

“Leaves on a Stream”

Cognitive Defusion Exercise

Harris (2009) provides an excellent cognitive defusion exercise used in Acceptance & Commitment Therapy:

*“Nothing can bring
you peace but
yourself.” – Ralph
Waldo Emerson*

“Leaves on a Stream” Exercise

- (1) Sit in a comfortable position and either close your eyes or rest them gently on a fixed spot in the room.
- (2) Visualize yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream with leaves floating along the surface of the water. *Pause 10 seconds.*
- (3) For the next few minutes, take each thought that enters your mind and place it on a leaf... let it float by. Do this with each thought – pleasurable, painful, or neutral. Even if you have joyous or enthusiastic thoughts, place them on a leaf and let them float by.
- (4) If your thoughts momentarily stop, continue to watch the stream. Sooner or later, your thoughts will start up again. *Pause 20 seconds.*
- (5) Allow the stream to flow at its own pace. Don't try to speed it up and rush your thoughts along. You're not trying to rush the leaves along or “get rid” of your thoughts. You are allowing them to come and go at their own pace.
- (6) If your mind says “This is dumb,” “I’m bored,” or “I’m not doing this right” place *those thoughts* on leaves, too, and let them pass. *Pause 20 seconds.*
- (7) If a leaf gets stuck, allow it to hang around until it's ready to float by. If the thought comes up again, watch it float by another time. *Pause 20 seconds.*
- (8) If a difficult or painful feeling arises, simply acknowledge it. Say to yourself, “I notice myself having a feeling of boredom/impatience/frustration.” Place those thoughts on leaves and allow them float along.
- (9) From time to time, your thoughts may hook you and distract you from being fully present in this exercise. This is *normal*. As soon as you realize that you have become sidetracked, gently bring your attention back to the visualization exercise.