

Observer you and Picking From a Menu Script

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INTRO

In this exercise, caregivers are invited to reflect on different identities they hold, they are invited to hold these identities lightly, then they are asked to “pick from a menu” which values-aligned caregiving behaviors they would like to engage in. This exercise was originally developed by Walser and Westrup as a self as context exercise. With slight adaptation, this exercise can target values clarification and flexible committed action as well.

SCRIPT

In the first part of this exercise, we’re going to deepen our connection with our observer self. Sometimes when we buy our thoughts or emotions, it is because we are holding on to a particular aspect of ourselves. It’s as if we have linked ourselves to a particular identity, and we hold on to that identity as if there were no other way to view ourselves. For example, holding an identity of being a bad mother...sometimes gluing ourselves to one identity leads us to lose sight of all the other aspects of ourselves. We can do this with many kinds of identities or self-concepts. You may be hugged tightly to the self-concept of yourself as a professional, or as a strong person or a weak person, or as a doer of good deeds, or as a victim, a survivor, or a mom or dad, and so forth.

If we stand in the observer perspective, all self-concepts or identities can be held lightly—none of them to be taken as literally true. Let’s begin by visualizing a few of those different identities. Before we begin the active visualization, let’s just settle into our seat...taking a few deep, intentional breaths...noticing the sensation of air against our skin...noticing the sounds around us. As we’re ready, gathering our attention and turning it inward. Let’s begin by visualizing “caregiver you” or “parent you.” Imagine the character of you that is a caregiver. What is that you doing? What does that idea of you look like? How is your caregiver self feeling? And what thoughts is “caregiver self” experiencing?

As you picture this idea of you, practice just observing...curious and separate...like watching a character. Now imagine that you are holding a small version of caregiver self in your hand. And as you gently hold the small version, say to yourself, “I hold this idea lightly, as though I am a breeze holding a floating feather. It is not me anyway.” Then allow that idea of self to gently dissolve or float away.

Next, bring into your mind's eye the image of your worker self or professional self...What is that character doing?...What do they look like?...How are they feeling? And what thoughts does work self have? Again, just observing, warm, curious. And again, imagine that you are holding a small version of this image in your hands. And as you do this, say to yourself, “I hold this idea lightly. This is not me anyway.”

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LIVING ACT
learn - do - grow

Now visualize your best self or the character of your aspirational self. What does this identity look like? What are they doing? What thoughts are they thinking? And how is best self feeling? Take a moment to draw this image in your mind. And again, as before, we're practicing, just observing, watching from a distance. Next, imagine that there is a small version of this best self character that you are holding your hand. And as you do this, you say to yourself, "I hold this idea lightly like a floating feather, and I am the breeze. This is not me anyway." Allow that image to dissolve.

Finally visualize struggling you...the you that is having a hard time. Noticing what that identity looks like...what they're doing...how are they feeling? What thoughts are they having? You may notice additional reactions or emotions emerging as you observe the struggling self. This is the practice...practice observing, just watching with openness and warmth. Then imagining that you are holding a small version of the struggling self in your hand, gently and with care saying to yourself, "I hold this idea lightly as though I am a breeze holding a small feather. This is not me anyway."

Now imagine all of these characters lined up in your mind's eye... caregiving self, work self, best self, struggling self...each held gently in your hands. Then repeat to yourself "I hold all of these images lightly...like a warm breeze holding floating feathers. These images are not me anyway."

Allow those images to dissolve as you are ready, gently turning your attention back to your breathing...noticing the movements of your body...the sounds around you...observing and breathing for a few more moments. As you're ready, opening your eyes And taking in what surrounds you.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What did you notice? What emotions came up as you observed different ideas of you?
What parts of you were you attracted to? What parts did you notice an aversion to?
If picking your behavior was as simple as picking from a menu, what behaviors or aspects would you like to continue?

During post-exercise discussion, you can help caregivers reflect on and clarify their parenting values, describe aspirational behavior, articulate rigidly held caregiving identities, and consider parenting behavior as a series of small choices flexibly enacted.

With special thanks to Drs. Walser and Westrup. This exercise is minimally adapted from the following source: Walser, Robyn; Westrup, Darrah. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma-Related Problems: A Practitioner's Guide to Using Mindfulness and Acceptance Strategies . New Harbinger Publications. Kindle Edition.

