

Observing & Accepting Painful Thoughts

People who have experienced traumatic life events often report experiencing painful intrusive thoughts. Most people try to suppress these, in the hope of reducing the distress these cause in their lives. Such thoughts particularly those, in relation to sexual trauma may be connected to feelings of:

- Fear and intimidation
- Apprehension
- Guilt and Regret
- Shame and Self-blame


Additionally, it is also common for people to experience self-critical thoughts that often lead to the creation of a negative self-image and subsequent low mood.

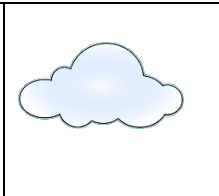
The exercise below focuses on observing such thoughts. The purpose of the exercise is to allow people to develop some emotional distance from their painful thoughts, which helps in reducing feelings of anxiety, low mood and emotional pain.


Instructions:

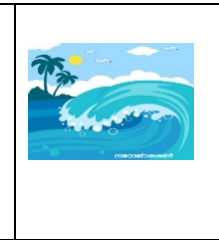
1. Choose a quiet place, where you feel safe and where there is minimal distraction.
2. Sit in a comfortable chair, with your eyes open or closed.
3. Notice the thoughts as they come and go. You do not need to judge these thoughts as being true or false or think about what they mean or do not mean. Simply engage in the process of observing these come and go.
4. Choose a metaphor about the passing of these thoughts that works well for you.

For example:

Imagine you are on a cloud where it is soft and comfortable and your thoughts are other clouds in the sky. Watch these come and go without getting involved in their content. You are safe and comfortable on your cloud.	
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Imagine you are sitting on the beach in a comfortable chair and your thoughts are like waves. Watch them roll in and out of the shore. Feel your feet firmly in the sand. Notice how some waves are strong while others gentle. Notice the waves whilst you are sat safely and comfortably in your chair.	
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5. After doing the exercise log your responses on the following, from 0/10.
 - *Level of anxiety before thought observation*
 - *Body sensations before thought observation*
 - *Level of anxiety after thought observation*
 - *Body sensations after thought observation*

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Adapted from Raja, S. (2012). Overcoming trauma and PTSD: A workbook integrating skills from ACT, DBT, and CBT. New Harbinger Publications.