

## Nonjudgmentally and Cognitive Therapy

- See, but don't evaluate. Take a nonjudgmental stance. Just the facts. Focus on the "what," not the "good" or "bad," the "terrible" or "wonderful," the "should" or "should not."
- Unglue your opinions from the facts, from the "who, what, when, and where."
- Accept each moment, each event as a blanket spread out on the lawn accepts both the rain and the sun, each leaf that falls upon it.
- Acknowledge the helpful, the wholesome, but don't judge it. Acknowledge the harmful, the unwholesome, but don't judge it.
- When you find yourself judging, don't judge your judging.

Linehan, pg.113

*Men are disturbed not by things that happen but by their opinions of the things that happen.* Epictetus, A.D. 55-135

The ancient wisdom of Epictetus anticipated cognitive therapy by about 2000 years. Epictetus suggests you are not disturbed by the things that happen, rather the judgments of things that happen. Focusing on the facts without evaluation or judging will have a calming effect, improve your mood and help you choose the wisest course of action.

The core mindfulness skill, *Non-judgmentally*, incorporates many of the principles of cognitive therapy. I have illustrated *non-judgmentally* with some of the basic ideas of cognitive therapy.

When you judge, you label or evaluate something as good or bad, as valuable or not, as worthwhile or worthless. Judging is an opinion - an unproven belief. Too often, people tend to judge themselves and others in either excessively positive terms (idealization or "what I like") or excessively negative terms (devaluation or "what I don't like"). The goal is not to be more balanced in your judgments, but rather to drop judging in most situations. Cognitive therapy will teach you how to take a non-judgmental stance and unglue your opinions from the facts.

There are three fundamentals of cognitive therapy. First, the viewpoint you “choose” is vital to your mood. If you can manage your mind, you can “choose” the way you view things. Second, mood and thought are linked. If you change, one you change the other. Third, the methods of cognitive therapy work on your thoughts and beliefs to change your mood. The challenge of cognitive therapy: “Is there another way to see things?”

Feelings influence how you think, and thoughts affect how you feel. Feelings and thoughts are so well blended that we rarely think that the association matters. It does. The linkage of feelings and thoughts is so strong we take it for granted. When you feel happy, you think happy thoughts. If you feel miserable, you think of all the things that have gone wrong in your life. When feeling anxious, you worry.

Thoughts affect feelings in a similar way. If you think someone is disrespecting you, angry feelings arise. If you think you have failed, sadness or disappointment follow. Thoughts that people are richer, prettier, or smarter prompt feelings of envy. Gratitude follows thoughts about those less fortunate.

### **All-or-Nothing Thinking.**

All-or-nothing thinking distorts your worldview into polarized extremes. Some polarities are quite familiar: good & bad, right & wrong, black & white, beautiful & ugly, should & should not, in & out, either-or, win & lose, life or death, off & on, and on and on. This sort of splitting the world encourages idealization on one side and devaluation on the other. The problem with split thinking is that reality is not polarized. Reality is a unified whole with all the parts inter-related. You cannot appreciate the unity of reality if you have a fixed (polarized) perspective because it prejudices your point of view.

You might believe that a small fault makes it impossible for a person to be “good” inside. Such a rigid style of thinking limits your ability to engage ideas of future change and growth. Polarized thinking tends to magnify errors and decrease your ability to adjust to circumstances. This extreme mode of thinking is exacerbated when you are in *emotion mind*.

When you are under the influence of emotion mind, you may feel there is only one way to see a situation. If depressed, you feel as if there are no options - it’s hopeless. If

angry, you are RIGHT and he is WRONG. If anxious, it is safe in here and dangerous out there. There is always more than one way of seeing things. Mindfulness and cognitive therapy increase self-awareness (the ability to be aware of how you are seeing things) and self-agency (the ability to control your behavior).

Practice the skill of *non-judgmentally* to see the world from multiple perspectives, to gather more information, to expand your perspective, to look for multiple viewpoints, and to think flexibly. Once you recognize the polarities, you can start to rise above them. By choosing to be non-judgmental, you increase your options for action and reaction.

### **Labeling.**

Good & bad, terrible & wonderful, and right & wrong are just opinions. When viewed from emotion mind, you may feel there is no other way to see things. Perhaps you believe the situation really is terrible, but this opinion may be a trap. Once you label something as terrible, your mind tends to continue to see it that way.

Labeling is not a problem with a rotten tomato, it will always be bad. But things once defined, tend to remain fixed in the mind (the importance of first impressions). Labeling a person judgmentally results in the definition of a part (they're sloppy) becoming the whole opinion (a person not worth my time). Can you be non-judgmental about losing your job? It may seem terrible at the time, but if you are able to see it as an opportunity to start something new, to re-evaluate yourself and your life, it is more bearable. When you step back, observe, and describe the experience, you gather more facts, let go of your opinion, and you gain a better perspective for your choice. Seeing a job loss as an opportunity is an example of flexibility of thinking. Your mood will change as you notice the alternatives and shift your perspective. When difficulties arise, you will have more options if you can spend more time with the questions words (who, what, when, where) and less time with an emotion-based point of view.

### **Mental Filtering.**

Mental filtering screens out facts or opinions that don't fit with your current belief. If you are feeling down, you attend more to the negative than to the positive. Because you feel down you discount anything that would inspire confidence in yourself or acceptance by

others. You ignore things that would affirm your self-worth. If you have a crush on someone, you might ignore unflattering information about your new beau. Strive to be like the blanket spread on the lawn - there is no filter, it accepts the rain and the sun.

### **Over-generalization.**

The basis of this cognitive distortion is that you take an isolated case and apply it to all others. Rather than looking at each case individually, you make decisions based upon previous information. “I never say the right thing.” “We always do things your way.” As you become more self-aware you will notice the words “always” and “never” as a signal to step back and look for the facts.

### **Discounting the Positive.**

This cognitive distortion rejects affirmations, positives, and compliments as if they didn't count. Too often people fall into the habit of disqualifying the positive comments directed toward them. Accept compliments graciously. When somebody says something nice to you say “thank you.”

### **Jumping to Conclusions or Mind Reading.**

You may believe that you know what somebody else is thinking, but you don't. Too many people anticipate that others think negatively of them. Jumping to conclusions comes from assumptions, some of which may be faulty. If a friend is late or forgets to call you she could be tied up in traffic or became stuck in an urgent situation, but you may jump to the conclusion they are commenting on your worth as a person. If you see the world through your insecurities, then your insecurities distort incoming information. “Don't take it personally” means not to let it affect your self-confidence or self-worth. Step back and look at the facts, ask questions, release your opinion of the event and focus on the details of what is going on in the here-and-now. Remember the adage about what happens when you assume!

## **Magnification.**

Take a difficult event. Now, exaggerate the importance of this event and make the meaning momentous. “This is terrible, it means I’m ruined, I’ll never be able to recover.” By applying the fact questions who, what, when, where and accept like a blanket. Be reasonable. Put this situation into perspective by looking at it from a detached point of view. How important is this really? Will I remember it in 3 years, 3 months, 3 days, or even 3 hours?

The problem with magnification is that intense emotions follow intense thoughts. Once an intense emotion is activated, mood-congruent thoughts, actions, memories, and images follow.

## **Emotional Reasoning.**

When emotions rule, feelings are mistaken for facts. “Emotion mind” takes over. Emotional reasoning makes stress worse, depression deeper, anxiety higher, and anger hotter. Instead, activate your Wise Mind. “Observe & describe” your emotions and the situation. When you say you can’t stand it, do you really mean you don’t like it. Ask yourself, “I am over-reacting and making this situation worse?” “Could I stand it a little bit longer?”

## **“Should” and “Shouldn’t” Statements.**

Albert Ellis dubbed the unrealistic use of “shoulds” musterbation. People shouldn’t be rude. Drivers shouldn’t cut you off in traffic. Life should be fair. Other words that put unnecessary pressure on you are “must”, “ought”, and “have to.” I must finish this. I ought to save money. I have to be on time.

Things are not always as the “should” be. Realistically, many unfair things happen, and we need prepare for them. Some “shoulds” are really a demand in disguise. If you rigidly hold to unrealistic expectations, you will often be angered because people will not behave the way you feel they must. Your ability to be flexible and accept is healthy. Change unrealistic demands to healthy preferences. Try to be a blanket and accept reality as it is.

## Conclusion

The goal of non-judgmentally is to see things from other perspectives. Flexibility of thinking is characterized by the ability to entertain other points of view. Instead of polarized extremes, activate your Wise Mind to find balance, unity, and acceptance. Consider too how you would think about something if you were feeling better. To unglue your opinions from the facts, you could try to see things from some else's point of view.

Reality doesn't come with labels, magnified, polarized, filtered, or discounted. The difference between judging and acknowledging is the difference of polarization and synthesis. Judging tends to go to extremes. Acknowledging takes some of the pressure off by getting unstuck by stepping back a bit and looking at the bigger picture.

Who, what, when, and where. questions reveal the facts which are not as disturbing as opinions. Assumptions, like opinions, close the mind to facts. An open mind allows for possibilities, options and surprises.

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