

**Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for PTSD**  
**Group Manual**

Regan Settles, Ph.D.  
Beth Morris, Ph.D.  
Kristi Bratkovich, Ph.D.



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## Manual Overview

### How to use this manual:

The manual is designed for a group consisting of ten 90-minute sessions. The manual is set up to allow the group leader to balance fidelity to the core principles of ACT with flexibility to the individual needs of the group. For many sessions, there are core components and optional components. The group leader should ideally strive to cover all content and stay within the suggested time recommendations. However, there may be times when a particular group is struggling to grasp a critical concept and clinical judgment suggests that strictly adhering to the outline would result in failure to understand a core concept. We encourage leaders to read the entire manual and practice skills themselves before beginning a group. This allows the leader to keep the “big picture” of ACT for PTSD in mind as they proceed through the group. This also helps group leaders better understand the experiential nature of learning in ACT. While content is important, the process of experiential learning is critical for veterans to develop greater psychological flexibility.

ACT is best learned experientially. For this reason, new content is first experienced by group members. The ACT process is then named and its application is explained. Leaders should keep this process in mind when introducing new content: ***Experience it, Name it, Explain it.***

### Components of ACT and their applicability to PTSD

ACT targets experiential avoidance, which is the avoidance of emotional states, thoughts, and physiological experiences that are considered negative or unwanted. Experiential avoidance is considered a normal human tendency that both patient and therapist are likely to exhibit. From an ACT perspective, experiential avoidance is problematic for several reasons: (1) It does not actually get rid of the unwanted thought, emotion, or experience; (2) failed attempts to avoid painful internal experiences can result in an increased sense of failure and perceived “brokenness,” and (3) efforts to remove pain take tremendous amounts of energy that interfere with pursuing valued activities and relationships. As valued activities decrease, veterans’ daily life and sense of identity become increasingly defined by their trauma.

Unlike cognitive behavioral therapies, the goal in ACT is not to reduce the presence of unwanted internal experiences. Instead the goal is to help veterans “make room” for their past traumas. This is referred to as ***psychological flexibility***. The goal is for veterans to be able to acknowledge their negative internal experiences and pursue a meaningful life despite their presence. This is accomplished through the following six core processes:

***Mindfulness:*** Veterans are first introduced to mindfulness as a way to reconnect with the present moment. This builds the foundation for increased exposure to avoided thoughts and emotions.

***Willingness:*** Willingness refers to being open to one’s full experience, even if that experience is painful or anxiety provoking. This does not mean that the veteran likes or wants the pain and/or anxiety, rather that they accept its presence and create room for it. By taking a willing stance, veterans are able to move forward with important activities in the face of pain and anxiety.

**Connection to Personal Values:** Often veterans' lives have become so dominated by avoidance that they have forgotten their own personal values. A significant goal of ACT is help veterans reconnect with their personal values and to create discrepancy between trauma-driven behavior and behavior that is driven by values.

**Committed Action:** Even when veterans are aware of their personal values, their behavior may still be driven by trauma. Committed action focuses on establishing clear goals to begin moving in the direction of one's values. In ACT for PTSD, veterans use their most important values to guide personal goals that become the basis for in vivo exposure activities throughout the group. In this manual, we refer to these as values-based exposure goals.

**Defusion:** Through mindfulness practice, veterans become aware of painful thoughts that get in the way of them reaching their values-based goals. Defusion strategies help veterans learn to acknowledge their thoughts as just thoughts. Unlike more cognitive strategies, the goal is not to challenge thoughts but rather to acknowledge when they are not helpful, detach from them, and move forward. It is not necessary to determine if they are true or untrue. Defusion strategies allow veterans to create distance from painful thoughts in order to continue committed action in the face of pain or anxiety.

**Observing Self:** Finally, veterans learn to utilize their skills to take a "big picture" perspective of their life over time. This helps veterans moving forward to see painful experiences of the present moment in the broader context of life by connecting with the self that is constant across time. This connection with a constant sense of self promotes greater psychological flexibility and makes the experience of present anxiety less threatening.

## **Exposure in ACT**

One of the primary goals of this protocol is to begin to facilitate in vivo exposure to avoided activities. The framework for exposures in ACT will differ from that of traditional exposure therapies. From an ACT perspective, the goal of exposure is not to experience anxiety reduction (although that can be a nice byproduct). Instead, the goal is to increase psychological flexibility in the presence of painful and anxious internal experiences so that engagement in valued activities can be re-established. Readers are referred to Arch and Craske (2008) for a thorough discussion of the differences between ACT and cognitive behavioral therapy elements, including the potential for values-based action to include exposure activities motivated by the individual's values rather than by symptom reduction.

Starting in session 5, veterans will begin to select activities that will serve as in vivo exposures. Through early sessions, veterans should have identified discrepancies between their personal values and their behavior. These areas of discrepancy guide the selection of exposure exercises. Clinicians will need to carefully assess each veteran's goals to ensure that they have selected a goal that is both valued and that is avoided due to PTSD, not other causes (e.g., not exercising due to struggles with motivation). In some cases, it may be necessary to schedule individual meetings to help veterans select exposure activities. While not a necessary component of selecting exposures, SUDS ratings may be used to ensure that selected weekly activities are

sufficiently challenging. But keep in mind that the purpose of SUDS in ACT exposure is not to measure how much anxiety decreases but to reinforce the attempt or completion of valued action despite feeling strong negative emotions.

The application of exposure within this manual is consistent with recent theoretical and empirical knowledge about the mechanisms underlying successful exposure therapy. Readers are referred to Craske, Treanor, Conway, Zbozinek, and Vervliet (2014) for a discussion of the inhibitory learning model and clinical recommendations that aim to maximize the effectiveness of exposure activities. Two of these recommendations are briefly described as they relate to exposure-based activities in ACT for PTSD. First, the inhibitory learned model suggests that exposure is most effective when the individual's expectations about the aversive experience are violated (i.e., expectancy violations, Craske et al., 2014). In ACT for PTSD, exposure exercises are not timed based on the habituation of fear. Rather, the exposure activity aims to violate the negative expectancy associated with that activity by tolerating anxiety rather than reducing it. In other words, ACT is focused on violating the universal PTSD expectancy of "I can't" or the belief that one is unable to tolerate the negative emotion that will come from engaging in a particular valued action. When the valued action is taken anyway, the fear is tolerated and the individual's experience thus violates the expectancy that they cannot tolerate that activity. Clinically speaking, we refer to this in ACT as "learning by doing" and leaders empower veterans to create their own opportunities for learning through weekly activities.

The second recommendation by Craske et al (2014) that is important to mention is the idea that exposure activities are most effective when presented in a variable order in terms of frequency and intensity. That is, traditional exposure exercises are ranked and placed in a hierarchy and the individual proceeds up the hierarchy from least fearful to most fearful activity. In ACT for PTSD, veterans generate a list of exposure exercises based on their personal values and goals, but are free to move through them in any order. Veterans are also free to repeat a weekly goal and are empowered and reinforced for skill use rather than goal completion. If SUDS ratings are utilized to help veterans pick appropriate goals, keep in mind that (unlike Prolonged Exposure, for example) activities can be completed in any order.

The flexible hierarchy approach also reinforces the idea that willingness changes moment to moment, and it empowers veterans to be mindful and accepting of variations in willingness. That is, an activity they feel willing to do today may not be something they feel willing to complete once they get there. By not judging this as a "success/completion" or "failure/non-completion," veterans learn rather to be mindful in the moment of what is getting in the way of willingness and to use that information during homework review with the group to choose their next goal or use a new skill to keep moving toward the same goal. This approach will be new to some leaders and we encourage leaders to practice mindfulness of their own reactions and to be open to feedback from co-leaders in order to maintain an ACT stance toward exposure-based activities.

For additional reading about exposure in ACT, see:

Arch, J.J., & Craske, M.G. (2008). Acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety disorders: different treatment, similar mechanisms? *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 15, 263-279

Craske, M., Treanor, M., Conway, C. C., Zbozinek, T., Vervliet, B. (2014). Maximizing exposure therapy: an inhibitory learning approach. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 58, 10-23.

## **Tips for Maintaining an ACT Stance**

### **1. Practice and model ACT**

One of the primary tenants of ACT is that experiential avoidance is a normal human process. It is important to normalize the pull to avoid by acknowledging your own experiential avoidance. You can also acknowledge your own lack of mindfulness, fusion with thoughts, and times when values have not guided your behavior. Model ACT principles by noticing them in yourself and your co-leader. Be playful and humble about demonstrating your humanity and use of skills. Take advantage of any opportunities to demonstrate skills. For example, notice and label aloud an urge to “convince” a veteran of something, share your own example of using defusion to get through an anxious moment, or notice your co-leader use the word “but” and prompt them to replace it with “and” instead.

### **2. Resist the urge to restructure**

It can be tempting for clinicians who treat PTSD to try to challenge cognitive distortions while delivering ACT. Remember that the goal of ACT is not to get rid of thoughts or determine their veracity, rather it is to create distance from thoughts that are unhelpful. It is very important to be aware of your own urge to correct during sessions. If you find yourself correcting, label it for the group members. When faced with what you would view as a cognitive distortion, focus your efforts on helping the veteran understand the function of the thought. Is it helpful to them? Is it interfering with their goals? If it is deemed unhelpful, then the goal is to help them make room for the thought so they can continue pursuing their goals. This can be accomplished through willingness strategies and through defusion.

### **3. Practice Mindfulness**

While the goal is to get through every activity in this manual, you may have to slow down to meet veterans where they are. Don’t get so caught up in the agenda that you lose the process. Unwillingness on the part of the group leader can often come in the form of being overly directive and trying to push patients in a direction you think they should go. Be very mindful of urges to correct and your own lack of willingness to stay with your group.

### **4. Values-based living is based on the veteran’s values:**

Sometimes a veteran’s values do not reflect what a provider hopes for. Remember that values are individually decided and you should respect a veteran’s value even if you disagree. Occasionally a veteran may decide that they value safety so highly that they are willing to let go of all other values. Your goal will then shift to helping their choice be a thoughtful, mindful choice rather than a choice that is made out of reaction to avoidance. You may also remind them that values may shift over time and encourage them to continue assessing whether that one value is worth giving up all others.

## **5. Highlight ACT processes throughout group as they occur**

While this manual provides an outline of core components to guide each group session, go beyond simply covering the content and incorporate ACT processes into your group process. For example, look for opportunities to highlight willingness during group (e.g., willingness to take the risk of coming, opening up) and highlight what they potentially gain through that. Praise the use of skills as you see them being used so that veterans recognize their use. For example, often veterans will come to group having just encountered a stressor that tapped their resources to be present. Below is an example way to reinforce a veteran's skills use:

*“Wow, Mr. Smith, it sounds like you were able to use mindfulness in the moment to be aware of how frustrated you were feeling in traffic on the way here, and to be aware of that urge to turn around and go home. I also heard you say you were aware of that voice in your head giving you the “hot head” label again. Great job noticing all of that in the moment. We know you’ve said before the group is important to you, and you were able to remain willing to come today despite the traffic and frustration. How are you feeling now that you are here?”*

You may also ask veterans to practice identifying a specific thought or urge that is interfering with group participation and help them practice willingness and defusion. Encourage other veterans to notice skill use in each other – write skills on board that they know so far to remind group members of what to look for. Just be sure not to use words they haven't learned yet.

## **6. Highlight ACT processes through homework review.**

Homework review should also be used to reinforce use of ACT skills in the moment. If a veteran did not complete their homework, you can use homework review to help them identify what got in the way. Begin by asking if they are willing to let the group look at what happened and highlight willingness if they are. Then proceed to identify potential barriers to homework completion. For example, did the homework assignment not feel in line with what is important to them? Were there some painful thoughts the assignment brought up that they weren't willing to have present? Help them acknowledge thoughts and emotions that come up as their homework is reviewed. Be careful to not use ACT terms that they have not learned yet, but do reinforce ACT skills as you see them.

The following is an example of how to incorporate processes when a veteran did not complete their homework:

Therapist: *“Mr. Jones, I heard you say you noticed yourself feeling really “stupid” when you were starting to try the mindfulness skills at home. You said you were having the thought, ‘here we go again with some other weird therapy thing that won’t work,’ and it seems like that was right before you decided not to try it. So, it seems like even though you didn’t start the mindfulness exercise, you were pretty mindful in the moment of how you were feeling and what got in the way of your trying it. That process is really a key part of ACT – learning to tune in to how we are doing on the inside and what kinds of things get in the way of us doing things on the outside. And it very well may be that the mindfulness exercise we asked you to try for homework may not be your cup of tea, and we end up finding some other way of being mindful that suits you better. Some of the exercises still feel weird to me! As we talk about a lot in here, we learn by doing. So we will be learning different ways to work around the negative emotions or thoughts or whatever that keep us from doing things. I wonder what would happen if you tried doing the*

*exercise for 1 minute even if you continue to feel stupid. It's up to you. Maybe another group member had a similar experience?"*

The goal here is not to pressure the veteran into trying the skill, but to help him or her be mindful of how big an impediment this “stupid” feeling is and how much the hopeless thought process gets in the way. If it gets in the way of doing a 1 minute mental exercise, this may be a repeating thought process that gets in the way of many other valued activities. Becoming aware of those internal “repeat offenders” that interfere with valued actions is an important process in ACT. In this case, the leader is reinforcing the only skill the group has learned at that point, mindfulness, while also touching on other concepts such as willingness and valued action even though the group is not there yet.

The following is an example for a veteran who did complete homework:

Therapist: *“Ms. Cooper, I heard you say you completed the assignment. Are you willing to share with us how that was for you?”*

The leader here is not assuming that Ms. Cooper had “success” or had a positive outcome. The leader empowers the veteran by asking about her level of willingness and is prepared to accept any answer nonjudgmentally. Her response may be that she did the assignment by rushing through as fast as possible to get it over with, or that it was easy and she now feels foolish for having avoiding it for so long, or that she is not willing to share about it. The leader thus models in homework that there is “room” for all experiences and that tuning into those experiences is an ACT skill.

## SESSION 0: OPTIONAL PRE-GROUP INDIVIDUAL SESSION

This is an optional individual session that may occur prior to group. In clinics where referring providers are familiar with ACT, this may be completed as part of the referral process. When referring providers are less familiar with ACT, or veterans are referred to group immediately following assessment, a pre-group individual session is recommended. The goals of this session are to provide a brief orientation, develop rapport, gain understanding of the veteran's problems, and develop motivation for group. Pre-treatment symptom measures may also be given during this session or prior to group entry by referring providers. Session length may range from a brief 20-minute meeting to a full therapy session, depending on clinic structure. For this reason, this session is less structured than others to allow therapist flexibility.

### **Materials Needed:**

(See Appendix D)

PCL-5

PHQ-9

AAQ-II

### **Session Outline:**

Introductions and Overview

Review of Presenting Trauma and Veteran Goals

Administer Measures

### **Session Content:**

#### **Introductions and Overview**

- Leaders introduce themselves, assess veteran's understanding of the group, and provide a brief overview of the group structure and goals

#### **Review of Presenting Trauma and Veteran Goals**

1. Obtain a brief overview of the trauma leading them to seek treatment.
2. Obtain at least a brief overview of the ways they have attempted to cope with their PTSD. During this discussion, begin to gently plant seeds that control efforts are exhausting and don't work. Below is a sample discussion:

Therapist: *A lot of people are referred to this group because they have tried a lot of things to get rid of their PTSD. What all have you tried?*

Veteran: *Well I used to drink alcohol but I quit that. Once I quit, I started thinking of my trauma more so I've tried to just push it away by working a lot and exercising.*

Therapist: *How has that been going for you? I imagine there must be some limit to how well it is working for you to be here?*

Veteran: *Yes it worked really well for a while but now I'm finding myself going numb a lot and I don't feel connected to my family. I'm still having nightmares and thinking of it when I don't want to.*

Therapist: *I wonder how much of your energy it has taken to try not to think about it?*

Veteran: *A lot. I just really want it to go away.*

Therapist: *I wonder how using all that energy affects your life? For example, do you feel like you are able to live the type of life you want to live?*

3. Obtain a brief overview of the veteran's values and use this to fuel motivation for group. Below is a sample discussion:

Therapist: *I hear you saying that in your attempts to get rid of all this pain, you have started to feel numb and distant from your family. Is your family important to you?*

Veteran: *Yes, incredibly important. I know I'm hurting my spouse and I hate that I can't connect with my kids as well as I'd like to.*

Therapist: *What you are describing is one of your personal values. Our values are essentially the things that matter most to us, or the things we want our lives to be about. What you are describing is really common in people with PTSD. That is, that you are so overwhelmed by your PTSD symptoms, that some of the things that matter most to you start slipping away (OR in some cases, you may have forgotten what really matters). Helping you live those values out is a big part of what this group is about. Is that something you would like?*

Veteran: *Yes, I'd really like to feel happy and close to my family again.*

Therapist: *Are there other important things in your life that have been impacted by PTSD that you would like to work on?*

### **Administer Measures**

Administer and record PHQ-9, PCL-5, and AAQ.

## SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO ACT

The primary goals of this session are to introduce veterans to ACT, to introduce the concepts of pain of presence and pain of absence, and to help veterans identify the ways they have tried to suppress or “get rid of” pain and what that has cost them. The ubiquity of human pain discussion introduces pain as a normal human process and introduces the concepts of the pain of presence (“clean pain”) and the pain of absence (“dirty pain”). Continual efforts to get rid of pain are validated and referred to as “the struggle with pain.” This is illustrated through the Tug of War Monster exercise. It is important to explain that trying to get rid of psychological pain is a normal human process. It should not be labeled or explained as wrong or invalidated in any way. The focus, rather, is on how well (or poorly) strategies to suppress pain work, and whether they bring about additional suffering through the pain of absence. The Pain of PTSD worksheet helps veterans identify the sources of their PTSD pain, how they have tried to avoid that pain, and the impact that struggle has had on valued living. In ACT terms, this is the beginning of facilitating *creative hopelessness*, which is the process through which people realize the futility of their efforts to avoid pain. As part of this process, veterans may experience frustration. Validate that frustration as part of the process and don’t rush to remove or reduce it. It is an important part of creating openness to trying out a new way of relating to trauma.

### Materials Needed:

Rope for Tug of War Monster  
Veteran manuals

### Session Outline:

Introduction and Group Expectations (10 minutes)  
Ubiquity of Human Pain (10-15 minutes)  
The Pain of PTSD worksheet (30-45 minutes)  
Tug of War Monster (10 minutes)  
Overview of ACT (5 minutes)  
Wrap up and Homework (5 minutes)

### Session Content:

#### Introduction and Group Expectations (10 minutes)

- Group Introductions
- Review Group Rules
- Confidentiality
  - Review limits of confidentiality for providers
  - Explain expectation of confidentiality among group members

- Respect
  - Discuss expectation for group members to show respect for others' points of view
- Being on time
  - Inform that group will start on time and members are expected to arrive promptly. Group members who arrive more than 5 minutes late may miss important information. Late arrivals are asked to enter the room quietly to avoid disruption.
- Missing sessions
  - Inform the group that if a veteran is to miss more than two weeks, he/she must discontinue the current group and complete the next group cycle. Missing more than two sessions does not give the veteran adequate exposure to the necessary components of the ten week group. Acknowledge that prioritizing group can be difficult, and there may be times when veterans feel a pull to avoid. Encourage committing to attendance for themselves and their fellow group members.
- Timing of sessions
  - Explain that there is a lot to cover in group. Prepare group members that leaders may redirect the conversation if needed to cover all group topics for that week and explain that leaders can be available outside of group if veterans need to discuss something further.
- Posttraumatic Stress Focus
  - Inform the group that the primary focus of sessions will be on the impact of trauma.
- Homework
  - Set the expectation that there will be homework assignments between sessions. Explain that homework has two primary purposes: 1) It serves as an extension of the session to provide group members more time to individualize the lesson, and 2) Homework serves to provide members with experience using the material in a real world setting. Group will have limited effectiveness without the completion of homework. Explain that making changes is difficult for all of us, requiring time and emotional energy. If this is not a time in their lives where they are ready and able to commit to that, this group may not be the best fit right now. Acknowledge that working on themselves can be difficult, and the commitment to themselves and the group is important. Encourage group members to speak up about barriers to homework completion so that leaders can help them problem solve collaboratively.

### **Ubiquity of Human Pain (10-15 minutes)**

- *All of you are here because you have experienced significant pain in your life, maybe particularly during your military service. Many of you have encountered things that a lot of people will never have to encounter. You are also here because PTSD has become a significant source of pain in your life. How many of you have felt like you are the only one struggling and wondered why you can't just be happy? How many of you have had*

*the thought, “If only I didn’t have this PTSD I could be happy?” or “If this one thing hadn’t happened, my life would be better,” or “If I could just stop being so anxious or angry, things would be better?”*

- *Something that this group is built around is that every human suffers. Anyone who lives long enough will experience the devastation of losing someone close to them. Every person will experience rejection and betrayal at some point in their life. Every person will experience physical and emotional pain, anxiety, sadness, and fear. Some people’s pain will be more visible than others. Some people will experience more tragedy and hardship than others (for instance, veterans who have been exposed to military trauma). Even so, everyone experiences pain. Can you think of anyone you know who doesn’t experience pain? Do you think it is possible to go through life avoiding pain? What is the cost of trying to avoid pain?*
- *There are actually two types of pain. One is called the pain of presence. This is the one that we are all familiar with. It includes the pain we feel in response to death or divorce, anxiety, traumatic memories, and specific problems. Another way we refer to this type of pain is the term “clean pain” because this pain is related to inevitable difficulties of life. The second type of pain is one that we don’t think about too much. It occurs when the ways that we try to get rid of pain cause us to miss out on things that are important to us. It’s called the pain of absence. What we mean by pain of absence is the things that we miss out on in life when we are focused on the pain of presence. For example, if you are consumed by trying not to think about a traumatic memory, then you may not be out making new positive memories or spending time with people you care about. If the presence of anxiety prevents you from going places, then you may not be creating the life that you enjoy. Some refer to this type of pain as “dirty pain” because it does not relate to an inevitable life challenge, and is instead created by trying to get rid of the “clean pain.” Most of the work we are going to do in this group is teaching you a new way to relate to your PTSD pain, so that it doesn’t control your life and so that you are able to fully engage with what matters to you in life. Note that our goal in this group isn’t to get rid of the pain completely, but to help you relate to it in a new way.*
- *We are going to focus a lot on the pain of absence in this group. To get started, we want you to start thinking about where the pain of absence is in your life.*

### **Activity: The Pain of PTSD Worksheet (30-45 minutes)**

#### **Sources of PTSD Pain (Column 1):**

*Now that we have identified that everyone has pain and anxiety, we are going to walk through an exercise to help you identify the sources of pain in your life is and what the pain of PTSD looks*

*like for you personally. At this point, we are only going to focus on the first column (What are the sources of my PTSD pain?). When we talk about PTSD pain, this can include: feelings, sensations, urges, thoughts, memories, and images. We are not talking about specific situations, but experiences of having a memory or image of a past painful experience, and sensations or urges to do something that has caused you problems in the past (e.g., drinking, avoiding places, angry outbursts), negative thoughts about yourself, others, or the world that bother you, and feeling anxious or angry in certain situations. For example, a painful urge might be the urge that you feel to run out of a crowded place or to constantly check for danger. A painful sensation might be the intense tightness in your chest. A painful thought might be fear that your family will be harmed, that others will hurt you, or that you are damaged. These are all examples of the pain of presence – these thoughts, feelings, and urges bring about pain just by being there.*

- Give group members 5 minutes to start listing their own sources of PTSD pain in Column 1.
- After 5 minutes, ask group members if they are willing share some of the things they wrote down and list on the board.

#### Ways I have tried to get rid of it (Column 2):

*Most people with PTSD have tried a lot of ways to deal with the pain. Let's make a list of all of the things that you or other people you know have done or currently do to try to get rid of it.*

- Make a list on the board of what they share. Things you can draw out if they are not shared include the following: Distraction (staying busy on work or other projects, shopping, watching TV), withdrawing or giving up, thinking (ruminating, dwelling on, fantasizing, blaming), and numbing (substances, self-harm, recklessness). Be sure to draw out fleeing from or avoiding anxiety-provoking situations in this part (e.g., not going to particular places, hypervigilant behaviors, exerting excessive control, avoiding intimacy, etc.)

*What is the main goal of these behaviors? To avoid the pain and anxiety. This is such a natural thing to do! All of us as humans, even those without PTSD, do this. With PTSD pain, we often try to avoid or get rid of it by not thinking about certain things or by staying away from situations that seem risky or dangerous. And a lot of times it works in the short term, right? For instance, if you know that going to a crowded football game will make you anxious, you can avoid that anxiety a bit by just not going. Or if the idea of your spouse driving a long distance alone makes you scared for their safety, you can sort of manage that temporarily by not allowing them to go or making them call frequently.*

*In the moment, this makes a lot of sense, right? Why would we want to do things that make us feel anxious or scared? Why not just continue doing what we've been doing in Column 2 to avoid the pain of PTSD?*

What I am Missing Out On (Column 3):

- Refer them to the list they have generated.

*Looking at what you listed in Column 2 as ways you have tried to get rid of PTSD pain, are there any that you have found end up causing you more problems in the long run?*

*What types of problems have you had as a result of trying to get rid of PTSD pain? (i.e., legal problems, loss of job, relationship issues, isolation, substance use issues, etc.).*

*It is often pretty obvious to us when our ways of trying to get rid of pain and anxiety cause new problems (e.g., legal problems, marital difficulties), but we tend not to stop and think about how these ways of avoiding PTSD pain can also interfere with our living the life we want. Column 3 asks you to examine what you might be missing out on as a result of trying to get rid of PTSD pain. How are the ways that you try to get rid of it getting in the way of the life you want? For instance, in the example we talked about earlier, the person who stays home from the game may miss out on time with family and friends.*

- Give group members 5 minutes to look at what they are missing out on and fill in the third column of their worksheet.
- After 5 minutes, ask group members to share what they have been missing out on.
- During discussion make sure to get the following points across:
  - Validate efforts to get rid of pain as a natural human response and particularly natural for people who have had the types of traumatic or painful experiences veterans with PTSD have had.
  - Use reflections to emphasize the importance of what they are missing out on (e.g., “Your family is important to you and it is really painful to not be able to spend time with them the way you want to.”)
  - Use discussion questions to elicit the main point that when people try to avoid pain they may not be fully living the kind of lives they want (e.g., “So as we look at all this, do you see any common themes? Are people fully living the type of lives they want to live when they try to avoid pain?”).

- Validate difficult emotions that arise when looking at the pain of absence and reinforce willingness to have them. (e.g., *What is it like for you to look at these things? It can often take a lot of effort to avoid or get rid of pain and anxiety. It's something all of us as humans want so badly to do. And it can be really difficult for us to take a look at how our efforts to avoid pain can get in the way of the life we want to live. Your willingness to do this is an important first step towards living the life that you want.* )

### **Activity: Tug of War Monster (Adapted from Hayes et al., 1999)**

*We are going to walk through a metaphor to help you visualize what we are talking about here, and where we are going to go in this group. I need someone who is willing to volunteer to play tug of war with me.*

*\*\*Leader note:* the veteran may often be stronger than the group leader. In that case, just make light of it and note that the point of this isn't actually to have a winner but to illustrate the struggle. Also, please note that this activity should be a bit playful at times but also serious. Do not quickly rush through the tug of war but really draw out the veteran's experience. It is not abnormal for people to become tearful during the activity.

- Have veteran stand and hold other end of rope.

*Imagine that I am your PTSD monster. I represent all of your experiences related to your PTSD that you don't want. I am your bad memories of trauma. I am all of the fears you have about trusting others, letting go of control, and the safety of you and your family. I am all of the bad thoughts that you have. I am big, ugly, and strong, and in between us is a very deep hole that appears to be bottomless. If you lose this tug of war, you will fall into the hole and be destroyed. What are you going to do now?...You are going to pull as hard as you can, right?*

- *Can you show me what it looks like as you pull?* (i.e., feet locked, full body effort, both hands on the rope, etc.)
- *What are some of the ways in which you pull back against me?* (Prompt volunteer and group members to elaborate on avoidance and control behaviors as well as problematic thoughts).
- Each time the veteran pulls, you pull back and describe what you are doing. First ask, *"How do you think I'm going to pull back when you do that?"* If the veteran can't identify anything, share what you think would likely happen with PTSD. For example, if the veteran states that they are going to just stop going out in crowds, you might say something like *"Ok, now I'm going to start telling you how worthless you are because you can't go anywhere."*

- Continue pulling the rope back and forth, engaging the veteran with specific examples of how they try to fight PTSD, and how it comes back with another challenge.
- *So you pull and you pull, but the harder you pull, the harder I'm going to pull back.. The battle doesn't stop does it?*
- *Sometimes it looks like you are winning. What does that look like?* (For example, it may be that anxiety temporarily improves or they push back a memory for a while).
- *Other times the monster is winning. What does that look like?* (For example, it may be that they slide into depression, become suicidal, or have a series of panic attacks).
- *But neither one of you actually wins. You just continue to pull back and forth.* Ask the veteran what they notice (e.g., Where is their energy focused? Are they winning? Isn't this exhausting?)
- Try to point out the following things if the veteran doesn't notice themselves:
  - With hands and feet locked in the struggle, they can't do much else.
  - It's really exhausting! Really validate here how hard they are trying and how frustrating it is to keep trying and not win.
  - Where is their attention focused? Usually on the struggle, not on the rest of life.
  - Are they moving any closer to what's important to them? No
- After struggling with the rope for a bit, not the following: *"So we could go on and on like this for a long time. You could continue day in and day out to feel tired, discouraged, and not able to live the life you want. I'm wondering if there might be another way to deal with me?"*
- "Drop the rope" (e.g., stop the struggle) is what you're getting at, but respond to everything they have to say until the volunteer or someone else in the group gets to this point. Once it has been said, be sure to ask what they mean by dropping the rope.
- Ask the veteran what they notice now that they have dropped the rope. You want to eventually get at the following:
  - ✓ Their hands and feet are free
  - ✓ They have more energy
  - ✓ They can shift their focus to (other things).
- Now pick the rope back up, playfully dangle it around and taunt them to pick it up (Try to taunt them with something they specifically brought up in the exercise. An example might be the following: *"I am your trauma. You are never going to get rid of me! Who*

*are you to think you can keep moving with your life? I'm with you for life. Oh, I know you thought you could come into Wal-Mart and just let me be here, but really bad things are going to happen. You have to pick this rope back up!).*

The goal of this is to help them see how strong the pull to fight and defeat pain is. Note though that even though the PTSD monster is still there, still yelling and taunting at them, it is their choice whether to engage in the tug of war. If they choose not to struggle, they can be freed up to do other things.

**Discussion:** Make sure to allow time to discuss reactions and make room for all reactions. Some may really like the idea of dropping the rope. Others may notice one of the following points below. Allow ample time for discussion:

- That the struggle is important to them and they don't want to drop the rope. For some veterans, the struggle is all that they know. It is scary and takes a lot of willingness to think about a new way of relating to trauma.
- That they want to drop the rope but can't actually do it. There is a difference between thinking about doing it and actually doing it. Explore what underlies the disconnect between thinking and doing if time allows.
- Validate any resistance to this issue by noting that often pain has become a big part of their lives and even thinking of engaging with it differently can seem overwhelming or impossible. Veterans have often tried countless ways to get rid of pain without success, and so the idea of dropping the rope is very new. Do NOT engage in a back and forth of trying to convince the group of anything. Instead focus on the idea that the veteran has the power to choose how to interact with pain. Right now we are just stepping back and looking at what their individual struggle has looked like and whether some of the ways they have tried to get rid of pain have led to them missing out in areas of life that are important to them.

### **Overview of ACT (5 minutes)**

*Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT for PTSD, is about helping you overcome the pull of avoidance and “drop the rope” so that you can live the life that you want. This, of course, is not easy, so the group will give you the tools to relate to your pain in a new way, a way that feels manageable. At times, we put so much effort into pushing away the pain of PTSD that we can become distracted or even disconnected from what is really important and the kind of life we really want. ACT is about connecting with that as well.*

*The core idea of this therapy is that we can learn to live with inevitable pain while making more room for the important things in our lives. What is important varies from person to person. This*

*group is about helping you connect with what matters to YOU, and giving you the tools to move toward the life you want.*

### **Wrap-up and Homework: (5 minutes)**

*Today we have started by acknowledging the pain of presence that comes with PTSD. You took a big step today by taking a look at how the pain of PTSD has affected you and how you have tried to cope with it using that natural human response of wanting to avoid pain.*

*Today you also looked at what you may have missed out on as a result of trying to avoid the pain of PTSD. Some of those things may involve areas of life that are very important to you. Between now and next session, we ask that you continue to reflect on this. For homework this week, keep looking at and adding to your Pain of PTSD worksheet. Notice what comes up throughout the week and jot down pain or efforts to avoid that pain, along with thinking about the big picture areas of life that seem most affected by these. Also for homework, complete the PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors Worksheet. This worksheet is all about how PTSD can impact how we think about things (our beliefs) and what we do (our behaviors). Answer the questions about how PTSD has affected your beliefs in different areas of life and how this has affected your behavior. We will use this throughout the rest of the group so it is a really important assignment. Use the completed example as a guide.*

*You may go home today and think “This is hopeless” or “This is yet another stupid therapy idea.” That’s ok. These thoughts will likely come up AND we are on a path here that can make a difference. You know if you are driving on a dark road, and you may only be able to see the next bit where your headlights are shining? But you can make it home bit by bit by focusing on what is right in front of you? That is what we are doing here. You can feel frustrated, confused, and hopeless AND continue to move forward on that path. We really appreciate your openness and willingness to look at tough things today. We look forward to the next part of our work with you on the path to living the life you want next week.*

## SESSION 2: WILLINGNESS AND MINDFULNESS

The primary goal of this session is to facilitate willingness as an alternative to struggling. When introducing willingness, remember: “Experience it, name it, explain it.” Veterans are first introduced to willingness through questions designed to highlight their own experience with it and through the “Joe the Annoying Uncle” metaphor. The goal is for veterans to begin grasping the idea of willingness before you move into actually defining it.

Both willingness and mindfulness counter avoidance and hypervigilance. Therefore, there may be some resistance to these concepts. If this occurs, do not argue. Instead, validate the source of the resistance (e.g., “this approach feels very different than the way you have thought before” or “you feel like what you have been doing has been keeping you safe and you aren’t sure this new way will work”). Use Socratic questions to gently draw the discussion back to how lack of willingness and mindfulness can create barriers between us and the life we want. Remind group members that most of us learn fastest and best by doing, and it is the experiential knowledge they gain by trying the skills that is most effective in helping to engage with the pain of PTSD in a new way.

This is also a good time to validate that willingness to look at painful patterns of struggling and to try new experiences is often not as easy it sounds. Be sure to point out that they are starting to demonstrate willingness by coming to the group and entertaining a new approach.

### **Session Outline:**

Introductions and Homework Review (20 minutes)  
Joe the Annoying Uncle (10-15 minutes)  
Introduction to Willingness (15 minutes)  
Introduction to Mindfulness (15 minutes)  
Be Where You Are (10-15 minutes)  
Wrap up and Homework (5-10 minutes)

### **Session Content:**

#### **Introductions and Homework Review (20 minutes)**

- Group introductions again if needed
- Review of group rules if needed
- Review homework
  - Highlight patterns in problematic sources of pain, how they try to get rid of pain, and what they are missing out on. Reinforce veterans sharing their experiences, connecting with one another on similarities, empathizing with one another, etc.

- Offer positive feedback for the effort it took to complete the assignment and the effort it takes to share experiences with the group. Remember, just by being willing to look at their pain and the pain of absence brought on by problematic strategies to avoid pain, they are beginning to engage with pain in a new way.

Do not rush the homework review! This discussion is critical for building the foundation for willingness. You want to reflect and draw out the pain of absence as well as reflecting the willingness it takes to look at it.

### **“Joe the Annoying Uncle” metaphor (10-15 minutes)**

*We are going to start today with a metaphor related to what we have been discussing so far in this group.*

*Imagine that you have just moved into a new house. You've decided to have a housewarming party and invite all the neighbors over. The sign says "everybody's welcome." Well, this includes your annoying Uncle Joe, who lives down the street. Joe is smelly, dirty, loud, and rude. If he comes into the party, he is likely to be disruptive and unpleasant. So, you could decide that even though you said everybody was welcome, in reality Joe is not welcome. But as soon as you do that, the party changes. Now you have to be at the front door, guarding the house, and keeping Joe out.*

*In the meantime, life goes on, the party is going on, and you are spending all your time guarding the house. The alternative option is to welcome Uncle Joe into the party. You don't have to like him. You don't have to like the way he makes you feel.*

*But take a look at the costs of not being willing to have him there. When this party started, it was all about living a life you valued. Being with your friends and family, really connecting with them and doing things you enjoy. The more unwilling you are for Joe to be there, the more time you spend trying to keep him out.*

*The problem is that Joe—like your own distressing thoughts and feelings—is really good at finding a way back in. So very quickly, this party can become less and less about doing what matters to you, and more and more about fighting a losing battle and keeping Joe away.*

*Try hard to imagine what it would be like to do something like this; “I don’t want Joe here. He really complicates things, and I never invited him. But, in the interest of making this party be about what I value, I’m going to stop spending all this time and effort trying to keep him out. I’m going to give up the fight against Joe---and live my life in a way that matters to me with Joe in plain sight.”*

### **Discussion:**

The goal of this conversation is to help veterans self-discover that by choosing a stance of willingness, they can have a more meaningful life. They don't have to get rid of pain to have meaning.

- *How do you think Joe the Uncle applies to your PTSD?*
- *Do you think it is possible to have the things you identified as painful AND have the things that you feel you have been missing out on at the same time? Can you have pain AND have what you want in life?*
- *How? What would that look like?*
- *What would the result be in terms of what matters most to you?*

### **Introduction to Willingness (15 minutes)**

*We call the stance taken in this metaphor “willingness.” Dropping the resistance to distress, easing into it, and freeing up the energy you were using to fight it so that you can start using it to do what matters to you. This is also the stance that we were talking about last week in Tug of War monster when we talked about “dropping the rope.” The person in the metaphor can choose to take a willing stance by acknowledging that their annoying uncle is there AND still doing what matters to them by spending time with friends and neighbors at the party.*

*We want to start focusing on the AND in this therapy. Often, we get stuck in “buts.” For example we say, “I want to stay at my kid’s event, but I’m scared.” Dropping the rope, or letting Joe come to your party, is about saying “I want to stay at my kid’s event AND I’m scared.” The fear doesn’t go away but your fear no longer limits your behavior. Think about this when you were in the military. You may have been in combat scenarios or training missions where you felt scared for your life AND you still moved forward because it was important to you. You didn’t say, “I need to do this, but I’m too scared.” You’ve shown the ability to “live in the AND.”*

Ask group members for other examples of when they were scared but moved forward anyway. Scenarios like the first time repelling or jumping out of a plane can be helpful here. Ask the following questions to help identify what thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and urges the veteran was having at the time and whether they continued on anyway: *What was it like? Were you able to move forward anyway? How did you feel about yourself when you were able to do that?)*

*We want to help you start applying that to your daily life...so you can acknowledge all these painful and scary thoughts and emotions AND still pursue things that are important to you.*

### **Discussion:**

- *What do you think your life would look like if you could live with this AND?*
- *If you could truly drop the rope, what would be different?*

- Write on the board: Willingness means: “making room” for painful feelings, thoughts, physical sensations, urges, and memories so that you can focus on what matters to you.
- Explain that “what matters to you” means “what is important to you” or “what is meaningful to you.”

*\*\*Leader note:* Remember that you are not trying to convince group members of anything here. Do not get into a back and forth about how this is not possible. Reflect what group members are saying and validate how difficult it is to take a willing stance at times.

*Willingness isn't about just experiencing pain to experience it. It's being willing to have whatever pain or anxiety is present so that you can pursue what matters to. You are being willing in the service of something important to you.*

*It's also important to note that willingness isn't an attitude or a feeling. It's more of a stance you choose to take. Do you think that the person in the Joe the Annoying Uncle metaphor was ever really feeling good about Joe being there?*

*Willingness is also a constant choice. We don't just choose to be willing once and then we are done. Do you think the person in the metaphor got tempted throughout the party to go try and kick Joe out again?*

### **Discussion:**

- *You all have actually already started demonstrating willingness just by coming to this group. Who felt nervous about coming to group?*
- *What fears did you have? What risks did you take?*
- *Why did you choose to come anyway? (highlight that they chose to push through fears in the service of trying to improve their lives.)*
- *Do you think you will have to make that choice over and over again in your life?*
- *Sometimes people think that if they just choose this willing stance, life will get easier. Do you think that is true? (Answer: No—That thought is our brain once again trying to control the fact that life is hard and bad things inevitably happen.) Willingness is not about making life easier or avoiding pain. Remember we all agreed that everyone has pain? So willingness is more about choosing how that pain impacts your life—does it take over and pull you away from what matters? Or do you live a full life even in its presence?*

## **Introduction to Mindfulness (15 minutes)**

*One of the skills we are going to be working on in this group that, with practice, will help with taking a willing stance, is mindfulness. When we try to avoid or get rid of PTSD pain and anxiety, we are not acknowledging and experiencing in the present moment. PTSD often pulls our focus to what might happen in the future or toward thoughts and feelings about what happened in the past.*

*The goal of mindfulness is to become aware of your present environment, thoughts, feelings, emotions, and physical sensations, rather than thinking about the past or worrying about the future. The goal is also to learn how to be nonjudgmental of your thoughts.*

*What do you think we mean by nonjudgmental? (Answer: judging means evaluating whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, true or not true).*

*Can anyone think of a time when they started to feel anxious and then thought “this anxiety isn’t ok. It must mean something is wrong?” That is a judgment. What happened to your anxiety when you judged it? (it went up). So being nonjudgmental would mean that you could just acknowledge you were anxious without deciding whether it was good or bad. You might still be anxious, but your judgments wouldn’t make it worse and you would have a bit more freedom to keep moving towards what matters to you.*

*What is your understanding of what mindfulness is? Use this as an opportunity to catch and counter any mindfulness myths (e.g., that mindfulness requires ascribing to a religion, that the goal is relaxation, etc.).*

*Survivors of trauma often cope in two different ways, both of which are counter to mindfulness:*

- *Dissociation or Numbing: Some people shut down and don’t really notice life anymore. They feel distant and disconnected from their feelings, aspects of their daily life, or other people. Some also experience dissociation, where they completely disconnect from the present experience and feel spaced out.*
- *Hypervigilance: Many veterans find that the opposite occurs: they become highly aware of everything around them. This makes a lot of sense to combat veterans, for example, because when you were deployed it was likely very adaptive to have a high level of awareness, since danger really was always just around the corner. This is not what we mean by being mindful though, because this constant level of physiological arousal is very hard on your body physiologically, can be emotionally draining, and prevents you from ever being able to just enjoy the present moment.*

## **Discussion:**

- *When you are doing either of these things, how does it affect your ability to engage in important parts of your life?*

- *Are you fully present when numb?*
- *Has hypervigilance ever prevented you from enjoying good moments? What do you think life might be like if you didn't do these things? (Leader: use this to build motivation and buy-in!)*

*Mindfulness is a really critical piece of helping you live a life that is more meaningful to you. There are several key goals of mindfulness:*

- **To help you be aware of what is going on with you.** *Why might this be important? The ability to notice your experience in to the present moment directly counters the emotional disconnect of numbing and the hypervigilance of potential future danger that pulls you from the present moment.*
- **To serve as a “systems check.”** *If you are not aware of what you are thinking, feeling, and having urges to do, then it is really hard to do something healthy with it. The ability to know what is going on with you is an important part of being able to pursue a life that is meaningful to you.*
- **A related goal is to help you create some space between what goes on inside and how you react.** *When you are able to be more mindful, you can look at internal experiences for what they are: a thought, an emotion, or an urge. When you develop this skill, your ability to just be with your pain goes up, and you are less likely to feel overwhelmed by it, or like it is something that you have to get rid of. This will increase your ability to choose how you want to react to pain, and to react in a way that reflects what matters to you.*

*Mindfulness can help empower us to choose our reactions to painful experiences. For instance, often we get really caught up in trying to put blame where it belongs, whether that means beating ourselves up or holding on to anger toward others. Ask yourself, does doing this lead to a sense of empowerment for you? Does it benefit you? The alternative is acknowledging that you have the power to choose how to respond to pain in your life. You may not be able to choose what happens to you or has happened to you, but you do get to choose the subsequent impact. Some refer to this ability to choose our responses as “response-ability.”*

- **It helps you get better at noticing positive experiences.**

*Remember, mindfulness is about full awareness of experiences: positive, negative, and neutral.*

*The best way to learn mindfulness is to practice, so we will be starting each group each week with practice. Please know that there is no right or wrong way to practice mindfulness. You will likely get distracted, have moments of discomfort, or even have thoughts of wondering whether you are doing it right. This is all a part of your experience to be observed nonjudgmentally.*

**Be Where You Are Exercise: (Adapted from Hayes & Smith, 2005; 10-15 minutes to complete and discuss)**

*Assume a comfortable position with your back straight, letting your shoulders drop and relax. Close your eyes or find a spot on the floor to focus on. We are going to start by focusing on your breath. Bring attention to your stomach, feeling it rise or expand gently on the in-breath and fall or recede on the out-breath. Keep focusing on your breath, “being with” each breath for its full duration. Every time that you notice your mind wandering from your breath, notice what it was that took you away, and then gently and without judgment, bring your attention back to your breath. You may have to bring your attention back multiple times and that’s ok.*

*Now, become aware of the chair you are sitting in. See if you feel exactly where the chair touches you and you touch it. Mentally try and see if you can color in the shape of where your body touches the chair. Take a minute to feel the chair- grasp the arm handles and notice the connection your hands have to them. Notice the cushiness of firmness of the seat below you. Next, take a moment to notice any sounds that you can hear in this room right now. Spend a moment just observing them. Remember, if you get distracted, just observe that and gently redirect yourself.*

*Next, gently open your eyes and spend a moment noticing the light in the room. How bright is it? Where is the light hitting the room?*

*Next, look around and notice the colors, furniture, and people in the room. You may have been in this room or with these people before, but look at it all as if you were an alien entering a new environment. Spend a few minutes being aware.*

- Discuss veteran experiences. If a veteran says they felt like they didn’t do it right, help them observe and label that as a thought they are having. Anything that comes up is a part of their experience and should be highlighted as such.
- Validate any comments about awkwardness or trouble staying focused. Share that even providers with experience in mindfulness found it difficult at first and that some days are still more difficult than others. Validate resistance by noting that often the last thing that veterans with PTSD want to do is sit still with their experience because that is often a time when painful thoughts or emotions come up.
- Make sure to point out that while mindfulness often results in relaxation, the goal is not relaxation. Veterans will often feel that mindfulness didn’t go well or that they did it wrong if they are not relaxed afterwards or if it was difficult.

**Wrap-up and Homework (5-10 minutes)**

- Review group content. Ask members what the take-home point was for them today. Ask them how that might affect how they approach their week.

- Homework:
  1. Ask veterans to practice mindfulness daily for at least 5-10 minutes. Refer veterans to the script for *Be Where You Are* in their patient manual and the Mindfulness Log for tracking their practice.
  2. Reassign the PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors Worksheet to those who did not complete it. You can also frame this as a way to identify thoughts and images that make willingness difficult and note that they will be learning strategies to cope with those thoughts and behaviors in a future session. Ask those who did complete it to continue working on it and see if they can find one way to be willing during the week.
  3. Introduce the Willingness Assessment and ask veterans to complete for homework.

### SESSION 3: DEFUSION

The first goal of this session is to review the PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors worksheet in detail. Make sure to help veterans carefully identify specific thoughts and behaviors associated with their PTSD. This review should help in beginning to identify three important points of intervention: (1) specific thoughts that can interfere with a valued life and could be defused from, (2) specific anxiety control behaviors that may be future targets for exposure, and (3) continued facilitation of willingness through increased awareness of the impact of the above thoughts and behaviors, as well as how a desired life might be attained if the veteran took a stance of willingness. The second goal of this session is to introduce defusion. When introducing defusion, remember: *experience it, name it, and then explain it*. Once the concept of defusion is introduced, leaders should help veterans begin practicing defusion from specific trauma-related thoughts. Veterans should be encouraged to practice defusion throughout the week on identified beliefs.

#### Session Outline:

Mindful Check-in (10 minutes)

Review previous content and PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors worksheet (30-40 minutes)

Defusion Introduction and Practice (30-40 minutes)

Homework (5 minutes)

#### Session Content:

##### **Mindful Check-in or “Systems Check” (10 minutes; adapted from Stahl & Goldstein, 2010)**

Begin with review of rationale for mindfulness (see session 2)

*We are going to start a little differently today by doing a mindfulness exercise, and then we will review homework and move on with the rest of the session. This exercise is called the mindful check in and the purpose is to do a kind of “systems check” on ourselves to see how we are doing. Often we get caught up in our busy lives, or we get caught up in what is going on in our heads and we neglect to “check in” with ourselves and to become aware of how we are feeling emotionally, mentally, and physically.*

*To begin, let’s close our eyes, or find a spot on the floor to stare at, and I will step us through a mindful check-in script, which is also in your veteran manual for your reference.*

*As you close your eyes, just take a moment to get comfortable, and then be still... Begin the mindful check-in by first attending to your breath... Not changing it, just noticing its qualities, what it feels like. Breathe in, and breathe out, noticing how your abdomen rises with each inhale and falls with each exhale... Engage in focused breathing for a moment...(pause)*

*Now extend this awareness of the breath to your entire body, just being present with your whole body and noticing any sensations that arise. Do not judge these sensations, just notice anything happening in your body... Maybe you feel some relaxation in some area, or some tension. Maybe there is some discomfort, or another particular sensation. Just be with these experiences for a moment...(pause)*

*Now let's shift our attention to your emotions, and any feelings you may be having, no matter how subtle or strong. Again, we do not want to judge these emotions, simply notice and accept their presence... Stay with your emotions for a moment...(pause)*

*Finally, let's shift our awareness to our thoughts, just noticing the thoughts that are entering, flowing through, and exiting your consciousness. Without becoming attached to any of your thoughts, or getting wrapped up in them, simply notice them. Notice them as they arrive, observe them as they play out, and allow them to leave when they are ready, without trying to push them away or cling to them. Stay with your thoughts for a moment... (pause)*

*Now congratulate yourself on taking these moments to practice an exercise that enhances your well-being... When you are ready, slowly and gently open your eyes and re-enter the room.*

### **Discussion:**

- Ask group to share reactions to this exercise. Validate any difficulties brought up by noting again that this is a totally new approach for many, especially for those with PTSD who often have a great deal of practice at NOT noticing how they are doing inside. It can be difficult at first, and let them know that we will be teaching a number of different mindfulness exercises and have found that very few people find all of them equally helpful. Veterans often find one or two that are most helpful to them.
- If veterans state "I wasn't doing it right," or "it didn't work," you can help them to observe these statements as thoughts by saying something like "ok so you had the thought that you weren't doing it right."
- Offer positive reinforcement for being willing to try something new without the condition that there has to be a good outcome.

### **Review previous content and PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors Inventory (30-40 minutes)**

*Last week we talked about learning how to live in the "AND." Does anyone remember what we mean by that?*

*The "AND" means you can have the pain, anxiety, etc., from your PTSD "AND" you can still live a life that you want. Many people don't reach this point and instead live life in a place of BUT (e.g., "I want a better life, but I might get hurt." We also talked about how willingness is a stance that can help you live in the "AND."*

*What do you remember about willingness?*

**\*\* Leader note:** be sure that this discussion includes review of the following: (1) “Joe the Annoying Uncle,” (2) the concept that willingness is a choice not a feeling, and (3) that that willingness can’t be contingent on getting what we want.

*Your homework assignment was to complete the PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors Inventory. The goal of this was to help you start identifying some of the specific fears you have and the behaviors you engage in to cope with those fears. We are specifically focusing on those beliefs and behaviors that keep you from having the life that you want to live. We are going to spend the first part of this session reviewing that homework assignment. Then we will start learning some strategies to approach those thoughts in a new way.*

- Walk through each section of the PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors Worksheet and write answers on the board. Do not rush this! For those familiar with Cognitive Processing Therapy, you might think of this as an activity similar to creating a stuck point log. You want veterans to be able to clearly identify specific beliefs, behaviors, and their impact on the veteran’s values. For example, if a veteran expresses the belief, “I can’t trust other people” help them identify what they fear will happen if they do. This gives them more specific content to defuse from. Then help them identify how acting on this belief impacts their values.

Review their willingness ratings and how they think life might be different if they tried to approach these beliefs and behaviors differently, by instead taking a willing stance? What might life look like if they don’t?

### **Defusion Introduction and Practice (30-40 minutes)**

Saliva exercise: The purpose of this exercise is to help patients understand the power of language. Although you are only describing something, their minds will naturally connect the words with an image and sensations, and disgust will be evoked.

*Today we are going to focus on a skill that will help you start being able to have some of those difficult thoughts you identified and still move forward. Before we learn the skill, we first want to do a little exercise with you.*

- Ask the group members to close their eyes and follow along with what you describe. Then say something like: “*Imagine that I have given you the strange homework assignment of saving up your saliva in a water bottle for the next week. I instructed you to spit your saliva into the water bottle every time you thought of it. Now, we are back into group after a week of collecting. I’m giving each of you a glass, and I’m going to ask you to pour a small glass of the saliva that you collected into it. Now you are going to take the glass, lift it to your mouth, and take a sip. You will feel the warm, thick, saliva as it enters your mouth and slides down your throat. You swallow the saliva and then set the glass back down.*”

- Have veterans discuss reactions

*So none of us had to actually drink the saliva, but we were able to produce that disgust and terrible physical sensation. That is because even though all we did was use words and images, our mind gave them an element of realness. The fact that you were able to envision it without seeing it is what we call fusion.*

*This is a property of language. Even though that didn't happen, once those words entered your mind, you reacted to them as if they were real. This human ability to conjure up something that feels real based on thoughts and images is adaptive or helpful in some ways. It allows us to have a positive imagination (e.g., I can think of a beautiful sunset and feel at peace). However, it can also cause problems when we become too connected or attached to painful thoughts.*

*Imagine what happens when fusion occurs with a less simple or more painful thought. For example, the thoughts "I am a failure" or "things will never get better." Just like the description of saliva, those can conjure up intense emotions and reactions, even though in reality that are just words. If we take them seriously, they can have a huge impact on us.*

#### Define Fusion and Defusion:

- Write definitions on the board and do one more brief review to make sure everyone understands.

Fusion: Believing that a thought is true and important

- Link back to the saliva exercise – feeling disgusted is being fused even though it was just words, feeling as if words are true is fused

Defusion: Recognizing a thought for what it is - sounds, words, stories, bits of language

- Not believing, following, or attending to unhelpful thoughts. Instead recognizing that thoughts may or may not be true. Whether they are true or not is not what matters. What matters is whether they are helpful.

#### Hands As Thoughts Metaphor:

*Imagine for a moment that your hands are your thoughts. I'd like you to hold your hands together, palms open, as if they are the pages of an open book. Then I'd like you to slowly and steadily raise your hands up toward your face. Keep going until they're covering your eyes. Then take a few seconds to look at the world around you through the gaps in between your fingers and notice how this affects your view of the world.*

*So what would it be like going around all day with your hands covering your eyes in this manner? How much would it limit you? How much would you miss out on? How would it reduce your ability to respond to the world around you? This is like fusion: we become so caught up in our thoughts that we lose contact with many aspects of our here-and-now experience, and our thoughts have such a huge influence over our behavior that our ability to act effectively is significantly reduced.*

*Now once again, I'd like you to cover your eyes with your hands, but this time, lower them from your face very, very slowly. As the distance between your hands and your face increases, notice how much easier it is to connect with the world around you.*

*What you just did is defusion. You created distance between your thoughts (your hands) and your face so you could see and engage with the world. The thoughts were still there but they weren't as dominant. When your hands were in front of your face, you were fused and your hands were getting in the way – that is what fusion does. It gets in the way. When moving toward values based goals, our goal is to be able to defuse when thoughts or emotions get in the way of our goals.*

### **Discussion:**

Engage the group in a discussion about what fusion looks like in their lives and how it is limiting. Give examples if group members struggle (i.e., If my goal is to make friends and be more social but I am fused with the thought that I am weird how will that get in the way? Think of my fused thought of “I am weird” is my hands in front of my face – I can't see around, notice other person's reactions, and I'm so caught up in my own thought that I am weird that I can't see anything else. Link this back to the thoughts identified on the PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors Worksheet.

### **Defusion Practice**

*For the rest of group, we are going to practice some specific defusion exercises. Some will work well for you and others will be challenging. Be open minded about trying each one but know that some will work better for you than others. Just focus on the ones that work for you. We want you to pick one of the thoughts that you identified on your PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors Worksheet to practice.*

- Have each veteran share the thought they plan to practice with to ensure it is appropriate. Process reactions after each exercise.

### **Practice Exercises:**

- “I'm having the thought that...”: *Bring to mind your difficult thought. Focus on that thought and believe it as much as you can for 10 seconds. Next take that thought and in front of it insert the phrase, “I'm having the thought that...” Pay attention to what happens (pause 10 seconds). Now again, change the thought to “I notice I'm having the thought that...” Pay attention again to what happens (pause for 10 seconds). Note that this particular exercise is great for emotions and urges as well (i.e., I'm having the urge to leave, I notice I'm having anxious feelings).*
- Musical Thoughts: *Bring your difficult thought to mind again. Hold it in your mind for 10 seconds and notice how it affects you. Now imagine taking that same thought and singing it to yourself to the tune of “happy birthday.” Notice what happens*

*(pause 10 seconds). Now go back to the thought in its original form. Hold for 10 seconds and notice how it affects you (pause for 10 seconds). Now take that thought and silently sing it to the tune of “jingle bells.” Notice what happens (pause for 10 seconds). Veterans can also choose their own songs or you can give additional examples (e.g., follow the yellow brick road, any song that leaders or group members think of).*

- *Naming your stories: Identify your minds’ favorite stories. Give them names such as the “I can’t do it” story or the “my life sucks” story, or the “I’m a failure story.” When your story comes up, simply acknowledge it by name (e.g., “Oh here’s that old favorite of mine- the everything is my fault story.” Once you have acknowledged the story, just let it be. You don’t have to challenge it or push it away, but you also don’t have to pay much attention to it.*
- *Thanking your mind: When your mind starts coming up with the same old story, just saying “Thank you mind! That is informative.” Or “Thanks, mind! That is interesting!” Make sure you don’t do this sarcastically or aggressively, but with humor and appreciation that your mind is a great storyteller.*
- *Silly voices: Again, bring your painful thought to mind and spend 10 seconds believing it as much as possible (pause 10 seconds). Then, pick an animated cartoon character (e.g., Shrek, Homer Simpson, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Porky Pig, Bugs Bunny) and “hear” the thought being spoken in that voice. Notice what happens (pause 10 seconds). Alternate back and forth and notice what happens.*

### **Homework (5 minutes)**

1. *Practice Defusion. Take a list of each difficult thought you identified on your PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors Worksheet. Practice using any combination of defusion strategies on at least one thought per day. You can also continue to practice with the thought you used in group today. There is a list of extra defusion exercises you can try in your manual.*
2. *Practice the Mindful Check-in at least once per day. Aim for 5-10 minutes. Record your experience in your mindfulness log. You can find a script for the check-in in your Appendix of mindfulness exercises.*

## SESSION 4: PERSONAL VALUES

The primary goal of this session is to help veterans connect with their values and create values-based goals to work on during the course of the group. Some veterans may have lost touch with their values completely, whereas others may be aware of them but not realize that their struggle with pain prevents valued actions. It can be helpful to think of a distinction between “trauma-influenced values” and “personally-influenced values.” Often values such as emotional and physical safety will become more prominent following trauma, and will be lived out at the expense of other values. Additionally, some veterans feel that their ability to live out a certain value has been taken from them by the trauma. It is important to help veterans explore the impact of their trauma on their personal values. We recommend that you complete the values card sort yourself so that you can provide personal examples or relate to struggles experienced by the group members.

### Materials Needed:

Values cards (one set for each group member. See Appendix C.)

### Session Outline:

Mindfulness Exercise and Discussion (10 minutes)

Review Previous Week and Homework Review (15-20 minutes)

Introduction to Values and Goals (5-10 minutes)

Values Card Sort (30-40 minutes)

Homework (5-10 minutes)

### Session Content:

#### **Mindful Check-in or “Systems Check” (10 minutes; adapted from Stahl & Goldstein, 2010)**

*We are going to do the mindful check-in from last week again. Remember, the purpose of this exercise is to do a kind of “systems check” on ourselves to see how we are doing. Often we get caught up in our busy lives, or we get caught up in what is going on in our heads and we neglect to “check in” with ourselves and to become aware of how we are feeling emotionally, mentally, and physically.*

*To begin, let’s close our eyes, or find a spot on the floor to stare at, and I will step us through a mindful check-in script, which is also in your veteran manual for your reference.*

*As you close your eyes, just take a moment to get comfortable, and then be still... Begin the mindful check-in by first attending to your breath... Not changing it, just noticing its qualities, what it feels like. Breathe in, and breathe out, noticing how your abdomen rises with each inhale and falls with each exhale... Engage in focused breathing for a moment...(pause)*

*Now extend this awareness of the breath to your entire body, just being present with your whole body and noticing any sensations that arise. Do not judge these sensations, just notice anything happening in your body... Maybe you feel some relaxation in some area, or some tension. Maybe there is some discomfort, or another particular sensation. Just be with these experiences for a moment...(pause)*

*Now let's shift our attention to your emotions, and any feelings you may be having, no matter how subtle or strong. Again, we do not want to judge these emotions, simply notice and accept their presence... Stay with your emotions for a moment...(pause)*

*Finally, let's shift our awareness to our thoughts, just noticing the thoughts that are entering, flowing through, and exiting our consciousness. Without becoming attached to any of your thoughts, or getting wrapped up in them, simply notice them. Notice them as they arrive, observe them as they play out, and allow them to leave when they are ready, without trying to push them away or cling to them. Stay with your thoughts for a moment... (pause)*

*Now congratulate yourself on taking these moments to practice an exercise that enhances your well-being... When you are ready, slowly and gently open your eyes and re-enter the room*

### **Review Previous Week and Homework Review (15-20 minutes)**

- Review mindfulness practice
- Review concepts of fusion and defusion.
- Review their experience practicing defusion on beliefs from PTSD Beliefs and Behaviors worksheet
- Ask if they noticed themselves getting fused with any thoughts throughout the week.

**\*\*Leader note:** Remember that now that veterans understand the concepts of fusion and defusion, you can point out and help veterans label fused thoughts any time you see them in group.

### **Introduction to Values and Goals (5-10 minutes)**

*For the remainder of group today we are going to be focusing on values.*

*What are values?*

*Values are important life directions that reflect what is most important to you and what you want to be about. They are also about how you want to live your life.*

*Values are meant to structure the way you choose to live your life. They provide a sense of purpose and meaning to our lives. Values are not the same as goals. Goals are things that can be achieved in a specific time frame whereas values are ongoing. Your values shape what goals you set for yourself. For example, if I value my health, then I may set a goal of quitting smoking, running a 5K, or eating 5 fruits and vegetables each day. Another example is a value would be*

*like driving West. We never arrive at West but we arrive at destinations along the way to “west” such as a particular city or store.*

*Values are very personal and are different for different people. Values may change over time. For instance, a young person who valued excitement and enjoyed spontaneity may begin to value simplicity and inner peace as an older person. Another example would be someone who valued achievement above all else and had a very successful career may begin to value service and philanthropy in retirement.*

**\*\*Leader note:** The following are points that you should be prepared to discuss if needed, but do not necessarily need to be included in group discussion:

- You may need to distinguish values from Morals. Morals are often broadly held (e.g., don’t hurt children, don’t kill your neighbor, etc.) whereas values are more individual. One could have what we would consider no morals but still have a value (e.g., the person who will unscrupulously walk all over others to get what they want may be considered immoral but they likely value self-satisfaction and that influences their decisions).
- Make sure that veterans understand that they are selecting the values that they want to direct their life, regardless of whether they are currently acting in line with those values.
- You can tie in the concept of willingness and mindfulness again. The goal is for veterans to develop psychological flexibility so that they can make mindful decisions about what they want for their life, rather than having the trauma influence their decisions. Even if they choose to prioritize a value that is more influenced by trauma than their personal values, the goal is to help them become more mindful of that choice and why they made it.

### **Values Card Sort (30-40 minutes, Miller, D’de Baca, & Matthews, 2001)**

*The goal of this exercise is to help you clarify your most important values. You may already know what they are, but a lot of people have actually not given much thought to what is most important to them.*

- Give each veteran a stack of values cards.
- There should be 3 cards labeled “important to me,” “very important to me” and “not at all important to me.” Veterans should lay these out and then put each value card in one of the three categories.

- Once they are finished, have them discard any value cards that are not in the “very important to me” pile.
- The next step is to have veterans identify their top 5 values. To do that they will:
  - Lay down 9 cards at random. Chose the top value among those 9 and put it aside. Discard the rest (occasionally a veteran will be torn between two values. In this case, it may be that two of their top 5 happened to fall together. It is okay to occasionally “cheat” and select 2 cards if they really can’t decide.)
  - Continue with sets of 9 until are left with only 5.
- After all group members have completed the card sort, ask each veteran to share their top 5 values and write them on the board. Leaders should also direct each veteran to write down their values in their manuals.

### **Discussion:**

- Spend the rest of the session beginning to discuss the values each veteran selected. Below are questions to help facilitate discussion. The overall goal is to begin creating a greater emotional connection to the values they have selected.
  - *Why did you select this value?*
  - *Why is it important to you?*
  - *What does it feel like to look at this value?*
  - *What would it be like if there were no barriers to living out this value?*
  - *What makes this value so important/special?*

### **Homework (5-10 minutes):**

Values Worksheet: *For the remainder of this group, we are going to be working on helping you reconnect with at least one of these values. For your homework this week, you will complete the Values worksheet. When you complete this, we want you to think about one the values you identified that you feel you are not living out very well right now. This may be a value that you feel has become difficult for you to live out since you experienced your trauma. The worksheet will help you consider the importance of this value and how it is playing out in relation to your trauma.*

## SESSION 5: WILLINGNESS AND VALUES-BASED IN VIVO EXPOSURES

There are two primary goals of this session. The first is to continue to facilitate increased willingness to experience anxiety and difficult trauma-related thoughts and sensations. This is facilitated through review of the values worksheet. The second goal is to develop values-based in vivo exposures that veterans will work on for the rest of the group. These should ideally be in vivo exposures that the veteran is willing to complete in the service of being able to better live out their values. It is common to encounter some resistance to the idea of completing exposures. Refer to Appendix A for tips on how to respond in an ACT consistent manner and optional activities to facilitate willingness to do exposures.

### Session Outline:

Mindfulness Exercise- Leaves on a Stream (5-10 minutes)

Homework Review (30-40 minutes)

Development of values-based in vivo exposure goals (40-50 minutes)

Homework (5 minutes)

### Session Content:

#### **Mindfulness Exercise - Leaves on a Stream (5-10 minutes; adapted from Harris, 2009)**

*Sit in a comfortable position and either close your eyes or find a spot to focus on. Now, imagine you are sitting or standing in the middle of a stream. The water is flowing away in front of you. Notice if there is any sound from the running water. Notice if there are any trees, etc. on the banks of the stream (pause).*

*Now, look around and notice that there are leaves gently floating along the surface of the water. Notice that each leaf comes into your awareness and then gently floats down the stream until you can no longer see it (pause).*

*For the next few minutes, take each thought that enters your mind and place it on a leaf and let it float by. Do this with each thought- pleasurable, painful, or neutral. Just notice it, place it on a leaf, and let it float by. Just observe it floating by without becoming attached (pause).*

*If your thoughts momentarily stop, continue to watch the stream. Sooner or later your thoughts will start up again (pause).*

*Allow the stream to flow at its own pace. Don't try to speed it up or rush your thoughts along. You are not trying to get rid of your thoughts. You are allowing them to come and go at their own pace. Some may move by quickly, others may linger. Some may come by multiple times. Just let whatever thoughts come by be there for as long as they are (pause).*

*If your mind says, "This is dumb," "I'm bored" or "I'm not doing it right" place those thoughts on leaves too and let them pass (pause).*

*If a difficult or painful feeling arises, simply acknowledge it. Say to yourself, “I notice myself having a feeling of boredom/impatience/frustration/anxiety.” Place those thoughts on leaves and allow them to float along at their own pace (pause).*

*As you do this, you may find that a thought hooks you and distracts you. This is normal. As soon as you realize you have been side-tracked, gently bring your attention back to the exercise (pause).*

*You may also notice that you find yourself trying to push away a certain leaf. Again, once you notice it, gently bring your attention back to the exercise (pause).*

*Continue observing your thoughts and placing them on leaves for the next few minutes.*

### **Homework Review (30-40 minutes)**

- Review mindfulness practice
- Review the values worksheet. Do not rush review of the worksheet. There are several goals group leaders should aim to facilitate. The first is to continue to increase emotional attachment to personal values. The second is increase discrepancy between values and current behavior to increase motivation to take a willing stance.
- During the review, you may also consider referring back to the Joe the Annoying Uncle metaphor from session two. For example, when discussing question 7, you might ask “What would it look like to let Joe into your party?”

### **Development of values-based in vivo exposure goals (40-50 minutes)**

*For the rest of our time together in this group, we are going to work together to set and work towards goals that will help you get back in touch with your values.*

- Introduce SMART goals format. Note that our time limit will be working on a new goal that can be completed in one week’s time each week. This will allow for group members to review their experience each week.
  - Specific
  - Measurable
  - Attainable
  - Realistic
  - Time-Limited
- Introduce exposure smart goals. *Exposure is a method where you intentionally approach the very things that make you anxious. Let’s say for example that you would like greater peace of mind. You might notice that part of what lowers your peace of mind is that you don’t feel safe and you are always checking your surroundings. So some SMART goals you might create would involve going places that usually scare you or going out but*

*reducing the number of times you scan your environment. As you do that, you are showing willingness to experience your fear. In the process, you may find that you are able to feel more comfortable with the fear and increase your peace of mind. The fear may or may not go away when you do this. If it does, great! But if it doesn't, that is ok to. You will now know that you can have that fear AND still do things that are important to you.*

- *A second example would be if you really value your relationship with your spouse. Let's say you set a long-term SMART goal of being able to take him or her out for a dinner date by the end of group. This has always been a struggle for you due to anxiety being in crowded places. You might start out with a smart goal of going to the restaurant at 3:00 p.m. Then maybe try going to a less busy restaurant at 5 p.m., then a busy restaurant at 5:00 p.m. Then you might try to reduce the number of times you check behind you. You would keep doing this every week until you reach the ability to take your spouse to dinner and stay focused on him or her. Again, you may get the added benefit of reduced anxiety. Or you may not- but you will be able to carry your anxiety to do what matters to you, rather than having it limit you.*
- *Remember this therapy is all about learning to live with that AND. So as you do these exposures you are teaching yourself that you can experience fear AND still go do things that are personally important to you. It may not go away, but it doesn't have to limit you either.*
- Review the Ideas for Exposure handout in the veteran manual and talk through a few examples. Once veterans seem to grasp the concept, spend the remainder of group helping each member create a list of in vivo exposures that they would be willing to try during the remainder of group. Refer to any points in Appendix A as needed during this process.

### **Homework (5 minutes)**

1. Continue to practice mindfulness and record observations
2. Continue to practice defusion
3. Complete first values-based exposure

## SESSION 6: DECISION POINTS AND IMAGINING NEXT EXPOSURE

There are two primary goals of this session. The first is to normalize any struggle that veterans are having with taking a new approach to their trauma, to re-instill motivation, and to help them better understand the process of value-based living. This is done through the decision points exercise. The second goal of the group is to help veterans prepare for their next exposure and anticipate the decision points they will encounter as they complete their exposure activities. This is accomplished through an imaginal exercise in which veterans mentally rehearse their next exposure and practice identifying challenges and opportunities to apply what they are learning in ACT.

### Session Outline:

Mindfulness and Willingness Exercise: “Physicalizing” (10-15 minutes)

Homework Review (15-20 minutes)

Decision Points (15- 20 minutes)

Imagining Next Exposure Goal (20-30 minutes)

Homework (5 minutes)

### Session Content:

#### **Mindfulness and Willingness Exercise - Physicalizing (10-15 minutes; Adapted from Hayes and Smith, 2005)**

*For today’s mindfulness exercise, we are going to practice nonjudgmentally being mindful of a painful, trauma-related, thought, emotion, or memory. Can you think of one such thing related to your trauma that you would be willing to try taking a look at today? It doesn’t have to be the hardest thing for you—you have control over what you are willing to look at. But can you pick one thought, emotion, or memory that still has a lot of power over you or keeps you from your values? Bring that to mind before we start and write it down on your session 6 overview in your manual where it says my target item.*

*When we look at objects external to ourselves, we don’t take them to mean anything about us. For example, imagine you are walking down the street and you notice an ugly pile of trash. Normally, you wouldn’t take that pile of trash to mean that you are a pile of trash or a horrible person right? However, what if instead of a pile of trash, you noticed a feeling of self-loathing? You might fuse with that feeling as an indicator that you are a horrible person. But since we have talked about thoughts just being thoughts, that thought doesn’t really define you any more than the pile of trash does. This exercise is going to help you better look at a painful trauma-related thought, emotion or memory, like that pile of trash. By making it a bit more outside yourself, you can see that it doesn’t define you; it is just what it is - a thought, emotion, or memory.*

*Begin by looking at the target item you wrote down. Get in touch with how you feel when you make contact with it.*

*Now, close your eyes and imagine taking this item and placing it four or five feet in front of you. Later, we will let you take it back, so if it objects to being put outside, let it know you will be taking it back. See if you can set it out on the floor in front of you.*

*If this target had a shape, what shape would it be? Try to really picture it.*

*If this target had a size, how big would it be? Try to really picture it*

*If this target had a color, what color would it be? Try to really picture it.*

*If this target had a power, how powerful would it be?*

*If this target had a weight, how much would it weigh?*

*If this target had a speed, how fast would it go?*

*If this target had a surface texture, what would it feel like?*

*If this target had an internal texture, what would it feel like inside?*

*If this target could hold water, how much volume would it hold?*

*Now, see whether there are any sticky negative reactions that appear to interfere with your willingness to have this object be exactly as you experience it to be. These reactions might be things like disliking it, fearing it, or just wanting it to go away. If there are no reactions, you can stop the exercise. If there are, then stick with me. Move the original target object off to the right and imagine yourself taking your sticky, difficult reaction to that target and putting it four or five feet in front of you. For example, if you find that you hate the original target, put that “hate” out on the floor next to it. We call this the “new target.”*

**Leader:** *go through above questions with the new target. Then say now, see if you can drop your struggle with this new object. Try to be willing to experience it fully without defense. Meditate on that for a few moments.*

*Now before taking these objects back, since they do reside within you, take a look at them and notice if they look any different than when we started. Maybe they do, maybe they don't. Just observe. Now imagine picking up each target and putting it back inside of you, but also realize that it is possible to be more willing towards the things we struggle with, and notice too, that it is how we react to these events that gives them much of their power over us. Close your eyes and bring both objects back inside you, willingly, much as you would welcome a guest in your home.*

**Discussion:** *What was that exercise like? What was it like to imagine your target painful thing as an object? Did it change how you interacted with it at all? Where did you find “stickiness” in terms of your willingness? The point you want to get to is that painful thoughts and feelings lose their power when we are willing to have them.*

### **Homework Review (15-20 minutes)**

- Review practice of mindfulness and progress on their exposure goals.

### **Decision Points (15-20 minutes)**

*One of the important things for you to remember as you try out these exposures and this new way of relating to your trauma, is that living within your values is not a one time decision. Being mindful, being willing, and taking steps towards your values are not one time things. All of these choices are made daily, moment to moment. So if you are finding yourself taking two steps forward and one step back throughout this group, that is normal! This is not going to come naturally.*

- Direct veterans to the Decision Points handout in their manual. Group leaders draw target circle on the board and review each point from the inside out.
- Inner Circle - Anxiety/painful emotions.
  - This is the starting point that the veteran has no control over. This is the pain or anxiety that is inevitable and how the veteran responds to it influences whether they move towards values or toward other behaviors that make pain worse in the long run.
  - Give the following example situation that can be drawn out as you explain each ring: *Let's imagine this with an exposure goal of going out to be in a crowd. Let's say you selected specifically the goal of going to your child's basketball game. You get there and you start noticing thoughts like "I'm out of control" and "something bad is going to happen." You notice your heart starts racing and your palms get sweaty. You start feeling an urge to turn around and go home.*
- Start with reviewing the left side of the circle. The rings on the left side of the circle represent how various decisions can lead towards a path of increased suffering. Fill in examples for each circle (suggestions are below but ask the group for examples as well).
- As veterans to follow along and fill in their rings with what each ring represents.
  1. First circle: Write "Judge" in the ring to the left of the center. This represents the decision to judge the pain and anxiety that is being experienced (e.g., I have to get rid of this, it's bad that I feel this way, my anxiety must mean something bad really is going to happen).
  2. Second circle: Write "Unwillingness" in the next ring to the left. This represents the decision to be unwilling to experience that anxiety or pain (taking an unwilling stance or saying I'm not willing to feel these emotions, have this experience)
  3. Third circle: Write "Avoid" in the third ring to the left. This represents efforts to suppress or get rid of the anxiety (leave the situation, try to exert control, etc.).

4. Fourth circle: Write “Consequences.” The first consequences to review are the short term payoff of the avoidance. The short term consequences are reducing anxiety temporarily. Then review long term consequences. First, anxiety comes back anyway (i.e., still afraid of public spaces). Other long term consequences are often negative emotions such as shame, guilt, frustration, etc., which can lead to further judgment (e.g., “I am weak”) and further attempts to get rid of it. This perpetuates greater pain and anxiety. Demonstrate this by showing that veterans often wind up back at the first circle with judgments, then on to the second circle of unwillingness and back to third circle of trying to get rid of that pain or negative emotion. If nothing is done, the person just keeps cycling through the rings on the left like a whirlpool.
- Ensure that veterans are able to see the connection between the “Avoid” ring and the kinds of behaviors they listed in Session 1 on their Pain Inventory as creating more pain and suffering in the long run.
  - Review the right side of the circle (valued living). This shows how they have multiple decision points in which they can do what matters even in the presence of anxiety.
1. First circle: Write “Notice.” This represents the decision to notice the anxiety using mindfulness (e.g., they go to the game and mindfully observe that they are having anxious thoughts and urges to leave)
  2. Second circle: Write “Willingness.” This ring represents being willing to experience it (e.g., they make a commitment to stay at the game and experience whatever comes up for them).
  3. Third circle: Write “Valued action.” This ring represents the decision to engage in valued action despite the presence of anxiety. Note that they could try defusion strategies to help them continue with valued action as needed.
  4. Fourth circle: Write “Consequences.” Again, review short term consequences, which include still feeling anxious in the short term, maybe feeling good about doing the valued action, maybe not. Long term consequence is that the ability to tolerate anxiety increases and the ability to still do what matters increases.

Explain that each ring is a moment-to-moment decision point, and none of them are carved in stone. Every moment represents a new decision point (e.g., how to react to a judgment thought that just popped up, whether to continue with the action or avoid the pain). Practicing mindfulness will help them be more aware of their moment to moment decisions so they can make changes as needed.

### **Imagining Next Exposure Goal: (20-30 minutes):**

*For the rest of group, we are going to have you imagine yourself engaging in the exposure you plan to do this week. As you do this, we will guide you through noticing the decision points you are likely to encounter during your exposure. We will then practice applying what you are learning to make decisions that keep you moving towards the goal you have selected.*

*Close your eyes or find a spot in front of you to focus on. I want you to try to take yourself to the first step in the exposure you have selected. If, for example, you plan to try to go to Walmart at a busy time, I want you to envision yourself pulling in the parking lot. Mentally walk yourself through the process of what you will do. As you do that, I will be asking you some questions to help you be mindful of difficult things that might come up for you and how you can continue to move forward in the face of those difficulties (pause).*

*Are you noticing any physical sensations come up? Can you observe nonjudgmentally? Can you make the choice to be willing to have them and keep moving forward? Sit with those sensations for a minute.*

*Are you noticing any other emotions? Can you observe them nonjudgmentally? If so, sit with them for a minute. Can you make the choice to be willing to have them and keep moving forward?*

*Are you noticing any urges? Can you make the choice to be willing to have the urge and still move forward? If so, sit with them for a minute and then move forward towards your goal. Can you observe what it is like to have that urge and still move forward?*

*Are difficult thoughts coming up? For example, you might have thoughts like “I can’t handle this” or “something bad is going to happen.” Can you defuse from those thoughts and keep moving forward? If you notice a thought, try stepping back from it by saying “I notice that I am having this thought” or by saying “I hear that thought, mind. Thanks.” Continue doing this until you have mentally completed your exposure goal.*

### **Discussion:**

- *What decision points were hard?*
- *Why were those moments hard? Help them look at the blocks to exposure completion and validate them. This includes both helping them identify specific thoughts, emotions, and sensations and highlighting how they would make the exposure difficult (i.e. “yes I can see how if you bought that thought you would turn around and go home”)*
- *How would each decision point affect the ultimate outcome? (e.g., let’s say that you aren’t mindful and you are surprised by anxious thoughts? How does that affect your ability to respond nonjudgmentally and willingly? What if you choose to not be willing to have your anxiety and you flee the situation? How will you feel after? What if you choose to believe the thoughts you are having instead of looking at them as just thoughts? How will you feel if you choose willingness and meet your goal?)*
- *Instruct them to record potential decision points they will face during this week’s exposure on their Session 6 overview sheet.*

**Homework (5 minutes)**

1. Continue to practice mindfulness and/or the physicalizing exercise and record observations in the mindfulness log
2. Complete the next values-based exposure

## SESSION 7: POST-EXPOSURE REVIEW

The primary goal of this session is to teach veterans how to complete a post-exposure review. The purpose of the post-exposure review is to help veterans become more mindful of what happens while completing in vivo exposures. This can be used as a tool to (a) increase mindfulness to skills used that were helpful and (b) increase mindfulness to barriers in order to inform problem-solving for in vivo exposures. Veterans also complete the Imagining Next Exposure Goal exercise again, using what they learned in the post-exposure review to identify and problem solve potential barriers for the upcoming week.

### Session Outline:

Mindfulness Exercise - Physicalizing with a new target (10 minutes)  
Past Week Review (5-10 minutes)  
Post-Exposure Review (45-50 minutes)  
Imagining Next Exposure Goal (20-30 minutes)  
Homework (5 minutes)

### Session Content:

#### **Mindfulness Exercise- Physicalizing with a new target (10 minutes)**

Leader note: Today's mindfulness exercise will be a repetition of the previous week. This will allow any absent members to practice physicalizing. For members who were present the previous week, instruct them to select a different target thought, emotion, or memory to practice with.

- *For today's mindfulness exercise, we are going to practice nonjudgmentally being mindful of a painful, trauma related, thought, emotion, or memory. Can you think of one such thing related to your trauma that you would be willing to try taking a look at today? It doesn't have to be the hardest thing for you—you have control over what you are willing to look at. But can you pick one thought, emotion, or memory that still has a lot of power over you or keeps you from your values? Bring that to mind before we start and write it down.*
- *Remember, when we look at objects external to ourselves, we don't take them to mean anything about us. For example, imagine you are walking down the street and you notice an ugly pile of trash. Normally, you wouldn't take that pile of trash to mean that you are a pile of trash or a horrible person right? However, what if instead of a pile of trash, you noticed that a feeling of self-loathing? You might fuse with that feeling as an indicator that you are a horrible person. But since we have talked about thoughts just being thoughts, that thought doesn't really define you any more than the pile of trash does. This exercise is going to help you better look at a painful thought, emotion or memory,*

*like that pile of trash. By making it a bit more outside yourself, you can see that it doesn't define you; it is just what it is - a thought, emotion, or memory.*

- *Begin by looking at the target item you wrote down. Get in touch with how you feel when you make contact with it.*
- *Now, imagine taking this item and placing it four or five feet in front of you. Later, we will let you take it back, so if it objects to being put outside, let it know you will be taking it back. See if you can set it out on the floor in front of you.*
- *If this target had a shape, what shape would it be? Try to really picture it.*
- *If this target had a size, how big would it be? Try to really picture it*
- *If this target had a color, what color would it be? Try to really picture it.*
- *If this target had a power, how powerful would it be?*
- *If this target had a weight, how much would it weigh?*
- *If this target had a speed, how fast would it go?*
- *If this target had a surface texture, what would it feel like?*
- *If this target had an internal texture, what would it feel like inside?*
- *If this target could hold water, how much volume would it hold?*
- *Now, see whether there are any sticky negative reactions that appear to interfere with your willingness to have this object be exactly as you experience it to be. These reactions might be things like disliking it, fearing it, or just wanting it to go away. If there are no reactions, you can stop the exercise. If there are, then stick with me. Move the original target object off to the right and imagine yourself taking your sticky, difficult reaction to that target and putting it four or five feet in front of you. For example, if you find that you hate the original target, put that "hate" out on the floor next to it. We call this the "new target."*
- **Leader: go through above questions with the new target. Then say now, see if you can drop your struggle with this new object. Try to be willing to experience it fully without defense. Meditate on that for a few moments.**
- *Now before taking these objects back, since they do reside within you. Take a look at them and notice if they look any different than when we started. Maybe they do, maybe they don't. Just observe. Now imagine picking up each target and putting it back inside of you, but also realize that it is possible to be more willing towards the things we struggle with, and notice too, that it is how we react to these events that gives them much*

*of their power over us. Close your eyes and bring both objects back inside you, willingly, much as you would welcome a guest in your home.*

### **Past Week Review (5-10 minutes)**

- Briefly review the decision points discussion. Reinforce the take home message that mindfulness and willingness allow us to proceed with valued action. You also reinforce the point that values-based living requires constant decisions to continue to be mindful, to not judge experiences, to defuse, and to continue moving towards values.

### **Post-Exposure Review (45-50 minutes)**

- The purpose of the post-exposure review is to help veterans become more mindful of what happens in their pursuit of a goal. This can be used as a tool to (a) increase mindfulness to skills used that were helpful, (b) increase mindfulness to goal barriers and aid in problem solving, and (c) begin to introduce the concept of the observing self. As you conduct the post-exposure review, here are a few things to be mindful of:
  - The possibility for veterans to get stuck in judgment of themselves if they struggled during exposure and having urges to avoid/shut down. If this occurs, encourage them to practice mindfulness of judgmental thoughts in the moment. You may also highlight the opportunity to practice willingness to share about their experience completing the exercise.
  - The urge to use this as an analysis of “what went right or what went wrong.” It may be helpful to think of things as helpful or unhelpful to veterans in moving toward their value, and keep in mind that the veteran gets to determine what is helpful or unhelpful. The leader’s job is to help them use skills to do that.
  - Example: a veteran whose value is being friendly has a goal to go to the grocery store alone. The veteran does this in a teeth gritting, white knuckle way and afterwards feels like it “doesn’t count.” The leader may be tempted to restructure that veteran’s cognition to see that it does count; however, the ACT way of Post-Exposure review is not to judge goal completion as good, but to lead the veteran through a series of questions that help him or her to determine what was helpful and what was unhelpful during the experience.

### **How to conduct the post-exposure review:**

- Let veterans know you will be reviewing homework in a new way this week. Introduce rationale by reminding veterans that each week during homework review we have been working on being mindful of experiences and willing to acknowledge and share those with the group. This week we take these skills a step further and give veterans the tools to do this on their own in a way that is helpful in identifying decision points encountered during goal progress, identifying where a skill is needed, what skills were helpful or unhelpful, and how to use this information during goal progress the next time.

- Ask for a volunteer to be willing to go through the post-exposure review process with the group. Involve the group in identifying decision points, skill used, and opportunities for future skill use. It is most helpful if the person had partial completion.
- All aspects of the review should be written in the board. It may be a bit messy and that is ok.

Step One: Praise veteran for being willing to look at their experience and learn from it.

Step Two: Assess whether the veteran selected a clear exposure goal that reflects a top value.

- *Were you clear on your goal?*
- *How is this exercise connected to your value? Did you have link between the exercise and your value in mind when you started?*
- *Did you have a plan for enacting the exposure goal?*

Step Three: Have the veteran describe the steps they took toward their goal. Ask them to describe their experience in enough detail that an actor in a play or movie could reenact it exactly. Have veterans continue until they reach the point where they either completed the exposure or changed directions (stopped prior to completion). Write the veteran's steps in sequence on the board. Steps can be thoughts, urges, feelings, or behaviors. Use prompts to illicit details about their experience (e.g., *What were you thinking? What were you feeling? What was happening around you? What urges were you feeling?*)

The following is an example of a veteran who values his marriage and planned an exposure of taking his wife out for dinner:

1. I decided I'd better get going on this goal thing
2. I thought about asking my wife which restaurant she wanted to go to
3. I started to have second thoughts. I thought to myself, "I'm not sure I can do this right now." I started to feel anxious.
4. I decided I might wait to ask her to go with me until I was sure I wanted to do this
5. I started feeling ridiculous. I thought "I can't even ask my wife about going out to eat because I can't handle what she will say if it turns out I can't do it. I felt like a scared, weak child."

Step Four: Use the post-exposure review questions to help the veteran and the group identify ACT concepts and skills in the chain of events. Each question refers to a concept or skill that may be present in none or several of the steps. Write the concept/skills identified by the group/veteran next to the step in which it was present.

**WILLINGNESS:**

At any step, was the veteran willing to try the exposure regardless of the outcome? This also includes willingness to experience painful thoughts and emotions.

MINDFULNESS:

At any step, was the veteran mindful of their experience in the moment?

EMOTIONS:

At any step, did the veteran experience painful emotions? Positive emotions?

THOUGHTS:

At any step, did the veteran experience painful thoughts such as labels or judgments? What about helpful thoughts?

URGES:

At any step, did the veteran experience urges to do or not do something?

FUSION:

At any step, was the veteran fused with any thoughts about the self or what might happen? (i.e., I had the thought “I won’t be able to do this” and I fused with that thought so I believed I couldn’t)

DEFUSION:

At any step, did the veteran use defusion to step back from unhelpful thoughts?

VALUES:

At any step, did the veteran have their value in mind? Where there steps where the value was not in mind?

OTHER:

Was there anything else the veteran noticed was helpful or unhelpful to goal progress?

Step Six: Ask veteran and group to identify decision points which became barriers and what ACT skills might be tried in the future to address those barriers.

*\*\*Leader note:* Be aware also that veterans may realize once they are pursuing a particular values based exposure exercise that it actually is not reflective of their real value. For instance, the person who imagined himself attending basketball games as reflecting being a good father may realize that the goal isn’t worth it because he realizes he is only watching his son play rather than spending time with him. This should be reinforced as part of the process of reconnecting with one’s values and finding out how those values play out in their own individual life. In this case, the leader and group members would help that veteran develop a new goal to work toward that more closely aligns with his view of himself as a good father. Validate that PTSD often separates veterans from what matters to them and the process of getting back to those things and

figuring out how they need to look at this point in the veteran's life is what ACT for PTSD is all about.

### **Imagining Next Exposure Goal (10-15 minutes)**

*We use the post-exposure review to think about what we can do the next time we try to do a values-based exposure. Now we are going to envision the next goal for this week, using what you learned in the post-exposure review to help you be more mindful and problem solve in the moment. Have each veteran identify their next exposure (or repeat if they prefer).*

- Refer to session 6 for detailed script of this exercise. Have veterans close their eyes or focus their gaze and spend 5-10 minutes imagining themselves engaging in their exposure. Give them time to think about the setting they will be in and walk them through the five senses to get a full imaginal experience of engaging in their goal behavior. Prompt them to notice the concepts and skills that were discussed in the Post-Exposure review: WILLINGNESS, MINDFULNESS, EMOTIONS, THOUGHTS, URGES, FUSION, DEFUSION, VALUES.
- Discuss veterans' experiences. Ask specifically about each concept/skill and have veterans share what they noticed. Ask whether veterans have any new ideas about skills to use as they approach their goal this week. Highlight that they practiced willingness just by imagining.

### **Homework (5 minutes)**

1. Complete the next in vivo exposure or repeat exposure goal from last week
2. Complete the post-exposure review for next session. Detailed instructions are in the veteran manual.
3. Continue to practice the physicalizing exercise with any trauma related targets that they continue to struggle with.

## SESSION 8: THE OBSERVING SELF

The first goal of this session is to solidify understanding of the post-exposure review process. Continue to use homework review to solidify recognition and use of ACT processes during exposures. The second goal of this session is to introduce the concept of the observing self. Veterans have been using the observing self in the past few sessions by observing themselves in their decision points and completing post-exposure reviews. In today's session you will help them link those past experiences to the concept of observing self and use experiential exercises to help them further grasp the concept.

### Session Outline:

Homework Review (30-45 minutes)

Experiential Exercise: Observing Yourself Across Time (15-20 minutes)

Introduction to the Observing Self Concept (10-15 minutes)

Mountain Meditation and Discussion- (15-20 minutes)

Homework (5 minutes)

### Session Content:

#### **Homework Review (30-45 minutes)**

- Check in about in vivo exposure progress and assist with any post-exposure reviews as needed. You do not need to do one for every veteran but try to complete several so veterans can review the process. Select new exposures for homework.

#### **Experiential Exercise: Observing Yourself Across Time (15-20 minutes; adapted from Walser & Westrup, 2007)**

*Today we are going to talk about a new concept called the observing self. The observing self is really something that has to be experienced before you can grasp it, so rather than explain it to you, we are going to start off with an exercise to help you experience it.*

**SCRIPT:** *Sit back and find a comfortable position. Spend a moment focusing on your breathing. Observe yourself sitting in this room right now, noticing any sensations, thoughts, or sounds. Now, think of an experience you had this morning. It doesn't matter what it was, just go with the first thing that pops into your mind. When you have something in mind, raise your index finger so I'll know you've thought of something....Good. Now, thinking of this experience, see if you can remember what was going on around you at the time. What were you doing? (pause) Where were you? (pause) Was anyone else around you or were you alone? Can you remember some thoughts you were having? Can you remember what you were feeling?*

*Now, I want you to think of something you experienced last week. Perhaps a conversation you had or a task you accomplished. Again, it doesn't matter what it is, just whatever comes to mind. Raise your finger and let me know when you have it...Now see if you can remember what was going on at that time. What were you seeing around you? Can you remember any sounds you might have been hearing? Can you remember any thoughts you had at the time? Any emotions? Can you see that the person having that experience last week is you...the same "you" that had the experience this morning? It is the same person who is having various thoughts and feelings right now. There is a you that remembers that event from last week, the same you that remembers what happened this morning, the same you that is hearing me say this right now. Let's keep going with this.*

Leader should continue the above script pulling from various points in life. You may use: a high school memory, something from last summer, a childhood experience (vacation, holiday, interaction with favorite teacher), or a memory from military training, etc. You may do as many or few different memories as you like, tailoring to your group needs and available time.

*Now let's shift gears a bit. I want you to think about the various roles you've had and currently have in your life. For example, think of your role as someone's child or someone's sibling. Now think of your role as a parent....as a neighbor...as a friend...as a partner. Think of your role as a patient...as a citizen...an employee....a veteran. (Pause between these different roles to allow time for veterans to formulate the roles in their minds). Think of how varied these roles are, and yet it's the same you, the same continuous you in all of them. There is a you that is aware of these roles, and yet, is larger than these roles. (Pause again).*

*Let's move to two more areas that may be a bit more difficult to see. Take a moment to notice what it is you are feeling in this moment. See if you can describe it to yourself. Also notice that you have felt many, many emotions. Notice that your emotions at times have been high and at times they have been low. Observe that you have had excitement and joy and sadness and anxiety. Notice that within these emotions you have experienced different levels of intensity...sometimes a great deal of anxiety, sometimes just a little., sometimes you have been laughing, sometimes only smiling. As you notice all of these emotions, notice who is noticing: a you that has felt it all. A you that knows that these emotions come and go and come and go again. A you that is larger than your emotions.*

*And now, let's take a look at one last place; your thoughts. Take a moment to notice that you are thinking...Notice that the things you think now may not be the things you thought some time ago. Your thoughts have grown in complexity. You know things now that you didn't used to know, and you may have forgotten things you once learned. Your mind is full of thoughts, shifting, refocusing, learning, and remembering—thoughts are coming and going all the time. As you notice your thinking, once again notice who is noticing...there is a you there that experiences your thoughts and yet is not your thoughts. A you that is larger than any single thought. There is a you that is sitting here now, the same you that had those memories, the same*

*you that plays those roles, the same you that is aware of your emotions and your thoughts. A you that is larger than these things, an observer you—a continuous sense of you that stretches across all of these experiences and is larger than these experiences.*

### **Discussion:**

Ask group members to share their experience with the exercise. *Were you able to experience the observing self? What was it like to realize that continuous person who has always been there? How might this impact how you view your trauma? The anxious moments in your life?*

### **The Observing Self Concept (10-15 minutes)**

*What you experienced when we did that activity was the observing self. We've actually been starting to get in touch with this sense of self through group as you use your mindfulness skills and as you step back and observe yourself trying to reach your goals. Think back to when we have done mindfulness skills, can you remember that there is a "you" who is able to step back and do the observing that occurs in mindfulness. That was your observing self. It is important because it helps you realize that there is more to you than what you are experiencing in the current moment. We can think of there being two different types of ways you view yourself (write out definitions):*

- (1) "You in the moment"- This is the "you" that is experiencing whatever is happening for you at the present time. It is thinking thoughts, labeling yourself, etc. This is the "you" we tend to pay attention to. The problem with this sense of "you" is that it is easy to become fused with whatever is happening at the moment.*
- (2) "The Observing self"- This is the "you" that is always there and has always been there. It transcends your current experience. When you are in touch with this "you" you are able to experience that you are not defined by your current thoughts, sensations, emotions, images, physical body, etc. These things change constantly but they are not the essence of who you are. This is important because it helps you step back and see your current experience from a more distant perspective (like defusion).*

### **Metaphor for the Observing Self (Optional)**

- Football Field
  1. The "you of the moment"- is like the game that is happening. It's the players, the spectators, the commentators. They are attached to the outcome of the game so their emotions are going to change a lot with what is happening.
  2. The "observing you"- is like the football field. Does the field care who wins? Does it care what the spectators or thinking? No, it will continue to be a field no matter what. It isn't influenced by what is happening in the game.

### **Mountain Meditation and Discussion (15-20 minutes; Kabat-Zinn, 1994)**

*Let's do another exercise to help you experience this.*

*Settle into a comfortable position, with your spine straight but relaxed, with your head balanced easily on your neck and shoulders, sitting with a sense of dignity and ease. Letting your body support the intention to remain wakeful and present. When you are ready, allow your eyes to close or find a spot of the floor to focus on. And now, allowing your attention to rest on the sensation of the breath as it naturally flows in and out of the body. Just observing your body as it breathes. Coming into stillness, sitting with a sense of completeness, with your posture reflecting this.*

*Now, when you are ready, bring to mind the image of a mountain. Picture the most beautiful mountain you have ever seen or can imagine. Focus on the image or just the feeling of this mountain in your mind's eye, allowing it to come more clearly into view. Notice its overall shape: the lofty peak in the sky; the large base rooted on the earth, steep or gently sloping sides. Notice how massive it is, how unmoving it is, how beautiful both from afar and up close. Its unique shape and form. Perhaps your mountain has snow at the top and trees on the lower slopes. Perhaps it has one prominent peak, perhaps a series of peaks and a high plateau. However it appears, just sit and breathe with the image of this mountain, observing its qualities.*

*And when you're ready, see if you can bring the mountain into your body so that your body sitting here and the mountain in your mind's eye become one. So that as you sit here, you become the mountain. Your head becomes the lofty peak, your shoulders and arms the sides of the mountain, your buttocks and legs the solid base rooted to your cushion or your chair. Experience in your body a sense of uplift from the base of the mountain up through your spine. With each breath, become more and more of a breathing mountain, unwavering in your stillness, completely what you are, beyond words and thought, a centered, rooted, unmoving presence.*

*As the sun travels each day across the sky, and light, shadows, and colors are changing virtually moment to moment, the mountain just sits. In the mountain's stillness, night follows day and day follows night, seasons flow into each other, and the weather changes moment by moment, day by day. Calmness abiding all change. In summer there is no snow on the mountain except maybe on the peaks. In the fall, the mountain may wear a coat of brilliant colors. In winter, a blanket of snow or ice. In any season, it may change; it may find itself enshrouded in fog or clouds or pelted by sleeting rain. People may come to see the mountain and be disappointed if they can't see it clearly or they may comment on how beautiful it is. And through all this, seen or unseen, sun or clouds, in sweltering heat or in freezing cold, the mountain just sits. Solid and unwavering. At times visited by violent storms, snow, rain, and winds of unthinkable magnitude; through it all the mountain just sits, unmoved by what happens on the surface.*

*As we sit holding this image in our mind, we can embody the same unwavering stillness and rootedness in the face of everything that changes in our lives, over seconds, hours, and years. In our meditation practice and in our lives, we experience the constantly changing nature of mind and body, and all the changes in the outer world.*

*We experience our own periods of light and dark. We experience storms of varying intensity and violence in the outer world and in our minds. We endure periods of darkness and pain as well as moments of joy. Even our appearance changes constantly, like the mountain's, experiencing a weathering of its own.*

*By becoming the mountain in our meditation, we can touch these qualities of strength and stability, adopting them as our own. We can use its energies to support our efforts to encounter each moment with mindfulness. It may help us to see that our thoughts and feelings, our preoccupations, our emotional storms and crises, all the things that happen to us are much like the weather on the mountain. We tend to take it personally, but like the weather, it is impersonal. In holding it in this way, we come to know a deeper silence and wisdom than we may have thought possible, right here within the storms. Mountains have this to teach us, if we can come to listen.*

*In the last moments of this meditation, continue to sit with this image of the mountain, embodying its rootedness, stillness, and majesty.*

### **Discussion:**

- Begin to discuss these questions at the end of the group. Any that are not discussed during this session, may be brought up in the next session. Leaders may also consider asking veterans to reflect on one or two of the questions as a part of their homework assignment.
  1. *How does this awareness that there is a “you” that has always existed impact how much your trauma defines you?*
  2. *Think back to the mountain. When the mountain has a period of really bad storms (e.g., wildfires, blizzard), does that change it's essential being? (e.g., is it not still the same mountain?). Even though it had a really terrible season, does spring still not come? Does summer not come? Do the seasons cease to come and go because there was a bad one? What does this mean for our lives?*
  3. *If the mountain knows it is still a mountain regardless of what storm hits it, does it feel as threatened by the storm? How does this apply to your PTSD? How does this apply to your future?*
  4. *If you can keep in mind that constant sense of self and realize that your past and present painful experiences don't define the whole of you, how would that impact your ability to engage in a valued life?*

**Homework (5 minutes)**

1. Practice the mountain exercise and/or observing yourself across various points in time to increase your awareness of your observing self.
2. Complete your next exposure goal. After you complete it, complete the post-exposure review

## SESSION 9: OBSERVING SELF AND OBSERVING THE TRAUMA

There are two primary goals of this session. The first is to continue to solidify understanding of the observing self. The second is to increase both willingness and ability to experience the emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations associated with a specific trauma memory through the perspective of the observing self. This is done through the Tin Can Monster exercise. In this exercise, veterans are instructed to select one painful trauma memory or thought. They then imagine various physical qualities of this memory or thought as the “monster,” which serves as a means of defusing from painful trauma content. This exercise also increases willingness to approach painful trauma content.

### Session Outline:

Homework and Observing Self Review (40-45 minutes)

Tin Can Monster (40-45 minutes)

Homework (5 minutes)

### Session Content:

#### Homework and Observing Self Review (40-45 minutes)

- Review exposure homework assignments. Complete post-exposure reviews as needed. Select this week’s exposures and discuss potential challenges as needed.
- Review the observing self and their experience of connecting with the observing self

#### Tin Can Monster (40-45 minutes; Adapted from Hayes and Smith, 2005)

### Discussion:

1. *If we can see things from the perspective of the observing self, does our experience of current PTSD symptoms change? Are they as threatening? As overpowering?*
2. *If you know that your PTSD is one part of you, would you be more willing to experience it for what it is? Would you be willing to try to look at one part of your trauma from this observing perspective today?*

*For the rest of this group, we are going to do a long mindfulness exercise that helps you look at your trauma from the perspective of this observing self. We are going to take an in depth look at the thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and memories associated with a difficult part of your trauma. Now we know this might be very overwhelming and you might not feel willing to have all parts of your experience, so part of this exercise will help you break the trauma down into smaller chunks that you can practice being willing to experience. We call this exercise the tin-can monster. Facing your trauma is like facing a thirty foot monster composed of tin cans, wire, and string. In this huge form, the monster may feel like too much to face. However, if we*

*disassemble the monster into all the separate wires, cans, and strings that he is made of, we can deal with these pieces one by one which is much easier than all at the same time. So what we are going to do is walk through multiple components of your trauma such as thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and memories. We will practice learning how to look at each component mindfully and nonjudgmentally, from this observing self perspective, and see if we can become willing (“or drop the rope”) to have each component.*

*For this exercise, we want you to bring to mind another part of your PTSD that is painful to you. Like the previous two weeks, this can be an emotion, a thought, a memory, or an image. This is going to be called your “target” throughout the exercise.” Write this target down in your manual. (Stop and ensure everyone has selected an appropriate target item).*

**\*\*Leader note:** Be prepared to discuss any reluctance to engage in the tin can monster exercise. This exercise may need to be adapted in several ways. First, do not rush through this exercise and do not hesitate to pause and help group members clarify areas of unwillingness. If the full exercise is not completed, the rest can be assigned as homework. Second, if a veteran is unwilling to use their trauma as a target or you feel they are not ready, they may select another PTSD related target. For example, a veteran may choose to complete the exercise looking at fear of loss of control. Refer to Appendix A for suggestions on how to respond in an ACT-consistent manner.

***SCRIPT:*** *Get comfortable wherever you are seated. Now first notice your breathing and take a few nice deep breaths, with the air coming in through your nose and out through your mouth. See if you can notice those parts of your body that come in contact with the place you are sitting. Now notice any sounds that are present in or outside the room. Take at least a minute just to get centered before moving on.*

*Start out by recalling something that happened last summer. Anything that comes to mind is fine. Remember what was happening then. Remember where you were and what was happening. See if you can see, hear, and smell, just as you did last summer. Don’t remember the scene as if you were someone else looking at the scene from the outside. Do it from inside the body of the person called “you” who was there, looking out from behind your eyes. Take a few moments to imagine this scene.*

*Now notice as you remember the scene that **you were there**. There was a person behind those eyes, just as there is now. And although many things have happened since last summer, notice too that there is an essential continuity between the part of you that is aware of what you’re aware of now, and the part of you that was aware of what you were aware of back then. Remember, we call this person your “observing self.” See whether you can do the rest of this exercise from the point of view of your “observer self.” You can let the scene you’ve called into memory go once you step into the observer’s seat.*

### ***(Bodily Sensations)***

*Get in touch with your target. Take a few moments to do this (leader pause). Deliberately become aware of the feelings that are attached to your target. Now watch your body and see what it*

*does. Just stay in touch with the feelings and watch your body. See if you notice any bodily sensations arising. Pick one to focus on.*

*Now, focus on that single bodily sensation. If other events crowd in (thoughts, emotions, memories, other bodily sensations), let them know that you will get to them later, and shift your attention back to this bodily sensation. Notice where the sensation begins and ends. Notice exactly where it is in your body. If you could make a sculpture into the shape of this sensation and put it into your body, what would it look like?*

*Now see if you can completely “drop the rope” with this sensation. Must it be your enemy? Is it ok to have it be exactly as is? By ok, I don’t mean “ok” in that if you like it, but just “ok in the sense that you acknowledge it and allow it to be what it is.”). If you find that there is something you are resisting, create an imaginary sculpture that is 100 percent identical to the sensation and place it where the sensation used to be, you now have the identical sensation that you created. They are identical, but this one you created. See if you can allow this sensation to be there as it is, instead of running away from it. How would that be? You aren’t promising yourself you will always do this, but for just this moment, see whether you can do it.*

*Now, go back to get in touch with your target, and once again watch your body and see what it does. See if there are any other bodily sensations that pop up in association with your target. If there are, that’s just one more sensation to focus on.*

*Now focus just on that bodily sensation. Notice where the sensation begins and ends. Notice exactly where it is in your body. And once again see if you can give up any sense of struggle with this sensation. Is it ok to have that sensation? Take a few moments and sit with that feeling until you sense that you are a little more open to having it in your body. If you find that you are talking to yourself about it, that is a thought. We aren’t dealing with thoughts yet. Just come back to feeling the sensation and see whether you can renegotiate your relationship with it. Are you willing to sense what you are already sensing?*

*Now set that aside and get in touch with your original target. Take about a minute to look for other specific bodily sensations. You can repeat the process described above as many times as you wish for each different specific bodily sensation. After a while, you can also just go through and notice all the little twinges or other reactions that appear, without spending much time on each. As each one pops up, notice it and acknowledge it. It would be like waving to one acquaintance after another from across the street. Just welcome them and acknowledge them, without arguing, agreeing, doing what they say, resisting, defending, or any of the rest. Continue doing this for a moment with any sensations that come up (Pause).*

*Take a few moments to sit with that feeling until you sense that you are a little more open to having that feeling in your body. If you find that you are talking to yourself about it, that is a thought. We aren’t dealing with thoughts yet. Just come back to feeling the sensation and seeing whether you can renegotiate your relationship with it. Are you willing to sense what you are already sensing?*

*If you are able to do that before we direct you to something else, see if you can do the same set of steps with another physical sensation that comes up. If not, keep sitting with this one and see if you can be willing to experience it. You aren't promising yourself you will always do this, but for just this moment, see whether you can do it.*

### **(Emotions)**

*Go back and get in touch with your target once again. Take a few moments to do so. Deliberately become aware of that feeling. This time, watch for emotions associated with your target. Just watch and see what they do. Stay in touch with your feelings and take a few moments to see what comes up for you. If several things come up, select one to focus on.*

*Focusing just on this one specific emotion, see if you can actually get next to this emotion by choice, instead of running away from it. See if it's okay for you right now to feel this particular emotion. The goal here is not to like or dislike the emotion. We aren't evaluating it. The goal is to feel it, as it is, without needless defense. Try not to let it spread out into other areas like thoughts, or behavioral urges. Just go into the emotion. You will have a chance to get to others later.*

*Is there anything in this emotion that you cannot have in this moment and this moment only? Is there anything truly dangerous, harmful, hostile, or bad that requires you to get rid of it, or considering it only as an emotion, is this something you can experience? However much you have opened up to this specific emotion, see if you can open up to it just a little bit more. Again, see if you can actually get next to this emotion by choice, instead of running away from it. See if right now you can stay with this one emotion. Take a few minutes and sit with the emotion until you sense that you are a little more open to it.*

*Now set that aside and get in touch with your original target. Take a moment looking for another specific emotions. Repeat all of the same steps, seeing if you can allow yourself to experience that emotion, just for this moment.*

### **(Behavioral Urges)**

*See if you can get in contact with the person behind your eyes, the observer you, the aware person you've been your whole life. As we have been diving into your PTSD experience, that sense of self may have slipped away, and doing this exercise effectively requires contact with this more transcendent aspect of your experience. From that perspective, get in touch with your target again. Take your time until you have it.*

*Now, see whether you can sense an urge or pull toward action. What do you want to do when you feel this? Don't actually do it, just notice the pull to engage in this behavior. It's almost as if your muscles are starting to move. It's kind of like a bodily sensation, but it's more like the beginnings of a behavioral sequence.*

*This time, instead of just doing that behavior or trying to suppress it, stay exactly where you are and feel what it feels like to feel the pull to behave in this way, without actually behaving in this way. It's like standing on the ledge of a tall bridge over a river and feeling a slight pull to step back or to jump. Instead of stepping back or jumping, just feel the pull. Now ask yourself, "Is*

*there anything in this pull that is something I cannot have? Is it fundamentally bad or something that will destroy me? Is it something I must get rid of? As before, if other reactions (bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc. try to creep in, let them know you will get to them later.*

*Take a few minutes and sit with your behavioral urge until you sense that you are a little more open to its pull to act on it, without needing to act on it or make it go away.*

### **(Thoughts)**

*Now set your behavioral predisposition aside. We are now going to move to thoughts. Thoughts are very tricky, so take a moment to gently get in contact with the person behind your eyes, the observer you- that you who has always been there. You can't look at this sense of you. Instead you are looking at your current experience from the perspective of this bigger you that has always been there. Get back in touch with the target you've been struggling with and then watch which thoughts show up from this place. See if you can catch just one, much as you might catch a fish. See if you can reel it in and focus on it. Now, see if you can just think that thought without trying to minimize, diminish, or argue with it. It is important that you don't try to dismiss it, because it will demand your attention and agreement if you do. See if you can really listen to it and give it your maximum attention, much as you might listen to a babbling baby: carefully but with neither disagreement nor agreement. You are not believing the thought and you are not disbelieving it. You are seeing it as a thought. Notice that it is indeed true that your mind thinks when coming in contact with your target. Is it ok if that thought is simply a thought?*

*See if you can think that thought as a choice. That doesn't mean you have to believe it. It doesn't mean you disbelieve it. It means allowing your mind to think that thought as a thought on purpose. Ask yourself if there is anything in there that is fundamentally bad, hostile, or harmful that you cannot have, if this thought is just a thought. When you sense you are more willing to think the thought as a thought, set it aside and get in touch with your target again.*

*Once you are experiencing your target, go "thought fishing again." When you catch the next thought associated with your target, focus on it for a minute. See if you can defuse from that thought by saying "Cool, nice thought. That's a good one." Notice whether you have seen that thought before. Do not do any of this dismissively or in a way that patronizes your mind. It will provide you with a sequence of words that you are going to hear and you are going to respectfully decline to struggle with these thoughts, either way. You are going to hear them, with understanding.*

*If other physiological sensations, emotions, or thoughts try to creep in, let them know you will get to them later. Sit with this thought until you feel like you are more willing to have it for this moment. Sit with the thought you brought up until you sense that you can just think the thought without trying to minimize, diminish, argue with it, or do what it says in order to make it go away. Then, set that thought aside. Again, get in touch with the person behind your eyes, your observer self. From this perspective, contact the target and place it fully in the center of your consciousness; again watch quietly for other thoughts that may be associated with it. Repeat the above process as many times as you need until you feel you can acknowledge your thoughts in a defused in accepting way.*

### ***(Memories)***

*We are now going to focus on memories associated with your target. Again, see if you can get in contact with the person behind your eyes, your observer self, the person you have been your whole life. From that perspective, get in touch with your target item. For the last part of this exercise, imagine you have all the memories from your life on little snapshots, like index cards filed away in a file drawer, all the events of your life from your birth until the present moment. Get in touch with your target, open the file cabinet, and start gently flipping through your cards of memories. Start from the present, and flip back deeper and deeper into your past. If you find yourself pausing at any picture, stop flipping and look at that memory.*

*Now just notice, from behind the eyes of the person called “you,” your observer self:*

- *Who else was there?*
- *What were you feeling?*
- *What were you thinking?*
- *What were you doing?*
- *What did you want to do?*

*Now, see if you can let go of any struggle that might be associated with your memory. It might be again associated with the picture, or an unwillingness to leave the memory. Whatever your reactions to the memory, just see if you can gently let go of your struggle with it and make room for all of those reactions. See if you can let yourself be willing to have that memory exactly as it is. That doesn’t mean you’ll like it, but that you are willing to have it.*

*If there is anything in that memory that you didn’t fully process at the time, there will be a sense that the work in the memory is incomplete. For example, you may have felt angry in the memory but hid it. If so, see if you can go into that part of the memory and complete the work you didn’t know to do then: feel what you felt, think what you thought, and so on. Your guide here is a “reverse compass.” If you sense a part of you saying, “Don’t go there,” see if it is possible, in fact, to go there. See if it is what it is, not what it says it is.*

*When you have thoroughly remembered your memory and have a sense that you are open to it, then put the memory back in the “file drawer.”*

*Notice your breathing and take a few good deep breaths, with the air coming in thorough your nose and out of your mouth. See if you can connect with the fact that you are a whole, complete person. This “tin can monster” is inside you, and so it is an illusion that it is bigger than you are. Ask yourself: Am I willing to be me, with the history I have, and to go on from here carrying all these reactions forward as part of an empowered life?*

### **Discussion:**

- *What was this exercise like for you? Were you able to be willing? How did that change your experience? Were there points where you were not able to be willing? What thoughts were you having then? (Leader should be assessing for any thoughts the veteran might be fused with, such as “If I am willing to look at this, I will fall apart”).*

- *If you found yourself struggling with willingness, what is standing between you and being fully willing to have these pieces of your trauma, without allowing them to play a destructive role in your life?*
- *As you did this exercise, you may have found yourself feeling frustrated with your history and reasoning that you would be better in life without it. Remember as we have discussed, that you can't control the history you have. What you can control is the role it plays in your life now.*

### **Homework (5 minutes)**

1. Complete next exposure. Complete post-exposure review if needed.
2. Continue to practice the tin can monster. Ideally try to do this daily and see if you can increase your willingness to experience whatever comes up. You can do this with the same target selected today, or with another trauma-related target.

## SESSION 10: REVIEW AND WRAP UP

The purpose of this session is to review ACT concepts learned throughout the course of therapy and discuss changes seen in group members. This session should serve primarily as an opportunity to review and reinforce the use of ACT skills, to reinforce progress, and to help them identify next steps. There is only a very loose outline for this session.

Components of group may be presented in any order and leaders may determine how much time to focus on various topics depending on their particular group. Otherwise, group leaders should use their clinical judgment to determine how to best meet the objectives of the group. While not included in this group outline, leaders may also incorporate more skills practice, elicitation of how to apply skills to future goals, or have group members provide feedback to one another.

### **Session Outline:**

Mindfulness Exercise (5-10 minutes)

Homework Review (variable time)

Overall ACT Review (variable time)

Group Discussion (Variable time)

Final Measures (10 minutes)

### **Session Content:**

#### **Mindfulness Exercise (Leader's choice, 5-10 minutes)**

Refer to previous sessions for mindfulness exercise. You may also consider another physicalizing exercise.

#### **Homework Review (variable time)**

- Review exposure exercises. Complete post-exposure review as needed
- Review experience practicing Tin Can Monster. Possible discussion questions include:
  - *Where you able to experience higher willingness?*
  - *Did anything change when you were willing to experience your target?*
  - *We talked briefly last week about how the trauma is something that is just one piece of you. Did anyone struggle with feeling frustrated that the trauma is a part of their history? What does getting caught up in that struggle cost you? What would it look like to “drop the rope” with the struggle that your history is part of you?*

## **Overall ACT Review (variable time)**

This may be included as a structured review or a review of concepts may be integrated into general discussion. The primary goal is to allow time to ensure veterans have a strong enough grasp on each topic to be able to continue to apply ACT to their lives. Below is an acronym that is in their manual. Their manual also includes a list of self help resources for those who wish to continue to work on their own.

### **Six Core Principles of ACT**

1. Mindfulness
  - Bringing your awareness to the here-and-now with openness
2. Willingness
  - Making room for feelings, sensations, and urges
3. Defusion
  - Recognizing thoughts, images, and memories for what they are – just words and pictures. Allowing them to come and go as they please, without struggling with them
4. Values
  - Clarifying what is most important to you
5. Committed Action
  - Taking action and making goals that are in line with your values, no matter how many times you might get off track or struggle to succeed
6. The Observing Self
  - Remembering that there is a you across time

### **The Common Barriers to Values-Based Living (adapted from Russ Harris, [www.thehappinesstrap.com](http://www.thehappinesstrap.com))**

**F** = Fusion

**E** = Exiting the present moment

**A** = Avoidance of discomfort

**R** = Remoteness from values

### **The Antidote to Barriers:**

**D** = Defusion

**A** = Acceptance of discomfort

**R** = reunite with the present through mindfulness

**E** = embracing values

### **Group Discussion (Variable time)**

The session 10 Values Domains worksheet is included in the veteran manual. This may be used to provide structure to discussion and wrap up, or may be simply given to veterans to complete on their own after group.

- Have group members discuss changes made in group over time. Ask veterans what changes they have noticed in others
- Questions to consider for discussion include the following:
  - *How much influence did your trauma have over your life before you started and how much does it have now?*
  - *How much are you defined by your trauma?*
  - *How do you want to relate to your trauma differently than you did in the past?*
  - *What is most important to you and how are you going to pursue that in spite of your pain?*

### **Final Measures (10 minutes)**

- Administer PCL-5, PHQ-9 and AAQ

## APPENDIX A: Responding to Challenges in Exposure

You may encounter resistance when you introduce the concept of in vivo exposures and throughout assignment of exposures. When this occurs, resist the pull to argue or “educate.” Instead, try to identify the source of resistance in terms of ACT processes. Below are some common challenges and tips:

- ***Fusion with thoughts:*** Veterans may be fused to thoughts that they don’t deserve to pursue their values, that this won’t work, or that they will never get better. Leaders should seek to identify any thoughts that are serving as barriers to values based exposures. Once identified, help veterans identify these thoughts as a product of their minds and practice defusion.
- ***Fear of exposures:*** Veterans may also be fused with specific fears related to exposures (e.g., “If I don’t check behind me at the restaurant, someone will attack me.”). Again, help veterans identify and defuse from these thoughts. Leaders may also normalize that fear may create a pull to avoid and help veterans remember the reasons they are willing to experience anxiety.
- ***Lack of willingness:*** Refer back to early sessions on willingness. Reflect the reasons veterans have shared for wanting to change. Highlight what they miss out on by not being willing and reflect any pain they have expressed this causing them.
- ***Lack of “wanting”:*** Review the concept that willingness is a choice and an action, not a feeling. You might say something like *“When we ask you to consider the exposures you are doing each week and the next activity today, you may not always want to or feel like it. That isn’t necessary to be willing. The real question is, will I do it regardless of how I feel in order to get what I want? Remember when you were in your early military training? You valued your career and you wanted to do well. But did you always feel like you wanted to do your PT? Did you always want to wake up in the morning? Probably not, but you chose willingness because it was in service of your bigger goal.”*
- ***Exposure activity not appropriately linked to value:*** Often veterans will select an exercise that is not closely related to a value that holds enough personal importance to promote willingness to experience anxiety. Other times, they will have difficulty identifying how an exposure activity may help them move towards their personal value. In these cases, help them identify how completing the exposure is related to their value. For example, if a veteran has identified peace of mind as a value they would like to work on, one exposure activity may include reducing checking behind them. You may say something like *“I hear you saying that the ability to check behind you at restaurants helps you feel more safe. I also hear that you aren’t able to be fully at peace when you are out with people. I wonder if you would have more peace of mind if you were able to reach the point where you could be ok with not checking?”*

### **Optional Activities to Facilitate Willingness**

These exercises are not included in group content to allow for them to be flexibly incorporated as needed throughout the group.

#### **Cards Exercise (a.k.a “Get off your Buts”)**

- This exercise offers veterans a weekly reminder of how their mind develops reasons not to engage in valued actions. The goal of the activity is to raise awareness of when they allow verbal content to alter their behavior, as well as a physical reminder to continue valued action in the face of thoughts that might otherwise deter them. Begin by reviewing the use of the word “AND” rather than “BUT” and by reviewing the idea that “but” is a limiting word. Then, give each veteran a notecard. On one side, ask them to write down the value they are working towards and their exposure goal for the week. On the other side, have them write “get off your butts” at the top of the card. Below this heading, they should then fill in any reasons their mind may give them not to follow through with their exposure goal. Have them replace the word but with AND for each excuse and encourage them to carry the card as they work on their exposures (e.g., “I plan to go to the basketball game AND my mind is going to tell me something bad will happen.”)

#### **Do something while saying you can’t**

This exercise also helps veterans realize that their verbal content does not have to direct their actions.

- *Pick up the pen exercise;* Instruct patients to tell themselves multiple times that they can’t pick up the pen in front of them while picking it up.
- *“The Mind”* One leader or volunteer should serve as “the mind” and one will serve as the doer. The doer will have a task to complete and “the mind” will follow them around making statements that would discourage the action. For example, the doer may be asked to walk around the room and introduce themselves to other members. Meanwhile the mind will follow and make statements such as *“nobody wants to talk to you. You are making a fool of yourself. Everyone thinks you are stupid.”* Afterwards, discuss how one can keep engaging in valued action in the presence of thoughts that would suggest otherwise.

#### **Urge surfing/Tape on the Nose**

*You may have a strong urge to leave an anxiety provoking situation, but you can acknowledge that urge and keep moving forward. Think of a time at home when you had challenging experience with a symptom of PTSD (avoidance, fear of certain stimulus or place, security concern, inability to trust others), where you tried to do something consistent with your values but didn’t. You went with your habit instead.*

*Imagine you were back in this moment. What would happen if, instead of going with that urge to escape that anxiety, you were willing to sit with it for a while?*

*Willingness is most important, though often most difficult, in a situation where you have strong urges about reducing your anxiety or strong emotions.*

*A way to combat urges that we use in ACT is called “urge surfing,” or becoming aware of urges but without fighting them. Instead, you “label” the urge for what it is, acknowledge that you are having a specific urge, and, at the same time you notice how the intensity of the urge gets stronger and then weaker, like waves coming and breaking up in the ocean.*

- Give each veteran a piece of tape and ask them to place it on the end of their nose (if any resistance, have them place it on their index finger as if taking a fingerprint). Group leaders take one also and place on end of your nose. (Be playful with this activity and share your own urges or annoyance with the tape)

*After you place the tape on your nose, begin to notice any urges that may arise about removing it. They may come up right away or later on. In the meantime, I will describe this process further and we will NOT touch the tape on the ends of our noses.*

*The reason we call this urge surfing is that urges often ebb and flow like the surf on a beach. Imagine yourself on a beach, gazing out into the surf. Notice how each wave starts off very small, gradually grows larger. It continues to grow larger until it reaches its peak. Then, once the wave has peaked, it gradually subsides. Like waves, our urges are a natural phenomenon. If we let them play out like nature intended, they will rise and peak and subside on their own.*

*Let’s take a moment to sit quietly and notice our urges. You may notice the urge to remove the tape, or you may notice other urges come up. Try and give them a chance to peak, and stay with them as they subside.*

- Give group 1-2 minutes of sitting quietly. Group leader then asks group about their experience of urges. This is a good time for leaders to chime in with similar experiences and validate that urges are natural. Goal is not to eliminate them but be able to acknowledge and experience them.
- Emphasize that by telling themselves “I’m having to urge to pull this tape off” creates some space between them and the urge. This observation or noticing the urge is mindfulness. And just as you can be mindful of the urge you can also be mindful that you are tolerating it and not acting upon it. Sometime urges come and go, strengthen and weaken and you can tolerate the discomfort that the urge brings and **still do what matters.**
- Discuss how this would come up when they are pursuing exposures. Relate this to anxiety and ability to tolerate anxious feelings in order to do what matters.

## APPENDIX B: Measures

### Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II)

Below you will find a table of statements. Please rate how true each statement is for you using the scale below.

Scale:

1=Never true

2=Very seldom true

3=Seldom true

4=Sometimes true

5=Frequently true

6=Almost always true

7=Always true

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. It's ok if I remember something unpleasant.							
2. My painful experiences and memories make it difficult for me to live a life that I would value.							
3. I'm afraid of my feelings.							
4. I worry about not being able to control my worries and feelings.							
5. My painful memories prevent me from having a fulfilling life.							
6. I am in control of my life.							
7. Emotions cause problems in my life.							
8. It seems like most people are handling their lives better than I am.							
9. Worries get in the way of my success.							
10. My thoughts and feelings do not get in the way of how I want to live.							

## PCL-5

**Instructions:** Below is a table of problems that people sometimes have in response to a very stressful experience. Please read each problem statement and rate how much you have been bothered by that problem in the past month on a scale from “not at all” to “extremely.”

In the past month, how much were you bothered by:	Not at all	A little bit	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
1. Repeated, disturbing, and unwanted memories of the stressful experience?					
2. Repeated, disturbing dreams of the stressful experience?					
3. Suddenly feeling or acting as if the stressful experience were actually happening again (as if you were actually back there reliving it?)					
4. Feeling very upset when something reminded you of the stressful experience?					
5. Having strong physical reactions when something reminded you of the stressful experience (for example, heart pounding, trouble breathing, sweating)?					
6. Avoiding memories, thoughts, or feelings related to the stressful experience?					
7. Avoiding external reminders of the stressful experience (for example, people, places, conversations, activities, objects, or situations?)					
8. Trouble remembering important parts of the stressful experience?					
9. Having strong negative beliefs about yourself, other people, or the world (for example, having thoughts such as: I am bad, there is something seriously wrong with me, no one can be trusted, the world is completely dangerous)?					
10. Blaming yourself or someone else for the stressful experience or what happened after it?					
11. Having strong negative feelings such as fear, horror, anger, guilt or shame?					
12. Loss of interest in activities that you used to enjoy?					
13. Feeling distant or cut off from other people?					
14. Trouble experiencing positive feelings (for example, being unable to feel happiness or have loving feelings for people close to you?)					
15. Irritable behavior, angry outbursts, or acting aggressively?					
16. Taking too many risks or doing things that could cause you harm?					
17. Being “superalert” or watchful or on guard?					
18. Feeling jumpy or easily startled?					
19. Having difficulty concentrating?					
20. Trouble falling or staying asleep?					

## PHQ-9

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things				
2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless				
3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much				
4. Feeling tired or having little energy				
5. Poor appetite or overeating				
6. Feeling bad about yourself or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down				
7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television				
8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite—being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual				
9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead or hurting yourself in some way				

If you checked off any problems, how difficult have these problems made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

Not difficult at all      Somewhat difficult      Very difficult      Extremely difficult

## References and Scoring

### 1. Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II

Bond, F.W., Hayes, S.C., Baer, R., Carpenter, K.M., Guenole, N., Orcutt, H.K., Zettle, R.D. (2011). Preliminary psychometric properties of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II: A revised measure of psychological inflexibility and experiential avoidance. *Behavior Therapy*, 42, 676-688.

Scoring:

Reverse score items 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9. Higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological flexibility.

### 2. Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9)

Kroenke, K., Spitzer R.L., & Williams, J.B. (2001). The PHQ-9: validity of a brief depression Severity measure. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 16, 606-613.

Items are scored on a scale of 0-3. Sum all items for total score.

### 3. PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5)

Weathers, F.W., Litz, B.T., Keane, T.M., Palmieri, P.A., Marx B.P., & Schnurr, P.P. (2013). The PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5). Scale available from the National Center for PTSD. [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov).

Items are scored on a scale of 0-4. Sum all items for total score.

APPENDIX C: Values Card Sort  
(W.R. Miller, J.C'deBaca, D.B. Matthews, & P.L. Wilbourne; available at  
<https://casaa.unm.edu/Instruments>)

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# **Personal Values Card Sort**

W.R.Miller / J. C'de Baca/  
D.B. Matthews / P.L. Wilbourne

University of New Mexico, 2001

**IMPORTANT TO ME**

**VERY IMPORTANT TO ME**

**NOT IMPORTANT TO ME**

## **ACCEPTANCE**

to be accepted as I am

**1**

## **ACCURACY**

to be accurate in my opinions and  
beliefs

**2**

## **ACHIEVEMENT**

to have important accomplishments

**3**

## **ADVENTURE**

to have new and exciting experiences

**4**

## **ATTRACTIVENESS**

to be physically attractive

**5**

## **AUTHORITY**

to be in charge of and responsible for  
others

**6**

## **AUTONOMY**

to be self-determined and independent

**7**

## **BEAUTY**

to appreciate beauty around me

**8**

## **CARING**

to take care of others

**9**

## **CHALLENGE**

to be accurate in my opinions and  
beliefs

**10**

## **CHANGE**

to have a life full of change and variety

**11**

## **COMFORT**

to have a pleasant and comfortable life

**12**

## **COMMITMENT**

to make enduring, meaningful  
commitments

**13**

## **COMPASSION**

to feel and act on concern for others

**14**

## **CONTRIBUTION**

to make a lasting contribution in the  
world

**15**

## **COOPERATION**

to work collaboratively with others

**16**

## **COURTESY**

to take care of others

**17**

## **CREATIVITY**

to have new and original ideas

**18**

## **DEPENDABILITY**

to have a life full of change and variety

**19**

## **DUTY**

to carry out my duties and obligations

**20**

## **ECOLOGY**

to live in harmony with the environment

**21**

## **EXCITEMENT**

to have a life full of thrills and stimulation

**22**

## **FAITHFULNESS**

to be loyal and true in relationships

**23**

## **FAME**

to be known and recognized

**24**

## **FAMILY**

to have a happy, loving family

**25**

## **FITNESS**

to be physically fit and strong

**26**

## **FLEXIBILITY**

to adjust to new circumstances easily

**27**

## **FORGIVENESS**

to be forgiving of others

**28**

## **FRIENDSHIP**

to have close, supportive friends

**29**

## **FUN**

to play and have fun

**30**

## **GENEROSITY**

to give what I have to others

**31**

## **GENUINENESS**

to act in a manner that is true to who I  
am

**32**

## **GOD'S WILL**

to seek and obey the will of God

**33**

## **GROWTH**

to keep changing and growing

**34**

## **HEALTH**

to be physically well and health

**35**

## **HELPFULNESS**

to be helpful to others

**36**

## **HONESTY**

to be honest and truthful

**37**

## **HOPE**

to maintain a positive and optimistic  
outlook

**38**

## **HUMILITY**

to be modest and unassuming

**39**

## **HUMOR**

to see the humorous side of myself and  
the world

**40**

## **INDEPENDENCE**

to be free from dependence on others

**41**

## **INDUSTRY**

to work hard and well at my life tasks

**26**

## **INNER PEACE**

to experience personal peace

**43**

## **INTIMACY**

to share my innermost experiences with  
others

**28**

## **JUSTICE**

to promote fair and equal treatment for  
all

**45**

## **KNOWLEDGE**

to learn and contribute valuable  
knowledge

**46**

## **LEISURE**

to take time to relax and enjoy

**47**

## **LOVED**

to be loved by those close to me

**48**

## **LOVING**

to give love to others

**49**

## **MASTERY**

to be competent in my everyday  
activities

**50**

## **MINDFULNESS**

to live conscious and mindful of the  
present moment

**51**

## **MODERATION**

to avoid excesses and find a middle  
ground

**28**

## **MONOGAMY**

to have one close, loving relationship

**53**

## **NON-CONFORMITY**

to question and challenge authority and norms

**54**

## **NURTURANCE**

to take care of and nurture others

**55**

## **OPENNESS**

to be open to new experiences, ideas and options

**56**

## **ORDER**

to have a life that is well-ordered and organized

**57**

## **PASSION**

to have deep feelings about ideas, activities, or people

**58**

## **PLEASURE**

to feel good

**59**

## **POPULARITY**

to be well-liked by many people

**60**

## **POWER**

to have control over others

**61**

## **PURPOSE**

to have meaning and direction in my life

**62**

## **RATIONALITY**

to be guided by reason and logic

**63**

## **REALISM**

to see and act realistically and  
practically

**64**

## **RESPONSIBILITY**

to make and carry out responsible  
decisions

**65**

## **RISK**

to take risks and chances

**66**

## **ROMANCE**

to have intense, exciting love in my life

**67**

## **SAFETY**

to be safe and secure

**68**

## **SELF-ACCEPTANCE**

to accept myself as I am

**69**

## **SELF-CONTROL**

to be disciplined in my own actions

**70**

## **SELF-ESTEEM**

to feel good about myself

**71**

## **SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

to have a deep and honest  
understanding of myself

**72**

## **SERVICE**

to be of service to others

**73**

## **SEXUALITY**

to have an active and satisfying sex life

**74**

## **SIMPLICITY**

to live life simply, with minimal needs

**75**

## **SOLITUDE**

to have time and space where I can be  
apart from others

**76**

## **SPIRITUALITY**

to grow and mature spiritually

**77**

## **STABILITY**

to have a life that stays fairly consistent

**78**

## **TOLERANCE**

to accept and respect those who differ  
from me

**79**

## **TRADITION**

to follow respected patterns of the past

**80**

## **VIRTUE**

to live a morally pure and excellent life

**81**

## **WEALTH**

to have plenty of money

**82**

## **WORLD PEACE**

to adjust to new circumstances easily

**83**

## **OTHER VALUE:**

**OTHER VALUE:**

**OTHER VALUE:**

**OTHER VALUE:**

**OTHER VALUE:**

**OTHER VALUE:**

**OTHER VALUE:**

**OTHER VALUE:**

**OTHER VALUE:**