

Using Visual Metaphors to Accept Your Worries and Distressing Thoughts

Objective: To learn how to detach your anxiety from your distressing thoughts.

Many people spend a lot of time and energy trying to get rid of their upsetting thoughts and worries. Not so long ago, psychologists encouraged people to “change their thoughts” by making them more rational and reality-oriented or to just suppress them entirely with techniques like snapping a rubber band on their wrists and saying “stop” in a loud voice. Although these techniques worked for some people, they tended to have only a temporary effect, and many found that their intrusive thoughts and worries would come back, often worse than before.

The newest research in helping people who are overwhelmed by their worries and intrusive thoughts is to encourage people to stop trying to get rid of them at all! This may seem strange, because it is the opposite of what you feel like doing, and that is why therapists call this the “anxiety paradox.” Therapists have discovered that the more you try and get rid of your thoughts, the harder it is to get rid of them. When you learn to accept them and detach from your thoughts they will no longer have power over you.

For example, suppose someone told you to stop thinking about a pink elephant. Immediately you would probably get a visual image of a pink elephant, even though you were told not to do this. The more you try not to think of a pink elephant, the more it comes to mind. This is the paradox in action the more you try to rid of specific thoughts, images, and memories, the more they will take control of your mind and even your actions.

So stop struggling with your worries! Just accept them. Don't try to distract yourself. Don't try and change your thoughts. Certainly, don't try and dull your thoughts with drugs or alcohol. And don't pretend that your anxieties and worries don't exist.

Instead, as difficult as this sounds, just accept your worries, detach from them and observe them without reacting to them in an emotional way. Try and “objectify” your worries, remembering that your thoughts are just thoughts, they have no special powers.

This worksheet includes four metaphors that can help you understand and practice the principle of detaching from your worries by objectifying your thoughts and just observing them. After you read the different metaphors, you should practice using them several times a day. *Even if you are not worrying at the time, you should still practice using these visual metaphors*

Don't Struggle in Quicksand

When you struggle to get out of quicksand you sink in deeper. When you relax and float, you will eventually find that you are able to swim or walk out of the quicksand. Contrary to popular movies, quicksand does not "suck you down." Quicksand is usually shallow and when you stop struggling it is easy to get out.

Try using this metaphor to stop resisting your worries. Imagine that your worries are a pool of quicksand. Struggling will make it harder for you to get out. Accepting your worries as just thoughts and not real dangers will rob them of their power. When you stop struggling, your worries lose their power over you. Just walk away.

After you do this exercise, rate your anxiety below.

_____ 1=very anxious 10=very calm and disengaged from your worries

Ignore Annoying Passengers in Your Car

You've probably had the experience of driving a car with annoying passengers. Maybe it is the kids making too much noise in the back seat. Maybe it is a complaining friend or co-worker sitting next to you. So what do you do? You just consciously tune out the noise from the passengers in the car, letting the noise fade into the background, and you keep on driving. You don't stop the car and you don't go in the wrong direction. You are aware of the annoyance, but you tune it out.

Now, sit back and visualize yourself driving your car, but your worries are the passengers. They are clamoring to get your attention, but you just tune them out. They are just background noise, as you keep on going about your daily routine.

After you do this exercise, rate your anxiety below.

_____ 1=very anxious 10=very calm and disengaged from your worries

Watching the Worry Train

Imagine that your worries are on a train. Each car contains a different worry. Visualize each car of the train and then think for a moment about the worry that is in each car. Now sit back and visualize this train pull out of the station. Watch it as it rounds the bend and then continues on a journey out of sight. Relax and visualize this metaphor. Then rate how you feel.

After you do this exercise, rate your anxiety below.

_____ 1=very anxious 10=very calm and disengaged from your worries

Clouds Floating By

Think about something that you are worried about. Say this worry out loud and visualize the worst thing that could happen. Now take a photo in your mind of that worry. Imagine that photo is resting on a cloud. Don't do anything to make the cloud go away, but just let it go where it wants. Watch it from the ground and see what happens to it.

After you do this exercise, rate your anxiety below.

_____ 1=very anxious 10=very calm and disengaged from your worries

After you have practiced using visual metaphors every day for one week then answer the questions below.

Have you noticed that you feel less anxious after a visualization exercise? Describe your feelings.

How would you describe any changes in your moods during this week?

Were there any changes in your behavior during the week?

Was this technique helpful? Rate the technique from 1 = not at all helpful to 10 = extremely helpful

Do you think that you will use it again?

_____ Yes _____ No _____ Maybe

Comments on the Usefulness of This Technique
