

# How to Debrief Crisis Situations with School Staff: A Field Guide with the ACT Matrix

Phil Tenaglia with Kevin Polk



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By Dr. Kevin Polk and Phil Tenaglia, M.A.

This guide emerged from hundreds of crisis debriefings I have participated in with school staff. It is a procedure for how you and your staff can use the simple and sustainable process of the ACT Matrix.

Years of collaboration between Kevin (clinical psychologist and trauma expert) and myself (school psychologist/family therapist/crisis intervention specialist) have created a means for using it with any existing program or procedure.

Crises are an inevitable part of living with our fellow humans. They happen more frequently than we would like and are a source of suffering. It can be a bolt out of the blue or lasting and enduring. Whatever a crisis takes, it throws us off balance until we can get sorted out and hopefully back on track.

We have spent much of our lives helping others navigate troubling events and situations (and have been through a few of our own). We have discovered that if we can offer individuals and groups a point of view that allows them to learn from crises, they more often go on and keep doing what matters to them. We also know there are no guarantees.

Applying the ACT Matrix to crises helps staff and students move past the situation and toward who and what is important to them and the life they want to lead.

So what is the ACT Matrix?

The ACT Matrix is a simple way of visualizing the cognitive-behavioral approach to values-based behaviors known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Training (ACT). Dr. Kevin Polk developed the matrix to engage people in a collaborative learning process quickly. Working with Dr. Polk, I have taken it into education, where it is working in many schools and classrooms.

The target of the ACT Matrix is psychological flexibility. The latest research supports promoting psychological flexibility as the cornerstone of psychological health and well-being. In simple terms, psychological flexibility is noticing what works to get you where you want to go. The Matrix visually represents the core learning processes of ACT so people of all ages can be psychologically flexible and quickly learn what works. The function “loosens up” stuck and struggling individuals and groups by empowering them to move toward resilience and persistence in the face of everyday obstacles and challenges. Psychological flexibility is crucial in overcoming crises.

Many years ago, John F. Kennedy referred to the fact that in the Chinese language, the word “crisis” is composed of two characters; one represents danger and the other, opportunity. Since schools are in the business of teaching and learning, crisis events are seen and responded to as unwanted and unwelcome. The other side of education and learning within a crisis are opportunities for change and growth. The usual ways of responding have not worked for the most part. There are windows for new understanding to be discovered and applied. If we can learn to respond to crises in ways that work, we can help ourselves and pass on valuable learning to those we serve.

Debriefing staff should include listening and offering support. But if you stop there, opportunities are missed. There will be more crises to respond to. You want to set up conditions that strengthen staff response. With the ACT Matrix, you set the context for strengthening and taking what they are already doing well so they can learn what works to respond to the other crises they will undoubtedly encounter. We use the Matrix to build resiliency for everyone involved.

Dealing with students and others who are struggling is stressful for everyone involved. Staff that has been a part of crisis situations (or witnessed them) experience a wide range of reactions and responses. Being able to manage oneself and influence others in a crisis comes in handy. While most of us will never enjoy being in crisis, we can learn (with some help) what works and what doesn't. Over the years, I have had my fair share of successes and failures.

The ACT Matrix takes what seems complicated and confusing in a crisis and helps you simplify things. When you can get others on board, everyone learns how to come together to achieve common goals and become more resilient when facing a crisis. Like anything else, it takes practice, and over time staff can learn to use the Matrix for lots of things since using it boosts creativity and the ability to discover new solutions for the issues they face.

Using the ACT Matrix for debriefing accomplishes the following:

- Models a nonjudgmental stance for processing the experiences of both staff and students in the moment of crisis.
- Establishes a shared language that allows for quick and effective communication.
- Promotes prosocial problem-solving that supports staff and students in learning how to make workable decisions both before, during, and after crises and events

### The Crisis Meets Your Amygdala

The amygdala (the almond-shaped bit of grey matter nestled inside your brain) is your threat detector. It is your lifeguard. It is always ready, alert, and on patrol. When danger shows up, it sounds the alarm bells, and you take evasive action. It is a blunt instrument. It doesn't know language. It wants to get you out of danger by running, freezing, or fighting. You want it to work because you want to stay alive. So thank your amygdala for helping you get this far.

In a crisis, the amygdala is on high alert. You react first, and then your mind registers that something happened. If a bus is coming at you, your amygdala gets you out of the way. Your mind thinks, "Close call," but your amygdala did the heavy lifting and got you to safety.

In crises, there may or may not be a threat of physical harm, but the lifeguard is on patrol. It also responds to internal signals of danger as if an actual bus was heading your way.

Amygdalas learns not by language but by experience. This is also true of most learning, but that is a subject for a different time. Fear feels like life and death to your amygdala. This is because for our ancient ancestors, it was life and death. One false move could mean you ended up as breakfast.

Now things get interesting because if the amygdala responds to internal threats (yucky thoughts, feelings, memories, etc.) as if they are external threats, you have a narrow range of options. Hence the danger part of crises.

We humans have many other grey matter dedicated to problem-solving, connecting with other people, and discovering behaviors that bring satisfaction and fulfillment. We want to be able to access these responses in a crisis. To do that, we need to send messages to our amygdala that we are OK so we can go on and learn what works vs. running, freezing, or fleeing. We don't want to be giving our amygdala the message to do its thing. We want it to be still doing its thing and allow opportunities for us to engage with the world.

I will show you how to use the ACT Matrix process to debrief with staff (and by the way, you can do the same thing with students) by shifting to a perspective that allows the amygdala to settle. As you work through the process, you will not be triggering your and anyone else's amygdala. This means more learning and keeping what works while helping staff strengthen their responses to students and others in crisis. They will also learn how to support each other and the power of working together.

Gathering The Tribe

Schools are interesting places. If you are a teacher, you spend most of your day with your students, and very little time is spent with your colleagues. You may run into your administrator or support specialist, and there is the teacher's lounge's refuge, but educators do not typically collaborate in the normal course of the school day.

Recalling that crises are opportunities, this is the time to gather the troops. So before you go in to do a debriefing, the school administration arranges to have those involved in the crisis attend the debriefing. This critically important intervention must set aside a time and place.

Who should attend? Anyone who had anything to do with a crisis. Crises occur outside of school, during school, over the weekend, or at the end of the day. It could have started in a classroom, hallway, bus, or playground. Wherever it took place, staff who witnessed or participated in the event were present. They were all affected. Every effort should be made to have them with you. If it means more than one meeting, that should also be arranged.

You are bringing the community together, which is a rarity other than faculty meetings. If you have ever been to a faculty meeting, there is usually a lot of information discussed. ACT Matrix crisis debriefing is different. You are there to help them settle their amygdalas so they can come together and move forward with the crisis experience.

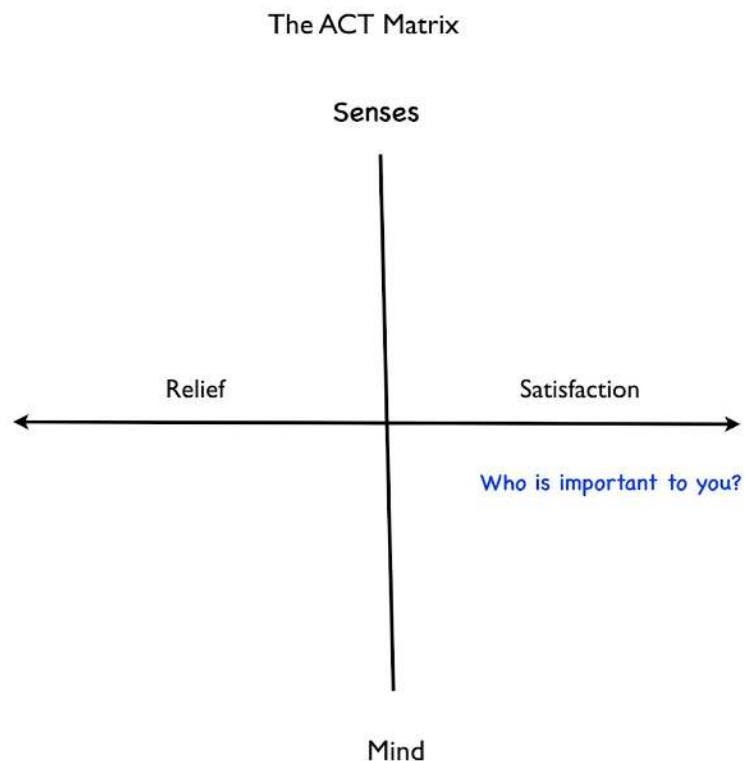
They will soon be back with the students who will need them.

The best way to move forward is to promote your psychological flexibility so you are not activating your own amygdala. Going in with a process like the Matrix gives you the ability to do that. You then know where you are going, and that will surely settle them for the work ahead.

**DO NOT SKIP THIS STEP!**

Read on and follow the outline. With some practice you will be up and running and helping school staff work together to discover what works for them in the situations they find themselves in. You do not have to be the expert to solve their problem. The ACT Matrix assumes that we are not broken so there is nothing to fix. Instead you will help them take what they already know and collaborate toward actions that they will take and try out while supporting each other and their students in the process.

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. In the lower right quadrant is the first question I ask which is "Who's Important to You?"



At the top of the vertical line is the Five Senses. At the bottom is the Mind. On the horizontal, I have Satisfaction over here on the right and Relief on the left. The vertical line is the experiencing line. Information flows in from our five senses and then later shows up in our minds as thoughts, feelings, memories, and urges. The horizontal line indicates 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 these experiences onto the Matrix promotes perspective-taking and leads to workable actions for whatever matters to us over time.

Respectfully Asking for Permission. I 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

I will use words like "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." You then write who's important to you in the lower right. You then write down who they tell you is important to them.

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 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?". I write "Fear" down and whatever they tell me shows up for them or other people in the lower left.

Step 3: Asking about Relief Moves



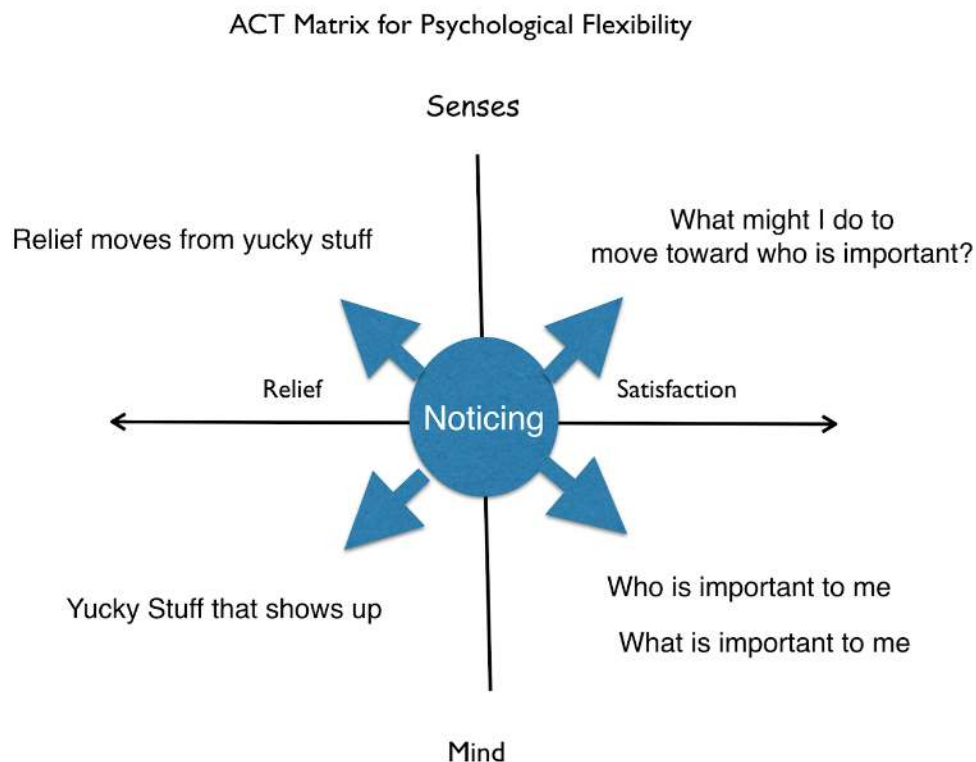
Now I move to the upper left: "Now we go to the upper left quadrant of the diagram. This is where we put behaviors; others can see myself or others doing". These are actions meant to reduce or eliminate the yucky stuff. I continue with, "So if fear shows up, I might run to reduce fear. Everyone does 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?". I will draw arrows from the yucky stuff up to the relief moves they share with me.

#### 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. Can you think of other behaviors you or others might do to move closer to important people? They will go in the upper right.

#### Step 5: Introducing Noticing in the Middle

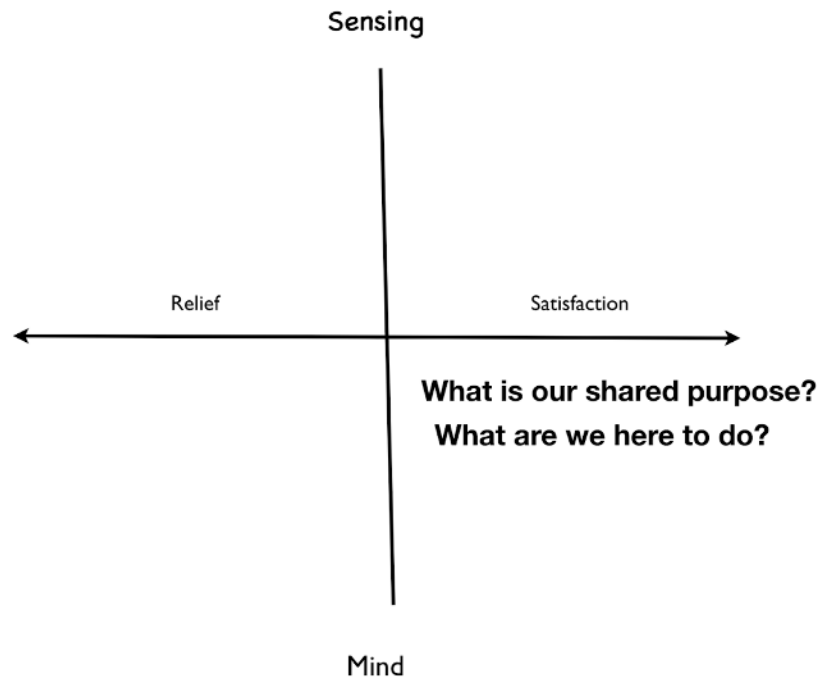
I will now complete the diagram with the point of view: "Now, in the center, we put a circle and write "Noticing". That is, we might have the opportunity to notice who and what's important, yucky stuff, away moves, and toward moves. Do you think you might have an opportunity to notice any of that in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



I have just increased psychological flexibility for each individual in the group. Noticing is nonjudgmental. It helps us to be aware of what we are doing, saying, and feeling. We can see better where our actions are leading us.

Nonjudgmental noticing allows us to shift perspective to our "Observer Self". Noticing is the key to struggling less and accomplishing more. This is one of the major objectives of the debriefing. Starting this way will soothe their amygdalas and allow them to settle in. They will also be participating with you. This is giving them a process and something to do. It will boost mental health in the short term and down the road because it is something they can do on their own and with their students if they choose to use it. We are not there yet because now you will be moving on with the second loop of the Matrix.

Here is how I proceed to the second loop:



### Step 6: Introducing Shared Purpose

I create a second diagram with a different question in the lower right. The question I write is "What is our shared purpose?" I 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? For me, I was asked to do this debriefing with you. What else might we be here for? I will record their responses. If it is not mentioned, I will write the word "Safety" on the diagram. They will quickly get the hang of it and I will say," Great! What are some other shared purposes we might have?"

At some point (if it hasn't already come up), I will also say, "Remember who was important to you in the first diagram? Well, they are still important, right? We can put them here too". We can also put the students since that is the overall mission of who educators serve.

You will want to take your time here. This step is the heart of the work you will be doing, namely, helping them to identify shared purposes. They will be using them to plan and move forward and refer back. Remember that they are with you due to unfortunate and unwelcome events. You want to acknowledge that and promote both flexibility and safety for them as they are with each other. Discussion shared purpose in and of itself is a powerful intervention and something that is usually not done. It will bring them together and encourage participation and collaboration.

#### Step 7: Social Yucky Stuff

Just like I did with the individual Matrix, I 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?". I write these in the lower left. You will now be getting some of what is showing up inside of them around the crisis they have experienced. Fear, frustration, confusion, overwhelmed, understaffed, etc., will show up and I write them in the lower left. We are simply getting what's yucky and putting it on the diagram without comment or judgment.

#### Step 8: Social Relief Moves

Next, I 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?". "For example, fear may show up inside of me, and I might leave," We write these in the upper left. As we have done before, we are writing down relief moves that people do. They also do the in crisis situations, so we want to have them up there.

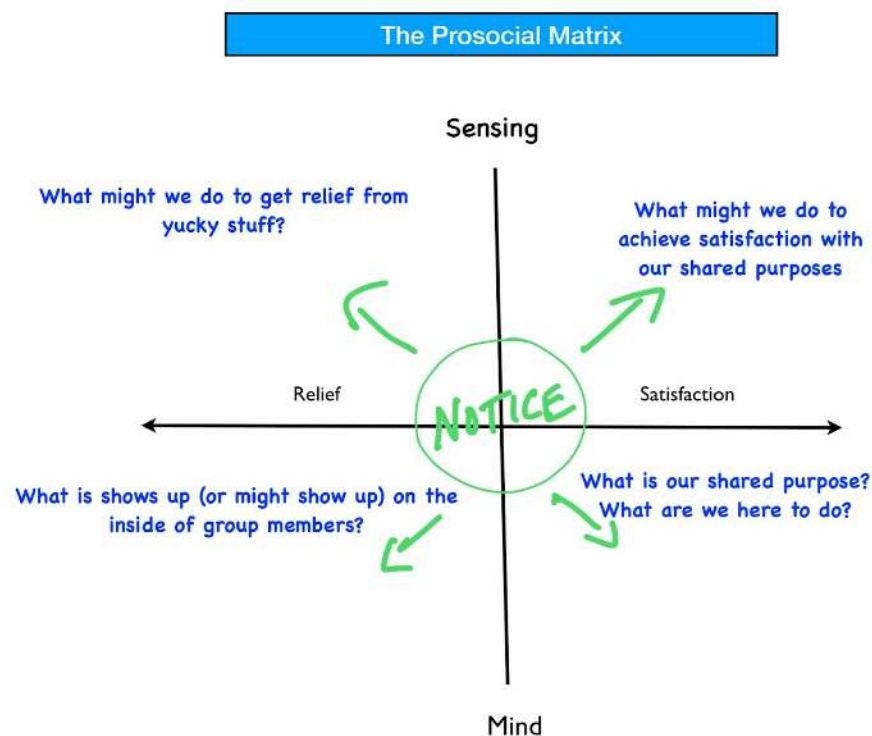
#### Step 9: Shared Purpose Moves

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

At this time, group members will add their share purposes moves. This step is the beginning of planning out how they might move forward. The difference is that they are doing it as a group where everyone participates and has input. I have seen some incredible shared purpose moves from these types of discussions.

#### Step 10: Introducing Noticing again

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



This completes the second loop of the matrix. This loop is made to promote psychological safety. Psychological safety is the feeling of being accepted and respected within the group. The feeling that group members “have my back” and that it is okay to speak up, disagree and share without fear of judgment. 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.

When staff are psychologically flexible and feel psychologically safe, they are in a much better position to go on and influence students in ways that work. They will be better able to work together and help each other out.

Noticing and Workability

The ACT Matrix is a model of Workability.

When individuals and groups notice workability, they are looking for actions that work to move them toward their individual and group goals.

Workability does not deal with judgments about right and wrong or being correct. It has to do with noticing one's actions and the consequences that follow.

When individuals and groups adopt the workability perspective, they can predict and control their own behavior better. They learn what works to get them where they want to go.

So the Big Question is:

Is what I'm doing working to get me where I want to go? Is it working for who's important to me? Is it working for the shared purpose of what we are trying to achieve?

Perspective-taking is critical to developing a solid sense of self, empathy, and problem-solving.

Sorting for Psychological Flexibility

I have now set a productive context so we can continue the debriefing. I will use the Matrix for individuals and the group to share the crisis story and how they can move forward. I will facilitate this through something called sorting.

Once I have shown both "loops" of the Matrix, I have set up the diagram and will use it to help them sort their experiences.

Each of us carries a story of how we think things are or how they came to be. Now that story is just that, something we tell ourselves. In life, especially in crises, we want to pay careful attention to what is happening around us and with those we spend time with. To do this, we need to be noticing our five senses experiences so we can tell if we are on track or if we need to make adjustments. If we pay more attention to what is happening inside of us (the story) we have less information to work from. And if we get hijacked by our amygdala, we risk of under-reacting, over-reacting, or looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

Enter sorting. As the group continues the conversation, I listen to what they are saying and then I ask, "Hey, where would you put that up on the Matrix?" They and I then pause, look at the diagram and respond. The pausing and responding are important, not where they think it goes. I want them to go inside themselves and sort. What they are doing when they are doing the sorting is getting some perspective on themselves and the story. They are now looking at things from a more backed-up perspective. They are using sorting to cue up their Observer Self.

So if someone says they feel angry, I will say, "Oh, so where would you put anger up here on the diagram?" Likewise, if someone says they went home and spent time with their family, I would say, "Cool, so where would you put "spending time with my family" up on the diagram?"

So the simple way to promote psychological flexibility with staff is to have them sort their experiences, thoughts, and feelings into the Matrix. Sorting builds up each person's Observer Self so they can benefit from the information from their senses and minds. From this point of view, they come up with new behaviors they can try out (or notice if the ones they use are working/not working)

Each person must sort for themselves. You do not sort for them. They are free to put things wherever they want.

## Wrapping Up



Once you have gone through the two loops and introduced noticing, sorting, and workability, you have provided them with powerful tools they can use moving forward. Doing debriefing with the ACT Matrix is a highly effective way to engage individuals and groups in learning what works for valued ends. They are ready for the next crisis or unwelcome situation that comes their way.

They can also offer support and encouragement to each other. Shared purpose moves will include planning, supporting, and monitoring them. Giving and receiving feedback is welcome. And now, they also have a process and point of view that they can use in any situation.

They can also see how the Matrix process would help their students. Exciting things happen when staff and schools have students and staff do Matrix work together!

I will leave you with something else. Helping staff promote their psychological flexibility and safety allows them to do things for the important people in their lives (students, families, friends, etc.). That is always a good thing to do.

Here's More!

Free weekly webinars at Matrix Talk at Crowdcast

<https://www.crowdcast.io/matrixtalk>

[ACT Matrix School and Social Emotional Learning Resources.](#)

Source Resources for the ACT Matrix

Polk, K.L., Schoendorff, B., Wilson, K.G. 2014. The ACT Matrix: A New Approach to Building Psychological Flexibility Across Settings and Populations, New Harbinger

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*The Matrix For Education Starter Manual: Developing Psychological Flexibility For Learners, Educators and Parents* available through “Matrix Goes To School” website (free download) [philtenaglia.com](http://philtenaglia.com)

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