Handout 17.4 (PATIENT VERSION)

Building a house metaphor, kicking your buts, creating defusion, and committed action form

The primary function of this metaphor is to help the patient to have a more organised view and experience of what it has cost him/her engaging with avoidance. At the same time, this metaphor also introduces the concepts of chosen actions and the capacity for change through acceptance. The exploration of the metaphor can go like this:

Have you noticed that every time you avoid a situation or an event because it might cause discomfort you are also narrowing the options available to you? By avoiding a situation, you are gaining the benefit of perhaps feeling a little bit more comfortable now. However, you are also not getting any other benefits that could have resulted from stepping into that situation. It's a trade-off, right?

At this point we would use the examples of the client's own life in which such a trade-off was made and ask something like:

Was that a good deal?

By avoiding situations because they might be uncomfortable, you are narrowing your life more and more. Living is very similar to building a house. To build a house you need bricks, and you have plenty of these lying around you. In your life you've noticed that some of these bricks look nicer than others. Some of them are shiny new bricks that represent nice sensations, thoughts, memories, and feelings. Other bricks are broken, dirty, or just don't look sturdy enough, and these represent all these difficult experiences such as symptoms and negative thoughts and feelings with which you've been struggling.

So, what would happen if you chose to build your house only with the nice shiny bricks? It would probably be a very small house, wouldn't it? And what if it happened that the nice bricks were close to or even underneath a pile of the nasty bricks? Isn't it the case that you have been so busy trying not to touch the nasty bricks that you would miss those nice hidden bricks? And wouldn't that narrow your living space even more?

You might even say that you are glad to live in a small house; however, every time you step out of the house, the nasty bricks will still be there waiting for you and stand in your way to getting more shiny bricks. You might even come to a place where you don't leave the house anymore. That sounds like a big trade-off for a small living space, doesn't it?

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On the other hand . . . What would happen if you chose to build a house with all the bricks that you have at your disposal? What if what we can do here could be about building a house with all the bricks available so that you can have a bit more room in which to live? What if this is a space where you can learn how to live with both nice and nasty bricks in your wall in the service of having a bigger life and one in which you will have the choice to keep expanding? How would that sound?

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Kicking your buts

The use of the word "but" in sentences has the function of creating an opposition between two statements. When you say something like "I would like to go out to eat, but my abdominal pain might flare up", the word "but" functions as a statement that "going out to eat" and "having abdominal pain" cannot happen at the same time. Think of some of the instances in which you have prevented yourself from doing something important because of a "but" type of thought. Jot down below the most common "but" types of statements in your life.

_____ but _____
_____ _____
_____ but _____
_____ _____
_____ but _____
_____ _____
_____ but _____
_____ _____
_____ but _____
_____ _____
_____ but _____
_____ _____
_____ but _____

Now see what happens if you take the same sentences and change the word "but" to the word "and":

_____ and _____
_____ _____
_____ and _____
_____ _____
_____ and _____
_____ _____
_____ and _____
_____ _____
_____ and _____
_____ _____
_____ and _____
_____ _____
_____ and _____

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Did you notice any difference? Are the "and" sentences less believable in any way than the "but" sentences? How was the meaning of the sentence affected and how can that be important to you? Let's look at our example: "I would like to go out to eat, but my abdominal pain might flare up". By changing "but" to "and", it will read as follows, "I would like to go out to eat, and my abdominal pain might flare up". By using the word "and", suddenly going out to eat and having abdominal pain can actually co-exist. Aren't both of these statements true? The difference is that the second one allows you to contemplate the choice of going out to eat while the first one automatically excludes this.

Creating defusion with your hands

Ask the patient to interlock the fingers of their hands and to hold them close to their face, effectively blocking their field of vision. Ask them how much detail they can see of the room or of their own hands. Likely responses will be that they can't see anything or that it's all blurry. Get the patient to then slowly move their hands until they are at arm's length. Get them to notice again the room and the detail of their hands. Likely responses will involve a lot more clarity and more detail. Ask them how well they could navigate their way out of the room in both situations (hands close and hands away). Then invite the patient to repeat this exercise but with this slight change: "Now imagine that your hands are like all the thoughts/feelings/physical sensations with which you have been struggling". Notice three things:

(1) When your experiences are all in your face, how much can you notice of your life and the details of what surrounds you? How connected do you feel to your life in this situation?
(2) How difficult is it to keep your attention in navigating your life? (like getting out of this room)
(3) How difficult is it to take action, to do the things that are important in your life?

Again, slowly bring your hands to arm's length. When you're able to have some distance from your thoughts, how much easier is it to engage and connect? How much easier is it to keep your attention focused on the things that are important to you? How much easier is it to take action? Notice these things (i.e., hands) haven't disappeared. If you can use them, do so. Thoughts and feelings often give us important information of which we can make good use. What if our stance was more one of noticing that we have these "hands" and that we have a choice of carrying them close to our face or at arm's length. What if noticing our hands is the first step to being able to create some distance from them. What if we could look at our thoughts/emotions/physical experiences rather than from our thoughts/emotions/physical experiences?

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Committed action form

Day:__/__/_____
The value I want to pursue is:
The way I want to pursue my value is by (describe action, what, where, when, for how long):
What I have been doing that is inconsistent with my values is:

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This has cost me (e.g., relationships, health, time, money, distress):
The goal I want to achieve is:
In order to perform my valued action, I am willing to make room for the following sensations in my body:

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In order to perform my valued action, I am willing to make room for the following *thoughts or images*:
In order to perform my valued action, I am willing to make room for the following *feelings or emotions*:
In order to perform my valued action, I am willing to make room for the following *urges*:

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