

Creative Hopelessness: Assessing the Emotional Control Agenda

In acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), we are trying to build a meaningful life while effectively navigating pain and difficulty. Unfortunately, our [natural way of navigating](#) usually involves trying to **control how we feel** in ways that often don't work long-term. Therefore, it's helpful to **investigate our own experience** to see whether our attempts to escape, suppress, and avoid emotions have helped us or hurt us.

Make a list of everything you have ever tried to escape, suppress or avoid difficult thoughts and feelings. Consider the following...

- Procrastinating
- Distracting yourself
- Reassuring yourself
- Avoiding anxiety-provoking situations
- Turning down opportunities
- Leaving difficult situations early
- Perfectionism
- Denying/ignoring problems
- Planning ahead for bad outcomes
- People-pleasing
- Over-apologizing
- Excessively caveating
- Deferring to others' preferences
- Drinking or taking drugs
- Lying about how you're feeling
- Telling yourself to think positive
- Reminding yourself why you should be grateful
- Burying yourself in work
- Keeping secrets
- Deflecting with humor
- Zoning out or doing mindless activities
- Sleeping
- Under- or over-eating
- Picking your skin, hair or nails
- Excessively checking for mistakes
- Avoiding reminders of unpleasant memories
- Trying not to get your hopes up
- Thinking of everything that could go wrong
- Withdrawing/isolating
- Over-analyzing
- Making excuses
- Meditating
- Criticizing yourself so others don't have to
- Only focusing on others' needs
- Only focusing on your own needs
- Staying in your comfort zone
- Pretending you don't care
- Telling yourself to get over it
- Telling yourself to relax
- Trying to forget the past
- Trying to get the past back
- Blaming yourself or others
- Self-harming
- Imagining suicide
- Acting out in anger
- Intellectualizing
- Being overly controlling
- Putting up with things you don't like
- Self-sabotaging
- Telling yourself nothing matters

Then consider each one you've tried, and **honestly assess whether it has served you**.

Consider things like, "What are the long-term benefits and costs of coping this way? Have I had to give anything up to use this strategy? How has it made my life richer, or smaller? If I had the choice, would I wish to be coping this way? Would I want this for my child or best friend?"

If emotional control strategies aren't working...

In ACT, if we discover that the emotional control agenda is not working, we call this state of mind “**creative hopelessness.**” We **throw up our hands and admit we can't do the impossible** (i.e., no matter how hard we try, we can't exempt ourselves from pain and difficulty without causing more pain and difficulty). This frees us up to say, “...now what?” and **find a better way to navigate, creatively (i.e., *not trying the same old coping*)**. That's where our [flexibility skills](#) come in.

If emotional control strategies *are* working (after all, some of those sound helpful!)

- Quite often, we engage in a mix of strategies to control emotions: some workable (i.e., effective and not too costly), and others unworkable.
- In addition, the same behavior can function as emotional control or not, **depending on the function**. Meditation, for example, functions as emotional control if we do it with the aim of escaping painful feelings - but it can be a healthy acceptance practice if we do it with the aim of coexisting with whatever arises.
- Creative hopelessness is not saying that no control strategies ever work. It is saying that **doubling down on emotional control as our main coping strategy cannot work**. Put another way, creative hopelessness acknowledges that, if we want a rich and meaningful life, emotional control can't be the roadmap to get there.
- With that in mind, it's useful to **discern which emotional control strategies are actually hopeless** (i.e., ineffective or too costly in the long term). We can commit to letting go of those strategies while **allowing workable forms of emotional control**.
 - E.g., someone living with alcoholism and a fear of flying might recognize that drinking on planes is unworkable - and commit to creatively navigating their fear sober. But they might also continue workable forms of emotional control that keep flying on the table (e.g., distraction or PRN medication).
- Still, remember that most of us are **miscalibrated to favor more emotional control than is actually useful**. So if you feel a pull to conclude that your current coping is working, take extra care to honestly weigh the costs.