

A8: Mindfulness of thought

Mindfulness is about learning to watch your thoughts without judging them. It is about deliberately noticing your thoughts, but not evaluating them as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ thoughts, and not trying to push them away. Mindfulness is not the same as relaxation, although some people do find it relaxing. If you do not find it relaxing, that is OK, as long as you are taking the opportunity to observe your thoughts without judging them.

It is good to practise mindfulness for 5 to 10 minutes each day until you are good at it. In this way, you will be able to call upon the skill more easily when you need to. To prepare for mindfulness practice, you need to get yourself into a comfortable place, either sitting or lying down, somewhere quiet where you can remain undisturbed for 10 minutes. If you are sitting, try to have both feet planted on the floor, as crossed legs make you more likely to fidget.

Close your eyes and focus your attention on your breathing. Just take normal breaths, not big deep ones, but try to slow them right down and try to breathe into your belly rather than shallow breaths into the chest. Observe the feeling of the air travelling in through your nostrils, down into your lungs, and all the way down until it pushes on the diaphragm. Then feel any tension travel out as you let the air out slowly.

You may like to try one of these images to help you with your mindfulness practice. When you are trying to do imagery exercises such as these, it is good to take the time first to create the image: consider what you see around you in detail, as well as any sounds or smells.

- *Leaves floating down a stream.* Picture yourself sitting outside by a stream, with trees around you, a light breeze blowing, and soft green grass. As thoughts or feelings pop into your head, imagine each one as a leaf on the stream, and watch it float on the water, gradually slipping by, then watch the next leaf. Do not evaluate the thoughts or try to push them away. Just notice each with interest—what kind of leaf it is—then calmly observe the leaves floating down the stream.
- *Thoughts on parade.* Imagine yourself watching a parade, complete with marching band, floats, balloons, and lots of people carrying

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placards or signs. As each thought or feeling comes to your attention, picture it written on one of the signs being carried along in the parade. Do not evaluate the thoughts or try to push them away. Just notice each with interest, and watch the parade carry on in front of you. You are *observing* the parade, not *in* it.

- *TV subtitles.* This is an exercise similar to that above, except your thoughts are appearing as text along the bottom of the TV screen, like the running text at the bottom of news and morning variety shows.

The key is to practise observing your thoughts with dispassionate interest, not judging them as ‘good’ thoughts, or ‘bad’ thoughts to be pushed away. Just let the thoughts happen. Any thought or feeling can be put onto a leaf or placard or subtitle—not just OCD thoughts—even thoughts such as ‘This is silly; I don’t understand the point of this exercise’, ‘My nose is itchy’, ‘I’m hungry’, or anything at all. The point is not to make OCD thoughts go away or to relax necessarily; this is just another way of practising achieving some distance from your thoughts rather than being so caught up in them.

ASSIGNMENTS FOR THIS WEEK:

TRYING TO CONTROL YOUR THOUGHTS VS LETTING THEM ‘JUST HAPPEN’

Spend one day during which you try as hard as you can to push all unwanted or intrusive thoughts out of your head. When they do occur, resist them as much as possible; try to push them from your mind and tell yourself not to think of them again. Note what happens in terms of frequency of thoughts, level of distress about thoughts, and levels of anxiety generally.

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Now spend the next day letting your thoughts 'just happen'. Do not try to control them or push them away. When you notice yourself having intrusive thoughts, just remember that 'this is just a thought', and do not scold yourself for having the thought. Again, note what happens in terms of frequency of thoughts, level of distress about thoughts, and levels of anxiety generally.
