

Mindfulness Methods

Poof! A Vanishing Bubbles Exercise

Help to release from the distress of the Thought Stream

Mindfulness Therapy has two roads. One is bringing awareness back to the present moment. The other is disconnecting from the stream of thoughts passing through consciousness -- not identifying with the stream of thoughts flowing endlessly through the mind. When we identify ourselves with thoughts, our ideas about self-in-the world are dominated by biases. We are controlled by whatever stimuli we experience, our habitual styles of perceptions, and our judgments. That means we need to overcome the negativity bias – the bias that we pay undue attention to unpleasantness -- or the confirmation bias – we pick out information most similar to what we already believe -- or overfocusing on one side of experience to the neglect of others sides.

For example, believing there will be trouble with a trip, we find the few things that may have been sub-optimal. Confirmation bias: “See, I know that would happen.” Negativity bias: “The weather didn’t cooperate, and pool was too cold.” This person could list everything that did not work out and ignore the success of the travel itself and all the parts of the trip that worked out.

All these approaches to thought are based upon judgment. Thoughts end up being called right or wrong, good or bad.

We want to be able to overcome thinking biases and just be in the moment. That way, we can experience all that happens. So, the flip side of the coin is distancing from the thought stream and connecting with immediate self-experiencing. That means being present and fully aware in the present moment.

Disconnecting from the Thought-Stream

One day, speaking with a client, I thought about the scene in the Harry Potter story in which Dumbledore uses a wand to extract a thought as a silver strand from the mind. He then put it into a bowl called a pensieve. What if, rather than identifying with thoughts, we could imagine casting them out, like Dumbledore. Then we are the Thinker, but not the thoughts.

From that moment, with a number of attempts and client feedback, I came up with this set of instructions I name the Bubble Exercise.

You can record this on your phone and just listen along. You can have someone read the script, slowly.

The Bubble Exercise

Close your eyes. Sit comfortably enough that you will concentrate along with me for a short while.

Remember blowing bubbles as child? Learning to blow with the right force, not too much, not too little, and the delight when a few bubbles flew from the wand.

When you blow bubbles, what happens to the bubbles?

Right, they pop. They vanish almost without a trace.

We're going to imagine a flow of bubbles from a bubble machine, hundreds of bubbles. A stream of bubbles. When you hear that, do you picture the flow as right to left, left to right, towards you, or away from you? Watch those bubbles flowing. And each one pops, vanishes.

Now, watch the bubbles and imagine your thoughts flowing from your mind, one thought flowing into a bubble, then pop, it vanishes. Another thought, flowing into a passing bubble. Then pop. It vanishes. Thoughts of all sorts, all thoughts, into bubbles. The feeling of the chair, into a bubble. The sense of the room, into a bubble. The next thought that popped into your mind, and the next, just a flow of thoughts like a stream of them into bubbles the flow by. Pop. Vanish.

Feel the flow of thoughts into bubbles as being just as swift as the flow of the bubbles. Imagine the connection between your conscious awareness and those passing bubbles. A communion between your mind and the flow of bubbles. As the bubbles flow past you and pop, vanish.

Notice your awareness that you are not the flow of thoughts. You are the one casting the thoughts, one after another.

You can also label the quality of thoughts passing out from consciousness – this thought is sensing, sensing the chair. This thought is judging, evaluating if it is comfortable or uncomfortable. This next thought is recalling. This next is judging again, am I doing this exercise just right. The next is a feeling, and emotion, fatigue, and then perhaps some irritation, then some comfort. And so on. Thought, sensation, judgment, recollection, emotion.

Now, just concentrate on that flow of bubbles a moment more, before coming back to the place where you are and opening your eyes.

Questions

What was that like for you?

Did you succeed in casting many thoughts out into bubbles?

Did you feel yourself in the flow, in synch with the bubbles?

What emotional state did you notice once you had cast out many of the thoughts? What about at the end of the exercise?

How would you describe what you may have learned?

