

Taking Hold of Your Mind: “What” Skills:

Observing, Describing, and Participating

Core mindfulness skills are the foundation of all Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) skills training. The problems addressed by core mindfulness skills are knowing who you are, where you are going in your life, and the inability to control what goes on in your mind. These mindfulness skills are of two basic types “What” and “How” skills. The “What” skills refer to ways of practicing thinking or “what” you do to take control of your mind. Observing and Describing are most useful when new behavior is being learned, there is some sort of problem, or a change is necessary. Mindfulness skills apply to emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness, too.

Observing

Observing is sensing or experiencing without describing or labeling the experience. It is noticing or attending to something. The benefit of this practice is that the mind becomes quiet. Eventually, you will be able to observe things without a running commentary of a talkative mind. Preoccupation, rumination, distraction, and daydreaming are all examples of a talkative mind.

Just notice the Experience. Notice without getting caught in the experience. Experience without reacting to your experience.¹

Allow yourself to experience with awareness, in the moment, whatever is happening. Pay attention to your experience. The information available to you includes bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, and external phenomena. Mindfulness involves observation of constantly changing internal and external stimuli as they arise.

Rather than just notice what is happening and stay in the moment, the temptation is to get caught in the experience. Getting caught takes many forms like not being able to get out of bed although it is time to go, or to stop eating

¹ Quotations from the skills training manual have been bolded.

when you are full. Rumination and preoccupation are other forms of getting caught in your experience.

Reacting to your experiences takes many forms too. Unpleasant emotions motivate you to terminate the experience or leave the situation. Naturally, we react to pleasant events by wanting to prolong them. The challenge of observing is just to experience the moment without judging it good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant.

The ability to step back from what is happening in the moment creates psychological space. This separation allows you to not get caught in or react to your experience. Without the psychological space, your reactions are automatic. Shame, guilt, anxiety, and depression often collapse your ability to create psychological space and cause automatic reactions (acting the way you feel). Experiencing the moment without getting caught or reacting is a way to extinguish automatic responses. Psychological space creates room for mental flexibility and freedom of choice.

Try to observe in a nonattached way. Whatever you observe happening in your mind is “grist for the mill.” Whatever happens in your mind is the nitty-gritty business of your life as it is being lived in the here-and-now. Observing is the basis of self-awareness and can only happen in the here and now. When you observe your experience, you are more likely to have a feeling of self-agency, being in control of your thinking.

No matter what you are doing, you can just “step back” and observe. Step back a little, but stay within yourself - the goal is to be slightly detached, not to shut down completely.

Have a “Teflon Mind,” letting experiences, feelings, and thoughts come into your mind and slip right out.

Teflon is a substance which creates a non-stick surface when applied to various materials. “Teflon Mind” is another way of saying “let go of troubling thoughts that stick to your mind.” The goal here is to stay in the present moment. Many have found that this is a way to cope with intense feelings. Distressing events and emotions easily become stuck in consciousness. “Teflon Mind” is a way to attend to painful thoughts without getting stuck - let them go.

In mindfulness practice, one is instructed to “experience” exactly what is happening in the moment, without either pushing any of it away or grabbing onto it. The idea is to let thoughts, feelings, and sensations come and go, rise and fall away, without attempting to exert control (although one is in control and can stop the process at any time). One important consequence of mindfulness is to realize that most thoughts, emotions, and sensations are transient and rise and fall like waves in the sea.

Mindfulness is an example of the psychological technique of exposure. Exposure is a way or people who have fears or phobias overcome their aversion. By exposing themselves gradually to what they fear, they overcome their fear little by little. Mindfulness to naturally arising thoughts, feelings, and sensations works like exposure gradually helping you overcome the grip of certain thoughts, feelings, and sensations. By observing thoughts, feelings, and sensations come and go, one learns that thoughts, feelings, and sensations do, indeed, come and go. This experience reduces the intensity of emotions. Observing what goes on in your mind without reacting to the content of your thoughts extinguishes automatic avoidance and fear responses. The goal is to allow oneself to experience with awareness, in the moment whatever is happening, rather than leaving a situation or trying to terminate an emotion.

Control your attention, but not what you see. Push away nothing. Cling to nothing.

Your attention will go wherever you direct it. What you see is based on the reality of the outside world. You see what you see. Sometimes what you see is grotesque and horrible, but don't push it away. Alternatively, you may want to cling to what is pleasant and beautiful. Clinging and pushing away are misdirected attention. Focus your attention on reality.

Simply allow yourself to experience with awareness, in the moment, whatever is happening, rather than leaving a situation or trying to terminate an emotion. Such control is possible when you are aware of your mental state.

Be like a guard at the palace gate. Alert to every thought, feeling, and action that comes through the gate of your mind.

If you can imagine yourself as a guard at the palace gate, watching what comes through your mind, you are able to differentiate a self that is separate from what goes on in your mind. Generally, the ability to attend to events requires a corresponding ability to step back from the event; observing an event is separate or different from the event itself. The ability to observe thoughts, feelings, desires, and conflicts as mental experiences involves representations of these mental events. A thought is a thought. A feeling is a feeling. This is a desire. That is a conflict. Focus on the parade of what marches through your mind.

Observe by focusing on experiencing the moment. Watch your thoughts coming and going, like clouds in the sky. Notice each feeling, rising and falling, like waves in the ocean. Notice exactly what you are doing.

Being in the present moment is a way to ground yourself in the here-and-now and to be flexible enough to go with the flow. The focus can be internal as when you observe yourself thinking, feeling, judging, reacting or remembering. The perspective of an observer self is slightly detached but remains interested. Awareness of your mental state, allows you to connect to the present moment in a powerful way. This psychological space also allows you to understand the difference between the thought, "I'm an idiot," and knowing who you truly are.

The focus can also be external as is the case with your senses.

Notice what comes through your senses - your eyes, ears, nose, skin, tongue. See others' actions and expressions. "Smell the roses."

Such sensing your senses requires awareness, attention, and some effort. The resulting connection helps you feel attuned and engaged with reality.

Practice Exercises for Observing

- Experience one hand on a cool surface (a table or a chair) and the other hand on a warm surface (part of your body).
- Stroke your upper lip, then stop stroking and notice how long it takes before you can't sense your upper lip any longer.
- "Watch" in your mind the first two thoughts that come in.
- Experience your fanny on the chair.
- Imagine that your mind is the sky and thoughts, sensations and/or feelings are clouds. Gently notice each cloud as it drifts by.
- If you find yourself distracted, observe that; observe yourself as you become aware that you were distracted
- Check how long you can observe. It is common to have to start and restart many times in the course of 1 or 2 minutes.

Describing

Put words on the experience. When a feeling or thought arises, or you do something, acknowledge it.

Describing is using words to represent what you observe. Observing is just noticing and attending; there are no words. Describing is a reaction to observing; it is labeling what is observed. Such acknowledgement is an expressed recognition of your experience.

For example, say in your mind, "Sadness has just enveloped me" ...or..."stomach muscles tightening" ... or ... "A thought 'I can't do this' has come into my mind" ... or ... "walking, step, step, step..."

Self-awareness is the ability to name an emotion like sadness as sadness from a slightly detached viewpoint. In an examination situation, the physical sensation - stomach muscles tightening - may be confused with the perception of the environment - an exam is starting - to produce a dysfunctional thought - I am going to fail the exam.

Thoughts are often confused with facts. If 'I can't do this' comes into your mind, this does not necessarily mean that in fact you can't do whatever. You may be able to do this or that despite thoughts to the contrary. Self-effectiveness depends upon your ability to test the reality of your thoughts. Describing a thought as just a thought requires you to notice that it is a thought instead of a fact.

Put experiences into words. Describe to yourself what is happening. Put a name on your feelings. Call a thought just a thought, a feeling just a feeling. Don't get caught in content.

Describing is using words to represent what you observe. Describing is "just the facts." Judging is labeling something in an evaluative way. The ability to apply names to behavioral and environmental events is essential for both communication and self-control. Learning to describe requires that you learn not

to take your emotions and thoughts literally - that is, as a literal reflection of environmental events. Feeling afraid does not necessarily mean that a situation is threatening to your life or welfare.

Thoughts are often taken literally; thoughts are confused with facts. I feel unloved is confused with I am unloved. One of the principle aims of cognitive therapy is to test the association of thoughts with their corresponding environmental events.

Practice observing and describing by doing this exercise: imagine that your mind is a conveyor belt, and that thoughts and/or feelings are coming down the belt. Your job is to sort what comes down the belt into named categories. For example, you could have a box for thoughts (of any sort), one box for sensation in your body, and one box for urges to do something. Thus, you are applying words, representations, to thoughts, sensations, and urges.

I recommend using the describe skill for DBT skills homework too. The idea is to use words to describe in what situation one used a skill. Express with words the relationship between the situation, the skill, and the result. Words focus thoughts. Describing events and personal responses in words develops the ability to label environmental events and behaviors.

The ability to describe what you feel and do when you are nervous, anxious, upset, impatient, fearful, excited, or tired helps you observe more clearly the connections between yourself and your environment.

Using observe and describe together can help you stay in the present moment and focus on doing what you can now to make your situation better.

Participating

Enter into your experiences whole-heartedly. Let yourself get involved in the moment, letting go of ruminating and self-consciousness (no separation of self from on-going events and interactions).

Become one with your experience, completely forgetting yourself.

Act intuitively from Wise Mind. Do just what is needed in each situation - a skillful dancer on the dance floor, one with the music and our partner, neither willful or sitting on your hands.

Actively practice your skills as you learn them until they become part of you, where you use them without self-consciousness. Practice:

1. Changing harmful situations
2. Changing our harmful reactions to situations.
3. Accepting yourself and the situation as they are.

Participating is entering wholly into an activity, becoming one with the activity. It is throwing yourself into something completely. It is spontaneous behavior to a certain extent, although you can also do it mindfully.

Conclusion

Observing and describing help us understand and improve things. Participating is the ultimate goal as one engages in activities non-self-consciously. Accept challenges and problems as part of life. Make changes as necessary to improve long-term consequences. Engage Wise Mind in the on-going practice.