

# MindFlex<sub>365</sub>

## Learning to Stay

In psychological flexibility training (PFT), you learned that painful thoughts and feelings are relative. They can be worth having because you'll usually discover things you care about in them. You also learned how to use pain as a valued living ally, experiencing pain for the sake of living your values.

Painful thoughts and feelings can also have a quality of uncertainty. Not knowing what will happen if you don't do something about them and your situation can activate an urgency to act that comes as an intense thought or feeling that lures you in. You might bite it and get hooked (Chödrön, 2002). Feeling tense, tight, and rigid, not wanting to be there, and wanting to do something quickly to get off the hook is what being hooked can feel like.

In the *Staying with Uncertainty* exercise, you'll practice staying still, holding, and making room within yourself for whatever painful thoughts and feelings might arise without moving away as you might habitually do. Staying still, you can begin to loosen up, soften your grip on the problem-solving approach to pain, and realize you don't fall into a black hole.

When you quiet yourself down and focus on a particular object, thought, feeling, or activity to stay present, such as breathing in the *Staying with Uncertainty* exercise, inevitably, you'll wander away to thinking and feeling. Concentrating on breathing, for example, does not mean you won't think and feel. Your mind can tell you all sorts of things all the time. You probably already listen, pay attention, be present, and set aside what your mind tells you to do. For example, remember a time when you were talking with someone important to you, and your mind unexpectedly threw out a thought unrelated to the conversation, perhaps slapping the person or something like that? What did you do? You probably didn't act on it and wondered where that thought came from. In your mind's huge network of thoughts, something about that moment was linked to the word 'Slap.'

So, in watching your thoughts and feelings in a situation (Gunaratana, 2011; Harris, 2009), remember to pay attention with

- Openness: allowing everything that arises.
- Curiosity: questioning the helpfulness of everything.
- Flexibility: observing without clinging to anything.
- Compassion: being kind to yourself.
- Patience: letting everything unfold naturally.

When painful thoughts and feelings show up, notice them, be patient, and get curious about them. In that moment of discomfort, know there's a good chance they'll trigger your mind to think about getting away. Do what you've done before. It will work. It will make you feel better. Does it? Will it be this time? The best you can probably say is yes, briefly. However, somewhere, you probably know it won't. However, the urge to do the usual thing can still be there in your mind and body. If you do it, you'll feel better. In the long run, you're strengthening habits that keep you in pain and away from living your values.

The facts are that the nature of thoughts and feelings is that they won't always feel pleasant. You'll experience unpleasant things despite naturally seeking thoughts and feelings that feel good. Thoughts and feelings, pleasant and unpleasant ones, will come and go. They have a quality of impermanence.

In the *Watching Impermanence* exercise that draws on ideas from the Soldiers in the Parade (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012) and Leaves on a Stream (Eifert & Forsyth, 2005) exercises, you'll practice watching your thoughts and feelings come and go and noticing when they pull you away from your experience. You'll become aware of their impermanence. So, relax wholeheartedly into the fact that things change.

### Some Final Words

As you get better at staying with your pain, you'll notice that sometimes, thoughts and feelings go away. At times, you get a lot of distance from them. At other times, you feel better. And sometimes, all these things happen. However, these things won't always happen. You might get little or no distance from your thoughts and feelings. You might feel worse or experience no difference in how you're feeling. Overall, the mindfulness exercises aim to improve your noticing and awareness. It's not to feel better. In the long run, though, people tend to feel better with practice and are less caught up in painful thinking and feeling.

With practice, you can also better track the connections and interactions among thoughts, feelings, and situations. You can notice thoughts and feelings for what they are (only thoughts and feelings) and where they are (only inside you). The alternative might be feeling wobbly, trembly, and tingly, with your heart beginning to pound without your noticing the thoughts or situation bringing them up. Then, all of a sudden, you're thinking something terrible is about to happen, and you have a panic attack. Thinking and feeling can reinforce each other, generating more painful thoughts and feelings. Remembering to come back to the present situation can keep you from staying hooked.

In summary, here are five key dos and don'ts of staying with your pain:

Do	Don't
welcome and greet your thoughts and feelings with appreciation, kindness, and understanding.	try to avoid, get rid of, or escape from your thoughts, feelings, or situations.
pay attention to your thoughts and feelings with openness, curiosity, flexibility, compassion, and patience.	think you already know what thoughts and feelings will show up in the situation.
practice to get better at noticing.	try to feel better.
give yourself a break.	beat yourself up for thinking and feeling.
give yourself space to choose how to respond to your thoughts and feelings.	react automatically to your thoughts and feelings.

## References

- Chödrön, P. (2002). *The places that scare you: A guide to fearlessness in difficult times*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- Eifert, G. H., & Forsyth, J. P. (2005). *Acceptance and commitment therapy for anxiety disorders: A practitioner's treatment guide to using mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based behavior change strategies*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Gallo, F. J. (2016). *A practitioner's guide to using the acceptance and commitment therapy matrix model*. Frank J. Gallo.
- Gallo, F. J. (2017). *Bouncing back from trauma: The essential step-by-step guide for police readiness*. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Gunaratana, B. (2011). *Mindfulness in plain English*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Harris, R. (2009). *ACT made simple*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (2012). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

## Disclaimer

The content in this handout is strictly educational in nature. We are NOT providing psychological services or medical advice or establishing a relationship of any kind, including doctor-patient or teacher-student. Please see our [Company Policies](#) for more information.