

Acceptance and Commitment coaching techniques: Passengers on the bus



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Citation: Passmore, J (2025) Acceptance & Commitment Coaching Techniques: Passengers on a bus. *The Coaching Psychologist*, 21(1), 78-79.
<https://doi.org/10.53841/bpstcp.2025.21.1.78>

Keywords *Acceptance; Commitment; Coaching, ACT, Coaching techniques*

Abstract

In this short paper we introduce the first in a series of ACT consistent coaching tools. This article builds on the previous paper, which provides an Introduction to ACT and is best read in conjunction with that paper. Passengers on the bus aims to help clients identify unhelpful thoughts and recognition that these are just thoughts (and to separate from them) while also increasing their choicefulness in any decision and that such thoughts while being acknowledged can be disregarded

Introduction

In the previous article I set out a brief introduction of ACT as a psychologically informed framework for coaches to draw upon, as well as summarising some of the research undertaken regarding ACT as a tool for behavioural change. In this article I set out the first of half a dozen ACT techniques. I have started with 'passengers on the bus' as it is one of my personal favourites. I have found it personally useful in managing my own mental health challenges and I find clients over the years have found it useful too.

Passengers on a bus

Metaphors are efficient, meaningful ways to communicate about experiences (Passmore, 2022). Within coaching, metaphors can be a helpful tool frequently used by both coaches and clients to help them explain and explore the world their encounter and how they make sense of it.

The Passengers on the Bus metaphor is drawn from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, a third wave cognitive behavioural approach (Leach, 2022). I find myself drawn to this for two reasons firstly I find the metaphor often has resonance with clients, who can easily and simply relate to the idea of a bus, passengers and unhelpful 'feedback'. Secondly, the image often creates a smile as the metaphor is in many ways 'silly' or at least slightly amusing which I have found over the years encouraged clients to view the tool positively.

In a more theoretical sense, the metaphor helps clients recognise how, sometimes, they can let their internal experiences seemingly 'drive' their external lives. The metaphor can help clients to recognise that external demands - in the form of passengers - are just that: demands, not requirements. Instead, we have the choice as the driver of our lives as to which direction to head. In so doing, we may need to accept that our decisions (to continue the bus metaphor), such as speeding or driving on the pavement, may bring consequences. As a coach, our job is to first help the client separate out these thoughts as external demands and, secondly, to help the client explore the consequences of their own choices, preferably ones consistent with their own values.

In using the technique, I typically invite the client to imagine they are the driver of a bus. I find helping the client bring an exact bus to mind (shape, colour etc.) can often help. I will typically describe the components of the metaphor: the bus symbolises their mind, the client's thoughts are represented by passengers and the client is the driver. On the journey, some passengers sit quietly, while others make critical and distracting comments or shout directions at the driver. These are the unhelpful, negative thoughts experienced by the client. In the metaphor the driver can choose how they react to the passengers. They can listen to these comments, plug in noise-cancelling headphones or just acknowledge them, thanking the passenger for the comments but focusing on the present moment and using their mind (values) to inform what and where they go next. Likewise, we can choose how we react to the thoughts and emotions.

I have found it can be useful for some clients to 'name' some of these passengers and what they are saying. I might then invite the client to monitor when such thoughts (passenger voices) occur. To label the passenger voice, to check the demand out against their own values and to simply ignore the voices or acknowledgement, but not to be driven to accept or obey these thoughts.

Conclusion

In this short article we have summarised 'Passengers on the Bus', but the only way to fully understand a tool is to test it out, both on yourself and with clients. One way to test any new tool is to offer it as a thought experiment to clients, thus deescalating its importance and simply inviting the client to 'give it a way and see what happens'.

Happy journeys!

References

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