

Doing What Matters

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Resilient Working with ACT

Ard van Oosten

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*To my parents, Aad and Ank,
and my girlfriend, Saskia,
because they mean everything to me.*

*And for you, dear reader,
you bring this story to life.*

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Foreword

Dear Reader,

Before you lies a book that addresses something many people engage with every single day: work. We spend a large part of our lives doing it. Work can provide direction and meaning, but it can also be a source of stress—sometimes even leading to mental health challenges.

Within this reality, **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)** offers a powerful compass: a transdiagnostic, scientifically grounded approach that has been shown to be effective in workplace settings (e.g., Unruh et al., 2022).

Doing What Matters—Resilient Working with ACT, written by Ard van Oosten, brings science and practice together in a clear and coherent way, helping readers work with greater resilience and meaning. The book offers practical tools for applying and training ACT in the workplace.

The author is no stranger to this field: Ard served as project lead in the development of the Dutch GGZ standard *Work as Medicine (Arbeid als Medicijn)*, published in 2017, and brings many years of ACT expertise to this publication.

This book is intended for anyone who encounters pressure, stress, or a sense of lost meaning in their work—from professionals to managers to HR advisors. It can be used as a self-help book to apply

ACT in your own work and life, or as a practical handbook for professionals—such as trainers, coaches, mental health professionals, and HR practitioners—who support others in applying ACT in work-related contexts.

In short: this is a values-based and practice-oriented book for everyone who wants to put ACT to work.

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My Name

26 March 1968. Three days old, I lay in my mother's arms. A son, named Marco—the second child in the family.

My parents had hoped for three children, but it soon became clear that I struggled to feed properly. I was born with a cleft palate. The family doctor said, "You're going to have your hands full with this child. Perhaps it's better to stop at two."

Even my name caused confusion at first. My grandmother was disappointed that I hadn't been named after my grandfather. In the end, my parents decided to call me Ard that same day. That name remained a struggle for a long time; I couldn't pronounce it properly, especially in an era of rolling r's.

I remember my first job, at thirteen, peeling flower bulbs. When the farmer asked my name and I answered with a stutter, he wrote down Arthur. I let it be.

That moment stayed with me. I was the boy who was taken out of class for speech therapy, who hid to avoid being bullied. The boy who dreamed and thought, my time will come.

From an early age, I became entangled in the belief that I wasn't good enough. I anxiously tried to live up to others' expectations, while not daring to invest in what truly mattered to me.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) changed that self-image. It taught me to look at what is—at what is possible. Through this, I discovered what my heart was drawn to and how I could keep taking small steps in that direction. ACT also showed me that Ard is simply the name I carry—not who I am.

In the workplace, too, we see how easily people become entangled in labels, roles, and expectations. How quickly we can lose ourselves in the daily rush, and how difficult it can be to stay focused on what truly matters.

Introduction

The realization that I did not have to be my name, my role, or my story gave me a sense of freedom. That same insight applies in the workplace: you are not your job title, your calendar, or your task list. Once you let go of that, there is space for the question of what truly matters.

For me, that question became unavoidable when I realized that hard work alone—long days, constant performance, the urge to do everything perfectly—no longer brought fulfillment. I became exhausted, lost my sense of enjoyment, and felt that something had to change.

ACT became a turning point—not because it solved my problems, but because it taught me to make room for difficult feelings and to direct my energy toward what I truly value. It brought me calm, joy, and a compass for my work and my life.

What is ACT?

ACT stands for **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**. It is a scientifically grounded approach that helps people live and work with greater resilience. At its core, ACT is simple: learning to accept what you cannot change and directing your energy toward what truly matters to you.

ACT helps you relate more consciously to your thoughts and feelings, without being swept away by them. In doing so, you develop **psychological flexibility**—the ability to stay open, make choices, and take action guided by your values.

This makes it possible not only to recover from psychological distress, but also to grow in both your work and your life.

Why This Book?

In a time of high work pressure and constant change—when emails and meetings compete endlessly for attention—more and more people are experiencing psychological strain.

Doing What Matters offers a different perspective. Rather than dwelling on what isn't working, this book focuses on what is possible: recovery, growth, and meaning in work and life.

What Can You Expect from This Book?

- This book combines scientifically grounded insights with recognizable, real-world stories.
- It includes reflection questions and exercises that help you apply new insights directly in your work.
- The tone is practical and personal, connecting theory, lived experience, curiosity, and compassion.

For Anyone Who Wants to Work in Line with Their Values

Whether you are personally dealing with pressure, stress, or a loss of meaning in your work—as a professional, manager, or HR advisor—or you want to support others with these challenges, this book is for you.

It offers guidance for anyone who wants to apply ACT in a work context, both in their own work and in supporting others.

What Can This Book Mean for You?

This book helps you relate differently to what comes your way:

- you experience more calm, agency, and energy in your work and life;
- you learn to make conscious choices aligned with your values;
- you discover how even difficult periods can create opportunities for growth.

For Trainers, Coaches, HR Professionals, and Care Professionals

The book also offers:

- practical exercises, methods, and training approaches to apply ACT effectively in guidance, teams, and organizations;
- tools to integrate ACT principles into training programs, coaching trajectories, and sustainable employability initiatives;
- inspiration to cultivate a culture of resilience and psychological flexibility within organizations.

Doing What Matters is a compass for anyone who does not merely want to survive, but truly wants to flourish—at work and in supporting others.

It invites reflection on what truly matters and strengthens the ability to be present with what is happening, make conscious choices, and act in accordance with your values.

Reading guide

Structure of the Book

This book consists of five parts. Each part has its own focus, but together they form a journey from insight to application in work and life. Throughout the book, personal stories, theory, reflection questions, and exercises alternate, so that you not only read about ACT but also experience what its principles mean in everyday work practice.

Part I – From Surviving to Thriving

In this first part, you explore how work affects your well-being. You gain insight into how work can be both a source of stress and a source of growth, and what is needed to strengthen that growth. This forms the foundation for the rest of the book.

Part II – ACT: Doing What Matters

This part shows why the modern work environment—full of deadlines, notifications, and constant availability—often throws us off balance. You learn how to reconnect with what truly matters and how to let that guide your direction, both at work and beyond.

Part III – The Six ACT Skills at Work

In this part, you discover how to apply the six core skills of ACT in your work: being present, stepping back from thoughts, making space for emotions, gaining perspective on yourself, working from values, and staying in motion. You learn how these skills help you function with greater resilience and satisfaction in a constantly changing environment.

Part IV – Working with ACT in Organizations

This part focuses on applying ACT within teams and organizations. You learn how to create a culture in which openness, psychological safety, and personal growth become the norm. In this way, individual resilience can grow into a shared source of strength that benefits the organization as a whole.

Part V – ACT Training in the Workplace

Finally, this part presents a training program that can be used within organizations. It offers guidance for anyone who wants to work with ACT—from trainers and coaches to managers or professionals seeking more meaning in their work.

How Can You Read This Book?

You can read this book in different ways:

- from beginning to end, as a journey from insight to application;
- by theme, as a reference for specific questions or challenges;
- or by actively engaging with the reflection questions and exercises—pen in hand—to slow down, go deeper, and experiment with what matters to you in work and life.

The theme of values runs like a common thread throughout this book.

Because values lie at the heart of *ACT*, you can begin working with them right away. For example, you might start with Chapter 13, “Values as a Compass,” to explore what is truly meaningful to you. From there, you can continue reading or return to earlier chapters, depending on where your curiosity leads you.

Resilience: Individual and Organization

Resilience is not only an individual matter. When we expect people to constantly adapt without the organization adapting as well, we approach resilience from the wrong angle. Only when the work environment also offers space for recovery, openness, and growth can resilience truly take root—both in employees and in the organization as a whole.