

Doing What Matters

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Resilience at Work with ACT

Ard van Oosten

First edition, March 2026

Second, fully revised edition, September 2026

In writing this book, ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to support brainstorming, refine the wording, and assist with translation.

Original title: *Doen wat ertoe doet*

Veerkrachtig werken met ACT

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Cover design: Ard van Oosten

ISBN: 978-94-6554-456-4

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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.*

Foreword

Dear Reader,

This book explores something that shapes almost every day of our lives: work. We devote a significant part of our lives to it. At its best, work can provide purpose, direction, and meaning. But it can also be a source of pressure and stress, sometimes taking a serious toll on our mental health.

Within this reality, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) offers a powerful compass. As a transdiagnostic, scientifically grounded approach, ACT has demonstrated its effectiveness in workplace settings (e.g., Unruh et al., 2022).

In *Doing What Matters—Resilience at Work with ACT*, Ard van Oosten brings science and practice together in a clear and accessible way, helping readers develop greater resilience and find more meaning in their work. The book offers practical tools for applying and practicing ACT in the everyday context of work and organizations.

The author brings substantial experience 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 draws on many years of experience working with ACT.

This book is for anyone who encounters pressure, stress, or a loss of meaning at work—from employees and professionals to managers and HR advisors. It can be used as a self-help guide for bringing ACT principles into your own work and life, as well as a practical handbook for

trainers, coaches, mental health professionals, HR practitioners, and others who support people in navigating work-related challenges.

Ultimately, *Doing What Matters* is a values-based, practice-oriented guide for anyone who wants not simply to cope better with work, but to work with greater resilience, purpose, and intention.

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My Name

26 March 1968. Three days old, I lay in my mother's arms. My parents had named me Marco. I was their second child.

It soon became clear that I was having trouble feeding. I had been born with a cleft palate. The family doctor told my parents, "You're going to have your hands full with this child. Perhaps it would be better to stop at two."

The name my parents had chosen for me did not last. My grandmother was disappointed that I had not been named after my grandfather. And so Marco became Ard.

My new name was difficult for me to pronounce, especially at a time when a rolled r was still the norm.

I was thirteen when I got my first job, peeling flower bulbs. The farmer asked my name. I stumbled over it. He looked at me, wrote Arthur on the list, and moved on. I left it at that.

I was used to adapting. I was the child who was taken out of class for speech therapy. The child who tried to go as unnoticed as possible to avoid being bullied.

While others my age were beginning to make themselves heard and seen, I preferred to retreat into my own world. I held on to the thought that my time would come.

I became convinced that there was something wrong with me.

For years, I carried that belief with me. It shaped the way I saw myself, the way I studied and worked, and the way I related to others. I set the bar high. From the outside, there seemed to be nothing wrong with that. On the inside, it demanded more and more of me.

Much later, I came to understand that it was not the events themselves that had kept me trapped, but the story I had come to believe about myself.

We all carry stories with us. They have shaped us, but they do not have to determine who we are or what our future will be.

The stories we tell ourselves travel with us. They color the way we see ourselves, the way we meet others, and the way we respond to what happens to us. At work, too, our stories reveal themselves.

Introduction

For most of us, work is a natural part of life. We spend a large part of our time working. It is where we meet people, learn new things, make mistakes, solve problems, and try to make a contribution.

In my work, I met many people who had reached a point where they felt stuck. For some, it happened after changes at work; for others, it was the result of illness, conflict, caring for a loved one, or loss. Different as their circumstances were, the same questions kept coming up. How do you move forward when life takes a different course than you expected? How do you stay connected to what matters to you, even as the pressure increases? And how do you find direction again when the things you once took for granted are no longer there?

In searching for ways to help people as well as I could, I discovered Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). What appealed to me was that it offered a different way of looking at things. Instead of searching for what is wrong, or dwelling on what could or should have been different. Instead of continuing to run away or fight. ACT offers an invitation.

An invitation to notice what is happening. To make room for thoughts and feelings. To pause and consider what matters. And, guided by what we value, to take the next step.

ACT is not the subject of this book. It provides a perspective through which I explore work, health, and what it means to live with dignity.

This book is about the relationship between work and health, about psychological flexibility, and about the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and the lives we lead. It explores how, even when life turns out differently from what we had hoped, we can continue doing what matters.

How This Book Is Structured

This book is for anyone who wants to explore how work, health, and psychological flexibility are connected.

Perhaps you are reading this book because you feel stuck in your work. Perhaps you lead a team, support others in their work or health, or are simply curious about ACT.

Professionals such as occupational physicians, primary care physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, other healthcare professionals, coaches, HR professionals, managers, and organizational consultants will recognize much of this from their daily practice. Yet this book is not intended for one profession. It is written for anyone who wants to understand how work and health influence each other and the role psychological flexibility can play in that relationship.

The book consists of five parts that together follow a progression: from understanding what influences us, to seeing things differently and responding more consciously to what we encounter along the way.

In Part I, we explore the relationship between work and health. We follow the changing view of health: from health as the absence of illness to health as the ability to live and work meaningfully, and to thrive.

In Part II, the focus shifts from knowing to doing. We are introduced to ACT, an approach that shows why insight alone is rarely enough and how psychological flexibility creates the space to do what matters.

In Part III, we take a closer look at the six processes of psychological flexibility. Together, they show how we can make room for our experiences, take limiting stories less seriously, and continue to move toward what matters to us.

In Part IV, we broaden our perspective from our relationship with ourselves to our relationships with others. We explore how the way we relate to one another influences the quality of our work and our lives.

In Part V, everything comes together. Through a series of exercises, you are invited to experience for yourself what has been explored in the preceding parts: noticing what is happening, making room for thoughts and feelings, exploring what truly matters to you, and choosing how you want to act from there. These are not steps to complete once and leave behind, but movements you can return to again and again.

You can read the book from beginning to end, or start with a chapter or exercise that connects with something that is on your mind right now.

Throughout the book, you will find stories from practice, based on situations I have encountered over the course of my work. To protect the privacy of those involved, names, circumstances, and other identifying details have been changed or combined.

Life cannot be planned. We all face events we did not choose. What remains is our ability to continually choose how we respond to whatever comes our way.

Let us begin with a simple question: Why do we often know very well what matters, yet still find it difficult to act accordingly?

That question lies at the heart of this book.

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