

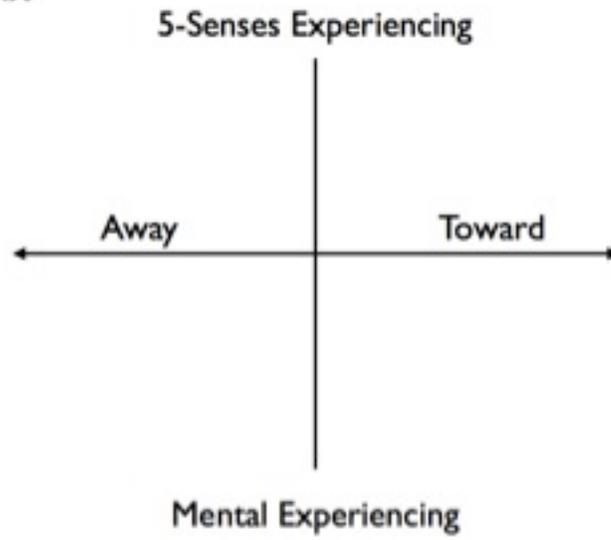
# Psychological Flexibility Training (PFT)

Flexing Your Mind along with Your Muscles

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## The Matrix



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## Prologue

You probably already know about the importance of strength and flexibility training for your muscles. It's the core of any sport or exercise program. This is also the spirit of Psychological Flexibility Training (PFT); psychologically flexing (PFing) your mind so you can deal with most anything life throws at you. You will soon discover that PFT is easy to do. You can combine it with any of your daily activities, including your current physical workout.

PFT is based in science, but fortunately you don't have to know the science behind it to learn the training. It's much the same as learning to ride a bicycle; you don't need to know the physics of bicycle riding in order to ride. For the curious, psychological flexibility training is based on a theory of language and cognition called Relational Frame Theory (RFT). The philosophy of science behind psychological flexibility training is called Functional Contextualism (FC). Again, those are complicated and you just don't need to know them. For the curious, I will discuss them in Section III.

Section I of this manual is a step-by-step guide to doing PFT. This section takes you through the three phases of the training.

Section II is about collaborating with others to do the training. Doing the training with others is a lot of fun; much more fun than you would

think for something that sounds as boring as psychological flexibility training.

Section III of the manual is a bit about the technical stuff of RFT and FC. You really do not need to read that stuff, it's just there for the curious.

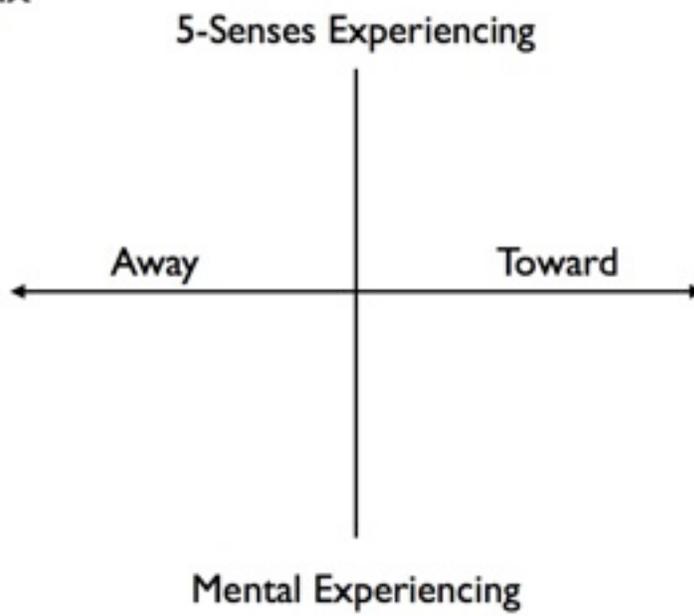
Finally there is a references section so you will know where to go and get more information.

**Practice:** As with any exercise program, the secret is consistently doing the program. Don't worry; there are easy ways for you to remember to do the program. I can even have you doing the program when you're not doing the program. You will learn about that trick a little later.

## **The Matrix Diagram**

The diagram we will be using for this training is often called The Matrix. My colleagues and I were playing around with names for the diagram, and one of the people we were working with (Jim Bastien, MSW) said, “You’ve got to call it the Matrix, its got Keanu Reeves sexy attached to it!” For obvious reasons, the name stuck. Before that the diagram was called “The Grid.” And even before that it was called “Two Axes.” The Matrix is definitely sexier.

## The Matrix



## **Acknowledgements**

The three names you see at the bottom of the Matrix diagram were the team that simplified previous diagrams into the Matrix: Jerold Hambright, Ph.D., Mark Webster, and me. Mark is from the U.K and had visited Jerold and me in Maine. However, the finishing work on the Matrix was done via the Internet while Mark was back home in the U.K. My wife and colleague, Mary Alyce Burkhart, Ph.D. provided constant support and encouragement while I was driving her crazy spending long hours developing this simple model (about ten to fifteen thousand hours). Finally, many students, coworkers and colleagues have provided encouragement, suggestions and tweaks. My sincere gratitude goes out to all of you.

## **Dedication**

In loving memory of Sylvester Peter "Pete" Burkhart, who was proud to have helped put the first telecommunications satellite into orbit. He exuberantly showed his love to family, friends and humanity. Around the end the nurse asked, "Would seeing a priest be important to him?" and all in the room simultaneously said, "Yes!" A day later when a good friend came by, roused him and reminded him of his "Hot Chocolate at 3am in Sydney" story he laughed like he always did during his many stories, but soon proclaimed, "I'm frustrated. My life's not going anywhere in here." He had one final move, however, and it was Toward parenting.

## **Section I: Training**

Learning to do Psychological Flexibility Training is much like learning to ride a bicycle. You can probably recall learning to ride a bicycle. At first it seemed very hard and then after only a little practice, you were fairly accomplished at bicycle riding. PFT is much the same; you start off slowly and quickly get up to speed at something called Psychological Flexing. I will often shorten this to “PFing” in the manual. This is because the mind is obviously not a muscle, so it does not stay ‘loose’ after you stretch it; it can snap right back to rigid in a millisecond. So through Psychological Flexibility Training (PFT) you set up this constant practice of Psychologically Flexing (PFing).

To bring this into concrete terms, recall again the riding of a bicycle. Do you remain absolutely balanced in the middle without the slightest leaning to one side or the other? Of course not, to remain rigid would result in you falling down. You must ever so slightly lean to the left and then lean to the right to remain balanced. In other words, you are constantly flexing back and forth to stay balanced. Through PFT we are going to set up a similar scenario in your mind as you flex one way and then the other to keep your balance as you move forward through living a valued life.

## Setting Up PFT

Like almost any training, the first thing we need to do is set up a common language about how we are going to talk about things. All sports, professions and other human activities have terms, and psychological flexibility training is no different.

**Sensory Experiencing:** These are the five senses you are used to hearing about,

Sight

Hearing

Touch

Taste

Smell

**Mental Experiencing:** Commonly known as your mind, it's the rest of your experience that is not coming through one of your five senses.

The most common types of mental experiencing are:

Thinking

Feeling (having emotions)

Having urges

Having memories (that include all of the above).

There are two important categories of Mental Experiencing that I will emphasize:

### Important Ideas

### Unwanted Mental Experiences

**Important Ideas:** The mental experiences you like to move toward.

Things like

Family

Friends

Work

Education

Spirituality

Citizenship

Health.

**Unwanted Mental Experiences:** These are thoughts, emotions and urges that you would rather not have because they don't feel good.

That means when you move away from them, it feels good. A few examples are:

Fear

Sadness

Anger

Frustration

Depression

Boredom

Etc.

**Behaviors:** The things you do with your hands, feet and mouth.

Examples include

Walking

Sitting

Running

Laying

Talking

Eating

Touching

Writing

Reading

**Toward Behaviors:** These are behaviors you are doing in the service of moving toward what's important to you. While moving toward might not immediately feel good, in the long run moving toward important stuff eventually feels good. For example, you might need to go to the dentist, and in the moment going to the dentist does not feel good. However, in the long run going to the dentist is in the service of good dental health, and eventually you feel good about that.

**Away:** These are behaviors that you are doing in the service of moving away from your unwanted mental experiencing. Moving away

almost instantly feels good. So if you step from the curb and look to the left and see a bus coming at you, fear shows up and you jump back to get away from the fear. Whew! That feels good. Of course this behavior also works for your long-term health, but in the moment, getting rid of the fear is what feels good.

**Noticing the Difference:** This is a 'mental behavior' of comparing and contrasting two things, and it's the essence of psychologically flexing. You will be noticing the difference between two sets of experiences:

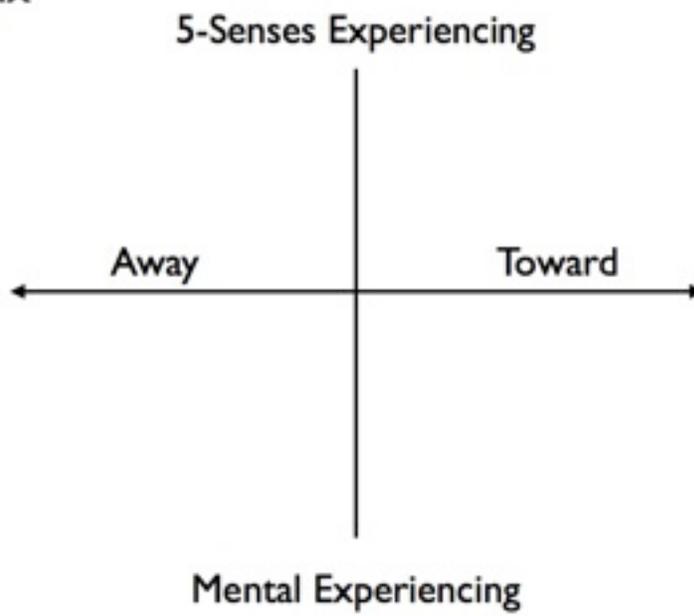
## Sensory and Mental Experiencing

### The Feeling of Away and Toward Behaviors

**“The Feeling”** of Away and Toward behaviors is big part of PFT. Recall the previous discussion about riding a bicycle and getting the feeling of balancing. You’re constantly adjusting as you ‘feel’ the lean to the left and then ‘feel’ the lean to the right and then you make adjustments to stay upright and “balanced” and moving forward. It’s much the same with the feeling of moving Toward and Away.

**Psychologically Flexing (PFing)** represents getting better and better at noticing the two sets of differences represented vertically and the other horizontally on the Matrix diagram. ‘You’ are sort of positioned at the cross hairs of the diagram, practicing the noticing of these two differences. In a way you “stretch and flex” each line, as you become expert at noticing the differences.

## The Matrix



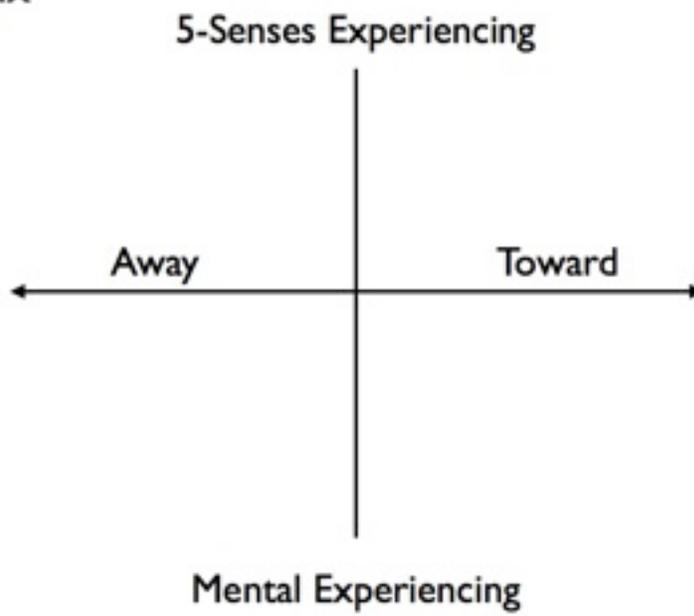
## Sorting

I need to mention sorting. Sorting is the common human behavior of putting things into categories after you have noticed the difference between two or more things. Let's say you are sorting socks. You might put the white socks in one pile and the dark in another. You might even sort the darks even further into brown, black and purple. Recall the five senses experiencing from before. You get information about the color of socks (plus the other four senses), and that information is transformed into mental experiencing. Then you notice the difference, and finally, you sort the socks.

You can do this same sorting with stories about your life, sorting the elements of the story into the four categories outlined in the Matrix. Part of every story is your sensory experiencing, part is your mental experiencing, part of the story is about behaviors you made to move Away and part of the story is about the behaviors you did to move Toward. You can sort your stories into these four categories. It turns out this sorting is sort of interesting and fun. Don't worry; we will play more with sorting later.

During the following training exercises you will become more and more experienced with using this language, noticing the differences and sorting things into the four categories, all in the service of doing Psychological Flexing and moving forward into a valued life.

## The Matrix



## Training Phase I

Noticing the Difference between sensory and mental experiencing

**Step 1:** Use any handy object and notice it through your five senses, unless it's really something you should not taste. If it's not safe to taste it, then leave taste off and just do four senses. The way around this is to use a piece of food, candy, or a throat lozenge.

- See the object
- Hear the object (may be tap on it)
- Touch the object
- Smell the object
- Taste the object (if it's safe)

**Step 2:** Put the object aside so that it's out of your five senses. Now close your eyes and *imagine* experiencing those same five senses.

-See it

-Hear it

-Touch it

-Smell it

-Taste it (in your mind it's always safe)

**Step 3:** Notice the difference between your five-senses experiencing of the object and your mental experiencing of the object. If you don't at first notice the difference, that's okay, just keep practicing and you will get the hang of it.

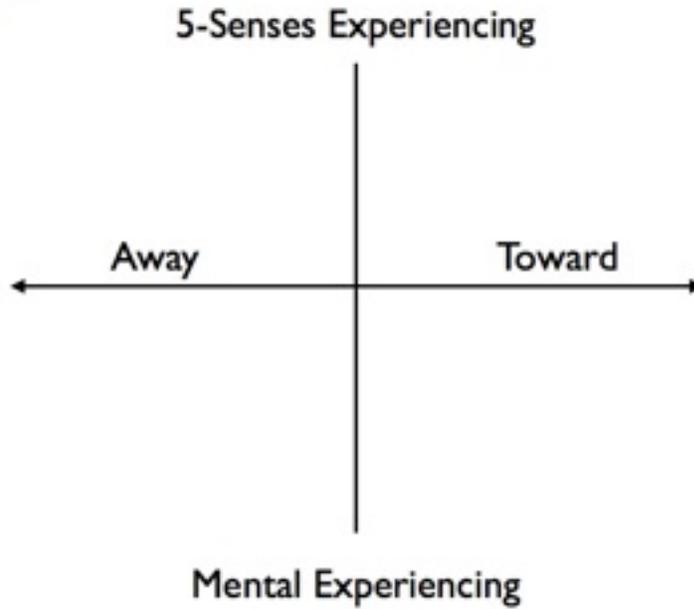
Note: I like to use a pen for the three steps above (mainly because there is almost always one in my pocket). Someone might ask, "What do you do for a living?" I say, "I'm a psychological flexibility expert." They might say something like, "What's that?" And then I whip out my pen and have them start noticing the five senses (not taste). Then I put the pen away and have them notice the mental experiencing of the pen. Then I have them notice the difference. People almost always giggle when they notice the difference between five senses and mental experiencing.

Also: You may have noticed that this is a bit of sorting. You are sorting your 5-senses experiencing of the pen into one "pile" and your mental experiencing into another "pile."

You can of course practice this sorting of you sensory and mental experiencing at any time. Just notice your sensory inputs and then notice your mental experiencing about the sensory inputs. It can be quite interesting to notice this process. For example, you might notice your 5-senses experiencing while walking down a hall, and also notice your mental experiencing. You might notice your 5-senses and mental experiencing while driving. If you are a parent, you can notice

your 5-senses as you walk into your child's room, and then notice your mental experiencing saying, "This is a mess!"

## The Matrix



## Training Phase II

Noticing the Difference between *Away* and *Toward* behaviors.

### **Away Experiences**

**Step 1:** Identify some mental experiencing that you often move *Away* from. Recall that some of your unwanted mental experiences might be:

Fear

Sadness

Anger

Frustration

Depression

Boredom

**Step 2:** Identify some of the behaviors that you do to move away from your unwanted mental experiencing. Recall that some possible behaviors you might do to move Away are:

Walking

Sitting

Running

Laying

Talking

Eating

Touching

Writing

Reading

**Step 3:** Link up the unwanted mental experiencing with the behavior that you use to move away from it. For example, fear might be matched up with running,

Fear ----- Running

Link up some more of your unwanted mental experiencing with the behaviors you do to move away from them.

\_\_\_\_\_ ----- \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ ----- \_\_\_\_\_

## **Toward Behaviors**

**Step 4:** Identify some important ideas that you move toward. Recall the following list of possible things that are important to you. If your important idea is not on this list, by all means add your own.

Family

Friends

Work

Education

Spirituality

Citizenship

Health

**Step 5:** Identify some of the behaviors that you do in the service of moving Toward these important ideas. Recall that some behaviors are:

Walking

Sitting

Running

Laying

Talking

Eating

Touching

Writing

Reading

**Step 6:** Link up the important idea with the behavior that you use to move Toward it. For example, health might be matched up with walking,

Health ----- Walking

Now you can practice noticing the feeling of moving Toward important ideas and the feeling of moving Away from unwanted mental experiencing. Once you learn to quickly notice those, it will be easy for you to sort your Toward and Away behaviors.

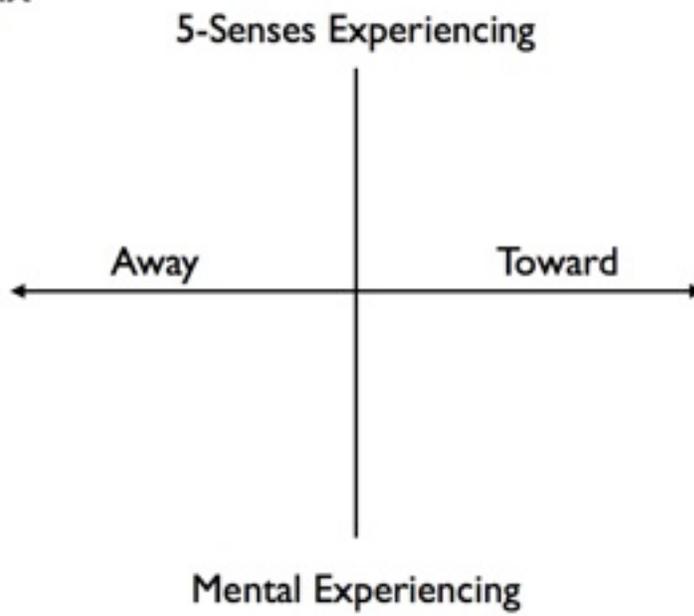
## Assigning Away and Toward Percentages to Behaviors

You might have already been noticing that the same behavior can be used to move either Toward or Away. For example, 'walking' can move you away from stress, or it can move you toward health.

You may have also been noticing that at times a behavior is in the service of moving Away and Toward at the same time. As in the walking above, you might in part be walking to move Away from stress, but at the same time you are also walking to move Toward health. In cases like this, you can assign percentages to the behavior. For example, you might say that 60% of the behavior was for moving Away from stress and 40% was for moving Toward health. The accuracy is not important; just make your best guess.

Away-----Toward  
40%-----60%

## The Matrix



## **“Psychological Distancing” and Psychological Flexibility**

Something that I have not mentioned before is Psychological Distancing (PD). Let's return back to noticing differences and you will get the feel for PD.

Each time you pause and notice one or both of the differences in the Matrix you 'step back' from your usual experiencing. Of course you don't really step back, that's impossible. However, because of the wonders of the human mind, the experience is like stepping back, and that's plenty good enough for the purpose of PFing (psychologically flexing). In other words, this 'stepping back' is part of the stance you use for PFing. In order to notice the difference between sensory and mental experiencing and how it feels to move Toward and Away, you step back from those a bit and notice the difference. In a way psychologically stepping back and psychologically flexing are part of the same action.

This 'stepping back' process is often called, “Looking at the Big Picture.” The 'further' you step back, the bigger the picture. Most people find that the bigger the picture, the easier it is to notice the differences and do the sorting. Said another way, the more Psychological Distance you get, the easier it is to 'see' how to do the sorting.

## Training Phase III

### Practicing Psychologically Flexing During Your Day

As with any activity you learn to do, the more you practice the better you get, and it's no different with PFing (psychological flexing). As you have already learned, no special equipment or circumstances are needed. You only need your self and whatever you are experiencing in the present moment. However, like almost everything else, it's hard to remember to practice. Fortunately, life gives you numerous reminders that come in the form of something I like to call "Hooks."

**Note:** Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun and author was one of the originators of the term "Hooks." I'm not a Buddhist, but one day while searching the Net I came upon her article about 'Hooks,' and she got me hooked on hooks.

Hooks are those moments in life when you feel a fairly strong emotional response to a situation. For example, you are next in line in the grocery store and someone walks up and places their stuff on the conveyer belt in front of you while stating, "I'm late for an appointment, you can wait." Such an event would probably result in an emotional response to show up inside of you. If one did, we might say that you are 'hooked.' Maybe after the incident you go home and there is someone there who asks, "How was your day?" What story about your day do you think you would tell first? If you told of the, "So and

so who cut in front of me in the grocery store!" we could be fairly assured that you were hooked.

The following are some more examples of popular hooks:

Someone pulls in front of you in traffic,

Someone takes the parking space you were about to pull into,

Someone you live with does not put the cap on the toothpaste,

The telephone rings just as you sit down to dinner,

Someone criticizes you,

You see a very attractive person,

You get unexpected praise for what a great job you're doing,

Someone says, "I love you,"

Someone says, "I hate you."

For most people this list can be quite long, and life tends to add more things to the list. For now just make up a list of a few of the hooks that happen to you the most:

---

---

---

---

You might also notice what kind of mental activities such as thoughts and emotions that show up during the hook. For example, when someone cuts you off in traffic maybe anger shows up,

Cut-off in Traffic -----Anger

Here are some more examples:

Someone yells at you-----Shame

Waiting in a long line----Frustration

See and attractive person----Interest

Now fill in some of your own:

Hooky Situation-----Mental Activity

\_\_\_\_\_-----\_\_\_\_\_

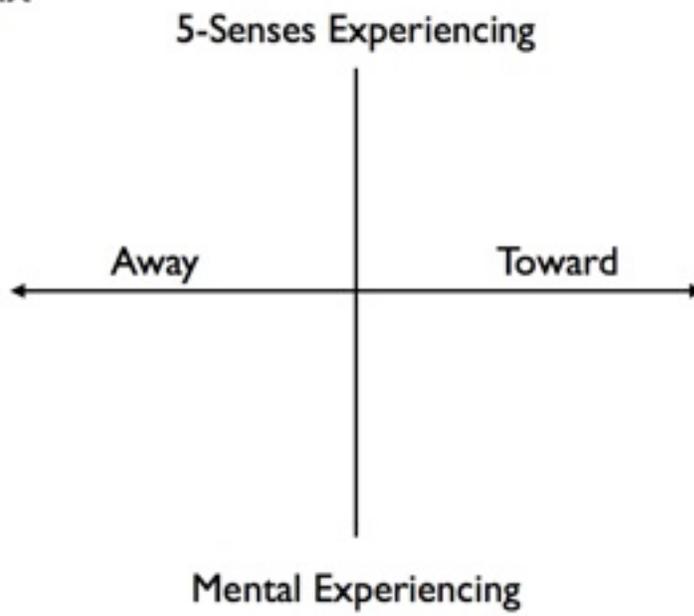
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\_\_\_\_\_-----\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_-----\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_-----\_\_\_\_\_

## The Matrix



## **Noticing your five senses experiencing during the hook.**

As you already know, you are always experiencing your five senses. Therefore it's easy to add in the noticing of your five senses while also noticing your mental experiencing of the hook. Recall the list of the five senses

See

Hear

Touch

Taste

Smell

and then notice each one of those during the hook.

## **Big Hooks and Little Hooks**

Some hooks feel big and some hooks feel small. The size of a hook depends entirely on the individual and the context he or she is in at the time. Some people might shrug off someone taking cuts in line while others might get enraged. However, the person who shrugged it off one day might go ballistic if she or he were under a lot of stress on another day. So the size of your hooks depend on what is going on inside of you in the moment and what's going on around you in the moment. In other words, your 5-senses experiencing of the world plus your mental experiencing in the moment determine the size of a hook.

For the purposes of your psychological flexibility training, the 'size' of the hook does not matter at all. Rather it's the number of times you notice hooks that makes a difference in your life. Each noticing of a hook gives you a little practice at taking that distanced Big-Picture-Psychologically-Distanced view of your life, and that's the stance from which you do PFing (psychological flexing).

## What You Do Next

After noticing a hook you might also notice what you do next. Recall the list of common behaviors:

Walking

Sitting

Running

Laying

Talking

Eating

Touching

Writing

Reading

And then you might notice if what you were doing was a Toward move, an Away move, or a combination of the two.

Let's do the 'Cut-off in Traffic as an example:

Cut-off in Traffic||Anger||Yell (Toward or Away?)

Cut-off in Traffic||Anger||Hit the other car (Toward or Away?)

Another example:

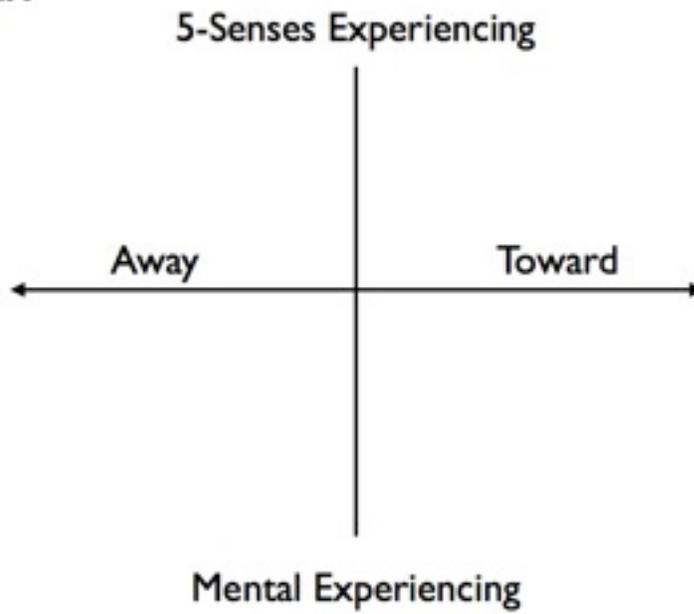
You get complimented||Happy||Smile (Toward or Away?)

You get complimented||Happy||Look Down (Toward or Away?)

The accuracy is not vitally important; just do your best guess.

Notice that while doing the above you are “sorting” your behaviors into two categories in real time. As I said before, if you want to add a bit more sorting to this you also sort sensory and mental experiencing.

## The Matrix



## **Pausing and Choosing**

The final step in PFing (Psychological Flexing) is noticing that you have a choice of behaviors in any given moment. The easiest way to do this is to do a variation of:

### **Notice the Hook and What you Do next.**

In this case, however, you notice the elements of the hook, and then you add a **Pause** and a **Choice**.

Step 1: Notice the experiencing of the hook.

Step 2: Pause for just a moment (usually less than a second)

Step 3: Choose your next behavior. (This will either be an Away move, a Toward move, or a combination move.)

Notice that Step 3 is the essence of Psychological Flexing. You are now making a choice of behavior in the present moment that will ultimately work for learning valued living.

## **Sorting**

Let's Review: First you learned about noticing the difference between sensory and mental experiencing, and then you learned how to notice the difference between moving Away and moving Toward. Then you learned how to notice hooks as a way of remembering to practice noticing. Then you learned about noticing what you do after noticing the hook. And finally you learned about pausing and choosing. This is the process of psychological flexing (PFing) and then flexibly choosing your behaviors. These are all happening in real-time, and of course real time is the only time you actually do behaviors. The rest of the time you are just talking about doing behaviors.

However, it can be very educational for you to sort the stories about what you have already done or might do in the future into the four categories of the Matrix:

Sensory

Away-----Toward

Mental

For example, let's imagine the story of your life is written on 3x5 cards and each of those 3x5 cards fits one of the four categories of the Matrix. Now let's stop right there. The entire story of your life is way too big for 3x5 cards. There would be thousands and thousands of them. So let's just sort some short snippets from your life. For example, the time you saw a species of bird called a robin...

In that case you might have a card that says, "I saw a robin." That sounds like a sensory experience, so it gets sorted into the Sensory pile. Next you say, "and I ran away." That would probably sort into the Away pile, and finally, "in fear." That would sort into the Mental pile. So the sentence, "I saw a robin and I ran away in fear," was 'sorted' into three categories of the Matrix. Of course you might have also been running Toward health (that avian flu thing). As you can see, you can sort entire stories about your life in this way, it just depends on how long of a story you want to take apart and sort. The accuracy of the sort is not very important; it's the sorting that's important.

By the Way (BTW): This kind of sorting makes a great team-building exercise. You can have different members play the piles, others be the sorters, and others telling stories about what the team has done or needs to be doing. It's a very interesting exercise and very much worth setting up. So let's move onto Section II: Collaborating.

## **Section II:**

### **Collaborating with others for Psychological Flexibility**

As I have already noted above, Psychological Flexibility Training can be a great team building exercise. Groups can come together to practice psychological flexing much like they might exercise or do yoga together. As strange as this may sound, once you have done some PFing in groups, it's sort of addictively fun. Below are the steps to setting up a successful Psychological Flexibility Training that moves everyone toward PFing.

Before you begin, recall the distanced stance of psychological flexibility. That's the stance you want to take into the start of any PFT group exercise. 'See' yourself as 'way back' watching the training, sort of like observing from some unseen camera in the ceiling. While that may sound a bit weird (and you might notice some paranoia showing up as a mental experience), taking on such a stance lets you stay flexible about how the training progresses. Think about it. If you were to go into PFT thinking, "It must be done this way and no other way," then you are, well, rigid and psychologically inflexible. Instead what follows are some guidelines for how to do the training. The whole thing, from start to finish, can be changed in the moment.

With that said, we all like some step-by-step instructions for how to get started. So here goes...

## **Step 1: Curiosity**

Nothing sets up moving toward psychological flexibility like a little curiosity, so that's just what you want in your self and the other people in the room when you go about doing PFT.

Would you be interested in more valued living and less struggling with suffering?

As you read those words did you notice a bit of curiosity showing up inside of you? Most people do because we are all curious about how to go about living more and struggling less.

I wonder if psychologically flexing is related to better sex?

Again, there's that curiosity showing up.

The basic question is:

“Just what lies ahead to be discovered?”

The great thing is that we don't know what's to be discovered and curiosity can help get us there. Again, there are no set rules about how to set up curiosity, just keep it in the back of your mind.

Something like...

“I wonder what might set up some curiosity?”

## **Warming Up**

Just like warming up for some physical exercises, warming the group for PFing (psychological flexing) is a good idea. Not that you are going to sprain your brain or anything, warming up just gets folks primed for the experience.

You can warm up on the vertical line or the horizontal line of the Matrix first. Just do what seems to fit in the moment.

### **Vertical Line Warm Up:**

-You could have the group do the exercises from Section I of this manual. Use a pen or some food or something to notice the difference between Sensory and Mental Experiencing.

-You could have people listen to a piece of music and notice the difference between the vibrations of the music and the mental experiencing of the music.

-You could have people say a word to each other and notice the difference between the sound of the word and the meaning(s) of the word, etc.

### **Horizontal Line:**

-Have people choose a valued life direction (one of those important ideas), that they could move toward while in the room,

-Have them move toward it, literally walking, talking, writing, etc.

For example, the person might choose the valued life direction of health. You could have them write “HEALTH” on a piece of paper, place it across the room, and then walk toward it, noticing how it feels to make that move toward health. This might seem artificial, but try it anyway.

-Have people tell stories of moving Toward and recall how it felt to move that way.

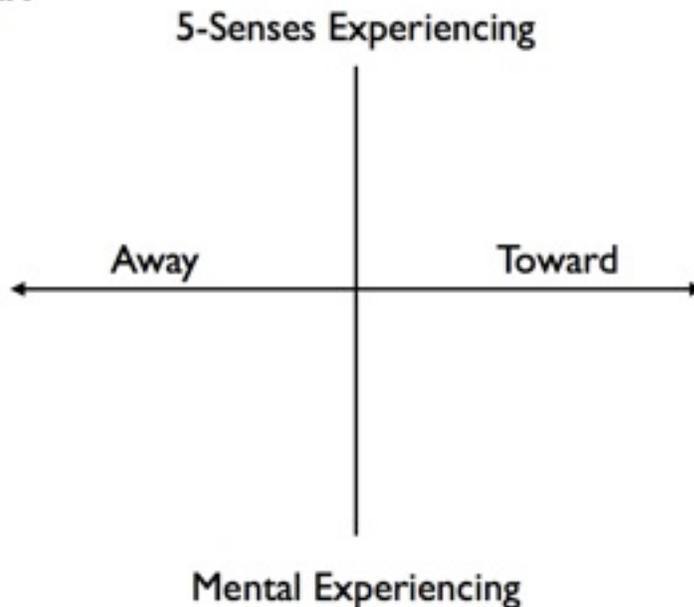
-Have people tell stories of moving Away and how it feels to talk about that.

## Setting Up Sorting

After warming up a bit you and the group will be ready for some sorting. Recall sorting is simply a thing all of us humans do; we divvy things up into categories. Give a human a pile of junk and it's hard to resist the temptation to sort it into different piles of junk.

For the purposes of PFT and PFing we are going to be setting up the Matrix diagram, and sorting stuff into the four 'piles' represented by the end points of the lines of the Matrix. Besides just handing folks a copy of the diagram, which is fine, there are other activities.

### The Matrix



Kevin Folk, Ph.D., Jerold Hambricht, Ph.D. and Mark Wilber

- You might draw it up on a white or chalk board for all to see,

- You might project it on a wall with a projector,
- You might create a Matrix on the floor with the people in the room,
- You could draw the Matrix on the floor with chalk or string,
- You could write each point on a piece of paper, and then tape each to one of the four walls of the room, etc.

We will leave it up to you to create more ways of setting up the Matrix diagram. For this writing we will use the 'Matrix on the Floor with people' example.

Recall the sorting task from the end of Section I. You were imagining bits of stories written on 3x5 cards that were sorted into the categories of the Matrix. With a group of people you can do several things:

- You might have four of the people of the group play different points of the Matrix, and then have other people do the sorting, and some people telling the stories;
- You might have four people play the points and have one person stand in the middle, telling and sorting a story, turning toward the appropriate point (sensory, mental, Toward, or Away) as each element of the story is told.

Once you do just a bit of this with groups of people, you will find that the group will invent endless ways of doing this exercise. All that you need to provide is the Set-Up; Psychological Flexibility, collaboration and human creativity will provide the rest.

## **Training only Toward and Away**

As I noted before, this stuff is flexible, so flexible you can even skip the vertical line and only focus on training noticing the difference between Away and Toward behaviors. An easy example of this is someone who is currently suffering from a headache. None of us really like to notice the difference between Sensory and Mental experiencing with a headache. Also, you might just not have time to train noticing the difference between Sensory and Mental experiencing. In these cases it's fine to simply begin training noticing the difference between moving Toward and moving Away.

In addition, training of Toward and Away can take place over months, like for example, in monthly sales meetings. Someone might only show up for meetings every two or three months. It's much easier for a person to report on the noticing of Toward and Away moves and skip the other.

The initial training might sound something like:

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"Would you like to change behaviors regarding managing and increasing your sales? Great, one way is to notice when you do things that move you Toward sales and when you do things to move Away from things like fear. Both sets of behaviors can ultimately work to move you toward sales. For example, there are times when it's

best to leave someone alone (move Away) when you get the feelings they are not receptive. The trick would be to come back at a later time (Toward) in the interest of making the sale. In this example Away and Toward moves have combined to work for making sales and moving you forward into valued work.

You might want to write down the things you can do to move Toward sales and the things you do to move Away that ultimately result in less sales.

Don't worry, after just a bit of practice you will be able to easily notice the difference between moving Toward and moving Away when it comes to managing your sales.

When you come back for your sales meeting we will ask you what you have noticed in terms of Toward and Away moves. Remember, even if you just notice that you did not do this homework, you will learn something about how you manage your sales.”

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Another example might be a medical professional collaborating with someone who has Type II diabetes. The person might only show up for appointments every few months, so noticing Toward and Away behaviors and then reporting them is fairly easy.

The initial training would sound something like:

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“Would you like to change behaviors regarding managing your Type II Diabetes? Great, the way to start is to notice when you are doing things to move Toward better management and when you do things that move you Away from unwanted mental experiencing like fear. For example, you might carefully choose your food as a move Toward, or you might become afraid of the diabetes and end up eating to move Away from that fear. The point of this exercise is to notice when you do each of these kinds of behaviors.

You might want to write down the things you can do to move Toward eating better for diabetes, and write down the things you do to move Away that result in you doing things that don't move you Toward.

Don't worry, after just a bit of practice you will be able to easily notice the difference between moving Toward and moving Away when it comes to managing your diabetes.

When you come back for your next visit we will ask you what you have noticed in terms of Toward and Away moves. Remember, even if you just notice that you did not do this homework, you will learn something about how you manage your diabetes.”  
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## **Collaborating for Creative Problem Solving**

Once you know how to do psychological flexing, keeping your mind ready to make flexible decisions in the moment, it's fun to share the flexibility with others in what is often called Creative Problem Solving. In other words, because psychological flexing almost invariably leads to the thinking of new ideas, it's a great warm-up for creative problem solving. Creative problem solving has been written about since the early 1960s, if not before. The usual steps involve the following:

1. A problem-solving state of mind,
2. Defining the problem,
3. Generating solutions,
4. A pros and cons analysis of the solutions,
5. Do the chosen solution and review the results.

As you can see, psychological flexing is a great way of getting into the problem solving state of mind, it helps with defining the problem, and it really shines when it come to generating solutions. For that matter, many people start spontaneously generating solutions when they do the psychological flexing exercises. It's worth a try the next time you are part of group that needs some creative solutions.

## **Creating Training Programs for Collaborating**

As you can see, once you get the hang of PFT, PFing and Sorting, you have a range of things you might do in training and collaborating with others. While there are of course and infinite number of ways you can go about training others, here are some examples of training programs that you might adapt for your business, family or community setting.

## **4 Sessions for Coaching Psychological Flexibility**

Note: Homework is always given in this form: “You can do or not do this homework. You will learn from doing or not doing the homework. Simply notice if you do or don’t do the homework.

### Training Session 1:

1. Introducing the Matrix and the language of the diagram.
2. Homework: Noticing Toward and Away moves.

### Training Session 2:

1. Review Homework
2. Sorting Toward and Away Stories
3. Homework: Noticing Sensory and Mental Experiencing

### Training Session 3:

1. Review Homework
2. Sorting Sensory and Mental Experiencing
3. Homework: Noticing Toward and Away plus Sensory and Mental Experiencing

### Training Session 4:

1. Review Homework
2. Sorting Stories into Toward, Away, Sensory and Mental
3. Homework for Life: Noticing moving Toward and Moving Away while Noticing Sensory and Mental Experiencing.

## Single Session Coaching for Psychological Flexibility

**Step 1:** Explain the Matrix diagram and the language:

“I would like to show you the point of view that we often use to increase psychological flexibility and make it easier for you to change behaviors for your \_\_\_\_\_.”

Note: The blank “\_\_\_\_\_” in the sentence could refer to any important direction. For example, this could be used during school office visit for education. In that case the blank would read “education” like this:

“I would like to show you the point of view that we often use to increase psychological flexibility and make it easier for you to change behaviors for your education.”

However, anything that is important to the person such as Family, Socializing, Work, Spirituality, etc., can be inserted into the blank.

**Step 2:** Explain noticing the difference between doing Toward and Away behaviors.

“Away behaviors are the actions you take to move away from unwanted mental experiencing. For example you might eat to move away from hunger, stress or sadness. However, the most common thing we move away from is fear. Have you ever noticed yourself

moving away from fear? [Wait for answer.] Yes, it's very common to move away from fear because moving away from fear can keep us alive, such as when we get out of the way of a bus coming at us on the street. However, sometimes fear shows up in our minds based on our imagination. Have you ever had imagined fear? [Wait for answer.] Yes, we all have it, and then we do some behavior to move away from it.

We also do things to move toward important ideas like family, friends, work and education. Can you recall doing an action with your whole body that moved you toward your family? For example, maybe you called a family member or went to visit? Those are toward behaviors.

We all do both Toward and Away behaviors every day. So your homework will be to notice when you are doing Toward and Away moves regarding \_\_\_\_\_ (the identified value). Remember that you will learn from either doing or not doing the homework, just notice while doing or not doing the homework.

### **Section III: (The Technical Stuff)**

**“A cat that has sat on a hot stove lid will not sit on one again.  
Nor will it sit on a cold one.” Mark Twain**

One of the differences between cats and people is that the cat in the quotation above will only refrain from sitting on stove lids that she actually sees in the moment. A human who has sat on a hot stove lid will refrain from sitting on actual and *imagined* stove lids. Such is the human condition and a theory called Relational Frame Theory (RFT) goes about trying to explain how humans can react to the words ‘stove lid’ like cats react to real-world, 5-senses stove lids. Another way of saying this is that RFT is a theory about human language and cognition. If ‘cognition’ seems a bit too much, just call it ‘thinking’ and that will do for our purposes.

Another way of saying this is that RFT is theory explaining how humans go from not talking at birth, to talking and thinking in less than two years. It’s the story about the vertical line of the Matrix: How sensory experiencing is transformed into the mental experiencing we call words. We don’t only learn words for our own entertainment; we also learn them to communicate with other humans. So, RFT is both about how we transform sensory information into verbal information inside our selves (the vertical line of the Matrix) and about how we then use those words to talk to other humans (the horizontal line of

the Matrix).

An interesting thing about RFT is that it's not only a story about humans transforming information from the five senses into words, and then across people and generations; it's also a story about how a person can end up avoiding imaginary stove lids.

As I already said, RFT is complicated to say the least. Take the following 'formula' for example:

$$C_{\text{func}} [C_{\text{rel}} A r_x B \text{ and } B r_y C \{A f^1 ||| B f^2 r_p \text{ and } C f^3 r_q\}]$$

I will not be getting into that complexity in these pages. I am only concerned with RFT and how it might relate to psychological flexibility and inflexibility. In that sense RFT is a story of how attached a person can become to a word, a phrase or a story. It might sound sort of strange to talk about attachments to words and stories, but we all get attached to them. Let's take for example the word 'intelligent.' Most of us are rather attached to that word when it comes to describing the self. If you don't think so, consider the word 'idiot' and how it's attached to describing the self. Most people are going to have a strong attachment to 'intelligent' and a weaker one to 'idiot' while describing the self during a job interview or in the vicinity of a potential date.

How about the story of your life from birth until now? Yes, you are

probably pretty attached to that story. If someone were to suggest that you replace the story of your life with the story of someone else's life, you would probably balk because you have grown rather attached to the story of your life.

The problem is that these attachments to words and stories are all but invisible to us. We are so used to using the words and stories we almost forget they are there, and we certainly forget that the attachments are there, and that's why the words and attachments to words can get us stuck. That is, we get stuck in words and stories and we don't even realize we are stuck.

Let's take a look at another example of this: Over the years you might come to believe that you are, "an attractive and funny person ALL of the time." Now when you look at that "ALL" in the sentence, you might start feeling a bit of 'stuck' showing up. With the word ALL there are no chances to *not* be attractive and funny in life. In a way the story about you being an attractive, funny person has taken over. There's no wiggle room for having 'bed hair' and being grumpy. That might sound far fetched, but maybe you get tired of having to look good and be funny all of the time. But the story inside your head keeps telling you to be attractive and funny no matter what. Imagine someone delaying going to the hospital when critically ill in the service of looking attractive. This is an example of getting stuck in words and thoughts. You could refer to this as, "Being stuck in the story."

In case you are thinking that being stuck in a story is unusual, it's

actually the norm. Everyone gets stuck his or her stories. For that matter, it's down right useful most of the time. Chances are you are either a male or a female. There's a story that goes with each, and for the most part each of those stories is functional. So getting stuck in the story of being a male or a female is no big deal...most of the time. It becomes a big deal when you start getting stuck in a rut that's not working to move you toward valued living and you can't see that you are stuck because it's part of the male or female story. What's that mean? When you need to understand the world from the other gender's perspective for purposes of dating and procreation (both may be valued life activities). If you're too stuck in your male or female story, you won't be able to be empathetic to the other gender's situation and that might just get in the way of the procreation.

If you think loosening up stuck stories can be troublesome, you're right. The usual way has been to talk ourselves out of the stuckness. For example, "Stop acting like a pig." This can certainly work, but sometimes it backfires, and it backfires because of the nature of language according to (RFT).

Basic RFT: Any word (sound) can get attached to anything. Let's use the sounds of the word "pig" as an example. First, it can get attached to the letters p-i-g. However, that's of no use to us, we need to know what p-i-g is referring (attached) to, and that's often a four-legged creature with a snout that lives on farms. However, in America in the 1960s "pig" got attached to law enforcement. Soon after "pig" got attached to chauvinist males. And almost all speakers of English

know about people who eat like a pig. And it does not stop there. The human mind can go on forever attaching the sound “pig” to absolutely anything that comes to mind around the time the sound “pig” shows up.

Now why in the world did I just go into all of that about the sound of “p-i-g”? Because if you try to NOT think about the word pig, then you *are* thinking about the word pig and anything that happens to be floating around in your experience (sensory or mental) while you are trying to *not* think of pig can get attached to pig. It gets even worse. Trying to *not* think about pig gives you more practice in thinking about pig. It’s enough to get someone psychologically inflexible.

Want a real-world example? Next time you are anxious, make sure and don’t think about anxiety. No matter what you do, don’t think about anxiety...Working so far? And if someone, let’s say a very attractive person, comes walking by as you are doing all of that *not* thinking about anxiety, all that thinking about anxiety can get attached to that person. Next time you see that attractive person, bam, you’re anxious because the experience of the word anxiety also got ‘attached’ to the attractive person. Even worse, in your mind the anxiety can also get attached to *all* attractive people. See how easy it is for us humans to get stuck? These language traps are everywhere!

Why are the traps so powerful? Think about why you were trying to not think about anxiety in the first place? Because anxiety does not feel good, so you were trying to move away from it. In the words of

the Matrix, you were moving Away from the unwanted mental experiencing. So the whole enterprise was in the service of moving Away from anxiety, and if anything you do works to move you away, it feels good. That “feels good” is what is known as a ‘reward’ in psychology. In other words, going from anxious to less anxious feels good, and that’s rewarding. So anything you think or do while you are focused on moving Away from anxiety can end up being rewarding if anxiety just happens to decrease around the time you are doing it. It’s the same with any unwanted mental experiencing you might move away from (anger, depression, sadness, etc.). Because of the rewards involved (feels better not to have that stuff), it’s a very sticky process. [So sticky that later an attractive person can show up and you will move Away from the anxiety AND the attractive person. Yuk.]

It’s not that getting rewarded for Away moves is a bad thing. Moving away from fear (like the fear of an oncoming bus) can be very, very functional for living a valued life. It’s just that Away moves can be so darned rewarding that you can end up using them in situations which are not as functional for valued living. The trick is to notice both the functional and not so functional Away moves and choose if you want to keep doing them. But there’s more...

Derived Relational Responding:

Remember when I was telling you about how not thinking about anxiety could end up getting attached to attractive people going by? And even further, the anxiety could get attached to ALL attractive

humans? That's the complicated world of RFT and Derived Relational Responding (DRR). We humans have put telecommunication satellites into orbit with DRR, and we have invented weapons of mass destruction with DRR. [Some people might sort "telecommunication satellites into orbit" as "Toward DRR" and "invented weapons of mass destruction" as "Away DRR."] Notice that DRR is just DRR, it's the intention that makes the difference.

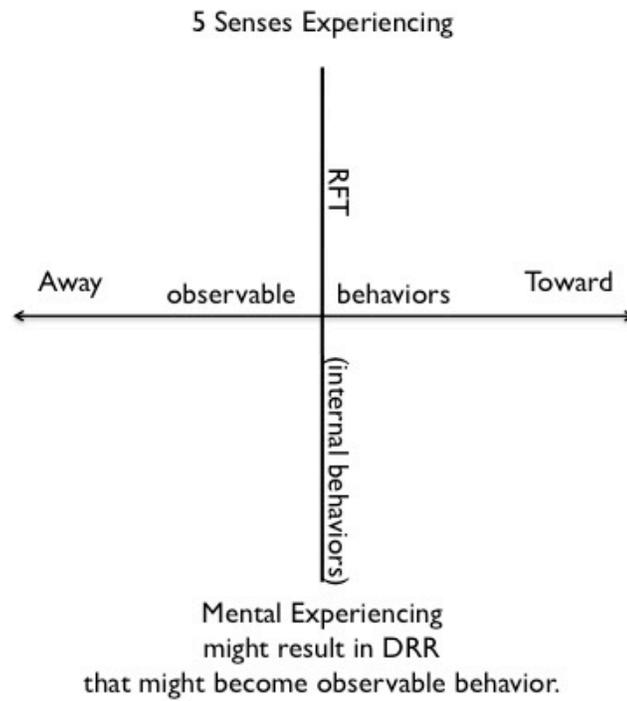
At it's simplest, derived relational responding is just about the human ability to create connections inside the mind. For example, if I tell you that  $A=B$ , and then I tell you that  $B=C$ , now you know something that I have not written... $A=C$ . Most humans instantly know the  $A=C$  connection after reading the  $A=B$  and  $B=C$ . However, humans can derive up all kinds of other connections based on less than, greater than, sorta kinda like, not so kinda sorta like, and so on. Some humans report a little surge of pleasant energy when these derivations occur inside the mind. In other words, it often feels good to make these connections whether they are connections made in the context of Away or Toward.

I'm not going to say much more about DRR. Like all of RFT, it just gets too complex for our current purposes. What does matter is that you develop a sense of moving Away and moving Toward, because the mental 'engine' of RFT and DRR is running all the while. If ultimately you would like to do more valued living, then keep your valued living in mind to increase the chances that you will derive up behaviors to move you in that direction.

If keeping your valued life directions in mind while noticing Toward and Away seems like a hard thing to do, well, it's not so bad.

Remember the beginning of this manual and the Matrix? Keeping your valued living in mind while the little engine of RFT is running is all that the Matrix is. The whole idea is that if your RFT is running in the context of valued living, chances are you will derive up more behaviors that will move you forward into a valued life and your life will be going somewhere.

## The RFT-DRR-Behaviors Matrix



Kevin Polk, Ph.D., Jerold Hambricht, Ph.D.,  
and Mark Webster

## Functional Contextualism

In the beginning of this manual I promised to tell you about a philosophy of science called Functional Contextualism (FC). Reread the paragraph above and you will start to get the 'feel' for FC.

Functional Contextualism is a point of view (philosophy) which focuses on learning which behaviors work (function) in a context. The question is, "Work for what?" And the answer for most humans is, "For valued living."

Functional Contextualism is most often compared to another philosophy (point of view) called Mechanism. Mechanism is about discovering how things work and how to fix them. This is of course a very handy point of view when it comes to fixing cars and even human bodies. We all use the mechanistic point of view. It can at times be functional for looking at human thoughts and behaviors. However, when looking at things through mechanistic eyes we will tend stop noticing the context the behavior is occurring (that's the  $C_{rel}$  in the RFT formula above) within and the overarching purpose (that's the  $C_{func}$  in the RFT formula) of behaviors.

One point of view is not 'better' than the other. As I often say, when I need my appendix taken out, I want a mechanist view for the operation. When it comes learning what works for recovery into valued living, a shift to functional contextualism is probably in order.

This manual *is* an example of Functional Contextualism. It's about identifying what's important to you and discovering what works in terms of both internal and external behaviors to move you in those important directions. The ideas that are important to you are not things in a mechanistic sense; they are evolving processes that need constant Toward and Away tweaking. A valued life is a moving target. Psychologically flexing is vitally important for moving forward to the target.

## **Epilogue**

I hope this manual helps you choose both *Away* and *Toward* behaviors on your journey into valued living, whatever you define valued living to be. At the end of your life story there may just be words written about you on a tombstone. Ultimately this manual is about flexibly choosing the behaviors that will result in the words written onto that stone.

Flexibly Yours,

Kevin

If you have comments or questions, you can visit [www.drkevinpolk.com](http://www.drkevinpolk.com). You will also find information there about speaking engagements, webinars and other materials related to Psychological Flexibility.

P.S. My wife read this and says that on her second reading of this manual she had to write in her own stuff.

## References

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The Relational Frame Theory book published in 2001 is very complex and it's a tough read for almost everyone. The Learning RFT book published in 2010 is much easier to read. The seeds of some of the exercises in Psychological Flexibility Training are loosely based on some of the exercises in the Get out of your Mind and Into Your Life book, which is a self-help book based on Acceptance and Commitment Training and Therapy, which is also based on RFT.

**Research:** There has been some research completed regarding Psychological Flexibility (PF). To date the main instrument used to measure PF is the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II). The interested reader is referred to the Contextual Behavioral Psychology website ([www.contextualbehavioralpsychology.org](http://www.contextualbehavioralpsychology.org)) for more information about the AAQ-II.

### **About the Author:**

Dr. Polk is a psychologist who practices at the VA Medical Center in Togus Maine and maintains a consulting practice in Hallowell, Maine. He's happily married, has three wonderful children and an assortment of pets. Other than esoteric psychology books, he enjoys reading books about the nature of the universe and most anything written by Mark Twain.