

An illustration of a tall, orange lighthouse with a lantern room on top, situated on a cliffside. The cliff is green with some bushes and a small tree. In the background, there is a blue ocean with white waves and a blue sky with white clouds. The lighthouse has several windows and a door at the base.

Promoting Psychological Safety for Social-Emotional Learning with The ACT Matrix

The Process of Developing and Implementing an ACT Matrix Trauma-Informed Classroom

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Training and Certification Information available at:

theactmatrixacademy.com

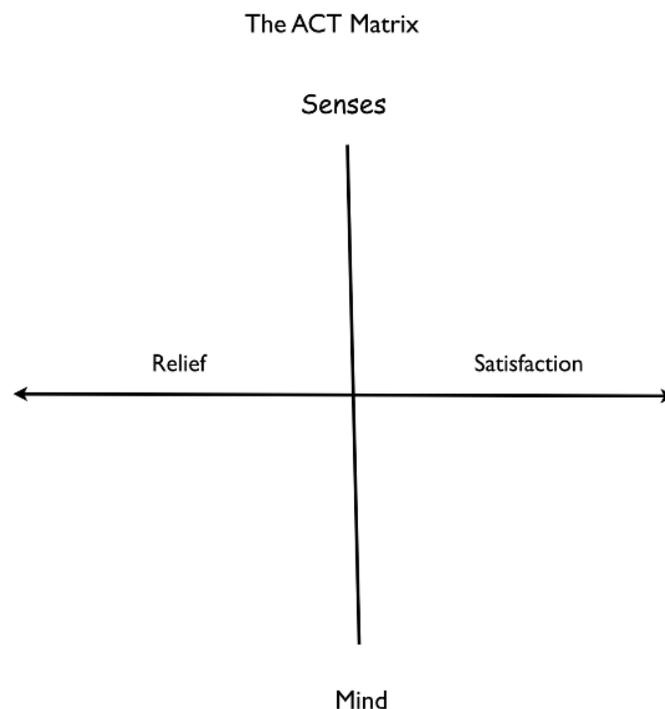
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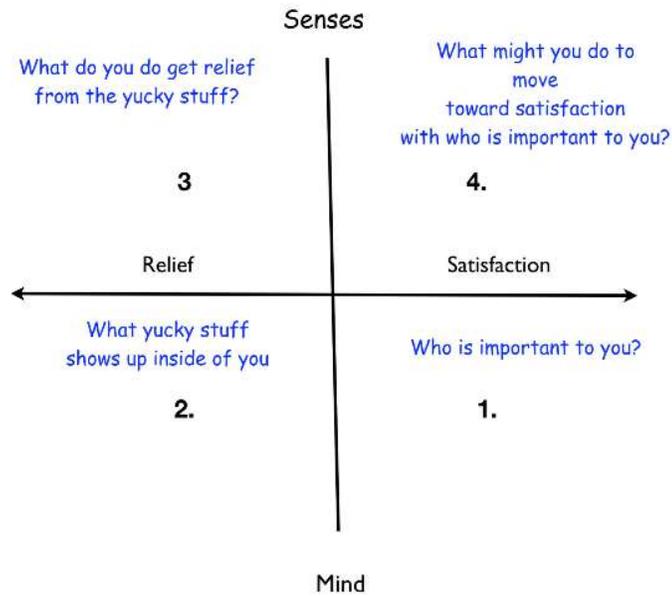
1. You begin by showing people the Basic Form of the Matrix. You will ask for permission and then do Loop 1 with the teacher or specialist. *Please refer to the ACT/Prosocial Matrix Basic Form at the end of this guide.*
2. Next, you introduce the Trauma-Informed ACT Matrix point-of-view. Trauma-informed is not about treating trauma; it is about being informed and sensitive to students who have experienced trauma or are currently experiencing trauma in their lives (otherwise known as adverse childhood experiences or ACEs). The Trauma-Informed ACT Matrix informs educators how to teach, support, and respond to students who experience the effects of trauma and who may manifest behaviors related to trauma. To do this, you introduce the role of the Amygdala.
3. The Amygdala-Informed Matrix is the vertical line of the Matrix. It is for the educator. It is a simple way to understand the role of the amygdala and how traumatic memories and experiences may show up in the classroom. It can be shared with students depending on circumstances and the level of understanding of the class.

- The Amygdala is our brain's threat detection system. It scans for danger and operates quickly (outside of our conscious awareness) to keep us safe.
- In terms of time, the Amygdala is activated long before the mind, so if something is said or done that doesn't feel safe, it will send the danger signal. It will often bypass the mind and sound the alarm.
- We use the vertical line of the Matrix to illustrate this by placing the Amygdala underneath the Senses. This depicts the natural flow of sensory information through the Amygdala before traveling to the mind at the bottom of the vertical line.
- Students and others with trauma experiences very often have overactive amygdalas. They are on high alert (hypervigilant) for danger.
- When any of us feel threatened, we will immediately seek to avoid danger through avoidance. We feel unsafe and want to protect ourselves. It is built into all of us and is essential to our survival.
- Avoidance will take the form of flight, fight or freeze behaviors.
- Teachers and other educators will want to be aware of (Notice) when a student or adult has their Amygdala fired up and activated. We call this being "triggered." Anyone can be triggered, including you or the teacher. When someone is triggered, they can notice it and notice their response. The teacher or educator will assist the students in noticing their responses and use the Matrix to collaborate about what is happening. This will settle the overactive Amygdala down.
- The Amygdala can generate responses in anyone at any time. The ACT Matrix sets a safe and respectful context to have workable conversations in-the-moment. The Amygdala can calm down, and we can go on with the business of teaching and learning.

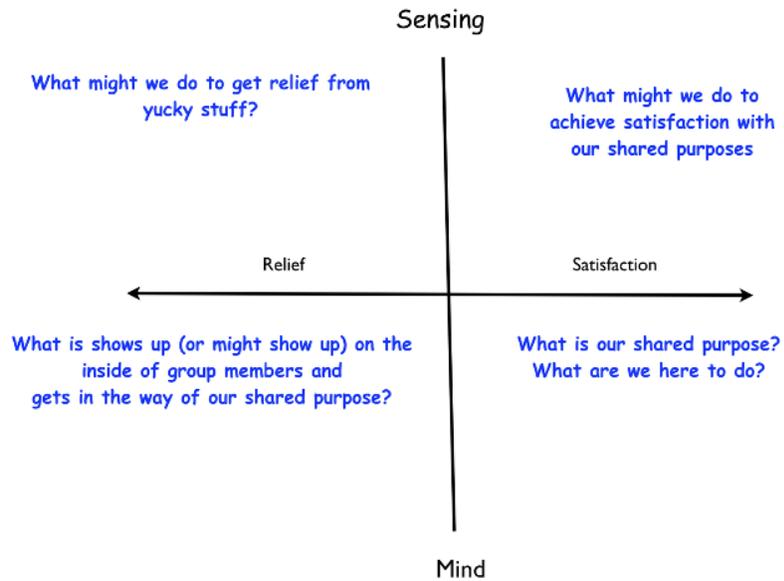
- It will take practice for students and others to notice how they respond to the Amygdala's messages. No one can stop the Amygdala from doing its thing (nor would we want to). We can, however, notice and pause. Students can learn over time they can generate more workable responses when the Amygdala gets activated.
 - If and when the Amygdala sounds the alarm in anyone, the ACT Matrix class will be better prepared to notice and pause. They can engage in verbal and non-verbal behaviors to calm things down and have open conversations that help keep moving toward their shared purpose of teaching and learning.
4. Presenting the ACT Matrix to the class: Once you have done the preliminary work either for yourself or for the teacher/educator/caregiver, you are ready to show the Basic Form of the ACT Matrix. Have it visible for everyone to see. Ask for permission to show them and get started!



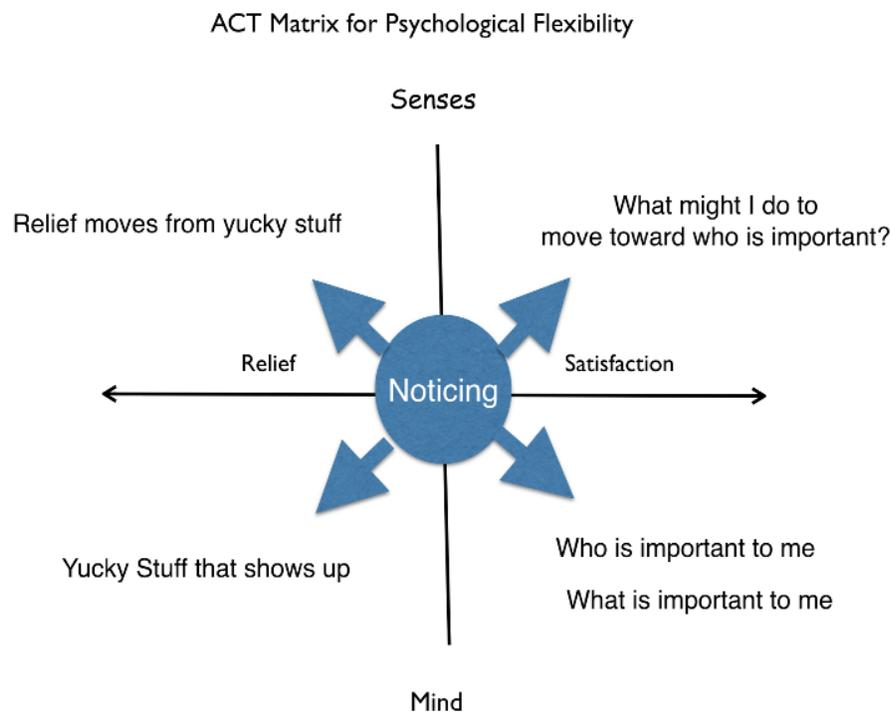
The ACT Matrix



The Prosocial Matrix



- You show the individual Matrix, ask the questions, and record their responses. Include your own responses as well. Finish with the opportunities to notice important stuff, yucky stuff, relief moves, and satisfaction moves in the coming days. Ask them if they will have opportunities to notice any of all of these things.
- You then show the group matrix and record their responses. Encourage everyone to be part of the shared purpose conversation. Go through yucky social stuff that can or might show up, relief moves, and satisfaction moves. End with opportunities to notice like the first loop.
- You add that anyone can notice anytime and that you will be doing it with them. Let students know that you will be using the Matrix to help figure things out, solve problems, or notice how things are going.
- You leave the Matrix up and visible so that anyone can look at it or use it throughout the day.



5. You have now set the context for a safe and respectful trauma-informed classroom

- Loop 1 promotes **psychological flexibility**. Psychological flexibility is the cornerstone of mental health with the ACT Matrix. It is all about noticing internal and external experiences, noticing how it feels to seek satisfaction and relief, and engaging in perspective-taking with the Observer Self (the Me who is doing the Noticing). The more opportunities to notice, the more chances the students have to use their observer self, significantly if their Amygdala is activated and yucky stuff is showing up.
- Loop 2 promotes **psychological safety**. Beginning with the shared purpose engages everyone in the process. You can't learn if you don't feel safe. Psychological safety is the ability to be secure with oneself and manage impulses coming from within. When members of a group feel safe, they learn how to work together to achieve common goals.
- The students learn to be trauma-informed through noticing. Noticing is a skill that will develop with practice. You model this by saying, "Oh, I noticed that we are all working on a project now," or "I am noticing some frustration showing up in me as I am trying to present this concept to you," or "Oh, you are noticing that you feel pretty satisfied with the story you have written."
- Give your students credit for anything they notice. It's easy and fun.
- You will also notice when someone's Amygdala gets activated (fight/flight/freeze behaviors). You pause and say, "Oh gee, I noticed that you put your head down just now. Do you remember or can you think of what happened right before you did that?". Noticing may lead to a brief chat and will help the Amygdala to settle down. It may also not be necessary to chat, depending on the student.
- You can also invite them to sort their experience onto the Matrix or do it with them. You refer to the diagram and ask, "Where would you put that on the diagram?" Wherever they put it is OK because you want them to use their Observer Self to notice, pause, and get some perspective on their yucky stuff. Engaging in sorting promotes psychological flexibility. To do this the educator simply invites the students to sort.

- You are helping them use the skill of noticing in the moment that yucky stuff (like trauma memories) is showing up in them. They can also notice themselves doing relief moves from yucky stuff and satisfaction moves toward who and what is important, They may even notice the shared purposes.
 - Students can use this skill to be safe. They will also be experiencing themselves in a supportive place where people have their back. The other students in the class benefit since you are modeling how to be flexible, safe, and respond to challenging events and circumstances. They learn how to help each other out.
 - As you continue to use the ACT Matrix, your students will use it increasingly independently and with others. You can notice that too and whatever “new moves” they begin to use.
 - You have set up a context that normalizes the experiences of your students. Everyone has important people and things in their lives, everyone has yucky stuff, everyone seeks relief and satisfaction, and we all have shared purposes when we are with others.
6. All of this occurs within a nonjudgmental, respectful point of view. You are free to add whatever you want to your trauma-informed classroom, as the Matrix is compatible

with the existing routines and activities of any classroom

The ACT/Prosocial Matrix Basic Form

Do This First!!

Practice these steps as often as you can. They are the keys to powerful social-emotional learning for you and your students and the path to sharing psychological flexibility!

Have the Matrix Up in Front of Your Learner(s) with the Matrix Diagram already drawn and the first question written in the lower left quadrant.

Respectfully Asking for Permission. Use words like these:

"Hello, I work from the point of view, and to get started; Is it okay if I show you the point of view that I use?"

Step 1: Asking about Who's Important

Use words like these: "I use this diagram that forms four quadrants. In the lower right, you see this question, Who's Important to you?". Give an example, "So for me, my wife is important to me." You then write who's important to you in the lower right.

Step 2: Asking about the Yucky Stuff

You 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 we put stuff like that in the lower left quadrant. Can you think of other yucky stuff that shows up inside of you and other people?"

Step 3: Asking about Relief Moves

Now you move to the upper left: "Now we go to the upper left quadrant of the diagram. This is where we put behaviors; others can see you doing. In the upper left, we put the behaviors meant to reduce or eliminate the yucky stuff. For example, one might run to reduce fear. Everyone does away moves every day. They are necessary for living. Can you think of other stuff you or other people do to reduce the yucky stuff?"

Step 4: Asking about Satisfaction Moves

You now move across the diagram to the upper right by saying: "In the upper right, we put behaviors that at meant to bring us closer to those who are important to us and get some satisfaction. For example, you might call your mother. Can you think of other behaviors you or others might do to move closer to important people?"

Step 5: Introducing Noticing in the Middle

You will now make it a point of view: "Now, in the center, we put a circle and write Noticing. That is, we might have the opportunity to notice who and what's important, yucky stuff, away moves, and toward moves. Do you think you might have an opportunity to notice any of that in the next week or so?"

This completes the first loop of the Matrix. It is the matrix for individuals. Depending on time and circumstances, proceed to the second loop.

Step 6: Introducing Shared Purpose

You will now create a second diagram with a different question in the lower right. The question you will write is "What is our shared purpose?" You then say: "Now I'm bringing up a new diagram that's much like the last one. The big difference is now we are going to talk about being and working with others. When we are with others, then we have a shared purpose. We write those in the lower right quadrant. For example, we have a shared purpose for being here today. What might that be? Great! What are some other shared purposes that couples, teams, etc., might have?"

Step 7: Social Yucky Stuff

Just like loop 1, you proceed to the lower left and say: “When we are with others, yucky stuff can show up. Can you think of some yucky stuff that shows up in people when being and working with others?”. We write these in the lower left.

Step 8: Social Relief Moves

Next, we head to the upper left: When the yucky stuff shows up, many of us have our favorite away moves to get rid of that yucky. Can you think of an away move one might do in a social setting? We write these in the upper left.

Step 9: Shared Purpose Moves

You now move over to the upper right and say: “Now, up here in the upper right, we write the behaviors that we might do to accomplish or get satisfaction with our shared purposes. The big one that works is to communicate respectfully (write that in the upper right for everyone to see). Can you think of other things we or others could do that would help us achieve the shared purposes?”

Step 10: Introducing Noticing again

Once again, you go to the middle and say: “ Now I will draw a circle and write in Noticing. Do you think that you will have the opportunity to notice shared purpose, social yucky stuff, social away moves, or shared purpose moves in the next week?”

This completes the second loop of the matrix. We often refer to the first loop as the Me Matrix and the second loop as the We Matrix. Together they are a powerful process to promote psychological flexibility and psychological safety in any situation.

