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01

**The ACT and Prosocial
ACT Matrix Mental
Health Check-In for
Schools**

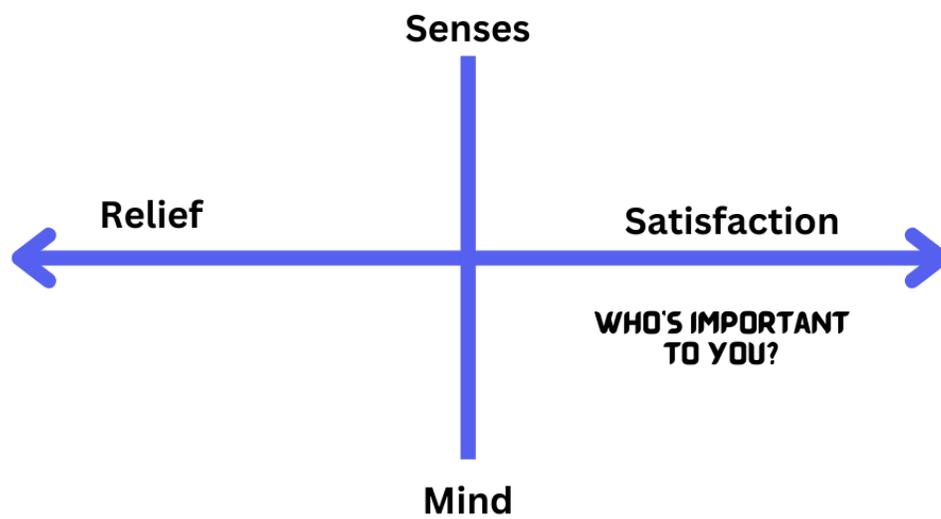
The ACT and Prosocial Matrix was created by Dr. Kevin Polk to spread psychological flexibility and safety to humans with language. The Matrix is a visual-verbal process that can adapt to any situation. Its versatility is grounded in simplicity. It has a single focus which is the cultivation of psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility is the ability to notice what you are doing and choose actions to get you where you want to go, even in the presence of obstacles. It is instrumental when someone is experiencing a lot of yucky stuff.

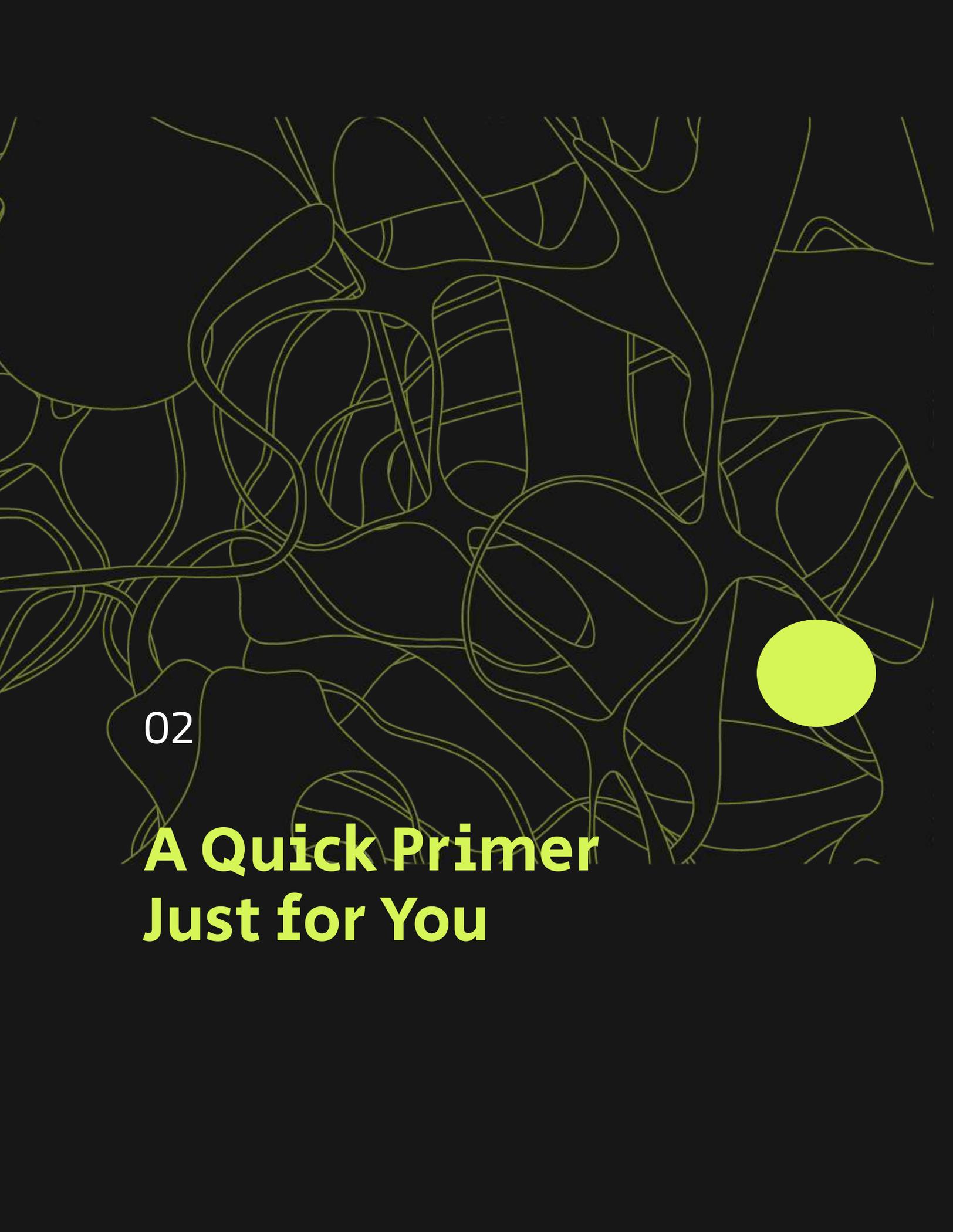
Current research (see Kashdan and Rottenberg below) supports promoting psychological flexibility for various behavioral issues that extend to the classroom and beyond. Psychological flexibility involves the ability to adapt to situational demands, to shift mental and behavioral resources or what we call self-regulate, and to be able to identify and continue to move toward who and what is vital in the presence of uncomfortable feelings, thoughts and urges.

The bottom line is that experiencing the the Matrix to students it leads to increased psychological flexibility for

The way to get started with using the Matrix in Schools is to show the point of view before you do anything else. If you are a classroom teacher, school psychologist, counselor, behavioral specialist, or social worker you start by getting this diagram up in front of your students. You can use a chalkboard, smartboard, whiteboard, etc. Paper and post-its work too.

The ACT Matrix





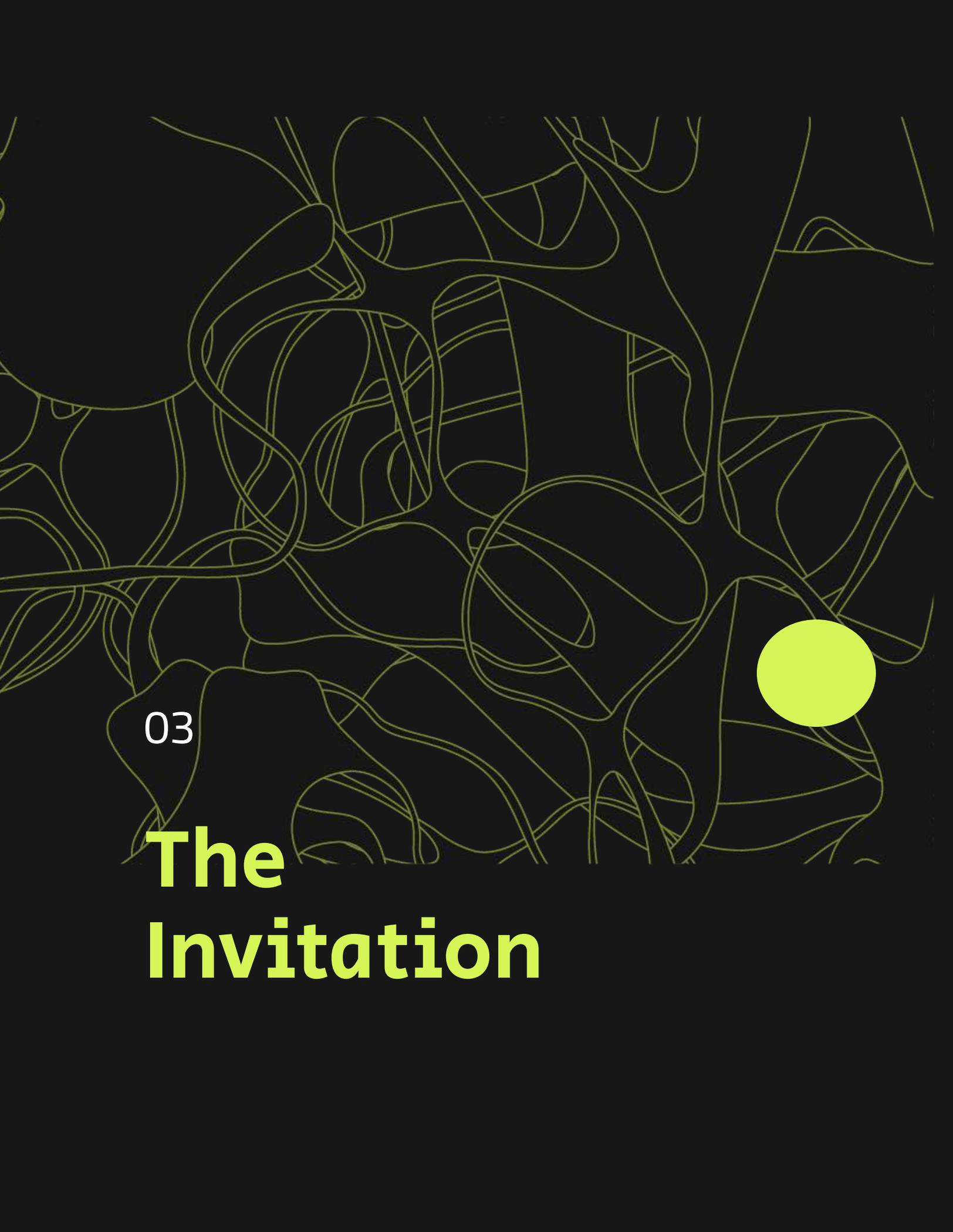
02

A Quick Primer Just for You

There is no need to explain the diagram to anyone. Since you may be new to the Matrix, let me give you a quick primer on using it. I suggest you tuck it into your memory banks and move on.

At the top of the vertical line are the Five Senses. At the bottom is the Mind. On the horizontal line, we have Satisfaction on the right and Relief on the left. The vertical line is the experiencing line. Information flows from our five senses and later shows up in our minds as thoughts, feelings, memories, and urges. We use language to connect our outside world and our inside world. The horizontal line has arrows on either side to indicate the direction in which our behaviors move us. We seek Satisfaction with the important people in our lives. We also do things to get Relief from uncomfortable inner experiences like fear, anger, worry, and sadness.

Mapping experiences onto the Matrix promotes mindful awareness and helps individuals and groups increase their psychological flexibility which boosts mental health. The first question I have already written on the diagram.

The background features a complex, abstract pattern of white, thin, overlapping lines on a black field. These lines form various shapes, including circles, loops, and elongated forms, creating a dense, organic texture. A single, solid yellow circle is positioned on the right side of the page, partially overlapping the white line art.

03

The Invitation

The next thing to do is to ask this question:

“Would it be OK if I show you my point of view of how I look at things?”

Asking for permission is an important aspect of the ACT Matrix as well as promoting mental health. You are establishing and modeling respectful communication with your students.

Next, you show them the basic form of the Matrix. Begin in the lower right corner and go clockwise around the diagram. You are continuing to model the open and accepting stance that you want them to engage in with you.

Step 1: Asking about Who’s Important

“I use this diagram that forms four quadrants. In the lower right, you see this question, “Who’s Important to you?”. I give an example, “So for me, my wife is important to me. Who’s important to you?” You then write who’s important to them in the lower right. As they respond to the question, I will say, “Great! is there anybody else who might be important to you?”. Once we get a few important people on the diagram, I move on. If they tell you about what is important to them, you can write that down as well. Asking “Who’s important to you?” calms students as they recall the important people in their lives.

Step 2: Asking about the Yucky Stuff

I proceed next to the lower-left quadrant of the diagram by saying: “We all have uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that show up inside of us sometimes. I call it yucky stuff. For example, yucky stuff, like fear, can show up and I put stuff like that in the lower left quadrant. Can you think of other yucky stuff that shows up inside of you or other people?”. I write “Fear” down and whatever they tell me shows up for them or other people in the lower left. You will do the same. You just need a few. The typical responses I have heard are anger, worry, boredom, stress, etc.

Step 3: Asking about Relief Moves

Now I move to the upper left: "Now I go to the upper left quadrant of the diagram. This is where we put behaviors to get relief from the yucky stuff that shows up inside us. These are the things others can see me or others doing". Relief moves are meant to reduce or eliminate the yucky stuff. I continue with, "So if fear shows up, I might run to reduce or get away from fear" I write "run" in the upper left and draw a swooping arrow from "fear" to "run". I continue. "Everyone does relief moves. They are necessary for living. Can you think of other stuff you or other people do to reduce or get relief from yucky stuff?". I will draw arrows from their yucky stuff up to the relief moves they share with me in the upper left

Step 4: Asking about Satisfaction Moves

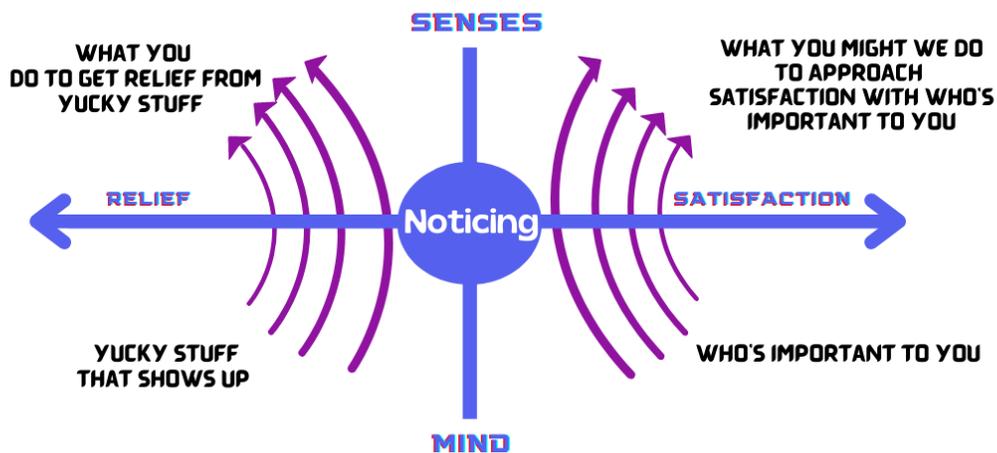
I now move across the diagram to the upper right by saying: "In the upper right, I put behaviors that are meant to bring me closer to those who are important to me and get some satisfaction. For example, I might text my wife". I will draw a swooping arrow from "wife" up to "text" just as I did for the relief moves. Next, I say, "Can you think of other behaviors you or others might do to move closer to important people?" They will go in the upper right with more swooping arrows.

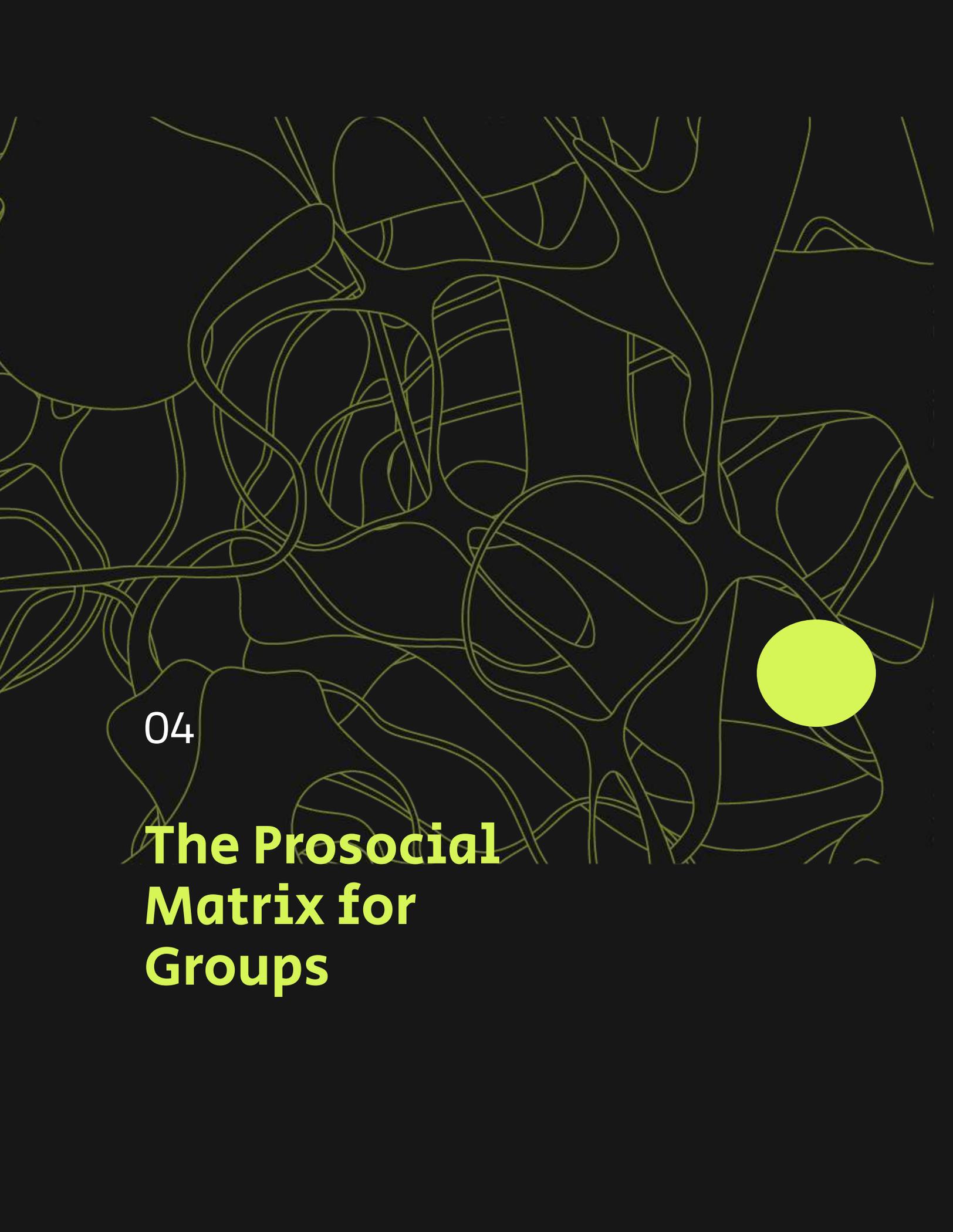
Step 5: Introducing Noticing in the Middle

To complete the diagram by introducing the point of view we will continue to work from, I say: "Now, in the center, I draw a circle and write "Noticing". That is, do you think you might have the opportunity to notice who and what's important, yucky stuff, away moves, and toward moves in the next week or so? I think I might have the opportunity. What do you think?".

The student and I have just completed the first loop of the ACT Matrix. Noticing is always done from a nonjudgmental, accepting stance. This Matrix is completed to promote or increase psychological flexibility. I will then proceed to the second loop of the Matrix.

Once you have shown the Matrix process, you can just go about your day. You can refer to the process at any time. Anyone can look at the diagram and ask "Hey, where are we now?" either to themselves or out loud. I highly recommend that the first time you show



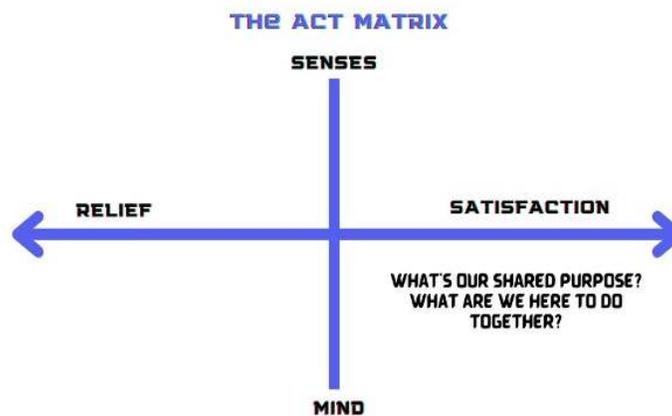
The background features a complex, abstract pattern of white line art on a black field. The line art consists of overlapping, stylized outlines of human faces and profiles, creating a sense of interconnectedness and social structure. A single, solid yellow circle is positioned on the right side of the page, partially overlapping the line art.

04

The Prosocial Matrix for Groups

You are now ready to introduce the Matrix for groups. It's also known as the Prosocial Matrix

You have a second diagram available to show your students. It is the same as the first but has a different question and focus. Write the question in the lower right quadrant like the example below:



Step 6: Asking about the Shared Purpose

"I would like to show you a second diagram. It works the same way as the one we just but I will start with a different question, what is our shared purpose?" You can add, "What brought you here? For myself, I am here for _____". Students will begin to share things like learn, get credit, be with their friends, etc. They will also say "Because I have to be here" or "My parents made me". Students come to school for many purposes. As they share you record their responses in the lower right quadrant.

Step 7: Asking About Social Yucky Stuff

Now I transition to the lower left and say, " Sometimes when we are with others, we can have yucky stuff like fear show up inside us and get in the way of our shared purposes and what we want to do. I call it social yucky stuff. What yucky social stuff has shown up for you and is getting in the way?" (As I do this, I write "Fear" on the diagram). You are not doing a deep dive into yucky stuff; you are highlighting the major "social yuckies" that may show up and get in the way of the shared purposes.

Step 8: Asking About Social Relief Moves

The transition to the upper left is much the same as in the first loop. I say, "What kinds of things do you do when you are with others to get relief from this yucky stuff?" I use the example, "So if fear shows up in me, you might see me run to get relief from my fear". I will also add, "Relief moves are normal and natural things humans do when yucky stuff shows up. We need to move away from fear to keep ourselves safe" (if it doesn't come up on of the things student do to get relief from school is "not show up"). " Can you think of some other relief moves you or someone else might do when they are with others?"

Step 9: Asking About Shared Purpose Moves

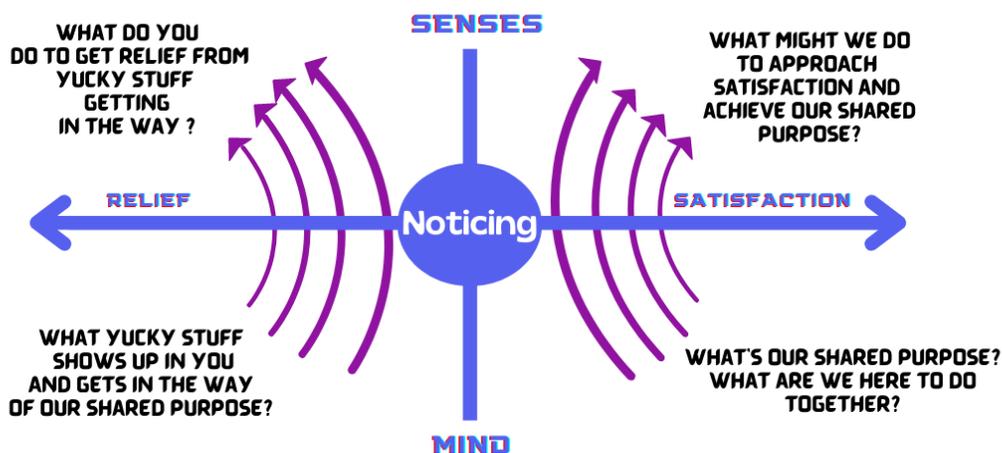
We complete the second loop by continuing to the upper right quadrant with the question, "What might you or others do to achieve or get some satisfaction with the shared purposes down in the lower right?" I like to add, "You have already done something really important. You have shown up here today". I will write that down. Another thing that would help would be "communicating respectfully" (I write both in the upper right quadrant). So, what else might you do now that you are here?"

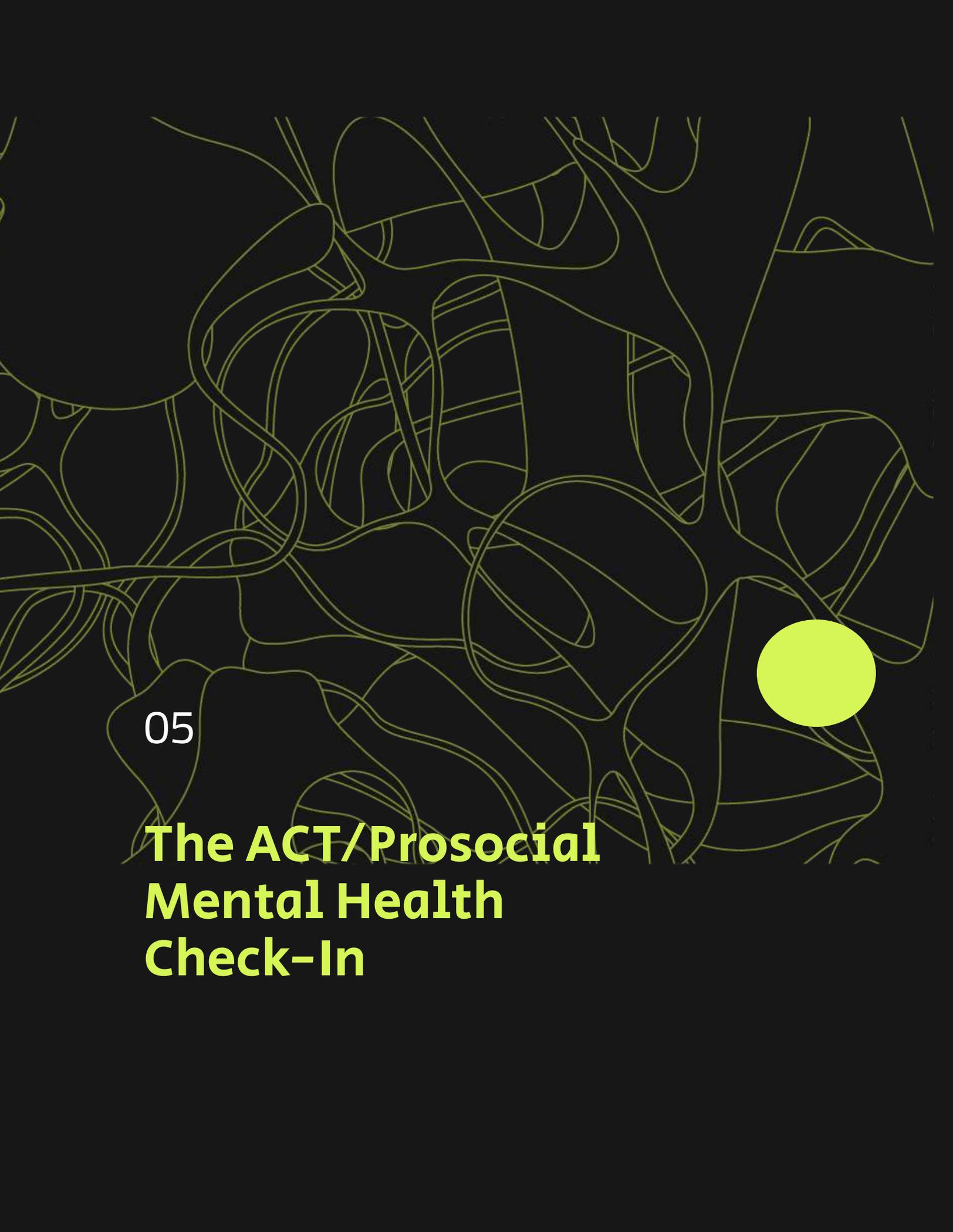
Step 10: Prosocial Noticing

As we did in the first loop, I will add a circle in the middle and write the word "Noticing." I can then say, "And might you have the opportunity to notice shared purposes, social yucky stuff, relief moves you or others do for yucky stuff, and satisfaction moves for shared purposes in the coming days or week?"

In completing the second loop around the Matrix, we have set the context for psychological safety. Psychological safety is a shared belief that it is OK to be a member of this group, that members can speak up, disagree, etc. Psychological safety also means they feel accepted, respected, and acknowledged for their efforts. In this group, it is the feeling that "People have my back." When psychological safety is present in a group, the group can learn how to come together to achieve common goals, make responsible decisions, and help each other out. Students struggle to learn and teachers struggle to teach when there is a lack of psychological safety.

The Prosocial Matrix



The background features a complex, abstract pattern of white line art on a black field. The line art depicts various human figures in motion, some appearing to be in conversation or physical contact. A single, solid blue circle is positioned on the right side of the page, partially overlapping the white line art.

05

The ACT/Prosocial Mental Health Check-In

Any time is the right time for a Matrix Mental Health Check In

Once you have introduced the Matrix you and your students will discover many opportunities to use it. One 6-year-old drew a Matrix in chalk on the playground. Another young person used it to help him get a handle on things when he feels like freaking out. A high schooler might use it to notice her anxiety as she goes about her day. A class of students might do some Matrix work around helping a peer who is being bullied. Having the Matrix visible and available encourages students and staff to use it for noticing and perspective-taking throughout the day.

The Matrix Check-In was developed with middle school students. They get tons of credit for participating in what we referred to as “Flexing Up!”

Teachers, students, and support staff would meet each morning and begin the day by drawing the Matrix and going through the process. Each person takes turns noticing “who” (and at times “what”) is important, naming yucky stuff (usually a mix of tired, pleased, anxious, satisfied, and bored) as well as satisfaction/relief moves. Students also listed what they wanted to do and what actual or potential obstacles may show up and get in our way (since the day has just starting the obstacles were usually the unwanted thoughts/feelings that we may be experiencing on the inside). It is also a time to celebrate successes and support continuing to work toward each member’s goals. Some days we only spent a few minutes with the diagram. Other days were longer. The students volunteered to take turns showing the matrix and asking the questions with their classmates. We were noticing what worked.

Everyone, staff and students alike, looked forward to checking in with the Matrix. We created our own ritual. Research and experience tell us that rituals involve activities that foster connection within a shared space. The Matrix ritual offers an empowering way to prevent and recover from problems while fostering sharing and creativity.

It's not about getting anywhere and yet everyone participated in the "respectful space" we created each day. We simply noticed all of this and then went on with our day, the class generally carrying the group cooperation with them as they moved through academic tasks and activities. As we were with each other throughout the day, we may or may not refer to the check-in and get curious about how things are going.

If you have a group or class that meets regularly you may want to give the check in a try. You never know what's going to show up!

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06

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The ACT and Prosocial ACT Matrix School Resources

Source Resources for the ACT Matrix

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