Creative Hopelessness

ACT: Seeing What the Struggle With Your Feelings Has Cost You

Creative hopelessness is an exercise from acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) that looks at how well your efforts to get rid of painful feelings have worked. Psychologist Steven Hayes and his colleagues built it into ACT. The hopelessness is about the strategies you have tried, and it says nothing bad about you. Once you can see that a strategy keeps letting you down, you are free to try something new, which is where the creative part comes in.

1 Name the struggle

What thoughts, feelings, memories or sensations have you been trying to get rid of or avoid?

Example: Anxiety at social events, the thought that I am not good enough

How long have you been struggling with them?

2 What have you tried?

List everything you have done to feel better or to make these feelings go away. Include things that seem healthy and things that do not. For each one, ask how well it worked and what it cost you.

What I tried	Did it help in the short run?	Did it help in the long run?	What did it cost me?
Skipping parties	*Yes, I felt relief*	*No, the anxiety grew*	*Friends, fun, feeling left out*

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Look at the pattern

Why does this work? *In ACT, the question is whether a strategy works to build the life you want. Trying to control painful feelings often brings quick relief with long-term costs, and the feelings tend to come back. ACT calls this pattern experiential avoidance. Seeing it clearly makes room for another approach: letting the feelings be there while you put your energy into what matters to you.*

Looking at your table, what do you notice?

What has the struggle kept you from doing or being?

4 Put down the shovel

ACT uses a story to describe this. Imagine you have fallen into a deep hole, and the only tool you have is a shovel. So you dig, and the hole gets deeper. Digging harder or better will not help, because digging was never going to get you out. The first step is to put the shovel down, even before you know what to do next.

What is your shovel? What might you be willing to stop doing, even for a short time?

What would you like to put your energy into instead?

This exercise can stir up hard feelings, so be gentle with yourself as you do it. A therapist trained in ACT can help you work through it. If you are in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

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