

In the core process of defusion, clients are asked to stand back and observe the process of thinking – to separate themselves from the content of their thoughts and recognise they are simply having thoughts. Similarly, in the process of Self as Context, the client is asked to stand back and observe a story about ‘the self’. Here, we discuss two strategies for helping our clients distance themselves from their physical and thinking selves, and take on roles of observers. As therapists, we are aiming to introduce and enhance our clients’ flexibility in taking a different perspective than what they are used to.

We can define three parts of our selves: the Physical Self, the Thinking Self and the Observing Self. We can easily demonstrate the Physical Self. We can be playful when exploring this with our clients. You look at me and see me as a whole. If I cut my fingernails am I still myself? If I cut my finger off, am I still me? How about if I cut my arm off? The answer is still yes. It begs the question how much do we need to cut off before I cease to be ‘me’? The point of this exercise is to invoke a sense of curiosity around experiencing the different parts of ourselves, of which the physical self is one. This should be a fun, light-hearted exercise.

The second demonstration is a little bit harder for clients to understand. This is a demonstration of the Thinking Self. The Thinking Self is that part of us that generates the thoughts, judgements, comments, images and memories that give each of us an individual, private perspective on and interpretations of our experiences of the world. We often find these perspectives useful, so we strongly connect with them – which means it is also easy to connect with the perspectives that our Thinking Self produces that are unhelpful.

The Thinking Self gives us many different stories about ourselves. The useful stories form a kind of map of who we are in the world. But the unhelpful stories are those that our Thinking Self generates that lead us to feel badly about ourselves.

We can then introduce the Observing Self through the previous Physical and Thinking Self exercises. The Observing Self is that part of us that is able to ‘watch, observe and witness’ the Physical Self and the Thinking Self – to notice that there is a part of us (Observing Self) that is able to witness the other parts (Physical and Thinking Self). It helps us realise that we are not our thoughts – that if we can see our thoughts, we cannot be our thoughts. For example, our Thinking Self enables us to prepare breakfast, decide that the blue tie I really like matches a particular shirt and will be suitable for a job interview this morning, and remember which route will be best to get there. However, the Thinking Self also generates the self story stating ‘I’m not good enough’ and ‘I’m not smart enough’. We fuse with these unhelpful stories, which leads to nervousness and, if repeated often enough over time, an unhelpful sense of self.

In a therapeutic context we are attempting to defuse from the self stories that are not so helpful and appreciate that there is another ‘self’, the observer, that does not hold judgement but only silently witnesses.

One way of introducing the Observing Self is to help our clients notice their thoughts. We can do this by asking them to participate in an exercise that has them quietly sitting for a

minute or two. Quietly ask them about their thoughts – what shows up as they sit there. Then point out that by noticing and identifying particular thoughts, they are able to separate themselves from the content of the thoughts. As discussed previously, this is defusion. Then take this a little further by highlighting that as they are noticing thoughts, they can be aware that they are noticing. This gives rise to the question of ‘what is this part of you that does the noticing’. The answer: the Observing Self.

This exercise enables us to help our clients recognise and experience the Thinking Self and then become aware of the Observing Self.

We realise that we are not our thoughts by noticing our thoughts. If we can see our thoughts, we cannot be our thoughts.

It is useful to help clients distinguish between these different selves to give them an understanding of the Physical, Thinking and Observing Selves. Often clients get stuck with one story about who they are and never become aware of the Observing Self. We are more than the ‘story about who we are’. Self as Context helps clients become more flexible in taking different perspectives of the self.

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