



Effective Use of Metaphors in the ACT Theory

THEORY

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) relies heavily on the use of metaphors to bring about therapeutic change. ACT is based on the idea that pain in life is inevitable and instead of fighting inevitable pain, **acceptance strategies can help clients make peace with it and detach from the intensity of the pain.** The use of metaphors helps clients conjure images of their unhealthy ways of thinking and this visualization helps them become more empowered. The following are a few of the popular uses of metaphors in ACT to help clients use metaphorical visualization to heal and move closer towards their life goals.

IMPLEMENTATION

ACT founder Stephen Hayes uses metaphorical visualizations to help clients learn the process of *cognitive defusion*, one of the cornerstones of ACT. *Cognitive defusion* is the act of objectifying your thoughts and “de-fusing” your irrational ways of thinking from your automatic thought processes.

An example of *cognitive defusion* is to replace the thought “I am a failure” with the thought that “I am having the thought that I am a failure.” The latter helps individuals **be more objective about their thoughts rather than identify with them.**

The following are some of the popular metaphorical visualizations developed by Hayes:

Quicksand – When you struggle to get out of quicksand you sink in deeper. When you try to stop and resist your thoughts, they often make it worse. In ACT, he instructs clients to be more accepting of life’s inevitable struggles and figuratively spread out in the quicksand, not resist it. Paradoxically, the less they resist, the less they sink in the quicksand. As the saying goes, “*What you resist will persist!*”

Passengers on the Bus – Clients imagine that they are driving a bus, and the cranky passengers represent their irrational and negative thoughts that sidetrack the driver from his goal. Instead of listening and getting sidetracked by these angry passengers (i.e. negative thoughts), the bus driver does not stop the bus or take the bus in the wrong direction. Rather, the driver keeps on driving towards a goal of living a more positive and healthier life, and commit themselves to stop getting sidetracked and manipulated by the behavior of others.



Thought Train – Ask clients to imagine a train is passing by, as they watch from a bridge, and each boxcar has a worry or negative thought written on it. Watching the train go by rather than getting on the train is an example of *cognitive defusion*. In essence, **instead of looking from your thoughts, you are looking at them.**

Leaves Floating on a Stream – Clients imagine sitting by a stream and imagining themselves getting their thoughts out of their mind and on to the leaves that are floating on the stream. Using visualizations, instruct group members to put all their negative thoughts on these leaves and then watch them float downstream and out of sight. Instead of keeping the thoughts inside their heads, they can imagine how to *de-fuse* their thoughts and be more objective and detached.

The Yellow Jeep – This metaphor shows that when you resist thoughts, you will think of them more. In this exercise instruct clients to think of a yellow jeep and then tell them to stop. Of course, that image is hard to shut off, and clients will certainly be more likely to imagine a yellow jeep than they had before the exercise. This will help people stop resisting obtrusive thoughts and become more accepting of their pain and their thoughts, although with more detachment.

A Beach Ball – Resisting reality and ignoring one's issues is like pushing a beach ball into water, and having it pop up when you let go. This demonstrates that you can only suppress your thoughts and feelings for so long.

PROCESSING

Processing these images as a group is just as important of using the images and visualizations themselves. For example, ask group members how they felt putting their thoughts on the leaves and watching them disappear. How can they incorporate these visualizations in their everyday life? What thoughts are they “fused” with and how can they develop more objectivity and acceptance of inevitable struggles? How can they become more accepting of things out of their control, without giving up and feeling like their efforts are futile? Helping group members use these lessons and personalize to their own life situations will help them apply metaphors to their own lives.