ACT Defusion Metaphors – "Watching the Clouds" exercise

ACT

Exercise

45-60 min

Client or group

No

One of the core objectives of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is to help clients relate more flexibly to difficult internal experiences, including thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations, rather than becoming identified or entangled with them [1]. ACT clients learn to observe their inner experiences using cognitive defusion and acceptance skills to help them notice thoughts and feelings as passing events, not facts that must dictate behavior [1, 2].

In ACT, the core processes of the transcendent self, mindfulness, cognitive defusion, and acceptance are often cultivated using metaphor-based experiential practices [1,3]. One such metaphor is *watching thoughts like clouds in the sky*. This imagery encourages clients to observe difficult experiences from a distance without engaging, analyzing, or avoiding them. Just as clouds drift across the sky, so too do painful thoughts or feelings pass through awareness, but only if we let them.

Research supports the use of these ACT metaphor-based techniques for improving psychological flexibility and reducing experiential avoidance across a range of client groups, including those experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma, and stress-related conditions [2, 3, 4, 5]. ACT metaphor-based practices are especially helpful for people who over-identify with painful thoughts or feel overwhelmed by strong emotions [1,2, 3, 6].

The following **Watching the Clouds Exercise** allows clients to experience the space between *noticing* and *reacting*. However, this is one of many ACT metaphors that can be used to similar ends. Some metaphors resonate with some clients and not others, so ACT practitioners tend to experiment with a range of metaphors that can be substituted using the *Appendix* attached. By using ACT metaphors to practice being a curious observer, clients learn they can hold discomfort gently without getting entangled, swept away, or overwhelmed [1, 2, 7]. In this way, using ACT metaphors when facing challenging situations makes room for more deliberate, values-based behavioral responses.

Author

This tool was created by Jo Nash, Ph.D.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients observe their difficult thoughts, feelings, and sensations with mindful awareness and cognitive defusion, using the metaphor of watching clouds drift across the sky. This can be substituted for other ACT metaphors that are also included. Practicing ACT metaphors builds psychological flexibility by reducing reactivity to inner experiences.

Advice

- Introduce this exercise in a calm, grounded moment, not during a state of emotional overwhelm. Explain to clients that the aim is not to relax or get rid of the thoughts and feelings, but to *observe* them with openness and curiosity.
- Use the metaphor of the sky to represent consciousness and clouds to represent transient experiences. This framing helps normalize difficult content (e.g., "even storm clouds pass") and reduces fusion with mental content.
- This tool pairs well with other ACT tools like **Thanking the Mind** and **Expanding Space**, especially when clients are beginning to understand that they are not their thoughts. You can use this exercise as a daily practice or in-session intervention when clients feel stuck or caught in a thought loop.

References

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3. Harris, R. (2022). *Trauma-focused ACT: A practitioner's guide to working with mind, body, and emotion using acceptance and commitment therapy*. New Harbinger Publications.
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This exercise can be used in a session when a client gets stuck and fused with painful thoughts and feelings. It's best to try it out with something manageable in a session (one-to-one or group) at first, then suggested as homework practice to build defusion skills. This introduction explains the exercise.

> "Have you ever watched clouds drift across the sky? Some are light and wispy, others are dark and heavy. But none of them stay forever; they all move on. In this exercise, we'll treat our thoughts and feelings the same way: as passing clouds*. We're not trying to change them or make them go away. We're just watching. Noticing. Letting them pass."

***Tip:** You can offer an alternative metaphor if clouds don't resonate with your client. Some options from the ACT Defusion Metaphors PDF attached in *Appendix A* include:

- Leaves floating on a stream
- Trains at a station
- Cars at a junction
- Pop-up ads on a screen
- Bubbles in a champagne glass
- People passing in the street

Step 1: Settle in and establish an anchor

Ask your client(s) to sit in a comfortable position, hands resting in their lap and feet on the floor. Then get them to establish an anchor as follows:

> "Gently close your eyes or soften your gaze. Take three slow, deep breaths.
>
> Feel the sensation of your breath moving in, and moving out."

Step 2: Imagine the sky (or another metaphor)

> "Picture a wide, open sky above you, vast and limitless. This is your mind, your awareness. In this sky, clouds come and go. These clouds represent your thoughts, emotions, or bodily sensations."

Alternative prompt:

> "If sky imagery doesn't connect with you, you might imagine standing on a bridge watching leaves float down a stream. Or being at a train station, watching trains come and go. Choose whatever works best for you."

Step 3: Observe internal events

> "Now gently notice what's happening inside. What thoughts are there? What feelings? What physical sensations? Imagine each one appearing like a cloud, or a leaf, or a passing car, and just notice it. No need to judge or hold on."

Example:

- "A worry might look like a dark thundercloud."
- "A feeling of guilt might be a heavy fog."
- "A recurring thought might be a car that stops at traffic lights, then moves on."

Step 4: Label and let go

> "Silently label each element of your inner experience as it arises."

- "There's a thought."
- "There's a feeling."
- "There's tightness in my chest."

> "Now let it move across your awareness, just like clouds drifting by. You don't have to follow it, wrestle with it, or push it away."

Step 5: Return to your anchor

> "If you notice you're getting caught up in a thought, gently bring your focus back to your breath… and then return to watching."

Step 6: Debrief and reflect

After 5–10 minutes, invite clients to slowly return to the room:

Suggest they wiggle fingers and toes, take a final deep breath, and open their eyes.

You can explore the experience with them with the following reflective questions:

- What did you notice?
- Were there any clouds (or other images) that stood out?
- How did it feel to watch your thoughts without reacting to them?
- What changed when you didn't try to fix or fight the experience?

Optional journaling prompt:

Today I noticed _____, and I practiced letting it pass like _____.

Optional Metaphor Substitutes

Let the client choose or experiment with any of the metaphors in the attached PDF.

- **Leaves on a stream**: "Watch each thought float by without jumping in."
- **Trains at a station**: "Stand on the platform and let them arrive and depart."
- **Pop-up ads**: "You don't need to click on every one that appears."
- **People in the street**: "Let them pass by without engaging."

Appendix A: ACT Defusion Metaphors

Thoughts are like…

Clouds floating, or birds flying, across the sky. They come and go.

Waves arising from the sea, then falling back in. You can watch the waves from the shore without being swept away.

Leaves and sticks floating down a stream. You don't have to dive in. You can watch from a bridge.

A passing parade. You can watch the floats pass by. You don't have to climb on board.

Trains coming and going while you stand watching from the platform.

A waterfall. You are standing behind it, not under it.

Guests entering a hotel. You can be the doorman. You greet the guests, but you don't follow them into their rooms.

Cars passing by while you wait at a junction.

Suitcases dropping onto a conveyor belt at the airport. You can watch them pass by, without having to pick them up.

People passing you in the street. You can nod and say hello, but you don't have to stop and have a conversation with them.

Bubbles rising in a champagne bottle. They rise to the surface and then disappear.

Actors on a stage. You can watch the play, but you don't have to get on stage and perform.

'Pop-ups' on the internet.

Junk email. You can't stop it from coming in, but you don't have to read all of it.

Appendix B: Script "Watching the Clouds"

Sit in a comfortable position, hands resting in your lap and feet on the floor.

(pause 6 seconds)

Gently close your eyes or soften your gaze. Take three slow, deep breaths.

(pause 6 seconds)

Feel the sensation of your breath moving in and moving out.

(pause 6 seconds)

Picture a wide, open sky above you, vast and limitless.

(pause 4 seconds)

This is your mind, your awareness.

(pause 2 seconds)

In this sky, clouds come and go.

(pause 2 seconds)

These clouds represent your thoughts, emotions, or bodily sensations.

(pause 4 seconds)

Now gently notice what's happening inside you.

(pause 4 seconds)

What thoughts are there?

(pause 2 seconds)

What feelings?

(pause 2 seconds)

What sensations?

(pause 2 seconds)

Imagine each one appearing like a cloud and just notice it.

(pause 6 seconds)

No need to judge or hold on. Just watch the clouds passing.

(pause 4 seconds)

A worry might look like a dark thundercloud.

(pause 4 seconds)

A feeling of guilt might be a heavy fog.

(pause 4 seconds)

A recurring unhelpful thought might be a grey sky that doesn't seem to move, with no trace of blue sky.

(pause 4 seconds)

However they seem, like all clouds they will disperse, they will change...

(pause 4 seconds)

Silently label each element of your inner experience as it arises.

(pause 2 seconds)

There's a thought.

(pause 2 seconds)

There's a feeling.

(pause 2 seconds)

There's a sensation.

(pause 2 seconds)

Now let these elements move across your awareness, just like clouds drifting by.

(pause 6 seconds)

You don't have to follow them, wrestle with them, or push them away.

(pause 6 seconds)

If you notice you're getting caught up in a thought or feeling, gently bring your focus back to your breath... and then return to watching them like clouds.

(pause 6 seconds)

Like clouds, they change, they move, they dissolve…

(pause 6 seconds)

See the sky in the background…

(pause 6 seconds)

The clouds change like your thoughts…

(pause 2 seconds)

But the sky never changes, it's the space clouds pass through…

(pause 4 seconds)

It's blue, open and spacious like your awareness… that notices your thoughts, that notices your feelings…

(pause 4 seconds)

You're spacious like the sky….

(pause 4 seconds)

And your thoughts just pass

(pause for 2 seconds)

Like clouds drifting by

(pause for 2 seconds)

As you watch, you open up like a blue sky…

(pause for 4 seconds)

There go the clouds, as they disperse and pass by…

(pause for 6 seconds)

Now, gently, open your eyes.