



**Anti-Racism Action Guide:
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy - Application to Anti-Racism for Allies**

*"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change.
I am changing the things I cannot accept."*

"In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist."

– Angela Davis

Systemic and institutional racism are forms of racism that are built into our laws, practices, systems, and realities in countless ways that impact BIPOC (i.e., Black, indigenous, and people of color) individuals, regardless of our personal beliefs, stances, or practices. Because White people benefit from these unjust systems that cause harm to BIPOC communities, and silence or inaction perpetuates them, more and more people are choosing to become allies in pursuit of actively and collaboratively changing these systems. In place of accepting these systems of disadvantage, we may find it necessary to instead accept the difficult and uncomfortable experiences and emotions that the work of changing them entails.

ACTION STEP

Anti-racism refers to action against (as opposed to passive disagreement with) racial hatred, bias, systemic racism, and the oppression of marginalized groups. In this guide, we outline how Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can help us – particularly those of us who are less practiced in talking about race and racism – make the transition to anti-racism through a combination of acceptance and behavior change strategies. Doing so will allow us to make room for discomfort and live in line with our values of equality and justice. It is important to acknowledge that this work may look different for everyone based on your experience and context. However, a commonality across all of us is that anti-racism work can bring up discomfort in a multitude of ways.

Examples of when we experience discomfort may include when we:

- Talk about race, racial identity, racial trauma, and other topics, which many White people have not been taught to talk about or “had to” talk about → insecurity/uncertainty

- Recognize that we are privileged and have not “had to” consider topics before → guilt
- Reflect on our past behaviors that may have perpetuated racism, or past experiences when we did not recognize systemic/institutional racism or bias → guilt
- Recognize that we’re having a thought that is consistent with stereotypes/racism → shame
- Receive feedback that we engaged in a microaggression → defensiveness
- Limit the sharing of our own perspectives to center and amplify BIPOC voices → frustration
- Step up and speak out during a racist situation in which BIPOC individuals are not positioned to speak out themselves → fear
- Identify ways in which we are privileged and, in turn, play a role in systemic racism → any of the above feelings/reactions

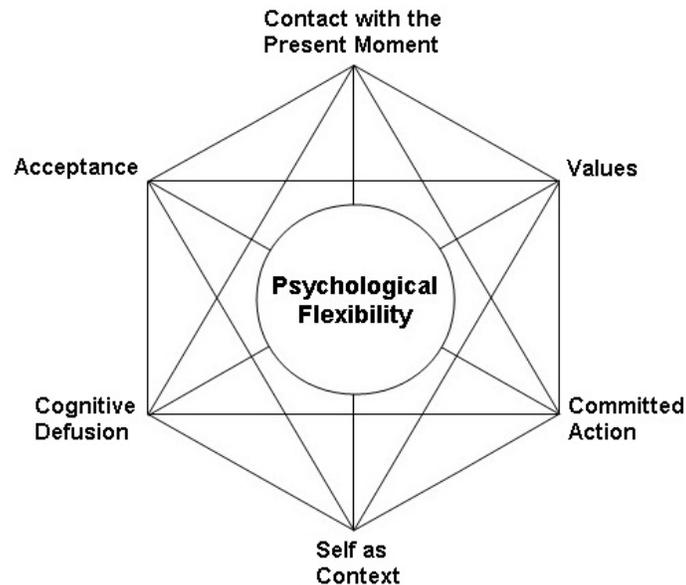
BEST PRACTICES FOR APPLYING ACT PRINCIPLES TO ANTI-RACISM WORK

According to the ACT framework, our initial responses to these uncomfortable emotions may involve **FEAR**. We may:

	Description	Example
<u>F</u>use with our thoughts	Believe we are our thoughts, or that our thoughts are always true	“I had a thought that is consistent with racist stereotypes, so I am a bad person.”
<u>E</u>valuate our experience	Judge our thoughts, feelings, or experiences, and what they must mean about us as people	“I don’t deserve to be feeling upset right now.” “I’m a bad person for having that thought.”
<u>A</u>void experiences	Move away from activities or experiences that bring up discomfort	“Conversations about race are uncomfortable, so I’m going to avoid speaking when those conversations come up.”
<u>R</u>eason-give for our behavior	Come up with reasons why we can’t or shouldn’t move towards change	“I wasn’t even thinking about race when I said that.” “I know they didn’t mean it that way, so speaking up about the bias in that statement would be making a big deal about something small.”

It's understandable that our initial urge may be to push away uncomfortable feelings or move away from the situations that evoke those feelings. At the same time, these responses often prevent us from actively engaging in valued action, such as anti-racism and promoting equity. Instead, it may be more helpful to approach these feelings and situations with psychological flexibility, using acceptance and a commitment to change. To do so, we can practice the primary processes of **ACT**:

	Description	Example
<u>A</u> ccept thoughts, emotions, and urges	Recognize that we don't have control over our thoughts, emotions, and urges	<p>"I'm feeling anxious right now, trying to talk publicly for the first time about race, racial identity, and privilege. It's uncomfortable and I don't like it, but it's okay and I can make room for the discomfort."</p> <p>"I had an offensive thought that doesn't align with my values. Instead of judging myself, I accept that not all of my thoughts are within my control."</p> <p>"I'm having the urge to explain that I'm 'one of the good ones' so they don't think I'm racist. I can acknowledge that urge and notice that I don't have to act on it. Listening may be more impactful than making a performative statement."</p>
<u>C</u> hoose a valued direction	Identify our values and what activities/actions align with those values	<p>"I value justice and equity, so I want to engage in activities and conversations that promote those values."</p> <p>"I value learning and inclusivity, so I am willing to participate in new activities that help me grow in this way."</p>
<u>T</u> ake action	Pursue activities that align with our values, regardless of what thoughts or emotions are present	<p>"Even though conversations about race are uncomfortable and anxiety-provoking, I will still participate in them because they align with my values of equity and justice."</p> <p>"Even though I had an offensive thought, I don't have to express or act on that thought if it doesn't align with my values."</p>



Here's an example of how this can be done using the six core principles of ACT:

Hypothetical Situation: A BIPOC coworker approaches you and shares that a comment you made earlier in the day was offensive and has racist implications¹ you were not aware of.

- **Make contact with the present moment:**
 - Check in with yourself and notice that this situation has brought up a lot of complex emotions
 - Note if you feel shame around making a comment that would be perceived as offensive, guilt for offending your coworker, defensiveness at feeling accused of something you didn't do intentionally, and/or fear that this may get back to your boss
 - Notice, with mindful attention, where you recognize these emotions in your body – attend to whether your heart is beating quickly, your face is flushed, or your body tightened
 - Attend to reason-giving thoughts

- **Use your observing self:**
 - Observe these changes with curiosity and openness, rather than judgment
 - Remember, we rarely have control over our automatic thoughts and emotional response to a situation, so it may not be helpful to try to control your thoughts and feelings
 - Notice what you are thinking and feeling and decide whether those thoughts and emotions will help you to act in valued ways

¹ See resource on handling microaggressions for additional considerations when you have been the perpetrator of a microaggression.

- **Practice acceptance:**
 - Allow uncomfortable emotions to come and go without struggling against them
 - Allow those emotions to be present, even though they were unwanted, rather than try to stifle them

- **Align with your values:**
 - Identify your relevant values, including compassion, justice, equality, learning, and being an ally
 - Remember that responding to emotions like shame, guilt or defensiveness would not be helpful or in line with your values
 - Remind yourself that practicing compassion involves listening to and taking others' perspectives, and that learning is a process that includes making mistakes and missteps along the way
 - Place your values at the forefront as you take next steps

- **Practice cognitive defusion:**
 - Create distance from your thoughts and emotions that reflect discomfort so that they don't take over how you respond
 - Consider telling yourself, "I'm noticing that I'm feeling defensive," or provide self-compassion, "It makes sense that I'm feeling ashamed when I inadvertently did something out of line with my values"
 - Name the process – "Ah, here's reason-giving. My mind is trying to come up with reasons why I wasn't at fault."
 - De-center your thoughts and emotions, and instead orient to your values

- **Use committed action:**
 - Set goals to practice anti-racism based on your values of justice and equity
 - Thank your coworker for their feedback and invite them to share the meanings your comment had for them and how they felt so that you can best learn from this experience, even though the situation is difficult and uncomfortable
 - Choose to validate these experiences and share how this increased understanding will help you prevent similar situations in the future
 - Share specific steps that you would like to take next

RESOURCES

Websites

- Anti-Racism Resources for Allies: <https://www.awis.org/antiracism-resources-for-allies/>
- On Handling Microaggressions: <https://psychiatry.emory.edu/documents/microaggressions.pdf>

Suggested Reading

- *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, a book by Ibram X. Kendi
- *The Racial Healing Handbook*, a book by Anneliese A. Singh