

COMPENDIUM OF ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY METAPHORS

This collection of ACT metaphors was created as a resource for clinicians. Some of these examples also fall under the category of experiential exercises; they were included as they too contain elements of metaphor.

I would appreciate any additions, variations, and corrections, and will add them all in when received. You can address all comments to Colleen Ehrnstrom at cehrnstrom@bouldercbt.com. I will regularly update and post to both the ACBS website (www.contextualpsychology.org) and my personal website (www.actskillsgroup.com).

Metaphors are such an important and beneficial piece of the ACT model. I hope this compendium allows for additional ease in using them.

With respect,

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This edition was completed in July, 2011. I am currently working on dividing these metaphors up into chapters, according to objective or intent.

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Alphabet Soup

Objective: Defusion, Willingness, Values

Visualize together what it might feel like to be served a big bowl of alphabet soup. Most frequently, the client will describe the feeling of warmth that comes with the soup, not only of physical warmth, but also of emotional warmth, a sense of being cared for. Then ask the client to imagine that every letter of the alphabet in that wonderful, warm soup signifies a positive quality that he or she has and invite the client to share a listing of these positive qualities.

Argyle Socks

Objective: Values

Do you care how many people wear argyle socks? Well, what I want you to do is really, really develop a strong belief that college boys have to wear argyle socks. Really feel it in your gut. Really get behind it! (Client: I can't.) Well, really try. Feel overwhelmingly strongly about this. Is it working. (Client: No) Ok, now I want you to imagine that even though you can't make yourself feel strongly about this, you are going to act in ways that make argyle socks important to college students. Let's think of some ways. For instance, you could picket the dormitories that have low percentage of argyle sock wearers. What else? (Client: I could beat up kids not wear them) Great! What else? (Client: I could give away free argyle socks to college students.) Super. And notice something. Although these things may be silly actions, you could easily do them. (Client: And would be known as that stupid guy who wasted his time worrying about argyle socks). Yes, and possibly because of your commitment to it, as the person responsible for bringing argyle socks back into fashion. But also notice this: If you behaved in these ways, no one would ever know that you had no strong feelings about argyle socks at all. All they would see is your footprints...your actions. Now here is a question. If you did this, would you be following a value that says that argyle socks are important? Would you in fact be "importanting" about argyle socks? (Client: Sure.) OK, so what stands between you and acting on the basis of things that you really do hold as important? It can't be feelings if they are not critical even when we are dealing with something so trivial.

Bad Cup

Objective: Defusion

There are things in our language that draw us into needless psychological battles, and it is good to get a sense of how this happens so that we can learn to avoid them. One of the worst tricks language plays on us is in the area of evaluations. For language to work at all, things have to be what we say they are when we're engaging in the kind of talk that is naming and describing. Otherwise, we couldn't talk to each other. If I say, "Here is a cup", I can't then turn around and claim it isn't a cup, but instead is a race car (unless I change the form to a car).

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Now consider what happens with evaluative talk. Suppose a person says, “This is a good cup,” or “This is a beautiful cup”. It sounds the same as if that person were saying, “This is a ceramic cup,” or “This is an 8-ounce cup.” But are they really they same? If we all left the room, this cup is still sitting on the table. If it was a “ceramic cup” before everyone left, it is still a ceramic cup. But is it still a good cup or a beautiful cup? Without anyone to have such opinions, the opinions are gone, because good or beautiful was never in the cup, but instead was in the interaction between the person and the cup. It looks the same, as if “good” is the same kind of description as “ceramic”. Both seem to add information about the cup. The problem is that if you let good be that kind of descriptor, it means that good has to be what the cup is, in the same way that ceramic is. That kind of description can’t change until the form of the cup changes. And what if someone else says, “No, that is a terrible cup!” If I say it is good and you say it is bad, there is a disagreement that seemingly has to be resolved. One side has to win, and one side has to lose; both can’t be right. On the other hand, if “good” is just an evaluation or a judgment, something you’re doing with the cup rather than something that is in the cup, it makes a big difference. Two opposing evaluations can easily coexist. They do not reflect some impossible state of affairs in the world, such as the cup is both ceramic and metallic. Rather, they reflect the simple fact that events can be evaluated as good or bad, depending on the perspective taken. And of course, it is not unimaginable that one person could take more than one perspective. Neither evaluation needs to win out as one concrete fact.

Battlefield

Objective: Willingness

You've been trying to win the war with your mind, with your anxiety, with your urges [add whatever is relevant]. True? (They always say "yes."). Well, ACT is about letting the war roll on while you leave the battlefield.

Beachball

Objective: Willingness

We try to stop thoughts, but that’s impossible. It’s like trying to constantly hold an enormous inflatable beach ball under the water, but it keeps popping up in front of our faces. We can allow the ball to float around us, just letting it be. So rather than stop the thoughts, we can stop fighting them, and let them be, without reacting to them.

Becoming a Lawyer for your Family Traditions

Objective: Defusion

"How has your mind tricked you into taking on the role as a defense lawyer for your family traditions?"

Box Full of Stuff

Objective: Control is the Problem, not the Solution

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Suppose we had this box here. This (put various items in; some nice, some repulsive) is the content of your life. All your programming. There's some useful stuff in here. But there are also some old cigarette butts and trash. Now let's say there are some things in here that are really yucky. Like your first divorce (add specifics to client). That would be like this (blow your nose into a tissue and put it in the box). What would come up?

Client: I'd think of something else.

Ok, so that's this (take item and put in box). What else would come up?

Client: I hate it.

Ok, so that's this (take item and put in box. Depending on client, this sequence can continue for some time). What else?

Client: I've got to get rid of this.

Ok, so that's this (take item and put in box). Do you see what is happening? This box is getting pretty full, and notice that a lot of these items have to do with that first yucky one. Notice that the first piece isn't becoming less important -- it's becoming more and more important. Because your programming doesn't work by subtraction, the more you try to subtract an item, the more you add new items about the old. Now it's true, some of this stuff you can shove back in the corners and you can hardly see it anymore but it's all there. Stuffing things back in the corners is seemingly a logical thing to do. We all do it. Problem is, because the box is you, at some level the box knows, is in contact with, literally up next to, all the bad stuff you've stuffed in the corners. Now, if the stuff that's in the corners is really bad, it's really important that it not be seen. But that means that anything that is related to it can't be seen, so it too has to go into the corner. There are more and more things you can't do. Can you see the cost? It must distort your life. Now the point is not that you need to deliberately pull all the stuff out of the corner -- the point is that healthy living will naturally pull some things out of the corner, and you have the choice either to pull back to avoid it or to let going forward with life open it up.

Bubble in the Road

Objective: Willingness

Imagine that you are a soap bubble. Have you ever seen how a big soap bubble can touch smaller ones and the little ones are simple absorbed into the bigger one? Well, imagine that you are a soap bubble like that and you are moving a long a path you have chosen. Suddenly, another bubble appears in front of you and says, "Stop!" You float there for a few moments. When you move to get around, over, or under that bubble, it moves just as quickly to block your path. Now you have only two choices. You can stop moving in your valued direction, or you can touch the other soap bubble and continue on with it inside you. This second move is what we mean by "willingness". Your barriers are largely feelings, thoughts, memories, and the like. They are really inside you, but they seem to be outside. Willingness is not a feeling or a thought -- it is an action that answers the question the barrier asks: "Will you have me inside you by choice, or will you not? In order for you to take a valued direction and stick to it, you must answer yes, but only you can choose that answer.

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Bullseye

Objective: Committed Action

Living according to your values is like hitting the bullseye in a game of darts.

Chessboard

Objective: Defusion, Self-as-Context

Imagine a chessboard that goes out infinitely in all directions. It's covered with black pieces and white pieces. They work together in teams, as in chess -- the white pieces fight against the black pieces. You can think of your thoughts and feelings and beliefs as these pieces; they sort of hang out together in teams too. For example "bad" feelings (like anxiety, depression, resentment) hang out with "bad" thoughts and "bad" memories. Same thing with the "good" ones. So it seems that the way the game is played is that we select the side we want to win. We put the "good" pieces (Like thoughts that are self-confident, feelings of being in control, etc) on one side, and the "bad" pieces on the other. Then we get up on the back of the black horse and ride to battle, fighting to win the war against anxiety, depression, thoughts about using drugs, whatever. It's a war game. But there's a logical problem here, and that is that from this posture huge portions of yourself are your own enemy. In other words, if you need to be in this war, there is something wrong with you. And because it appears that you're on the same level as these pieces, they can be as big or even bigger than you are -- even though these pieces are in you.

So somehow, even though it is not logical, the more you fight the bigger they get. If it is true that "if you are not willing to have it, you've got it," then as you fight these pieces they become more central to your life, more habitual, more dominating, and more linked to every area of living. The logical idea is that you will knock enough of them off the board that you eventually dominate them -- except that your experience tells you that the exact opposite happens. Apparently, the white pieces can't be deliberately knocked off the board. (Variations: There are an infinite number of pieces in this game. There will always be another game.) So the battle goes on. You feel hopeless, you have a sense that you can't win, and yet you can't stop fighting. If you're on the back of that black horse, fighting is the only choice you have, because the white pieces seem life threatening. Yet living in a war zone is no way to live.

Now let me ask you to think about this carefully. In this metaphor, suppose you aren't the chess pieces. Who are you? (Client: Am I the player?) That may be what you have been trying to be. Notice, though, that a player has a big investment in how this war turns out. Besides, who are you playing against? Some other player? Suppose you're not that either. (Client: Am I the board?)

It's useful to look at it that way. Without a board, these pieces have no place to be. The board holds them. For instance, what would happen if you weren't there to be aware that you thought them? The pieces need you. They cannot exist without you -- but you contain them, they don't contain you. Notice that if you are the pieces, the game is very important; you've got to win, your life depends on it. But if you're the board, it doesn't matter whether the war stops or not. The game may go on, but it doesn't make any difference to the board. As the board, you can see all the pieces, you can hold

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them, you in intimate contact with them; you can watch the war being played out in your consciousness but it doesn't matter. It take no effort.

Follow up: Are you at the piece level or at the board level right now?

Chinese Handcuffs/Finger Trap

Objective: Creative hopelessness

The situation here is something like those "Chinese handcuffs" we played with as kids. Have you ever seen one? It is a tube of woven straw about as big as your index finger. You push both index fingers in, one into each end, and as you pull them back out, the straw catches and tightens. The harder you pull, the smaller the tube gets and the tighter it holds your fingers. You'd have to pull your fingers out of their sockets to get them out by pulling them once they've been caught. Maybe this situation is something like that. Maybe these tubes are like life itself. There is no healthy way to get out of life, and any attempt to do so just restricts the room you have to move. With this little tube, the only way to get some room is to push your fingers in, which makes the tube bigger. That may be hard to do at first, because everything your mind tells you to do casts the issue in terms of "in and out" not "tight and loose". But your experience is telling you that if the issue is "in and out", then things will be tight. Maybe you need to come at this situation from a whole different angle than what your mind tells you to do with your psychological experiences.

Creating the Road Map

Objective: Committed Action

If your value is the compass point by which you want to guide your life's journey, your goals are the road map that can lead you there.

Dead Man's Goals

Objective; Committed Action

Goals that involve getting rid of something or stopping something are called "dead man goals". The only person capable of achieving such goals is a dead man.

Dirty Cup

See Mud in the Glass

Dropping Anchor (Opioid Substitution)

Objective: Willingness, Committed Action

People get into Heroin or Morphine for all kinds of reasons. You can compare it to getting into boating. At first you are given free rides and you like it. Then you get your own boat and you enjoy your trips. But soon you find yourself adrift at sea attacked by pirates. You have to seek shelter in a shark infested archipelago, full of reefs,

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sandbanks, rocks and dangerous currents and things get really unpleasant and very scary.

The sensible thing to do now is to throw in your anchor (which is a good metaphor for the Methadone substitution program). You are still in the same territory but for now you steadied the boat and you are safe from running aground, drowning and being eaten by sharks.

Remember, at that point there is nothing wrong with that sea anchor (Methadone). Lifting it (reducing/stopping) will not by itself be of benefit to you. You are not making any progress by setting yourself adrift again in those dangerous waters. In this situation the anchor is not your problem, it is your salvation.

But over time you will want to move on. So you think about where to go from here, looking for a safe direction and a worthwhile goal.

Once you have made up your mind where you want to go, you plot a course out of the treacherous waters. Now your anchor has turned into a hindrance and lifting it (i.e. getting off the Methadone) will set you free to move towards the goals you have chosen according to your deeply held values.

Emperor Moth

Objective: Willingness

A man found a cocoon of an emperor moth. He took it home so that he could watch the moth come out of the cocoon. On the day a small opening appeared, he sat and watched the moth for several hours, just watching as the moth struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared to have gotten as far as it could. It just seemed stuck.

Then the man, in his kindness, decided to help the moth. So he took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon. The mother emerged easily, but it had a swollen body and small shriveled wings. The man continued to watch. He expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and open out to be able to support the body. Neither happened! The little moth spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly.

What the man in his kindness and haste didn't understand was this: in order for the moth to fly, it needed to experience the restricting cocoon and the painful struggle as it emerged through the tiny opening. This was a necessary part of a process to force fluid from the body and into the wings so that the moth would be ready for flight once it achieved freedom from the cocoon. Freedom and flight would only come after allowing painful struggle. By depriving the moth of struggle, the man deprived the moth of health.

Expanding Balloon

Objective: Willingness and Commitment

Think of yourself as the expanding balloon in this Expanding Balloon Metaphor. At the edge of the balloon is a zone of growth, where the same question keeps being asked: "Are you big enough to have this?" No matter how big you get, there's always more "big" to get, and the same question keeps being asked. When an issue presents itself, you say yes or no. If you say no, you get smaller. If you say yes, you get bigger. If you keep answering yes, it does not necessarily get any easier, because the issue that

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shows up may seem just as difficult in relative terms. It does become more habitual, however, and your experience provides a reservoir of strength. If a difficult problem arises, you might think you could say, “No, I don’t want that problem to be next,” but life presents each new issue as your situation evolves, and it may not be possible to choose the sequence of the challenges. If you hit an issue you refuse to deal with, usually you have to distort your life around that issue until it is faced.

Feedback Screech

Objective: Creative hopelessness

You know that horrible feedback screech that a public address system sometimes makes? It happens when a microphone is positioned too close to a speaker. Then when a person on stage makes the least little noise, it goes into the microphone; the sound comes out the speakers amplified and then back into the mike, a little bit louder than it was the first time it went in, and at the speed of sound and electricity it gets louder and louder until in split seconds it’s unbearably loud. Your struggles with your thoughts and emotions are like being caught in the middle of a feedback screech. So what do you do? You do what anyone would. You try to live your life (whispering) very quietly, always whispering, always tiptoeing around the stage, hoping that if you are very, very quiet there won’t be any feedback. (Normal voice) You keep the noise down in a hundred ways: drugs, alcohol, avoidance, withdrawal, and so on (Use items that fits the client’s situation.) The problem is that this is a terrible way to live, tiptoeing around. You can’t really live without making noise. But notice that in this metaphor, it isn’t how much noise you make that is the problem. It’s the amplifier that’s the problem. Our job here is not to help you live your life quietly, free of all emotional discomfort and disturbing thoughts. Our job is to find the amplifier and take it out of the loop.

Finding a Place to Sit

Objective: Defusion

It is as if you needed a place to sit, and so you began describing a chair. Let’s say you gave a really detailed description of a chair. It’s a grey chair, and it has a metal frame, and it’s covered in a fabric, and it’s a very sturdy chair. OK. Now can you sit in that description.

Client: No

Here’s the thing, and check your own experience: Hasn’t your mind been telling you things like “The world is this way, and that way and your problem is this and that, et cetera?” Describe, describe. Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. And all the while you’re getting tired. You need a place to sit. And your mind keeps handing you ever more elaborate descriptions of chairs. Then it says to you, “Have a seat.” Descriptions are fine, but what we are looking for here is an experience, not a description of an experience. Minds can’t deliver experience, they only blab to us about our experience elsewhere. So we’ll let your mind describe away, and in the meantime, you and I will look for a place to sit.

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Fishhook

Objective: Willingness, Forgiveness

Your feelings about this person/situation is like having a fish on a hook. As long as the person/situation is there in front of you, you can see that he/she/it is wriggling and in pain. But the only way to make sure that he/she/it stays on that fishhook is to have yourself on that fishhook too, between the fishhook and the person who is hooked. The therapeutic question is, Is it worth it?

Fish in the Water

Objective: Defusion

We're the fish, and language is the water. How would a fish know if they were wet if they'd never been out of the water? Jumping out of the water helps you to notice the water, but we all still must swim in it.

Fish Swimming in Our Thoughts

Objective: Defusion

Fish swim in water naturally. They don't "know" they are under water, they just swim. Thinking is like this for human beings Thoughts are our water. We are so immersed in them that we are hardly aware they are there. Swimming in our thoughts is our natural state. You can't take a fish out of the water and expect it to live as a fish. But what would happen if the fish became aware of the water?

Flyfishing

Objective: Defusion

"Have you heard about fly fishing. A good fly fisher knows exactly what the trout are feeding on and tie up flies that imitate those insects. They are so good at this that the trout can not tell the difference. They cast the fly into the stream right in front of the trout – the trout sees it floating by – buys that the fly is real, bites and gets hooked.

Our minds can be like really skilled flyfishers. Our thoughts and feeling are like really specific flies our mind designs and are just the ones we will bite on. Our mind casts them out on the stream in front of us – they seem so real to us and so we 'buy' them, bite and get hook. Once we are hooked, the more we struggle the more we are behaving in ways that pulls the hook in further and keeps us on the line.

Funny thing is our mind can only tie flies on barbless hooks. It feels like we can't get off, but if we pause from the struggle and spit the hook out – we are off the hook. Our mind will tell us there is a barb on the hook and we can't get off – but if we stop struggling so hard, we get off the hook.

As we swim in the stream of life there are flies floating by on the surface all the time. As we get better at spotting ' that is just another fly floating by – I don't have to bite' we get hooked less often. But it is part of being human to get hooked on a regular basis. Remembering these flies are always on barbless hooks allows us to spend less

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time struggling, to get unhook and to then have the flexibility to swim in the direction our values let us know we want to."

Gardening

Objective: Values

Imagine that you selected a spot to plant a garden. You worked the soil, planted the seeds, and waited for them to sprout. Meanwhile, you started noticing a spot just across the road, which also looked like a good spot -- maybe even a better spot. So you pulled up your vegetables and went across the street and planted another garden there. Then you noticed another spot that looked even better. Values are like the spot where you plant a garden. You can grow some things very quickly, but others require time and dedication. The question is, "Do you want to live on lettuce, or do you want to live on something more substantial -- potatoes, beets, and the like?" You can't find out how things work in gardens when you have to pull up stakes again and again. Of course, if you stay in the same spot, you'll start to notice its imperfections. Maybe the ground isn't quite as level as it looked when you started, or perhaps the water has to be carried for quite a distance. Some things you plant may seem to take forever to come up. It is at times like this that your mind will tell you, "You should have planted elsewhere." This will probably never work." "It was stupid of you to think you could grow anything here" and so on. The choice to garden here allows you to water and weed and hoe, even when these thoughts and feelings show up.

Google Earth/Helicopter View

Objective: Defusion

Sometimes it's useful to see the bigger picture. When something is distressing us, we're so close to it, involved with it, part of it – it's really hard to stand back from what's happening. It's a bit like Google Earth – we see the close up view but everything else is hidden from us. "We can't see the wood for the trees". We can zoom out our perspective, and see the bigger picture. Some might describe it as like having a helicopter view – as the helicopter takes off, getting higher and higher, it sees a bigger picture, and is less involved with the detail at ground level.

High School Sweetheart

Objective: Willingness and Commitment

Recall a time when you were in high school and were in love with someone who rejected you. Can you remember how terrible the pain seemed to be at the time? For some people, this pain leads to lifelong scars, to a pattern of not trusting other people and avoiding opportunities for real intimacy. Look at the pain from your first rejection and ask yourself: How would it have worked if it really was OK just to hurt when you lose something? You have little control over the pain in your life -- people will reject you, people will die, bad things will happen. Pain is a part of living none of us can avoid. But what you do have control over is whether the pain turns into trauma. If you are unwilling to hurt, you have to avoid pain. Remember how hard it was for you, as a teenager, to

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open up after your first real rejection. But if you don't open up, the damage continues and continues.

Hungry Tiger

Objective: Control is the problem, not the solution

Imagine you wake up one morning and just outside your front door you find an adorable tiger kitten mewling. Of course you bring the cuddly little guy inside to keep as a pet. After playing with him for a while, you notice he is still mewling, nonstop, and you realize he must be hungry. You feed him a bit of bloody, red ground beef knowing that is what tigers like to eat. You do this every day, and every day your pet tiger grows a little bigger. Over the course of two years, your tiger's daily meals change from hamburger scraps, to prime rib, to entire sides of beef. Soon your little pet no longer mews when hungry. Instead, he growls ferociously at you whenever he thinks it's mealtime. Your cute little pet has turned into an uncontrollable, savage beast that will tear you apart if he doesn't get what he wants.

Your struggle with pain can be compared to this imaginary pet tiger. Every time you empower your pain by feeding it the red meat of experiential avoidance, you help your pain-tiger grow a little bit larger and a little bit larger and a little bit stronger. Feeding it in this manner seems like the prudent thing to do. The pain-tiger growls ferociously telling you to feed it whatever it wants or it will eat you. Yet, every time you feed it, you help the pain to become stronger, more intimidating, and more controlling of your life.

Jelly Donut

Send me your version! cehrnstrom@bouldercbt.com

Joe the Bum/Annoying Neighbor/Relative

Objective: Willingness and Commitment

Imagine that you got a new house and you invited all the neighbors over to a housewarming party. Everyone in the whole neighborhood is invited -- you even put up a sign at the supermarket. So all the neighbors show up, the party's going great, and here comes Joe-the-Bum, who lives behind the supermarket in the trash dumpster. He's stinky and smelly, and you think, "Oh no, why did he show up?" But you did say on the sign, "Everyone's welcome." Can you see that it's possible for you to welcome him, and really, fully, do that without liking that he's here? You can welcome him even though you don't think well of him. You don't have to like him. You don't have to like the way he smells, or his life-style, or his clothing. You may be embarrassed about the way he is dipping into the punch or the finger sandwiches. Your opinion of him, your evaluation of him, is absolutely distinct from your willingness to have him as a guest in your home.

You could also decide that even though you said everyone was welcome, in reality Joe is not welcome. But as soon as you do that, the party changes. Now you have to be at the front of the house, guarding the door so he can't come back in. Or if you say, "OK, you're welcome," but you don't really mean it, you only mean that he's welcome as long as he stays in the kitchen and doesn't mingle with the other guests,

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then you're going to have to be constantly making him do that, and your whole party will be about that. Meanwhile, life's going on, the party's going on, and you're off guarding the bum. It's just not life enhancing. It's not much like a party. It's a lot of work. What the metaphor is about, of course, is all the feelings and memories and thoughts that show up that you don't like, they're just more bums at the door. The issue is the posture you take in regard to your own stuff. Are bums welcome? Can you choose to welcome them in, even though though you don't like the fact that they came? If not, what's the party going to be like?

Jumping Off a Cliff

Objective: Willingness

Let's imagine this piece of paper on the floor is a cliff. Would you be willing to stand on it with your toes right up to the edge? You can keep your eyes open or closed. Go ahead and imagine all the things you would think, see, and feel if you truly were standing on the edge of a cliff.

Now describe to me, what action would be necessary for you to literally jump off this cliff? What would you legs, arms, feet, etc, be required to do?

If you are willing, would you go ahead and jump?

Leaves on a Stream

Objective: Defusion

Sometimes it feels like we're being carried away downstream struggling to stay afloat amongst all the mud, filth and debris. That muck and debris are thoughts, sensations, events, feelings, and that river/stream is our distress as we drift helplessly downstream. But we can stand on the riverbank, watching as those thoughts, events, sensations, feelings go by. You might watch individual items as they pass – perhaps a thought floating on a leaf, a sensation as a log, event as on old bicycle. We can stand and watch.

(Variations: Boxcars on a train, Soldiers in a parade)

Life as a cycling race

Objective: Defusion, Willingness and Committed Action

In a way, life is like a cycling race. We are all pedaling and we wear shirts with words written on them. In French we have a way of speaking («Vous roulez pour qui ?») that translates literally into "for whom do you travel ?" The idea is the same as the one Bob Dylan expresses in the song "[You've got to serve somebody](#)". We sometimes believe it's possible to have blank shirts without anything written on them or we can "not know" for what we pedal but in this case it happens that we nevertheless have something written on our shirt, namely "NOTHING" or "I DON'T KNOW". And how does that feel to travel for that master?

Now imagine there is a shop with piles of shirts wearing all kinds of words written on them. Like ELEGANCE, GENEROSITY, LOYALTY, HEALTH, LOVE, CARING, HONESTY, and so on. And you can choose, for free, any one of them. Which one would you choose? And look what happens (at least to me). There comes this voice (you've

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probably heard it before) that says : "Waah, ELEGANCE, are you kidding? Have you looked at yourself in a mirror? That one for sure is not for you." Or something like "How come you want to take CARING? With that crappy introverted personality of yours? Or like "XYZ, are you crazy? You really don't have the temperament to do that!"

Can you have all these thoughts AND take the shirt you find "way cool", the one showing the quality you choose to "make important" in your life (thanks to Hank Robb for those wordings)? Then, find a goal, preferably a small one, an action that would lead your life a tiny little bit in the direction of that value, and DO it! Of course the voice will come with you, all along the way. See if you can welcome it without trying to have it shut up but without obeying it.

Life's a beach

Objective: Control is the problem, not the solution, Willingness, Committed Action

Sometimes life is like swimming at the beach. We launch headlong into life expecting to have a fun, relaxing and refreshing time. People ply us with good advice. Don't forget the sunscreen. Swim between the flags. Stay out of the water for 30 minutes after eating. Watch out for sharks. So we jump in, splash around and have a good time. Depending on our personality and experience we may be carefree, or we might be anxiously watching for sharks, or continually monitoring the flags to make sure we're in the right place. Or maybe we are the sort of person who loves to flout the rules and swims anywhere.

Suddenly our pleasure is interrupted by an unpleasant sensation. We are knocked off our feet, we can no longer touch the sandy bottom and we notice we are headed out to sea. We panic and immediately set the goal, "I must get back to shore" so we take action to achieve that goal. We do it without thinking. It's instinctive. We start paddling furiously against the rip. Sometimes we seem to be making a little progress, but we start to tire and notice we are losing the battle. We swim harder, we roll over on our back and kick with our legs, but we are getting nowhere and getting exhausted. We forget why we came to the beach in the first place. We begin to tell ourselves, "If only we had stayed between the flags" or "I wish I'd done some more swimming training before I risked it all by coming to the beach", but none of this wondering how you got here is any help. You are still paddling furiously and getting nowhere. Maybe you call for help, and here I am – a lifesaver come to the rescue. So notice – here I am with a board to rescue you, and I suggest you grab hold of the board. Before you can grab hold of the board you need to stop paddling furiously. Even though every fibre in your body screams in protest, you must stop paddling and try something different – grab the board.

Now I am a very contrary lifesaver, for my job is not to rescue you, but to teach you to rescue yourself. For the thing about life is you can get sucked into a rip at any time. That rip may be depression, or grief, or anxiety or urges to eat, gamble, spend or use drugs.

So I want you to learn how to get out of trouble when you get stuck in a rip. So I invite you to swim slowly across the rip. I'll even swim alongside you. As you do this you will feel the tug of the rip. You will get carried out to sea further than you'd like to be and your mind will flash all sorts of scary scenarios before your eyes. That is what minds do.

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Mine does it too. I'm not asking you not to be scared, or anxious, or depressed. I'm asking you to swim across the rip while experiencing those thoughts and sensations and eventually you will come to calm water and be able to get on with enjoying your day at the beach. So what I'm inviting you to do is to give up paddling furiously and accept the uncomfortable sensations and scary thoughts of being carried out to sea. I'm inviting you to reconnect with what really matters – having fun at the beach for whatever reasons that is enjoyable for you. I'm inviting you to take effective action and what that is depends on the situation. If you're safe it means enjoying the sun and the surf for your own reasons. If you're stuck in a rip of (insert presenting problem) it means stopping the struggle and taking small strokes in the direction of where you want to be, whatever experiences come up.

Additional Extensions

(For OCD/Anxiety)

Notice that in this scenario there are precautions you can take to improve your safety. You can learn skills like how to do survival stroke, or simply train to be a better swimmer. You can put on sunblock to stop getting burnt. You can stay out of the surf on really rough days. You can avoid beaches where there are stingrays. You can swim between the flags. These can serve to improve your enjoyment of being at the beach. But what happens to your fun if you become obsessed with safety. Instead of floating around or catching waves, you keep your eyes glued on the flags? Or as soon as your toes hit the water you run back to your bag to put on some more sunblock? Or if you give up on going to the beach because it's too dangerous? (Let client answer – and discuss reasonable safety and how to practice it as well as willingness to have worry thoughts while pursuing valued activity)

Notice also that despite your best efforts, you can still get stuck in a rip. Winds, current and tide may change and the area that was once safe turns into a rip, or maybe a huge wave comes and knocks you off your feet. It doesn't matter whose fault it was or how it happened, once you're in a rip you have an important choice to make. Keep struggling and eventually succumb to exhaustion and drown, or stop struggling and start taking effective action by swimming across the rip towards your values.

(Values)

Notice that there are lots of people at the beach on a hot day. Now I imagine they're not all there for the same reason. What are some of the reasons for going to the beach? (Let client answer and prompt for as wide a range of options.) Use this as a jumping off point for discussing goals and values including pursuing the same goal for different reasons, and also being able to pursue values even if a specific goal is blocked. For example if you go to the beach (goal) to cool down (value) – if the road to the beach is closed, there are other ways to cool down – e.g. – sit in an air conditioned room, have a cold shower, have an iced coffee etc.

(Advice/Pliance/Programming)

Do you remember all the good advice people have given you about how to be safe when going to the beach? Notice that some of it is good advice (don't get out of your depth if you can't swim), some is mostly right but sometimes wrong (it's safe to swim between the flags) and some is just urban myth (rubbing butter on your skin protects you from sunburn). I'll bet you didn't ask for any of that advice, it just randomly

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came your way. People with good (and maybe bad) intentions filled your head with a mixture of good, bad and indifferent advice. So how do you tell whether that bit of advice that pops into your head when you make plans to go to the beach is worth following? (explore workability)

Life Direction

Objective: Values

A boat docked in a tiny Mexican village. An American tourist complimented the Mexican fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took him to catch them. "Not very long," answered the Mexican. "But then, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more?" asked the American. The Mexican explained that his small catch was sufficient to meet his needs and those of his family. The American asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?" "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and take a siesta with my wife. In the evenings, I go into the village to see my friends, have a few drinks, play the guitar, and sing a few songs. . I have a full life."

The American interrupted, "I have an MBA from Harvard and I can help you!. You should start by fishing longer every day. You can then sell the extra fish you catch. With the extra revenue, you can buy a bigger boat. With the extra money the larger boat will bring, you can buy a second one and a third one and so on until you have an entire fleet of trawlers. Instead of selling your fish to a middle man, you can negotiate directly with the processing plants and maybe even open your own plant. You can then leave this little village and move to Mexico City, Los Angeles, or even New York City! From there you can direct your huge enterprise."

"How long would that take?" asked the Mexican. "Twenty, perhaps twenty-five years," replied the American. "And after that?" "Afterwards? That's when it gets really interesting," answered the American, laughing. "When your business gets really big, you can start selling stocks and make millions!" "Millions? Really? And after that?" "After that you'll be able to retire, live in a tiny village near the coast, sleep late, play with your children, catch a few fish, take a siesta with your wife and spend your evenings drinking and enjoying your friends."

Looking for the Keys

Objective: Creative hopeless

Take your keys and place them under or behind something in the vicinity of your seat and then say something like: "Let's say it's the end of my day and I'm ready to lock up my files and leave the office. I quickly notice that I don't have my keys -- so what do I do? I begin to look for them." At this point I will check 5-6 places in my immediately vicinity, but not find them. I then go on: "So I've checked the obvious places, but no keys. I may even feel a little bit frustrated. So what do I do? I look again – I look in some new places and recheck some of the places I've already searched." (Again I act this out in my immediate vicinity – usually sweeping my search in a semicircle around seat.) "Hmm, no keys. My stress might be building a bit at this point. What do I do? Perhaps start thinking about what I was doing, mentally retracing my steps. Then I continue to

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search.” (At this point I find the keys.) “Great, I've got the keys – The problem is solved and my frustration vanishes. – Sounds familiar, right?” (Client usually nods)

I then continue, “I had a problem and used a problem solving strategy to deal with it – the kind of thing we do every day with great success. It turns out that people also tend to use problem solving approaches like this when they feel emotion pain. Perhaps you're in bed, but unable to sleep. In your mind you might start to look through the various nooks and crannies of your past, thinking about different events and situations that you've experienced. You look for information -- for answers – in ways that are similar to the way I looked for the keys. And after looking in a dozen places, do you find the answer you're looking for? (client is often reacting and smiling by this point) No, so what do you do? You look again, you keep searching. Perhaps you find yourself looking at many the same memories, over and over, as you also add new ones. (client typically affirms this.) But there's a fundamental problem – there aren't any keys – there's no solution – no key piece of information that will solve your problem and make you feel better.”

Magical Bank

Objective: Values

\$86,400 -- Something To Think About! Imagine that you had won the following prize in a contest: Each morning your bank would deposit \$86,400.00 in your private account for your use. However, this prize has rules, just as any game has certain rules. The first set of rules: Everything that you didn't spend during each day would be taken away from you. You may not simply transfer money into some other account. You may only spend it. Each morning upon awakening, the bank opens your account with another \$86,400.00 for that day.

The second set of rules: The bank can end the game without warning; at any time it can say, Its over, the game is over! It can close the account and you will not receive a new one. What would you personally do? You would buy anything and everything you wanted, right? Not only for yourself, but for all people you love, right? Even for people you don't know, because you couldn't possibly spend it all on yourself, right?

You would try to spend every cent, and use it all, right? ACTUALLY, this GAME is REALITY! Each of us is in possession of such a magical bank. We just can't seem to see it. The MAGICAL BANK is TIME! Each morning we awaken to receive 86,400 seconds as a gift of life, and when we go to sleep at night, any remaining time is NOT credited to us. What we haven't lived up that day is forever lost. Yesterday is forever gone.

Mailbox (Some thoughts are like junk mail)

Objective: Values, Willingness, Committed Action

1) When you go home today, what do you expect to find in your mailbox? (Client: Bills, advertisements, junk mail, maybe a letter.)

2) How do you sort through to decide which mail needs follow up and which is considered junk? (Client: I have to look at it, and decide what is important.)

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3) How do you know what is important? (Client: Well if I don't pay my bills my electricity would get disconnected, and if I don't renew my license plates, I can't drive.)

4) I see, so you sort things out according to what matters to you, your priorities are easy to identify because you value the stability of a comfortable home and the freedom of driving your own vehicle. What do you do with the junk mail? (Client: I throw it away)

5) When you throw it away, is that the end of it? (Client: no there's always more junk mail the next time I open the box.)

6) Why don't you follow up on it? You could call and check on those offers or you could get mad and call the advertisers and demand that they stop delivering the junk? (Client: Yes, but that would just be a waste of time...I've learned those offers are things that I don't need, or they are scams. I once tried to stop the mail but other companies send more. There's always more junk mail the next day, it's not worth getting upset..)

Summation: So your experience helps you sort out what is important, according to the things that matter to you. And you learn to live with the junk mail that shows up everyday. It's in the box, you notice it long enough to recognize it for what it is, and then you move onto what matters in your life. Maybe these thoughts are like the mail that shows up in your mailbox; you take action on the important things while you have to accept the fact that there will be some junk , and you simply allow it to show up.

Man in the Hole

Objective: Creative Hopelessness

The situation you are in seems a bit like this. 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. (Variation: No blindfold; if you are to live, you will move around, and eventually, in the course of living, you will encounter a hole.) That is how you are supposed to live life. And so you do what you are told. Now, unbeknownst to you, in this field 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 would 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. 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 digging faster and faster. But you're still in 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 and bigger. Isn't that your experience? So you come to see me thinking, "Maybe he has a really huge shovel, a gold-plated steam shovel." Well, I don't. And even if I did I wouldn't use it, because digging is not a way out of the hole -- digging is what makes holes. So maybe the whole agenda is hopeless -- you can't dig your way out, that just digs you in.

Follow up: Are you digging right now?

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A master storyteller

Objective: Defusion

The world's greatest storyteller – it never stops! It's never short of a story to tell, and it wants us to listen, whatever the story is. Like any great storyteller, it'll say whatever it has to say to get our attention. Some stories are true: we can call these facts. Others are opinions, beliefs, ideas, attitudes, assumptions, judgements, predictions etc. Stories about how we see the world, what we want to do, what we think is right or wrong, fair or unfair, good or bad.

Just listen now, to the story your mind is telling you now.

Radio “doom and gloom”

Broadcasting a lot of gloom about the past, doom about the future, and dissatisfaction about the present.

A spoiled brat

Making all sorts of demands, and throwing tantrums if it doesn't get its own way

A reason-giving machine

Churning out a never-ending list of reasons why you can't or shouldn't change

A word machine

Manufacturing a never-ending stream of words

A fascist dictator

Constantly ordering you about and telling you what you can and can't do

A judgement factory

Spending all day long making judgements

Message on a Computer Screen

Objective: Defusion

Imagine there are two computers, side by side, that are identical in all details -- same software, same data, same machine. Imagine that what is on the screen of both is a frightening image: say a picture of the walls of the room melting (specific to client needs). In one case the operator of the computer is sitting close, and has forgotten that what he/she is seeing is even on a computer screen. In the second case, the operator of the computer is sitting back quite clear that this is just something on the screen.

Which operator do you think will be more frightened by that image -- which one will work harder to change it?

(Variation: Two movie screens)

Mind as GPS

Objective: Willingness, Values, Contact with Present Moment

Sometimes I find it useful to see the voice in my head that constantly provides me with an analysis of the surroundings and tells me what I have to do to proceed safely (and to be right!) as one of those GPS systems you can have built into your car. A sampled voice will then give you constant advice about what to do at the next crossroads. These systems are very convenient and useful. But it's still important to keep one's eyes wide open. Some drivers ended in a river because a bridge had been

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suppressed and the system hadn't been updated. In the north of Europe, a truck driver got stuck in a narrow lane. For sure he was on the right way, but the road couldn't accommodate such a wide vehicle. And some accidents happen because a driver is too busy fiddling with the controls of the system and neglects to watch the road.

Of course that thought is perfectly logic and your mind tells you that it's not only a thought but the plain truth. But will doing what that thought tells you to do lead you in a direction dear to your heart ? Fiddling with the controls won't give you the answer...

Mind-Train

Objective: Defusion

Imagine that you are standing at a railway bridge gazing down at three sets of train tracks. A slow mining train is on each set of tracks moving away from you. Each train is composed of a string of little cars carrying ore. Seemingly endless, all three chug slowly along underneath the bridge.

Now, as you look down, imagine that the train to the left carries only the “ore” of things you notice in the present moment. That ore is composed of sensations, perceptions, and emotions. It carries things like the sounds you hear; sweaty palms you feel; skipped heartbeats you sense; sadness you notice; and so forth. The middle train carries only your thoughts: your evaluations, your predictions, your self-conceptualizations, and so on. The train on your right carries your urges to act; your pull to avoid and look away; and your efforts to change the subject. Looking down on these tracks can be seen as a metaphor for looking at your mind.

Monitor and Zoom Lens

Objective: Defusion

When doing presentations using a laptop and projector, there's an option of what to display on each monitor. The laptop screen is called Monitor 1, and the projector is Monitor 2. The graphic in Control Panel is shown as 2 large screens with large white numbers on them. Click on Monitor 1 and it enlarges and comes into the foreground, whilst Monitor 2 gets smaller and further away. Click on Monitor 2 and it zooms up towards you, getting bigger, whilst Monitor 1 goes away. It can be like that with our attention. Something grabs our attention – a sound, a sight, a feeling, a thought – and we zoom in, putting it the foreground of our attention, making it bigger and more intrusive. Everything else moves away into the background. We can choose what we put in the foreground – more helpful thoughts, our breath, imagery, a sensation, what we see, what we hear – so that other more unhelpful thoughts or sensations go more misty into the background. Like a zoom lens as it focuses in on something particular, the rest of the picture goes out of focus, loses clarity. We can zoom in and out, shifting our focus of attention.

Mountain

Objective: Willingness

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Whatever the weather, or whatever happens on the surface of the mountain – the mountain stands firm, strong, grounded, permanent. We can be like that mountain, observing thoughts, feelings, sensations, knowing inner stillness.

Mud in the Glass

Objective: Willingness, Creative Hopelessness

Our work here is going to be hard. It will stir some things up. Your life is kind of like this glass filled with mud that has settled to the bottom, and our work is to get this glass clean. How do you suppose that we could get the mud out of the glass? What if scooping the mud out could make an extraordinary difference -- what if getting the water messy was worth it? It will feel more painful initially, just the water will appear more muddy....

Mule in the Well

Objective: Control is the Problem

A farmer has an old, useless mule that falls into a dry, abandoned well. Upon realizing that he is stuck, the mule becomes afraid and begins to bray. The farmer, who hears the mule crying, decides that instead of pulling him out, he will just bury the creature in the well. As the farmer shovels dirt into the well, the mule realizes that he is being buried alive. He shivers and shudders, shaking the dirt from his shoulders to down around his feet. He steps up on top of the dirt. The farmer continues to shovel, and the mule continues to shake and step up and up, eventually stepping right out of the well.

Path up the Mountain

Objective: Values

Suppose you are taking a hike in the mountains. You know how mountain trails are constructed, especially if the slopes are steep. They wind back and forth; often have “switchbacks”, which make you literally walk back and forth, and sometimes a trail will even drop back to below a level you had reached earlier. If I asked you at a number of points on such a trail to evaluate how well you are accomplishing your goal of reaching the mountaintop, I would hear a different story every time. If you were in switchback mode, you would probably tell me that things weren’t going well, that you were never going to reach the top. If you were in a stretch of open territory where you could see the mountaintop and the path leading up to it, you would probably tell me things were going very well. Now imagine that we are across the valley with binoculars, looking at people hiking on this trail. If we were asked how they were doing, we would have a positive progress report every time. We would be able to see that the overall direction of the trail, not what it looks like at a given moment, is the key to progress. We would see that following this crazy, winding trail is exactly what leads to the top.

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Passengers on the Bus

Objective: Defusion

Suppose there is a bus and you are the driver. On this bus we've got a bunch of passengers. The passengers are thoughts, feelings, bodily states, memories, and other aspects of experience. Some of them are scary, and they are dressed up in black leather jackets and they have switchblade knives. What happens is that you are driving along and the passengers start threatening you, telling you what you have to do, where you have to go. "You've got to turn left," "You've got to turn right" and so on. The threat they have over you is that if you don't do what they say, they're going to come up front from the back of the bus.

It's as if you've made deals with these passengers, and the deal is, "You sit in the back of the bus and scrunch down so that I can't see you very often, and I'll do what you say pretty much." Now what if one day you get tired of that and say, "I don't like this! I'm going to throw those people off the bus!" You stop the bus and you go back to deal with the mean-looking passengers. But you notice that the very first thing you had to do was stop. Notice now, you're not driving anywhere, you're just dealing with the passengers. And they're very strong. They don't intend to leave, and you wrestle with them, but it just doesn't turn out very successfully. (Variation: You kick them off; they get back on at the next stop.)

Eventually, you go back to placating the passengers, trying to get them to sit way in the back again where you can't see them. The problem with this deal is that you do what they ask in exchange for getting them out of your life. pretty soon they don't even have to tell you, "Turn left" -- you know as soon as you get near a left turn that the passengers are going to crawl all over you. In time you may get good enough that you can almost pretend that they're pretty much not on the bus at all. You just tell yourself that left is the only direction you want to turn. However, when they eventually do show up, it's with the added power of the deals that you've made with them in the past.

Now the trick about the whole thing is that the power the passengers have over you is 100% based on this: "If you don't do what we say, we're coming up and we're making you look at us." That's it. It's true that when they come up front they look as if they could do a whole lot more. They have knives, chains, and so forth. It looks as though you could be destroyed. The driver (you) has control of the bus, but you trade off the control in these secret deals with the passengers. In other words, by trying to get control, you've actually given up control! Now notice that even though your passengers claim they can destroy you if you don't turn left, it has never actually happened. These passengers can't make you do something against your will.

Follow up: Which passenger is threatening you now? Are you still driving?

The Plane Crash

Objective: Values

Not so long ago, a plane landed seemingly miraculously on the River Hudson. All 155 people came out alive. What did those 155 people feel as they stood on dry land and realized what they'd been through? Would they all have had the same

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reaction? Absolutely not! Many would have felt very distressed and upset – they nearly died, and they might decide never to fly again as it's clearly too dangerous. Others might be overwhelmed with relief and happiness at having survived. Some might decide to live life to the full as a result of their experience, and be determined to fly even more. There could be 155 different reactions. Same event, different responses. It's not the event which causes our emotions, it's the meaning we give them. Those who interpreted the event as terrifyingly dangerous may feel very distressed, and be too anxious to fly again. Others will feel ecstatic as the meaning they gave the event was that they were incredibly lucky to survive.

Playground Bully

Objective: Defusion

Our minds are like school playgrounds that are surrounded by secure high fences – they keep children in, and others out. Any bullies in that playground mean that the other children can't escape for long. This particular bully uses verbal abuse, shouting, teasing, and threats (rather than physical violence). The children are all fenced in together, and ideally, they have just got to learn to accept and learn to be with each other. So neither can we escape our thoughts, we cannot stop them, but perhaps we can learn to live with them by seeing them differently. Along comes bully, and takes on 3 potential 'victims' who all react differently.

Victim 1 – believes the bully, distressed, reacts automatically (bully carries on)

Victim 2 – challenges the bully “hey I'm not stupid, I got 8 out of 10 in my spelling test this morning, you only got 4” (bully eventually gives up)

Victim 3 – looks at the bully (acknowledges the thought), then walks away and goes off to play football with his mates (dismisses the thought), then changes their focus of attention.

Poison Ivy and the Anxiety Itch

Objective: Creative hopelessness

Poison ivy is a plant that produces a strong skin irritant. Most people avoid touching the plant because they know what they'll get: a nasty, red, blistering rash that itches like hell. If you've been unlucky enough to have been exposed, then you know what this is like. You've got the strong urge to scratch. And when you do that, you make matters worse. You end up with open sores on your skin. And if you haven't washed the plant oils from your hands and exposed areas, you may spread the allergic reaction to other parts of your body. No amount of scratching will cure the inflammation. You need to stop the scratching and allow your body to heal itself.

The anxiety itch is like this too. The discomfort rages through your head and body, and you have a strong urge to get relief. So you avoid. You struggle. The problem is that you can't avoid exposure to anxiety in the same way you can avoid a poison ivy plant. Anxiety can show up anytime or anywhere. When you scratch your anxiety itch with avoidance and struggle, it makes the anxiety worse -- the anxiety grows and spreads to infect most of your life. And all that avoidance scratching pulls you out of your life too.

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Polygraph

Objective: Control is the problem, not the solution

Suppose I had you hooked up to the best polygraph machine that's ever been built. This is a perfect machine, the most sensitive ever made. When you are all wired up to it, there is you way you can be aroused or anxious without the machine's knowing it. So I tell you that you have a very simple task here: All you have to do is stay relaxed. If you get the least bit anxious, however, I will know it. I know you want to try hard, but I want to give you an extra incentive, so I have also have a .44 Magnum, which will hold to your head. If you just stay relaxed, I won't blow your brains out, but if you get nervous (and I'll know it because your'e wired up to this perfect machine), I'm going to have to kill you. So, just relax! ... What do you think would happen? Guess what you'd get? ... The tiniest bit of anxiety would be terrifying. You'd naturally be saying, "Oh, my gosh! I'm getting anxious! Here it comes!" BAMM! How could it work otherwise?

Quicksand

Objective: Willingness

When we're stuck in quicksand, the immediate impulse is to struggle and fight to get out. But that's exactly what you mustn't do in quicksand – because as you put weight down on one part of your body (your foot), it goes deeper. So the more you struggle, the deeper you sink – and the more you struggle. Very much a no-win situation. With quicksand, there's only one option for survival. Spread the weight of your body over a large surface area – lay down. It goes against all our instincts to lay down and really be with the quicksand, but that's exactly what we have to do. So it is with distress. We struggle and fight against it, but we've perhaps never considered just letting it be, and being with the distressing thoughts and feelings, but if we did, we'd find that we get through it and survive – more effectively than if we'd fought and struggled.

Room full of adhesive tape

Objective: Creative hopelessness

Picture your life as a room. One day you notice that a pipe near the ceiling in a corner is dripping. The sound of the falling drops makes you nervous and you'd like to get rid of it. So you repair the leak with a length of adhesive isolation tape and your peace of mind is back. Until the water finds his way through the glue and the dripping sound is back. Plop.... plop... plop... So you put one more length of tape around the first repair and you are quiet again. Of course your quietness doesn't last very long and you have to fix the leak again and again. That's not a great problem since adhesive tape is pretty cheap and you manage to always have a spare roll handy. It can take months, even years until you notice that that big clumsy repair slowly fills the whole room, that there's less and less space for you to live in and that the dripping comes nearer and nearer to you...

Sandstorms

Objective: Control is the problem, not the answer, Willingness

Sandstorms are violent wind storms that occur in the desert when high winds lift particles of sand into the air thus unleashing a turbulent and suffocating cloud of sand. They can occur unexpectedly and last for as little as a few minutes or as long as a few months. Regardless of how long they last, the effects can be abrasive and blinding to exposed skin. To survive a sandstorm one therefore has to experience the sandstorm from a different position of having exposed skin covered, and 'riding' the storm. A sandstorm can move whole sand dunes, thus changing the landscape. There is therefore a real danger of getting lost in a whirling wall of sand, as well as the abrasive effects on exposed skin and eyes. To survive a sandstorm, one has to cover exposed skin, and then sit and wait for it to pass whilst experiencing the sights, sounds, smell, taste of the storm, but doing so from a position that allows you to experience it, but not be caught up and exposed in it. Major sandstorms are a natural occurrence – they are part of life in the desert and cannot be avoided.

Difficult life situations/worries/anxieties/fears/problems can be like sandstorms. They are a natural occurrence of life and living. We can sometimes feel as though we are caught in the middle of a sandstorm, lost (moving sand dunes and changing landscapes), and unsure of which direction to move in.

Sh*t

Objective: Defusion

Here's a fun one. It's a little gross, perhaps. What minds do is kind of like what organs do for the body. So the client says: "I get it, intestines make shit. Minds make thoughts." We laugh and then start fooling around with the metaphor, like this: What happens if your intestines stop making shit? Not a good thing. What happens when your intestines do make shit?

We agree that most people tend to check it out to see if things are working all right, and then they flush it. Do your intestines make shit sometimes when you don't want them to? Yes and sometimes won't make shit when I DO want them to. Would it make sense to scoop your shit up, put it in your pocket, carry it around with you, and check on it all day? Ewww, no!

Skiing

Objective: Values

Suppose you go skiing. You take a lift to the top of a hill, and you are just about to ski down the hill when a man comes along and asks where you are going. "I'm going to the lodge at the bottom," you reply. He says, "I can help you with that," and promptly grabs you, throws you in a helicopter, flies you to the lodge, and then disappears. So you look around kind of dazed, take a lift to the top of the hill, and you are just about to ski down it when that same man grabs you, throws you into a helicopter, and flies you to the lodge. You'd be upset, no? Skiing is not just the goal of getting to the lodge, because any number of activities can accomplish that for us. Skiing is how we are going to get there. Yet notice that getting to the lodge is important because it allows us to do the process of skiing in a direction. If tried to ski uphill instead of down, it wouldn't work.

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Valuing down over up is necessary in downhill skiing. There is a way to say this: Outcome is the process through which process can become the outcome. We need goals, but we need to hold them lightly so that the real point of living and having goals can emerge.

Soldiers in a Parade

(Variations: Leaves on a Stream, Fourth of July Parade)

Objective: Defusion

I'm going to ask you to imagine that there are little people, soldiers, marching of your left ear down in front of you in a parade. You are up on the reviewing stand, watching the parade go by. Each soldier is carrying a sign, and each thought you have is a sentence written on one of these signs. Some people have a hard time putting thoughts into words, and they see thoughts as images. If that applies to you, put each image on a sign being carried by a soldier.

OK, in a minute I am going to ask you to get centered and begin to let your thoughts go by without having it stop and without your jumping down into the parade. You are just supposed to let it flow. It is very unlikely, however, that you will be able to do this without interruption. And this is the key part of this exercise. At some point you will have the sense that the parade has stopped, or that you have lost the point of the exercise, or that you are down in the parade instead of being on the reviewing stand. When that happens, I would like you to back up a few seconds and see whether you can catch what you were doing right before the parade stopped. Then go ahead and put your thoughts on the placards again, until the parade stops a second time, and so on. The main thing is to notice when it stops for any reason and see whether you can catch what happened right before it stopped.

One more thing. If the parade never gets going at all and you start thinking, "It's not working" or "I'm not doing it right," then let that thought be written on a placard and send it down into the parade. OK. Now let's get comfortable, close your eyes, and get centered. Now allow the parade to begin. You stay up on the reviewing stand and let the parade flow. If it stops or you find yourself in it, note that; see whether you can notice what you were doing right before that happened, get back up on the reviewing stand, and let the parade begin to flow again. OK, let's begin..... whatever you think, just put it on the cards. (For about 2 to 3 minutes, allow the client to work. Don't underdo it time-wise, and use very few words. If client engages, gently suggest that even that thought could be put on a placard.)

Stove

Objective: Control is the problem, not the solution

If one experiences physical pain when touching a hot stove, attempting to stop that internal signal of pain or distract oneself from it can have significant consequences (e.g., you may leave your hand on the stove and continue to get burned). So, while the experience of pain is unpleasant, it is adaptive in that it sends the message that an action is needed (moving one's hand). Further, if one avoids using a stove for fear of the possibility of experiencing physical pain, then the value of self-care becomes secondary to attempts to avoid the internal experience of pain.

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Swamp

Objective: Willingness and Commitment

Suppose you are beginning a journey to a beautiful mountain you can see clearly in the distance. No sooner do you start the hike than you walk right into a swamp that extends as far as you can see in all directions. You say to yourself, "Gee, I didn't realize that I was going to have to go through a swamp. It's all smelly and the mud is all mushy in my shoes. It's hard to lift my feet out of the much and put them forward. I'm wet and tired. Why didn't anyone tell me about this swamp? When this happens, you have a choice: abandon the journey or enter the swamp. Therapy is like that. Life is like that. We go into the swamp, not because we want to get muddy, but because it stands between us and where we are going.

Take your keys with you

Objective: Willingness and Commitment

(This is a physical metaphor.) Your keys represent different difficult emotions, memories, thoughts and reactions. Picking up the keys and carrying them does not keep you from going anywhere. In fact, the keys can actually open doors that might be locked to us without them.

Taking your Mind for a Walk

Thoughts as Sales Representatives

Objective: Defusion

Picture your thoughts as sales representatives. Some of them aren't really gifted for that job. You just tell them you are not interested or you are busy right now and they will apologize for having disturbed you and never bother you again.

But then there are the tough guys. If you refuse to give them an appointment in your office, they will pop up on the parking lot when you are going back to your car or even around your house wenn you are mowing the lawn and put their open briefcase under your nose with those fantastic products they want to sell you. Your life is becoming a hassle, you need to spend more and more time trying to escape them. Instead of doing productive work, you spend most of your time at the office door trying to get rid of them. Maybe it's easier to let them in, listen to what they want to tell you, thank them for coming and let them go... After all, you are the boss : It's up to you to decide which product you'll buy.

Can also add: And maybe one or the other of all these products they advertise could be a good business opportunity?

Tin Can Monster

Objective: Defusion

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Facing our problems is like facing a giant monster who is made up of tin cans and string. The 30-foot monster is almost impossible to face willingly; if we disassemble him, however, into all the cans and string and wire and bubble gum that he's made of, each of those pieces is easier to deal with one at a time.

Tombstone

Objective: Values

When people are buried, an epitaph is often written. They say things like "Here lies Sue. She loved her family with all her heart." If the headstone was yours, what inscription would you like to see on it? How would you most like your life to be characterized? Again, this is neither a description nor a prediction; it is a hope; an aspiration; a wish. It is between you and the person in the mirror. What would you like your life to stand for?

Tug-of-War with a Monster

Objective: Creative Hopelessness

The situation you are in is like being in a tug-of-war with a monster. It is big, ugly, and very strong. In between you and the monster is a pit, and so far as you can tell it is bottomless. If you lose this tug-of-war, you will fall into this pit and will be destroyed. So you pull and pull, but the harder you pull, the harder the monster pulls, and you edge closer and closer to the pit. The hardest thing to see is that our job here is not to win the tug-of-war..... Our job is to drop the rope.

Tunnel

Objective: Willingness

When we get anxious driving through a tunnel, the best option is to keep going rather than try to escape. This feeling will pass – there is an end to this tunnel.

Two Scales

Objective: Control is the problem, not the answer

Imagine there are two scales, like the volume and balance knobs on a stereo. One is right out here in front of us and is called "Anxiety". (use label that fits clients situation. It may help to move your hand as if it is moving up and down a numerical scale.) It can go from 0 to 10. In the posture you're in, what brought you in here was this: "This anxiety is too high. It's way up here, and I want it down here, and I want you, the therapist, to help me do that, please." In other words, you have been trying to pull the pointer down on this scale. But now there's also another scale. It's been hidden. It is hard to see. This other scale can also go from 0 to 10. (Move other hand up and down behind your head so you can't see it.) What we have been doing is gradually preparing the way so that we can see this other scale. We've been bringing it around to look at it. (Move hand around to front). It is really the more important of the two, because it is this one that makes the difference and it is the only one that you can control. This second scale is called "Willingness". It refers to how open you are to experiencing your own

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experience when you experience it -- without trying to manipulate it, avoid it, escape it, change it, and so on. When Anxiety (or discomfort, depression, etc) is up here at 10, and you're trying hard to control this anxiety, make it go down, make it go away, then you're unwilling to feel this anxiety. In other words, the Willingness scale is down at 0. But that is a terrible combination. It's like a ratchet or something. You know how a ratchet wrench works? When you have a ratchet set one way, no matter how you turn the handle on the wrench it can only tighten the bolt. It's like that. When anxiety is high and willingness is low, the ratchet is set and anxiety can't go down. That's because if you are really, really unwilling to have anxiety, then anxiety is something to be anxious about. It's as if when anxiety is high and willingness drops down, the anxiety kind of locks into place. You turn the ratchet and no matter what you do with that tool, it drives it in tighter. So what we need to do in this therapy is to shift our focus from the anxiety scale to the willingness scale. You've been trying to control anxiety for a long time, and it just doesn't work. It's not that you weren't clever enough; it simply doesn't work. Instead of doing that, we will turn our focus to the willingness scale. Unlike the anxiety scale, which you can't move at will, the willingness scale is something you can set anywhere. It is not a reaction -- not a feeling or a thought -- it is a choice. You've had it set low. you came here with it set low; in fact, coming here at all may initially have been a reflection of its low setting. What we need to do is get it set high. If you do this, if you set willingness high, I can guarantee you what will happen to anxiety. I'll tell you exactly what will happen, and you can hold me to this as a solemn promise. If you stop trying to control anxiety your anxiety will be low -- or it will be high. I promise you! Swear. Hold me to it. And when it is low it will be low, until it's not low and then it will be high. And when it is high it will be high, until it isn't high anymore. Then it will be low again. I'm not teasing you. There just aren't good words for what it is like to have the willingness scale set high -- these strange words are as close as I can get. I can say one thing for sure, though, and your experience says the same thing, if you want to know for certain where the anxiety scale will be, then there is something you can do. Just set willingness very, very low, and sooner or later when anxiety starts up, the ratchet will lock in and you will have plenty of anxiety. It will be very predictable. All in the name of getting it low. If you move the willingness scale up, the anxiety is free to move. Sometimes it will be low, and sometimes it will be high, and in both cases you will keep out of a useless and traumatic struggle that can lead only in one direction.

Two Mountains

Objective: Therapeutic Posture, Willingness

We all have challenges in our lives. It is as if we are all traveling up a mountain. We will encounter streams to cross, ditches to maneuver, rocks to scramble and switchbacks to manage. If you can imagine this, you are on your mountain managing your terrain, and I am on my mountain managing my terrain.

I have the ability to support and help you because I have a different perspective of your journey from my mountain. I can see the full picture from the distance while you see only the immediate obstacle in your path. In this way, we are all the same and yet, I can be of help in supporting you down your path.

Waiting for the Wrong Train

Objective: Willingness and Committed Action

"Imagine you are going on a journey. Somewhere really special, where you really want to go, somewhere you've wanted to go your whole life. When you get to the train station you see two trains, one is a bit odd looking and strange, some of the seats look a bit hard and overall it looks a bit dirty and uncomfortable. On the next platform, there is a different train; it's a super train. It looks familiar, safe, reliable, the sort of train an accountant or an insurance sales man might prefer. The sign says it has air conditioning, a cinema, and a fancy all you can eat French restaurant that is free. You think, wow! I just have to take this train, I couldn't possibly make my journey on that other one, no way! So you wait for this 'great' train to get ready to board and the odd looking train goes on its way. And you wait for the safe train some more and another odd train leaves the station, and another. All the while you are waiting for a chance to board this great reliable train so you can take your journey, as yet another odd looking one leaves. But here is the thing. What if the safe train can't ever board, what if it won't ever leave the station. What if you are waiting for the wrong train?"

Essentially we have 2 trains, one that will help clients move forward that might be difficult and another one that they would rather wait for. It should be possible to alter the descriptions of the 2 opposing trains to better fit our clients difficulties.

What do you want your life to stand for

Objective: Values

I want you to image that though some twist of fate you have died but you area bel to attend your funeral in spirit. You are watching and listening to the eulogies offered by your loved ones. Imagine just being in that situation, and get yourself into the room emotionally. OK, now I want to visualize what you would like these people who were part of your life to remember you for. Really be bold here. Let them say exactly what you would most want them to say if you had a totally free choice about what that would be. (Go through for several of the their loved ones, e.g., wife, children, best friend, etc).

Let them say all of these things -- and don't withhold anything. Have it be said as you would most want it. And just make a mental note of these things as you hear them spoken.

Your Life as a Movie

Objective: Defusion, Values

Picture your life as a movie. The first episodes are already shot. (Now summarize what you know of the – usually difficult – salient moments of the clients life). Now the movie is going on. Imagine you are the director and you can direct an actor that plays your part. But you're a special kind of director with a limited power. You can't go to the screenplay writer and ask him to change the life events happening to you or direct the other characters to act like you'd want them to do. The only actor you can have an influence on is the one playing your part. You can have him/her play exactly like the person you dream to be. Figure out how you would want him/her to act, in that precise situation you are experiencing now. How would you instruct the actor to act if you want

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the continuation of the movie to resemble what you would like your life to be, or to show the father / spouse / colleague / etc. you would like to be?