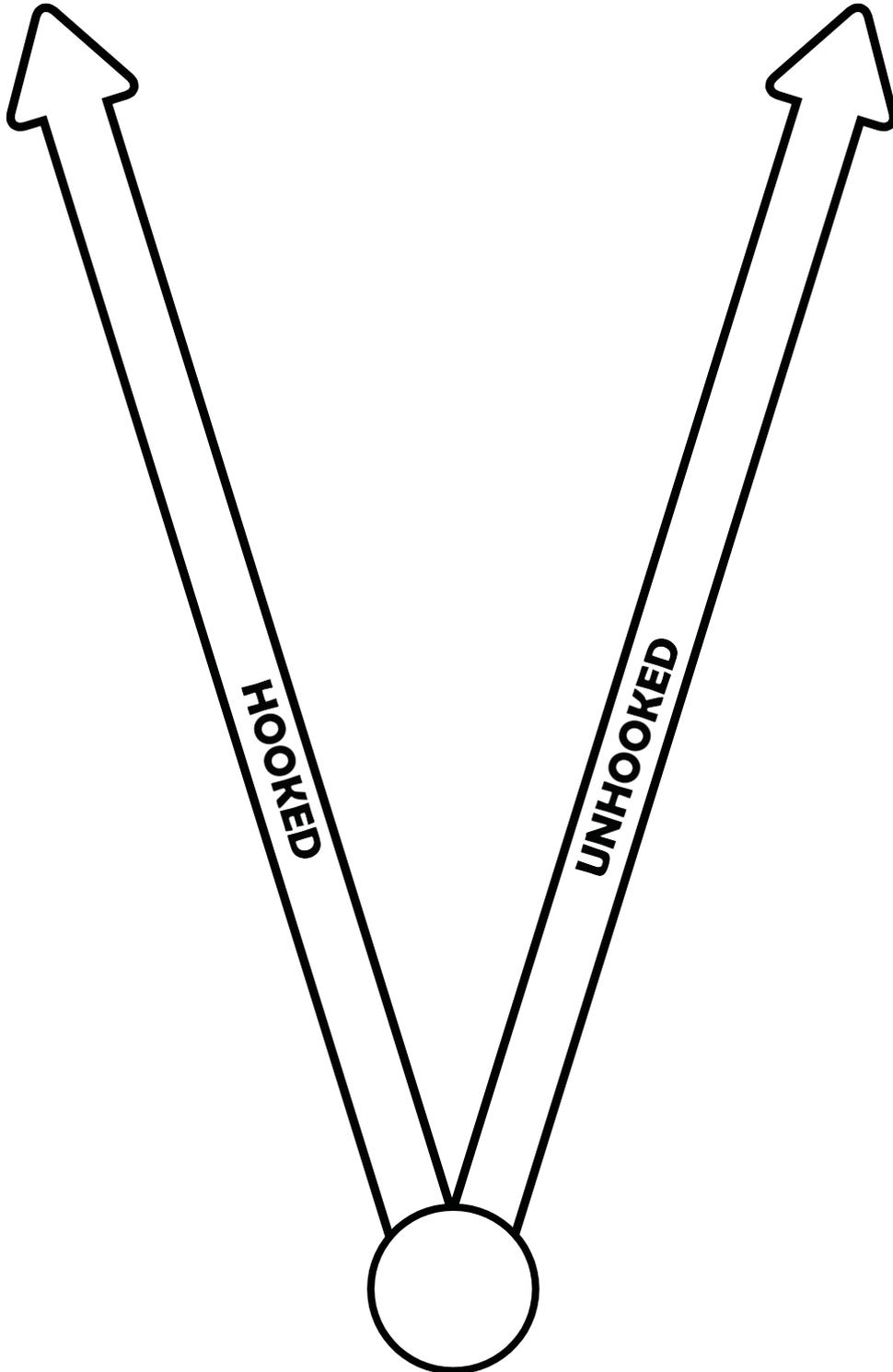


AWAY

TOWARDS



Situation(s)
Thoughts & Feelings

This is an extract from chapter 1 of the textbook *ACT Made Simple*, by Russ Harris

Welcome to the Choice Point

When I wrote the first edition of *ACT Made Simple* in 2009, the choice point didn't exist. It was only in 2013 that I cocreated this tool with my colleagues Joe Ciarrochi and Ann Bailey (for the book we were writing on an ACT approach to weight loss: *The Weight Escape* [Ciarrochi, Bailey, & Harris, 2014]). Since then, I've fallen in love with the choice point and I now make it the central tool in all my training. Why? Because it gives you and your clients a simple map to follow, while retaining the great flexibility of the ACT model.

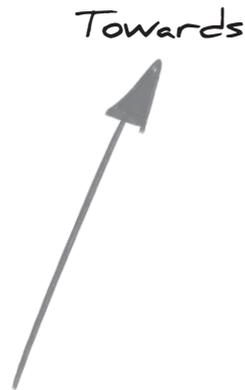
You'll see throughout this book there are many ways we can use the choice point, but for now I just want to give you a brief introduction. One of the beauties of the choice point is that it provides a clear overview of the ACT model. (Note: the choice point has similarities with but also significant differences from a popular ACT tool called the matrix [Polk & Schoendorff, 2014]; see Extra Bits for an explanation.) As I take you through it, I'm going to use the same nontechnical language that I use with clients because I want to achieve two things simultaneously: (a) simply explaining the ACT model to you and (b) demonstrating how you can explain ACT to your clients.

The choice point is a tool that rapidly maps out problems, identifies sources of suffering, and formulates an ACT approach to handling them. We can bring it in at any stage of therapy and use it for many different purposes. I often introduce it for the first time about halfway through my first session with a new client, as part of informed consent (chapter 5). Typically, it would go something like this:

Therapist: Would it be okay with you if I take a few moments to draw something? It's kind of a road map for helping us work together effectively. (*Therapist produces a pen and a sheet of paper.*) So you and I, and everyone else on the planet, we're always doing stuff. We're eating, drinking, walking, talking, sleeping, playing—always doing something. Even if we're just staring at the wall, that's still doing something, right? And some of these things we do are pretty useful; they help us move toward a better life. So I call them

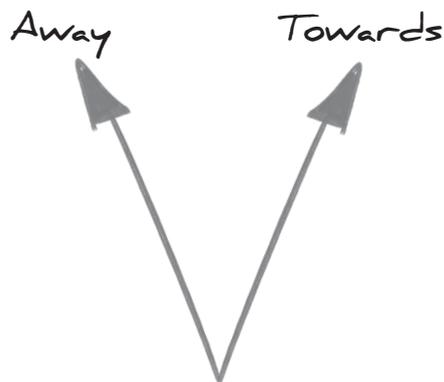
“towards moves.” Towards moves are basically the things you want to start or do more of, if our work here is successful.

While saying this, the therapist draws an arrow and writes:



The therapist continues: So when we're doing towards moves, that means we're acting effectively, behaving like the sort of person we want to be, doing stuff that's likely to make life more meaningful and fulfilling. The problem is, that's not all we do. There are other things we do that have the opposite effect: they take us away from the life we really want to build. So I like to call these “away moves.” When we do away moves, that means we're acting ineffectively, behaving unlike the sort of person we want to be, doing stuff that tends to make life worse in the long term. So basically, away moves are anything you will stop doing or do less of if our work here is successful.

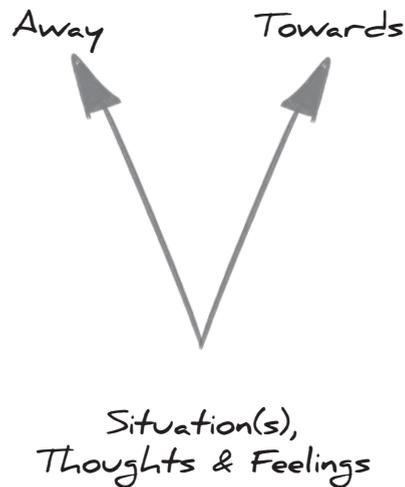
While saying this, the therapist draws a second arrow and writes:



The therapist now continues: And this applies to us all, right? All day long we're all doing towards and away moves, and it changes from moment to moment. And when life isn't too hard, when things are going okay, when we're getting what we want in life, it's a lot

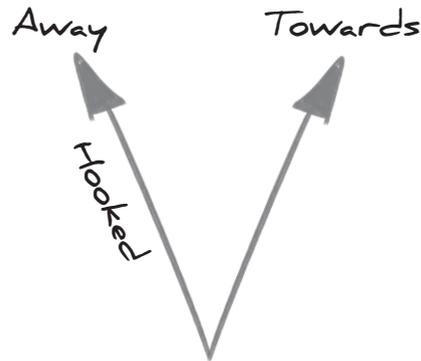
easier to choose those towards moves. But as you know, life isn't like that a lot of the time. Life is tough, and a lot of the time we don't get what we want. So throughout the day, we're going to encounter all sorts of difficult situations, and difficult thoughts and feelings are going to show up.

At the bottom of the diagram, the therapist now writes, "Situation(s), Thoughts & Feelings." (Note: throughout this book, the term "thoughts and feelings" is used as shorthand for thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, urges, impulses, images, and sensations. Any or all of these private experiences can be mentioned or written down on the choice point.)



The therapist continues: The problem is, the default setting for most of us is that when these difficult thoughts and feelings show up, we tend to get "hooked" by them. They kind of hook us, and they reel us in, and they jerk us around, and they pull us all over the place. You know what I mean? They might hook us physically, so we start acting out in various ways with our arms and our legs and our mouth. Or they might hook our attention, so instead of focusing on what we're doing, we get lost in our inner world. And the more tightly we're hooked...the more we do those away moves, right?

The therapist now writes “Hooked” alongside the “Away” arrow.

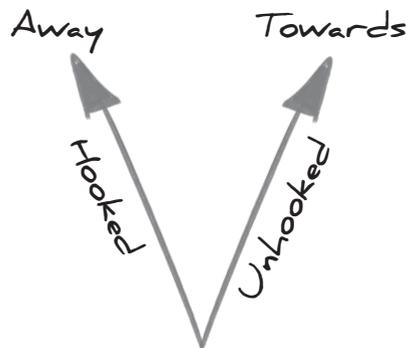


Situation(s),
Thoughts & Feelings

The therapist continues: So everyone does this stuff to some extent; that’s normal. No one’s perfect. But if this kind of thing happens a lot, it creates big problems. In fact, almost every psychological problem that we know of—*anxiety, depression, addiction, you name it*—boils down to this basic process: we get hooked by difficult thoughts and feelings and we start doing away moves. Does that make sense?

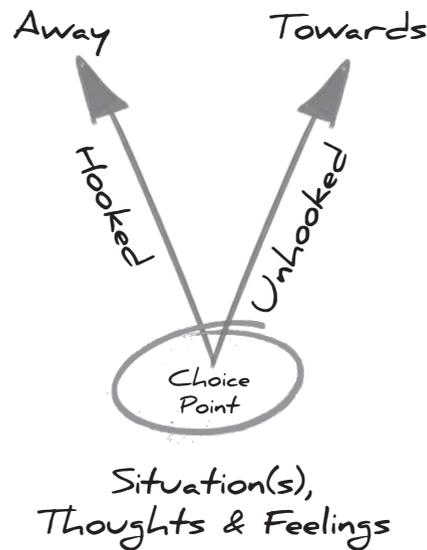
However, there are times when we are able to unhook ourselves from these difficult thoughts and feelings and do some towards moves instead. And the better we get at doing this...well, the better life gets.

While saying this, the therapist writes “Unhooked” alongside the “Towards” arrow.



Situation(s),
Thoughts & Feelings

The therapist now draws a little circle at the point where the arrows converge. (If desired, she can write in the words “choice point” or the initials “CP.”) While doing this, she continues: So when we’re in these challenging situations, and these difficult thoughts and feelings are showing up, there’s a choice for us to make: how are we going to respond to this? The more hooked we get, the more likely we are to do away moves. But the more we can unhook ourselves, the easier it is to do towards moves.



The therapist continues: So if we want to get good at doing this (points to the towards arrow), we need to do two things: We need to learn some unhooking skills. And we need to get clear about what towards moves we want to make. Once that’s in place, we’ve got a lot more choice about how we’re going to respond to all of this difficult stuff life is giving us. And that’s basically what this type of therapy is all about: learning how to unhook from this stuff (points to “Thoughts & Feelings”), cut back on this stuff (points to away moves), and help you to get better at doing this stuff (points to towards moves).

Tricky Terminology Some ACT practitioners use the term “hooked” to mean cognitive fusion only. The choice point uses the term in a broader sense to mean both cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance. We’ll explore this more in chapter 2.

The “Bare Bones” Choice Point

What you’ve just read is a “bare bones” summary of the choice point: a generic overview with no specific details. Ideally, you’d want to put a lot of flesh on that skeleton: make it personal for the