

Mindfulness of Thought

Our thoughts are often the source of our uncomfortable feelings. When troublesome thoughts decrease, our bodies relax and we feel less anxious and less depressed. Also, as in the previous chapter, when our bodies relax, our thoughts can relax too. In addition, we problem-solve better and are more likely to believe positive thoughts. Like our emotions, we can both observe and accept our thoughts, instead of fighting them. More than likely you have heard about the positive qualities of mindfulness. It is a mental state in which you are aware of thoughts, senses, actions, or motivations. Without always recognizing it, you probably engage in mindful activities every day even if only for a few seconds. While mindfulness has been a way of life for many centuries in Eastern culture and essential to the path of enlightenment, it has only recently become commonplace in the Western world. Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) is often credited with integrating Mindfulness into Western society.

EXERCISE

Observing Thoughts

Read the following script or listen to the second free recording, "Observing Thoughts."

Purposefully begin to think about something that you have been worried about and that you have wanted to stop thinking about [pause]. Observing the thoughts that are going on in your mind [pause]. From here on out, don't try to think and don't try to not think. Instead, be a passive observer by just noticing the thoughts that are going on in your mind without judgment [pause]. You may be inclined to try to think or you may be inclined to try to put the thoughts out of your mind. Do neither. Letting go of all effort except to just observe and accept any thoughts that go through your mind. Observing these thoughts almost as if you're an outsider looking in, almost as if you're watching cars pass by or birds flying by.

What was your experience?

Were you trying *not* to think? If so, consider the metaphors in the previous chapter, ask your therapist for more metaphors, or read the therapists' guide for more metaphors. Then reread the script, remember the essence of it, and observe and accept your thoughts accordingly. Give it time. Consider setting a timer for a minute. If this didn't ease your thoughts, the next exercise probably will.

Every thought that we have is either a new thought or a repeat thought. Repeat thoughts are thoughts that we've had before and new thoughts are thoughts that we have for the first time. While every worry is a new thought once, most worried thoughts are repeat thoughts because we think of them several times before we put them to rest.

If just observing your thoughts automatically frees you of unwanted thoughts, there is no need for you to go to the next exercise at this moment. However, you may find it helpful in the future if observation and acceptance alone are of limited effectiveness. Listen to the free recording "Labeling Thoughts" or read the next exercise. When using the script, it's best to read it first, remember the essence of the instructions, close your eyes, and then apply it.

EXERCISE**Mindful Labeling of Thoughts**

Label each thought that you have as being either "new" or "repeat": "repeat" if you've ever had the thought before, "new" if it's a new or unique thought. If you're not certain, don't get stuck on deciding; rather label it "new" or "pass." If you're alone, label aloud. Purposefully bring up something you've been worried about [pause]. Once you begin worrying, just observe the thoughts as if you're an outsider looking in [pause]. After each thought, label the thought as being "new" or "repeat" starting now. Do this for at least a minute or until your mind feels settled.

What did you experience?

The hope is that you felt the futility of your repetitive thoughts in a new way. You've known for some time that your worried thoughts are excessive, useless, and burdensome. When people label each thought as being a "new" or a "repeat" thought, they usually decrease or stop completely within a minute! Sometimes other labels of thoughts are more helpful. Beneath are a few other options. Circle the ones you'd like to try. And consider adding your own labels.

- Helpful, Not Helpful, Neutral

Positive thoughts or problem-solving ideas are helpful, worries are not helpful, and neutral thoughts are neither—e.g., "I'm hungry." Similarly:

- Useful, Useless (or Not Useful), Neutral
- Worry, Other
- Wanted, Unwanted
- Past, Present, Future
- Useful, Silly, Neutral

Next time you practice either mindful acceptance or mindful labeling of your thoughts, you can follow it with a relaxation strategy.

In addition to labeling our thoughts, we can label our emotions. Chapter 11 highlights healthy emotions. When emotions are healthy, we want to accept them. When emotions are not healthy, they are useless and detrimental. Sometimes our emotions are completely healthy, sometimes they are completely unhealthy, and sometimes they are a mix of the two.

Use the following exercise any time you are uncomfortable with your emotions. The hope is that unhealthy emotions will release while healthy emotions persist.

EXERCISE**Labeling Emotion**

Next time you feel an unwanted emotion or discomfort in your body, whether it's a pit in your stomach, a lump in your throat, heaviness in your chest, or something else, try labeling that feeling as "useful" or "useless," or instead "helpful" or "not helpful." Labeling it as "wanted" and "unwanted" can also be helpful.

End with a relaxation or mindfulness exercise.

Self-Monitoring of Observation and Acceptance

We tend to use coping strategies and develop habits more consistently when we self-monitor. The following will help you to keep track of mindful observation and acceptance practices more consistently. Complete this simple monitoring form daily. Under “% of Time Worrying,” place your guess of the percentage of time you spent worrying; a range is okay. Under “% of Time Feeling Unhealthy Emotions,” place your guess of the percentage of time you felt uncomfortable when it wasn’t a healthy response to your situation; a range is okay. Under the remaining categories write one of the following:

Y = did most of the time

N = forgot to do or chose not to do

ST = sometimes; did at least once

NA = not needed (no worries or unwanted emotions, or they were fleeting)

Date	% of Time Worrying	% of Time Feeling Unhealthy Emotions	Observed Thoughts	Labeled Thoughts	Observed Emotions	Labeled Emotions
11/1	70-80%	60%	ST	N	ST	Y

Another way of being mindful of thought is by noticing that what we think affects how we feel. The words we use when we attempt to alleviate tension and anxiety are often words that mean we're fighting anxiety; therefore, sometimes they have the opposite of the calming effect we intend. A very simple and small change in the words we use can make a big difference in the way we feel and the effectiveness of the strategies we use.

EXERCISE**Command, Process or State?**

1. Notice where you feel anxiety in your body now. If you don't feel much at the moment, think about where you feel it in your body when you feel anxious or worried.
2. Focus on that place or places now.
3. Remember these three words:
Relax, Relaxing, Relaxed
4. Soon, I'm going to ask you to close your eyes and say each of these three words aloud (or in your mind if you are in a public place). Pause in between each word while noticing how you feel.
5. Then repeat each of the words in reverse order, continuing to notice how you feel.
6. When you're ready, close your eyes and begin.
7. Which word felt the best? _____

If you are like most people, you didn't pick "relax." Has anyone ever told you to relax and you've found you just want to flip 'em off? Or it just makes you less relaxed? That's because "relax" is a command. Commands create tension and even anxiety. When trying hard to relax or let go unsuccessfully time after time, many people feel hopeless and depressed. Like when we try not to think about blue monkeys (see Chapter 2), when we try too hard to resist our anxiety, at best, it isn't helpful and it usually leaves us frustrated or more anxious. Command words make us try harder than process words do.

"Relaxing" is a process word. Unlike commands, process words do not create tension. It's more natural too, because becoming relaxed is not immediate—it *is* a process. Nothing in nature goes from high to low or fast to stop in an instant. Therefore, process words are much more comfortable. Relaxed is a state of being. It is also not a command, so it is more likely to be helpful than "relax." If you picked "relax," it may have only been because it was first in the list, and it may also only have been the most helpful to you because it was first. So choose either "Relaxing" or "Relaxed" for the next exercise.

Note: Throughout this book, you may notice the use of process words even when they are grammatically incorrect.

Finding Your Most Relaxing Words

If you chose "Relaxing," use the left-hand column. If you chose "Relaxed," use the list on the right.

1. Focusing on the places in your body where you typically feel anxiety.
2. Closing your eyes, say the words below with a pause after each one, noticing which feels best. Then, check the box of the word that felt best to you.

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Calming
<input type="checkbox"/> Softening
<input type="checkbox"/> Releasing | | <input type="checkbox"/> Calm
<input type="checkbox"/> Soft
<input type="checkbox"/> Released |
|--|--|---|

3. Repeat the above instructions with the next two sets of words below.

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loosening
<input type="checkbox"/> Letting go
<input type="checkbox"/> Chillin' | | <input type="checkbox"/> Loose
<input type="checkbox"/> Peaceful
<input type="checkbox"/> Chill (as "I am chill," not "Chill out") |
|--|--|--|

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Breathing
<input type="checkbox"/> Freeing
<input type="checkbox"/> Settling | | <input type="checkbox"/> Light
<input type="checkbox"/> Free
<input type="checkbox"/> Tranquil |
|---|--|--|

4. Below write the three words you checked above. If you'd like, you can add "Relaxing" or "Relaxed" to the list. Alternatively, you can add a word or two of your own.

<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	

5. Read the list above while noticing how you feel. Narrow your favorites down to two or three. Next, close your eyes and think or say those two to three. Check the best one. You may check more than one if you'd like.
6. In the days to come, instead of telling yourself to relax, chill out, calm down, or breathe, use the word or words above when you feel anxious or tense. If you chose states of being (e.g., loose, tranquil) these words *might* be of limited effectiveness while you are anxious or frustrated. If they aren't effective, it may be that they aren't believable. For example, if you are very anxious, "loose" may seem so incongruent with how you feel that it doesn't work. Process words may work best in this situation. So, when you are feeling anxious, if the state-of-being word that you chose isn't working, experiment with the equivalent process word instead (e.g., "loosening" instead of "loose"; "becoming tranquil" instead of "tranquil").
7. Share this idea with the people who are closest to you, particularly if you find them using command words to try to help you. Encourage them to use process words when they notice that you are worried, anxious, or frustrated. When others use commands, translate them into states of being or process words in your mind. So, if someone tells you to "let it go," think in your mind "letting go."