partner does that I don't like

e.g. leaves chores · shuts down · runs late

What I say or do to try to stop or change it

e.g. remind, criticize, go cold, keep score

Did it change their behavior for the long run?

honestly: yes / no / short-term only

What has it cost us over the long run?

e.g. warmth, trust, my own peace, their goodwill

One workable move I could try instead (influence, not control)

e.g. a clear ask, appreciation, letting a small thing go, acting on my own values

Seeing the difference between control and influence gives you somewhere to put your energy that's within reach. You can't make your partner change, and you can choose, again and again, how you show up and what you act on. If the same control patterns keep taking over and you can't find your way out of them, that's what couples therapy is for. Adapted from Russ Harris's *ACT with Love* (control versus influence, workability, values-based action). My Mental Climb is not affiliated with or endorsed by Russ Harris or the developers of ACT.

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