

WHAT SKILLS

Many of us spend excessive amounts of time trying to avoid obsessing over the past, worrying about the future, or drowning in stressful issues. But easier said than done. We can't just shut our brains off and avoid everything else around us.

The WHAT skills is an effective mindfulness skill that helps you with 'what to do' when you worry excessively or engage in unhelpful behaviors. All you have to do is practice one skill at a time, instead of engaging in multiple tasks at the same time. It helps you develop an action plan based on observe, describe, and participate exercises that the worksheet has to teach.

Identify a distressing situation where you want to apply the WHAT skills. Mention who, what, when, and where.

OBSERVE

Pay attention to physical sensations in your body. Observe the details of your surroundings. Notice your thoughts without trying to stop them when they become uncomfortable. Try to name your emotions when they arise. Remember that the goal of this exercise is to help you 'step back' from the distressing situation and observe it.

EXAMPLE:

- Observing the emotional components of your anxiety is different from being consumed by catastrophic thoughts.
- Observing the presence of sadness is different from being overwhelmed by it.
- Observing that you feel unloved is different from actually being unloved.

Observe your thoughts and then let go of whether or not it is true. You can imagine these thoughts or feelings floating on a cloud or an ocean wave and let them go without trying to catch them.

Here are some exercises to help you get started:

1. Sit on a chair comfortably or lay down. Spend 2-3 minutes observing everything you see, hear, feel, taste, or smell around. Notice that your brain will try to wander around and engage in thoughts or feelings of the past or the future. Don't try to resist or control these thoughts or feelings. Rather observe and watch them go.
2. Walk around in your neighborhood and observe your walking movements, breathing, and your reaction to anything that happens around you.
3. Pick an activity that you either like or dislike. Observe your thoughts, emotions, sensations, and so on for the next 2-3 minutes.

DESCRIBE

Try to describe your thoughts, feelings, or sensations without using non-judgmental and non-evaluative language. Use words to “*describe, not judge.*” Call a thought a thought. Call a feeling a feeling. Then let them go whether or not they're true.

EXAMPLE:

- *I'm feeling sad*, and not *I'm sad*.
- *I feel unloved*, and not *I'm unloved*.

Here are some exercises to help you get started:

1. Describe a distressing situation using a who, what, when, and where framework. For example, “She raised her voice (describes *who* & *what*) when I answered the phone (describes *when*).” Rather than “She was angry at me (just describes the *who*).” Try to cover all four aspects of the framework to describe a situation non-judgmentally.

2. Sit comfortably on a chair and this time, instead of letting your thoughts float away, try to give them a label. “Oh, that was anger,” “That’s resistance,” Try to write them down in a journal.

PARTICIPATE

Pick a task and get involved fully without hesitation. It could be anything from things you’ve never done to things that you enjoy doing. The goal is to *just be* in the present moment and let go of judgment. The best way to approach this exercise is by listing down your values. Then engage yourself with tasks that align with those values.

EXAMPLE:

- Joining conversations and contributing your thoughts, without letting anxiety hold you back.
- Breaking down tasks into manageable steps instead of feeling overwhelmed by challenging work.
- Write a blog on your favorite subject instead of feeling resistant to get started.

Here are some exercises to help you get started:

1. Engage yourself in different role-playing scenarios such as a group meeting, a public presentation, and so on. Consider different roles, respond, and adapt to the scenario without overthinking.
2. Choose your favorite meal and pay attention to its texture, flavors, and sensations. Feel each bite and fully engage in the act of eating.
3. Challenge yourself to try something new and just do it. Let your feel anxious about it and keep doing it for at least five minutes.

Remember that practicing the WHAT skills could be frustrating and challenging some days, while other days it will be easy. It's perfectly normal if you get discouraged and let your practice lapse. The key is to simply get into the habit of looking around for things to observe, describe, and participate in. Over time, you'll be able to get into the habit of pausing before making judgments, experience less anxiety, and discover life as enjoyable just as it is.