

# Practicing Psychological Flexibility in Infertility



acceptance  
detachment  
from thoughts

present-focused  
perspective

observing self  
values clarification  
values enactment

This workbook has been adapted for fertility journeys and enhanced with original reflection content.  
The original source is [Becoming Psychologically Flexible](http://TherapistAid.com) from TherapistAid.com



## Defining infertility:

Before we get started, let's take a moment to define infertility. Broadly speaking, infertility is the inability to have children easily without intervention. Infertility may have medical causes, like a disease, or it could be caused by many other factors. Same sex couples experience infertility. Trans people may experience infertility. A person pursuing single parenthood by choice experiences infertility. A person or couple in the wake of the loss of a pregnancy or child experience a type of infertility. In all of these cases and more, people struggle to reach a reality where they are raising their children.

## Infertility Outcomes:

It's also important to recognize that while the goal of infertility journeys is by and large to have a baby and grow a family, this is not always what happens. It's okay to reach a point and realize that we've done enough. It's okay to be okay with living child-free. It's okay to struggle to come to terms with the fact that it's not in the cards for us if that's what happens. There is the possibility for hope, fulfillment, and joy in all the possible outcomes of infertility.



## Be kind to yourself:

While going through this workbook, you may find that some activities come easily and some are more of a struggle. It is okay to take your time, skip sections and come back to them later, or do things completely out of order. This is your journey, and you are in control. It might be helpful to talk to someone while you are working through this booklet. You may choose to share with your partner, you may also find it helpful to speak with a therapist or counsellor who specializes in infertility. Please also make time for self-care on this journey.

Self care isn't just pampering or indulgence. It's about making choices that support your long-term wellness, especially when you're under stress or facing challenges.

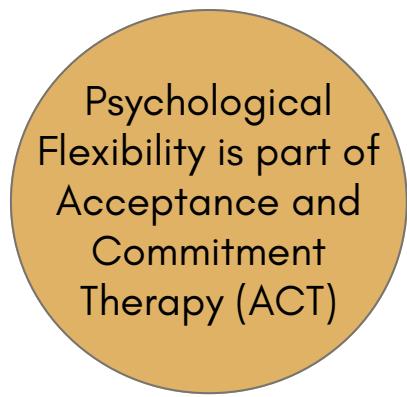
Self care might look like:

- Spending time in nature
- Practicing gratitude or reflection
- Asking for help when you need it
- Connecting with community/support groups
- Engaging in hobbies
- Getting enough sleep
- Nourishing your body



## What is Psychological Flexibility?

It is a set of skills that help us strengthen our ability to handle our thoughts and feelings without getting stuck in them while still doing what matters to us. For example, imagine you're nervous about upcoming fertility treatments or testing. Psychological flexibility means you don't have to get rid of the nervousness, you just notice it, accept it, and move forward with the treatment or tests because they are important to you. Psychological flexibility puts you in the driver's seat with your thoughts and emotions as passengers.



Psychological flexibility can help us adapt to hardships and struggles while respecting our values. It can help us to improve our emotional tolerance, resilience, and overall well-being.

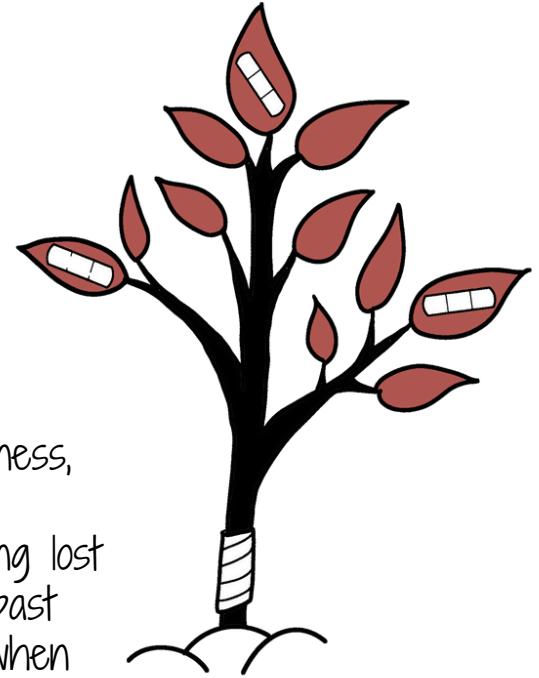
If we imagine our mental health like a tree in a storm, psychological flexibility helps us to bend in the wind without breaking.

Psychological flexibility is made up of six skills:

- Acceptance
- Detachment from thoughts
- Present-focused perspective
- Observing self
- Values clarification
- Values enactment

With psychological flexibility, we are able to:

- Be open to our inner experiences like anxiety, sadness, or doubt, without trying to fight or avoid them
- Stay present in the here-and-now instead of getting lost in worries about the future or regrets about the past
- Choose actions that line up with our values, even when life gets hard



In this workbook, we'll define and explore each of these skills and use reflection activities to work on building your strength in each area. Take your time going through these activities.

It might be helpful to only do one activity a day so that you have time to process what you're learning. This booklet also doesn't have to be a single use tool. Revisiting these reflections regularly can help to build your strength with these skills.



## What is Psychological Flexibility?

Before we get into building the six skills of psychological flexibility, let's take a moment to reflect on what you have learned so far and how it relates to you and your infertility journey.

Test your understanding of psychological flexibility by putting it into your own words.

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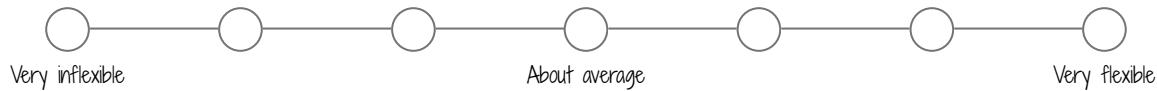
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How would you rate your current level of psychological flexibility?



What makes you give yourself this rating?

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How could Psychological Flexibility be helpful for your well-being while navigating infertility? Reflect on your own infertility journey and how improving your psychological flexibility might be helpful for you.



## Acceptance:

Practicing acceptance means embracing the thoughts and feelings that go on inside us. Resisting or struggling against uncomfortable sensations, thoughts, and emotions can cause them to last and linger. Accepting our internal experiences can provide us with insight and energy.

Notice any unpleasant thoughts and feelings you have about your infertility. Explore how they feel in your body and give them permission to be there.

What does it feel like to not resist this experience? What emotions are present? Where and how do you feel it in your body?



## **Detachment from Thoughts:**

Detaching from our thoughts involves putting space between us and what we are thinking. Our thoughts are complicated constructions that can be influenced by our insecurities and fears. Our thoughts are not reality, and it is easy to become consumed by them when we think of them as truth.

We might think or feel like if we don't have children, we will not be complete. We might become so tied up in a possible future that we lose sight of the present. When we detach from these thoughts we become open to finding meaning and joy right where we are.

Imagine you are in a movie theatre watching your infertility journey play out on the screen. What type of movie is it? Who are the main players? How attached are you to how the movie ends?

Are you able to watch the movie without getting lost in it? Why or why not?

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What strategies can we use to help us detach from our thoughts?

- remind ourselves that thoughts are not reality
- focus on the present moment, not the past or the future
- breathe through them
- let them be, don't fight against them
- acknowledge that this is how we feel "right now"



Practicing the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique can connect us to the here-and-now

In your present environment, pay attention to:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can hear
- 3 things you can touch
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

## Present-Focused Perspective:

Taking on a present-focused perspective means living in the here and now instead of the past or future. This can be especially hard in infertility when we are working so hard for a specific future.

How many of us have made, missed out on, or changed plans because we might be having a baby by then? This is natural in infertility but it ignores that life is happening in the here-and-now, so practice being present in the present.

Do you notice that you are stuck more in the past or the future rather than living in the present? How do you know that is where you are?

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Reflect on what you are grateful for in your present life as it is today.

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## **Observing Self:**

Connecting with the observing self means taking a break from the thinking self who is often quite active in infertility.

The thinking self interprets, plans, analyzes, and judges. This is the self that might be hyper-aware of early pregnancy symptoms, fertile windows, or possible/hypothetical due dates. The observing self notices our experiences, thoughts, and feelings without getting stuck in them.

How do you know when you are in your thinking self? What does that feel like? When might your thinking self be helpful? When might it be harmful?

How do you know when you are in your observing self? What does that feel like? When might your observing self be useful?



## Values Clarification:

Values clarification involves exploring, defining, and prioritizing our values. Over time and with new experiences, our values will change. Although it's not always easy, we need to regularly ask ourselves what is most important to us in this lifetime. The answer helps us decide what values to live by.

Consider who your role models were while growing up, and the people you currently admire. What qualities do you appreciate about them? What traits do they have that you want to nurture for yourself?

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Consider how your life will change when you are done trying to build your family. Imagine only having one child, your ideal family, and having no (or no more) children. What would be different? What would you miss about the life you have now? What are the most important parts of you to hold onto?



## Values Enactment:

Putting our values into action means committing to letting our values point us in the right direction on our fertility journey. When our values guide our journey, it will be easier to define the limits of what we are willing and able to do as well as identify if and when it is time to walk away. We can enact our values by defining specific goals related to our values and taking action on them.

Reflect on what you found in the Values Clarification activities; using this insight, identify your top three values.

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Take some time to create real and tangible goals for each of your values. For example, if your romantic relationship is one of your values, a goal could be to set aside a date night each month where you focus on your relationship outside of your infertility journey.



Remember to regularly practice the six skills of psychological flexibility

- I accept my thoughts and feelings about infertility
- I recognize that my thoughts are not reality
- I choose to live in the present
- I engage with my observing self
- I clearly recognize and understand my values
- I have real and tangible goals to live my values

Take some time to write a letter to the you that existed at the start of your fertility journey, use what you've learned about psychological flexibility to tell that version of yourself what you wish you had known back then.



Take some time to write a letter to a future version of yourself who may be at a low point in your infertility journey. Consider what may be helpful for them to hear and remember.

This booklet is yours to reflect on. Please revisit this booklet and reconnect with the material as needed.

Thank you so much for taking the time to engage with this booklet. You are making an investment in your well-being and that is not always an easy thing to do. If you found these activities difficult and you feel you may benefit from infertility counselling, I encourage you to reach out.

Sincerely, Annie Peratty

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