

# ACTing on Persistent Pain

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*Caring for Health*

Office régional de la  
santé de Winnipeg  
*À l'écoute de notre santé*

# Acknowledgement of Indigenous Ancestral and Territorial Lands

Health services across Manitoba are provided in facilities located on the original lands of First Nations, Inuit, and on the national homeland of the Red River Métis Nation.

Manitoba's health authorities respect that First Nations treaties were made on these territories, acknowledge harms and mistakes, and we dedicate ourselves to collaborate in partnership with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in the spirit of reconciliation.

# Ground Rules

- Please be respectful and remember confidentiality
- Please do not record today's presentation
- Please put your cellphones on silent
- There will be opportunities for questions during the presentation
- Make yourself comfortable- feel free to move, stretch and stand up as needed
- Your participation in practical exercises is optional. We ask that you not disturb others.

■ If you would like to download a copy of the presentation, along with handouts containing relevant information and practical exercises, you may do so at:

<https://www.panamclinic.org/patients-visitors/patient-resources>

# Outline

- Internal Barriers to Valued Living
- The Nature of Suffering
- The ACT Model of Treatment
- The ACT Matrix Model
- ACT Strategies
- Values and Committed Action

# Internal Barriers to Valued Living

- Struggling with Pain and Symptoms
- Setting unrealistically high standards
- Negative thoughts/Self-criticism
- Intolerance of Uncertainty
- Over-responsibility for others/Self-neglect
- Excessive need for approval
- Anxiety/Worry
- Fear/Avoidance
- Sadness/Depression
- Grief
- Guilt
- Shame

# ACT Model : Assumptions

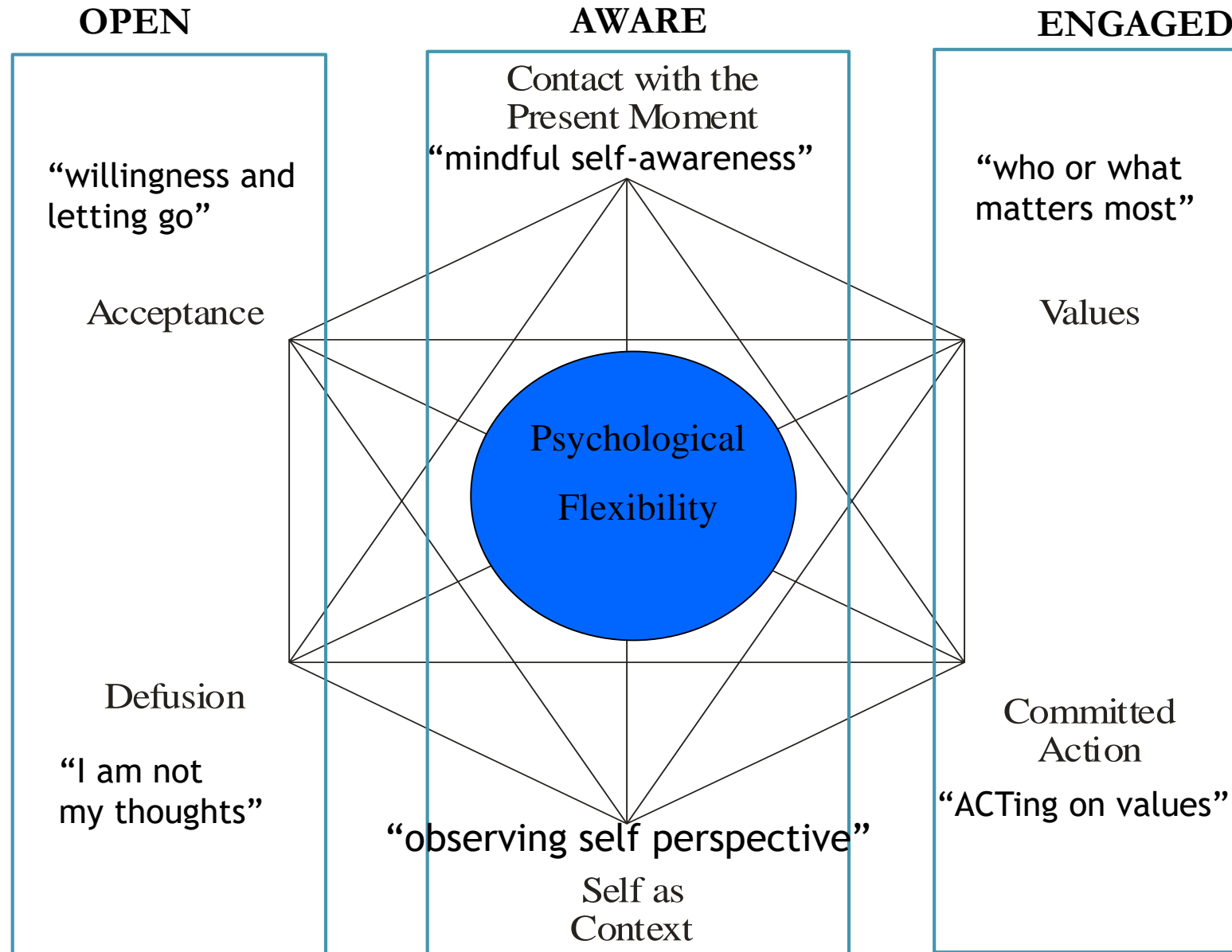
- ▶ Human Suffering is Universal
- ▶ Our Culture/Society has a general aversion to present moment experiences that are unpleasant but inevitable and necessary
- ▶ Our Culture/Society tends to approach the human body from a mechanistic perspective
- ▶ Rule of Private Events
- ▶ Persistent pain and other internal sensations, thoughts, and emotions are inevitable and can have adaptive features

# ACT Model of Suffering

- ▶ Human suffering is determined by how we relate to our internal experiences, often by over-identifying with our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations
- ▶ Distressing thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations are often seen as dangerous to our well-being
- ▶ Efforts to avoid/escape distressing thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations are often seen as the primary strategy for improving our life
- ▶ Experiential avoidance leads to behavioral avoidance - we fail to engage in actions that are consistent with what really matters to us



# The ACT Model of Treatment



# ACT for Persistent Pain

- ▶ Describe previous attempts to control/avoid pain and how they have not worked
- ▶ Undermine attachment, and engender willingness, to abandon unworkable attempts to control/avoid pain
- ▶ Help people open up to alternative ways of responding to pain and live in accordance with chosen values (i.e., Psychological Flexibility)

## **ACT for Persistent Pain**

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”

## Case Study: Lauren

Lauren, age 54, has a history of diffuse body pain that was diagnosed by a rheumatologist as fibromyalgia syndrome. Her analgesic medications have only been moderately effective, and she continues to experience pain, fatigue, and physical limitations across a number of life domains. At her first appointment, she stated that she is frustrated with how her symptoms are impacting her. She also said that she feels irritable, guilty, worthless, and hopeless about her future. Lauren separated from her spouse of 32 years recently and described the relationship as emotionally abusive. She has two grown children and two young grandchildren and wishes she could spend more time with them. She stopped working as a legal assistant, something that she really enjoyed, about 5 years ago, and indicated that her quality of life has diminished significantly, plus she criticizes herself and feels sad about not working. Although she has four siblings, she is the one who spends the most time taking her parents to their appointments and helping them with whatever they need. She figures that she should do this because she is no longer working. She spends the rest of her time at home binge watching Netflix and is disconnected from activities that she enjoyed in the past, including walking, dining out, and socializing with friends.

# Lauren's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?

What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?



What interferes with my life functioning?  
What hurts inside? (Thoughts-Feelings-Sensations)

Who or what matters most to me?

## Inside World

# Lauren's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?

What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?



Pain, fatigue, frustrated, guilty, worthless, hopeless, irritable, sad, lonely, self-critical

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What hurts inside? (Thoughts-Feelings-Sensations)

Who or what matters most to me?

## Inside World

# Lauren's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?

medications, rest, take care of my parents, stay quiet during family discussions (don't rock the boat), quit my job, stay home, avoid walking and going out with friends, binge watch Netflix, irritable/short with people I care about

What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?



ME



Pain, fatigue, frustrated, guilty, worthless, hopeless, irritable, sad, lonely, self-critical

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What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?

Away

Toward

ME

Pain, fatigue, frustrated, guilty, worthless, hopeless, irritable, sad, lonely, self-critical

What interferes with my life functioning?  
What hurts inside? (Thoughts-Feelings-Sensations)

Who or what matters most to me?

## Inside World



## Case Study: Bill

Bill is a forty-one-year-old man with chronic back pain and depression. He injured his back lifting a pallet on the job five years ago. He returned to work after a two month leave but found that his pain was too intense for him to continue working. He filed for permanent disability but was denied. Nevertheless, Bill continued to experience pain on a daily basis. He was offered vocational retraining but declined because he didn't feel he could do any type of work.

Bill consulted a surgeon and had a spinal disc fusion that initially helped but eventually left him with even worse pain. He was prescribed opioid medication and now he's dependent upon it and still experiences a lot of pain. Bill describes his pain as a burning, stinging sensation, like someone is putting a needle in his back. Pain sensations radiate down his right leg with associated numbness and tingling. His physician refused to increase his dosage and even recommended that he reduce it. Bill is furious that his doctor isn't helping and feels that none of his doctors have taken good care of him.

Bill spends most of his day sleeping or lying on the sofa, as this provides some relief. He also spends a lot of time in his room watching Netflix or playing video games. He doesn't go out much because upright activity tends to cause pain. He used to go to church with his wife but stopped after having to leave once because of a pain flare-up. Bill's wife complains that he doesn't help around the house and that he's short with her and their kids. They don't have much intimacy anymore as sexual activity increases his pain.

Bill believes his depression is caused by his chronic pain. The more he struggles to control his pain, the more angry and irritable he becomes. He often thinks about the day he hurt his back and whether he could have done something to prevent his injury. He doesn't see much hope that his life will turn around unless the pain is eliminated. He's disappointed in himself for not being able to work and he feels bad when he yells at his kids for no good reason. More than once, he's thought about suicide because he feels his family would be better off without him.

# Bill's Pain Matrix

Outside World

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Inside World

# Bill's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?

What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?



ME



Back Pain – burning, stinging, “needle”, numbness, tingling  
Depression, Anger at physician  
Self-blame, disappointed in myself,  
Loneliness  
Stigma about opioid use  
Thoughts of suicide

What interferes with my life functioning?  
What hurts inside? (Thoughts–Feelings–Sensations)

Who or what matters most to me?

## Inside World

# Bill's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?

What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?

Take opioid medication  
Turned down vocational retraining  
Spends a lot of time sleeping or lying on sofa, watching Netflix, playing video games  
Avoid going out – lost touch with friends  
No intimacy with wife  
Stopped going to church  
Short with/yell at my wife and kids

ME



Back Pain – burning, stinging, “needle”, numbness, tingling  
Depression, Anger at physician  
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## Inside World

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Away

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Who or what matters most to me?

## Inside World

# Reframing the Problem

- ▶ Trying to control how you feel is the problem, not the solution
- ▶ You aren't hopeless, but the strategies you've been taught are
- ▶ Which are you going to believe, your mind or your experience?
- ▶ If you gain control of your feelings, you lose control of your life
- ▶ Controlling your feelings is like holding a beach ball under water. When you're doing it, you can't focus on anything else
- ▶ A rabbit must stop running before it can figure out if it's safe
- ▶ Going to the dentist hurts, but it hurts a lot more if you don't go
- ▶ It's not about feeling "good", it's about getting good at "feeling"

## Events or Situations in Bill's Life

Bill suffered an on the job injury	A	C
Bill experiences back pain on a daily basis	A	C
Bill was denied a disability pension	A	C
Bill refuses to go through vocational retraining	A	C
Bill has thoughts that he has too much pain to work at any job	A	C
Bill had an unsuccessful back surgery that left him with more pain	A	C
Bill spends a lot of time on the sofa to control the pain	A	C
Bill feels angry and irritable when in pain	A	C
Bill yells at his children	A	C
Bill doesn't have sexual relations with his wife	A	C
Bill has thoughts that life has given him a raw deal	A	C
Bill doesn't exercise regularly because of the pain	A	C

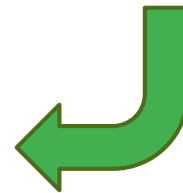
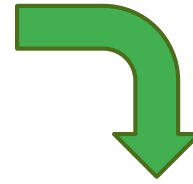
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# Break





# DIGGING



## IMAGINE

Imagine that you're placed in a field, wearing a blindfold, and you're given a little tool bag to carry. You're told that your job is to run around this field, blindfolded. That is how you're supposed to live life. And so you do what you are told. Now, unbeknownst to you, in this field there are a number of widely spaced, fairly deep holes. You don't know that at first - you're naive. So you start running around and sooner or later you fall into a large hole. You feel around and sure enough, you can't climb out and there are no escape routes you can find. Probably what you do in such a predicament is take the tool bag you were given and see what is in there, maybe there is something you can use to get out of the hole.



## SUPPOSE

Now suppose that the only tool in the bag is a shovel. So you dutifully start digging, but pretty soon you notice that you're not out of the hole. So you try big shovelfuls, or little ones, or throwing the dirt far away or not. But still you are in the hole. All this effort and all this work, and oddly enough the hole has just gotten bigger and bigger. Isn't that your experience? It may take some time to realize that digging is not a way out of the hole - digging is what makes the holes. So maybe the whole agenda is hopeless - you can't dig your way out, that just digs you in.

# HAVING A THOUGHT VS. BUYING A THOUGHT

Our thoughts only have as much power as we give them. Notice how changing the label of a thought can change how that thought makes you feel. This exercise again helps us to gain some distance from our thoughts. We can have thoughts – but we don't necessarily have to “buy” our thoughts.

**"I am..." vs. "I am having the thought..." vs. "I notice I am having the thought..."**

**"I am** worthless."

This is a powerful, self-defining thought.

This labels the *thought as the truth*.

**"I am having the thought** that I am worthless."

This loses its self-defining power over you.

It is now simply a *thought*.

**"I notice I am having the thought** that I am worthless."

This creates an even greater distance between you and the thought.

*What was it like to make the change in that language? What happened to how you felt about the situation?*

We can learn to separate from our thoughts – “Here is me.... And here are my thoughts. I am not my thoughts. So thoughts are not necessarily the truth. In fact, they are rarely the absolute truth.” By gaining this distance from our unhelpful thoughts, we can decrease our suffering in very real ways.

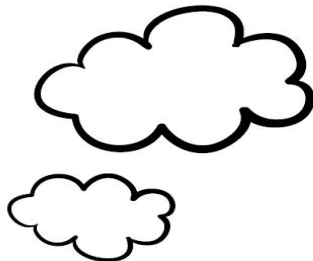
# YOU ARE THE SKY

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Our thoughts and feelings are like the weather. Some are really black, thick clouds that might even have thunder and lightning in them. Some might be rain, snow clouds; or lighter, fluffy clouds. Of course, there is also the sun.

Sometimes we can forget the sky is there, because there are so many clouds in the way – like some times we get so caught up in our thoughts and feelings we lose track of who we are and what matters to us.

The weather changes all the time and no matter how bad it gets, the sky never gets hurt. The sky is still there, behind the clouds, lightning and rain. The sky can hold all the clouds and weather, and still stay the same behind it all.



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**Our thoughts and feelings can change, but no matter what, we are still there. We can learn to be like the sky, making room for all sorts of weather that turns up, and still be ourselves.**

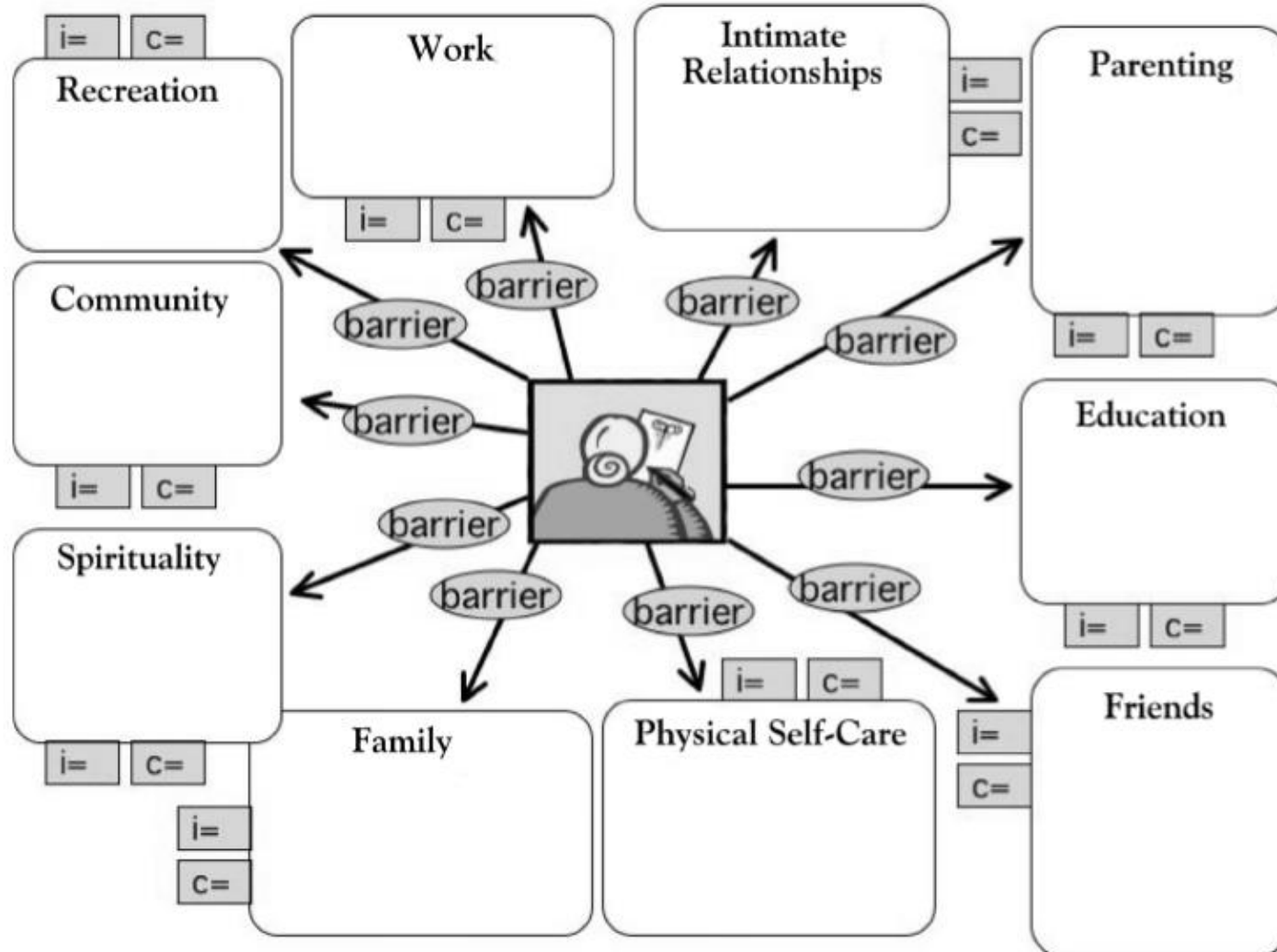
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# Values

- Describe global qualities of ongoing behavior (e.g., hard working, supportive, conscientious, compassionate, open, spiritual, imaginative, etc)
- Are deeply personal
- Create a sense of life meaning, purpose, and direction
- Aspirational (ie, what qualities or strengths do you want to exhibit on an ongoing basis) and
- Motivational

# LIFE COMPASS



# Values: Interventions

- ▶ What do you want your life to stand for?
- ▶ 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday exercise
- ▶ After the Party exercise
  - ▶ What did you worry too much about?
  - ▶ What did you spend too little time doing?
  - ▶ What would you do differently from this day onward?



# Pain and Values: Two Sides of the Coin

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Often the things that matter most to us are things that come with the risk of failure, loss, or physical/emotional discomfort (e.g., relationship, job, promotion, etc.)

Think about an important relationship or valued activity that is very meaningful to you, but lately have been less engaged in, pulling away from, or not taking much action

# Pain and Values: Two Sides of the Coin

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Step 1: One side of index card or paper: write down what valued action you want to take in your relationship or this area of living.

Step 2: Other side of index card: write down what difficult thoughts and feelings (about failure or loss) or physical sensations might show up for you if you start acting toward this value.

Step 3: Now take that card and put it in your pocket, wallet, or purse. For the next week, take it out and ask yourself: “Am I willing to have that card, both sides of it, or do I choose to throw it all away?”



# Pain and Values: Two Sides of the Coin

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## FRONT OF CARD – VALUED ACTION

To be more present and focused when I am with my spouse and children, to listen more and put my phone down

## BACK OF CARD – PAIN/DISCOMFORT

The feeling of anxiety about all of the things that need to get done

The thought “I have so many things on my mind, I need to be alone”

The thought “I can’t waste time playing a game, there is work to be done around here”

# Unwelcome Party Guest

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### My Valued Action Plan

Life Domain	Valued Actions What? Where? Who?	Barriers/Obstacles	Acceptance/Defusion/ Mindfulness Strategies
Family Relationships			
Social Relationships			
Work/Volunteer/ Project Activities			
Recreation/Leisure			
Health/Well-Being			
Personal Growth /Learning			

### My Valued Action Plan

Life Domain	Valued Actions What? Where? Who?	Barriers/Obstacles	Acceptance/Defusion/ Mindfulness Strategies
Family Relationships	Want to be present for my children or grandchildren		
Social Relationships			
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Personal Growth /Learning			

### My Valued Action Plan

Life Domain	Valued Actions What? Where? Who?	Barriers/Obstacles	Acceptance/Defusion/ Mindfulness Strategies
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Social Relationships			
Work/Volunteer/ Project Activities			
Recreation/Leisure			
Health/Well-Being			
Personal Growth /Learning			

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Family Relationships	Want to be present for my children or grandchildren	pain won't allow me to sit at games can't get housework done and play with them too	Recall the unwanted roommate metaphor Be mindful of each activity
Social Relationships			
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Personal Growth /Learning			

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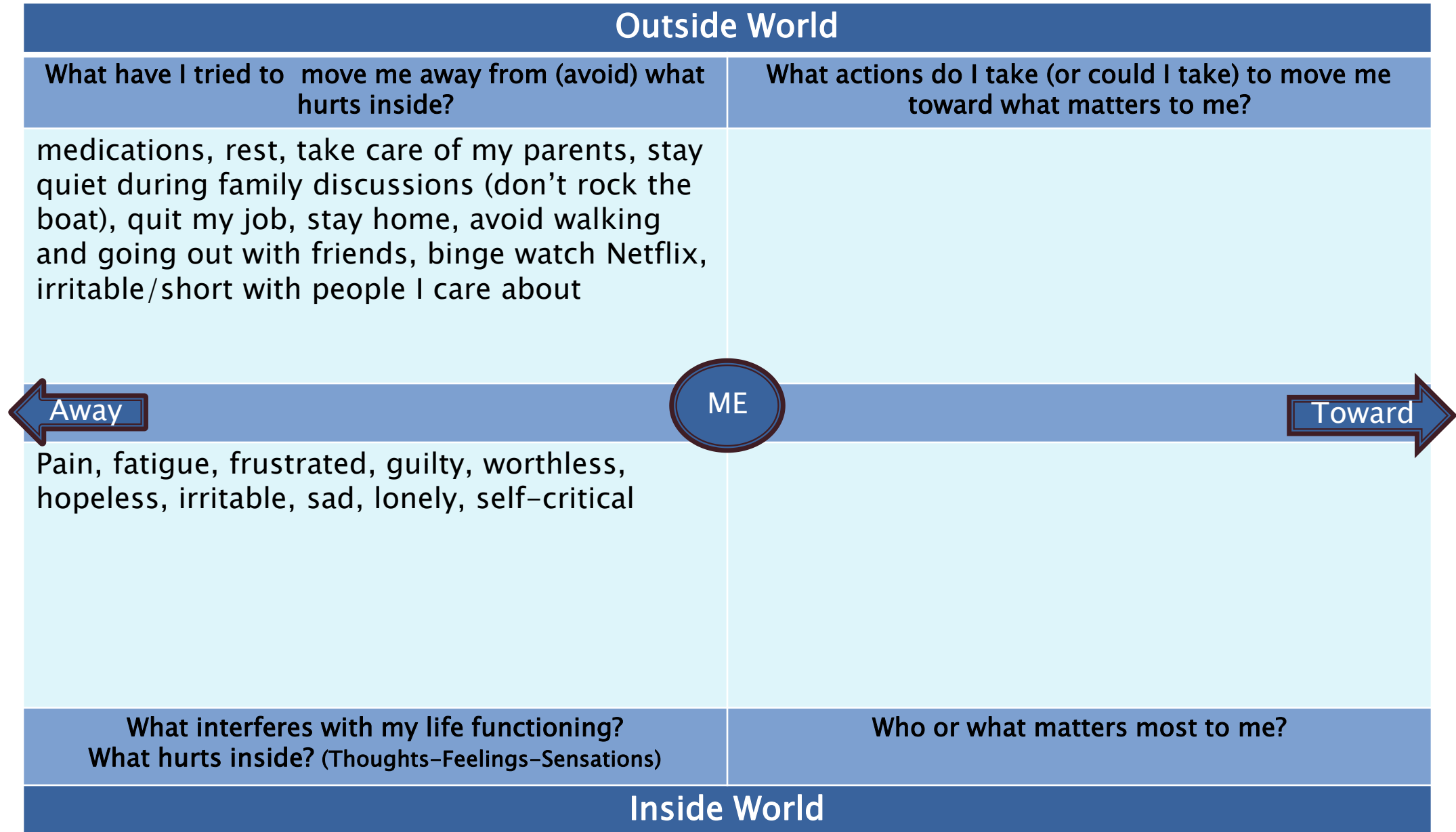
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Personal Growth /Learning			



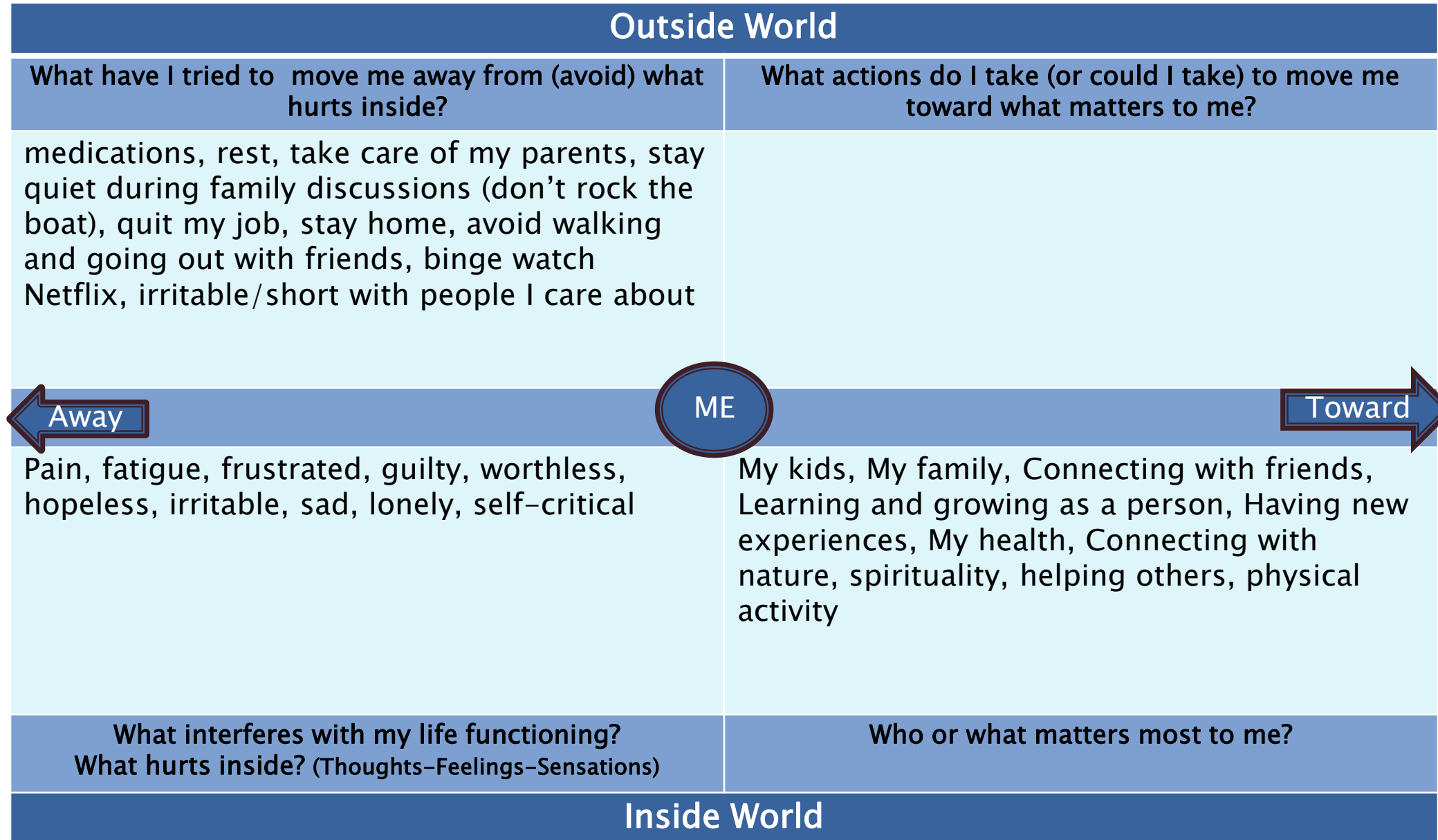
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Health/Well-Being	Begin a regular walking routine or join an aqua fitness class	Pain, self-conscious of appearance, have to find a place to go, too many responsibilities	Two Side of a Coin: Ask myself whether avoiding short term discomfort is more important than my long term health and well being
Personal Growth /Learning			

# Lauren's Pain Matrix



# Lauren's Pain Matrix



# Lauren's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?

medications, rest, take care of my parents, stay quiet during family discussions (don't rock the boat), quit my job, stay home, avoid walking and going out with friends, binge watch Netflix, irritable/short with people I care about

What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?

Spend more time with my friends, Spend more time with my grandkids, Take a course, Join a scrapbooking club, Start going for walks in the forest, Let my family know that I need help, Continue to **help** caring for my parents, Do some self-care activities, volunteer



Pain, fatigue, frustrated, guilty, worthless, hopeless, irritable, sad, lonely, self-critical

My kids, My family, Connecting with friends, Learning and growing as a person, Having new experiences, My health, Connecting with nature, spirituality, helping others, physical activity

What interferes with my life functioning?  
What hurts inside? (Thoughts-Feelings-Sensations)

Who or what matters most to me?

## Inside World

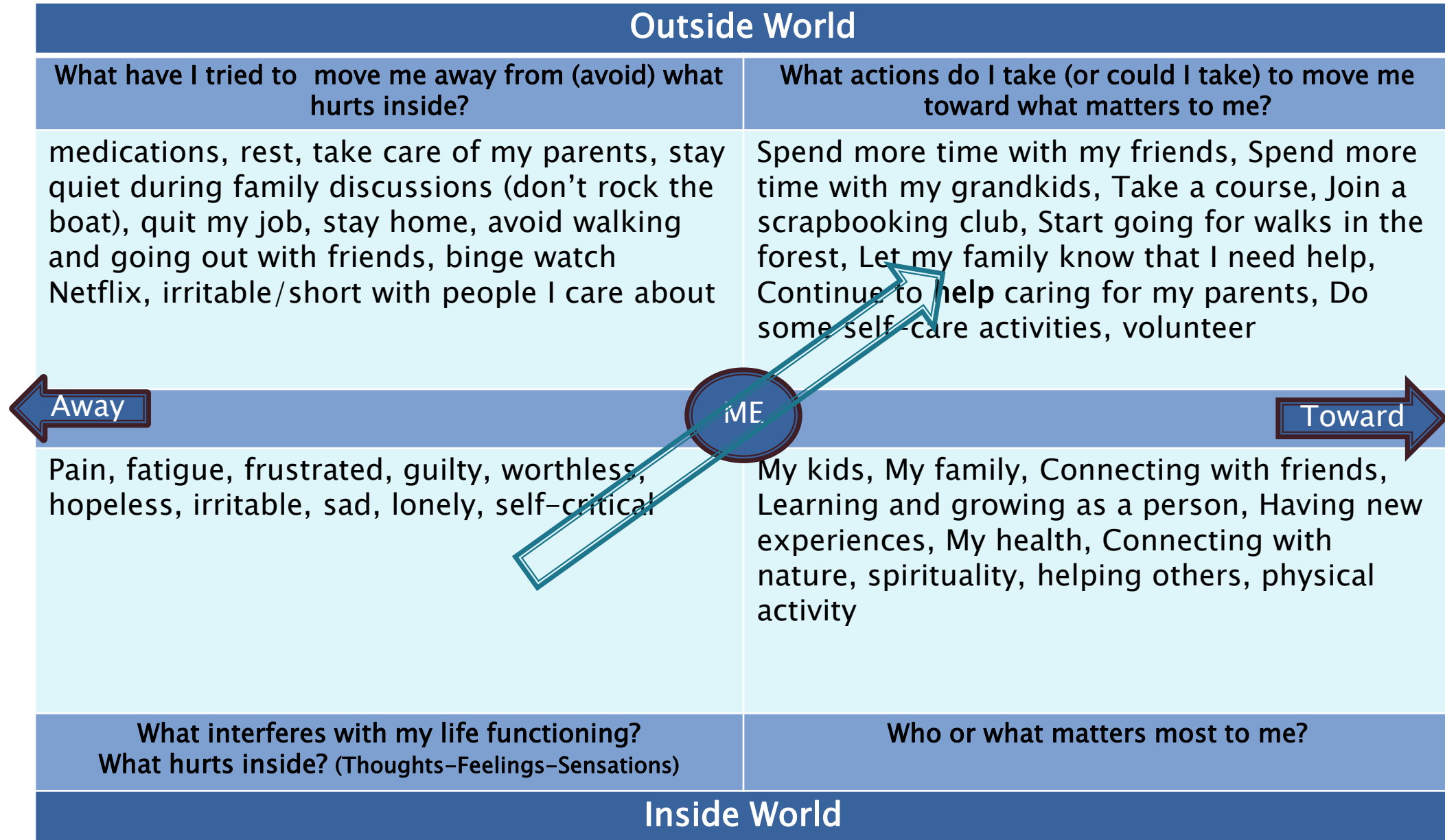
# Lauren's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

<p>What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?</p>	<p>What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?</p>
<p>medications, rest, take care of my parents, stay quiet during family discussions (don't rock the boat), quit my job, stay home, avoid walking and going out with friends, binge watch Netflix, irritable/short with people I care about</p>	<p>Spend more time with my friends, Spend more time with my grandkids, Take a course, Join a scrapbooking club, Start going for walks in the forest, Let my family know that I need help, Continue to <b>help</b> caring for my parents, Do some self-care activities, volunteer</p>
<p>← Away</p>	<p>ME → Toward</p>
<p>Pain, fatigue, frustrated, guilty, worthless, hopeless, irritable, sad, lonely, self-critical</p>	<p>My kids, My family, Connecting with friends, Learning and growing as a person, Having new experiences, My health, Connecting with nature, spirituality, helping others, physical activity</p>
<p>What interferes with my life functioning? What hurts inside? (Thoughts-Feelings-Sensations)</p>	<p>Who or what matters most to me?</p>

## Inside World

# Lauren's Pain Matrix



# Bill's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?

Take opioid medications  
Turned down vocational retraining  
Spends a lot of time sleeping or lying on sofa, watching Netflix, playing video games  
Avoid going out – lost touch with friends  
No intimacy with wife  
Stopped going to church  
Short with/yell at my wife and kids

What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?



Back Pain – burning, stinging, “needle”, numbness, tingling  
Depression, Anger at physician  
Self-blame, disappointed in myself, Loneliness  
Stigma about opioid use  
Thoughts of suicide

What interferes with my life functioning?  
What hurts inside? (Thoughts–Feelings–Sensations)

Who or what matters most to me?

## Inside World

# Bill's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?

Take opioid medications  
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 Depression, Anger at physician  
 Self-blame, disappointed in myself, Loneliness  
 Stigma about opioid use  
 Thoughts of suicide

My wife and kids  
 Being a good father  
 Being a good communicator  
 Connecting with friends  
 Helping others  
 Being able to work  
 Taking better care of my health

What interferes with my life functioning?  
 What hurts inside? (Thoughts–Feelings–Sensations)

Who or what matters most to me?

## Inside World



# Bill's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?	What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?
Take opioid medications Turned down vocational retraining Spends a lot of time sleeping or lying on sofa, watching Netflix, playing video games Avoid going out – lost touch with friends No intimacy with wife Stopped going to church Short with/yell at my wife and kids	Being intimate with my wife Helping kids with schoolwork/sports Call my friends to talk/get together Start going for a walk Let my family know that I need help Volunteering Look into vocational retraining options



Back Pain – burning, stinging, “needle”, numbness, tingling Depression, Anger at physician Self-blame, disappointed in myself, Loneliness Stigma about opioid use Thoughts of suicide	My wife and kids Being a good father Being a good communicator Connecting with friends Helping others Being able to work Taking better care of my health
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What interferes with my life functioning? What hurts inside? (Thoughts–Feelings–Sensations)	Who or what matters most to me?
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## Inside World

# Bill's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?	What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?
<p>Take opioid medications            Turned down vocational retraining            Spends a lot of time sleeping or lying on sofa, watching Netflix, playing video games            Avoid going out - lost touch with friends            No intimacy with wife            Stopped going to church            Short with/yell at my wife and kids</p>	<p>Being intimate with my wife            Helping kids with schoolwork/sports            Call my friends to talk/get together            Start going for a walk            Let my family know that I need help            Volunteering            Look into vocational retraining options</p>
<p>← <b>Away</b></p> <p>Back Pain - burning, stinging, "needle", numbness, tingling            Depression, Anger at physician            Self-blame, disappointed in myself, Loneliness            Stigma about opioid use            Thoughts of suicide</p>	<p><b>ME</b> → <b>Toward</b></p> <p>My wife and kids            Being a good father            Being a good communicator            Connecting with friends            Helping others            Being able to work            Taking better care of my health</p>
<p>What interferes with my life functioning?            What hurts inside? (Thoughts-Feelings-Sensations)</p>	<p>Who or what matters most to me?</p>

## Inside World

# Bill's Pain Matrix

## Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?	What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?
<p>Take opioid medications            Turned down vocational retraining            Spends a lot of time sleeping or lying on sofa, watching Netflix, playing video games            Avoid going out – lost touch with friends            No intimacy with wife            Stopped going to church            Short with/yell at my wife and kids</p>	<p>Being intimate with my wife            Helping kids with schoolwork/sports            Call my friends to talk/get together            Start going for a walk            Let my family know that I need help            Volunteering            Look into vocational retraining options</p>
<p>← Away</p> <p>Back Pain – burning, stinging, “needle”, numbness, tingling            Depression, Anger at physician            Self-blame, disappointed in myself,            Loneliness            Stigma about opioid use            Thoughts of suicide</p>	<p>ME →</p> <p>My wife and kids            Being a good father            Being a good communicator            Connecting with friends            Helping others            Being able to work            Taking better care of my health</p> <p>→ Toward</p>
<p>What interferes with my life functioning?            What hurts inside? (Thoughts-Feelings-Sensations)</p>	<p>Who or what matters most to me?</p>

## Inside World

# Questions?



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Health Authority  
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Office régional de la  
santé de Winnipeg  
*À l'écoute de notre santé*

# Thank you!



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Winnipeg Regional  
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