

HANDOUT 2: Managing Toilet Anxiety Through Distraction, Cognitive Diffusion, Mindfulness, & Guided Imagery

This handout provides a brief introduction to managing toilet anxiety by building upon the slow breathing techniques outlined in Handout 1. Handout 2 provides an introduction of short-term techniques to manage the distress associated with toilet anxiety.

Managing short-term distress through distraction:

- One of the most common strategies individuals use to reduce anxiety is distraction. That is, engaging in an activity with the purpose to distract yourself from an unwanted thought or feeling
- *Distraction is NOT effective when you continue to engage in it with the core focus of ignoring an unhelpful thought or unpleasant sensation.* Instead, it can be used to distract oneself from unhelpful thoughts temporarily, allowing you to feel less anxious and deal with the distress more effectively
- *Distraction can be useful when combined with breathing to help manage short-term stress*
- Distraction works in the short-term by reducing the attention to the thoughts, therefore lessening their impact on feelings
- For example, you may choose to go and sing along to one of your favourite songs

Cognitive diffusion:

- Cognitive diffusion works by changing the focus/intent of a thought to one that is less distressing. For example, say the word “tree” out loud at least 30 times. What happens? At first you might say the word and think of a tree, its colour, its shape, its location, etc. However, after about the 20th time saying tree, you may find that the word tree no longer results in you thinking of a tree, rather focusing on the word, and how strange it is to say it 20-30 times, etc. Here the word connection with the image of a tree becomes cognitively diffused.
- Cognitive diffusion techniques can also help in the short-term to help breakdown the distressing link between thoughts and its meaning to you. Try this technique again with a word that is associated with your anxiety, it might be “smell”, “toilet”, etc. Say it 30 times repeatedly, does it have the same impact it did when you first said or thought of the word?

Example cognitive diffusion exercises:

- *Sing a song:* When you have an unhelpful thought, verbalise it using a song. Sing it to a tune of a song you like, or one that makes you laugh.
- *Be kind, rewind:* When you have an unhelpful thought, try to say the words backwards or sound out the letters of the words backwards.
- *Be kind, cheer on your mind:* When you have an unhelpful thought, just thank your mind for the thought.
- *Thought character:* When you have an unhelpful thought, just imagine the words coming out of a silly politician or TV actor.
- *Thought addition:* When you have an unhelpful thought, just add a sentence before it and replay, such as “I’m having the thought that....”
- *Thought subtraction:* When you have an unhelpful thought, try to take out or jumble words in the thought to form another sentence.
- *Radio gaga:* Imagine you are hearing the thought from a radio or TV, as it is playing, just walk away from it, notice how the words become less and less clear.

Mindfulness:

- Mindfulness is a process whereby you actively focus on the present moment (e.g., this might include a sound around you or a feeling inside you). While you are focusing on being in the present moment, you should try to experience it with interest, openness, acceptance, and without the need to judge or critique it
- After practice, engaging in mindfulness can be a powerful way to reduce stress and become more relaxed by reducing the constant surveillance of our surroundings

Example mindfulness exercise:

- As an exercise in mindfulness, cut up a piece of fruit that you enjoy. Take the fruit to somewhere you can sit quietly without being disturbed – the place where you practice your breathing exercises would be ideal
- Take your time eating the fruit, focusing on how it tastes, looks and smells. You will need to continually direct your attention back to the fruit, though it will become easier to direct your attention with practice

The core aspects of performing a mindfulness exercise are:

1. Allowing yourself time – time to find a comfortable position where distractions are minimal, time to take some relaxing breaths, time to allow yourself to focus your awareness on an object
2. Being open to the experience – open to being curious and non-judgemental, focused on the object, noticing how it feels, sounds, moves, tastes, changes over time
3. Maintain your attention – know that you will be distracted as the mind likes to wander, however when it does, bring your awareness back to the mindful task. Don't judge these thoughts or distractions, just simply notice that it occurred and bring your awareness back to the mindful task; and finally
4. Enjoy it – take some enjoyment out of this task, as you attain a richer understanding and curiosity for the sensations or objects in which you are mindful of

Engaging in mindfulness every day:

- Once you get practice at engaging in mindfulness, it can be a powerful technique you can use in your day-to-day activities
- Engage in mindfulness during those tasks that we often do without thinking, without being mindful, often those tasks we do every day just because we need or must do
- Below is a list of just a few activities where you can practice at being mindful:
 - Taking a shower e.g., notice how the water runs over you, touches you on your head or another area of your body, notice and feel the soap bubbles
 - Washing up the dishes e.g., notice and feel the soap bubbles, changing surface of the plates/cups as they are wet and move about in the sink
 - Hanging out the laundry e.g., notice the sounds around you or the touch and feel of the clothes
 - Going for a walk – take notice of the sounds or feeling of the ground as you walk over it
- As mindfulness allows you to focus your attention, it is important that you avoid doing this task while engaging in activities where your divergent attention is required, for example driving, using knives, even power tools!

Acceptance and being mindful of the self:

- While this method of mindfulness can be helpful, one outcome of this strategy is that it distracts you from the unpleasant feelings or sensations you are experiencing. This in itself may be a good enough reason to engage in the mindful activity
- Alternately, mindfulness based strategies can also be a powerful method in which to explore these unpleasant feelings or sensations
- Again, the purpose of the mindful activity is not to increase the distress or negative feelings but instead to allow you to be curious and non-judgemental of them
- To understand this more it is important to review another important aspect of mindfulness called *acceptance*
- In this instance, acceptance refers to allowing one to be open to the moment, whether the feelings or sensations are good or bad, without engaging in strategies to avoid it. If you notice a feeling or sensation and are willing to accept it for what it is, again whether good or bad, pleasurable or unpleasant, it will allow you to react differently to it
- When you notice the start of your anxiety symptoms, you may in turn become more distressed and worried, etc. While this is all going on you may try to fight it, a bit like being at war with oneself. Unfortunately, this way of coping usually just results in more distress and anger towards oneself

Acceptance and being mindful of the self (continued):

- Another way to deal with distress is being mindful of it and being willing to accept the distress for what it is, without judgement or having a need to fight it. With practice, this strategy can be a powerful way to manage distressing emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations. Because you stop trying to fight it, you don't 'feed' it
- A nice metaphor for the benefit of not actively fighting distressing sensations/feelings/bodily sensations, is dealing with quicksand. Thanks to movies, we all know that if we were to find ourselves in quicksand, the best thing to do is not overreact and move about in a frenzied manner. Instead, what we should do is try to relax and lie on the surface of the sand... and wait for help (unless there is a handy tree branch nearby!)
- By engaging in an accepting, non-judgmental and mindful way towards our own unpleasant feelings/sensations we can learn to react differently to them. Instead of feeding them, we can learn to understand them better, and accept them
- By doing this you may actually find these sensations become less powerful and in turn less distressing

An introduction to guided imagery:

- As you may have found, mindfulness involves focused attention (e.g., focus on breathing), and depending on the method may also involve getting you to focus on a real or imaginary sensation/situation (e.g., movement of the air while you breathe). In turn, this focus (using suggestion) can alter how you attend to a wanted or unwanted sensation (e.g., use the breath to calm or soothe pain)
- Guided imagery (and hypnosis) also uses these methods, especially suggestion, to enable individuals to manage and reduce psychological and physiological symptoms
- You can utilise guided imagery to help overcome toilet anxiety. Imagine yourself being relaxed and being able to walk into a public toilet, and without any worries or concerns being successful at voiding your bladder and/or bowels. In addition to slow breathing, working on this guided image can help you to challenge and help overcome toilet anxiety
- Guided imagery is also often used by individuals to successfully move from overwhelming anxiety to exposure work (see Handout 4)

Engage in relaxation with mindful and guided imagery:

- This week we would like it if you could practice engaging in slow breathing using either a mindful and/or guided imagery technique
- All you need to do is spend a minimum of 20 minutes each day engaging in a relaxation task
- Find yourself a comfortable chair that has good support for your head and shoulders, or even use some cushions against a wall. Remember not to fall asleep while engaging in relaxation as sleep is not the same as relaxation. If you can, find yourself a quiet room free from interruption
- Remember it's all about practice – the more effort you put into it, the more likely you are to attain its benefits

Take home messages:

- Distracting yourself or avoiding unhelpful thoughts won't make them go away, however, distraction can be useful when combined with breathing to help manage short-term stress
- Cognitive diffusion works by changing the focus/intent of a thought to one that is less distressing; diluting our emotional link to the thought
- Mindfulness is about being open to the experience –being curious and non-judgmental of what is going on around you, as well as inside your body
- When we engage mindfully with unpleasant feelings and sensations, we can learn to understand them better, and accept them. The sensations then have less power over us and may become less distressing
- Guided imagery is another tool that can be used to manage and reduce psychological and physical symptoms
- By identifying and using positive strategies to challenge unhelpful thoughts, individuals can overcome anxiety/stress and in turn reduce anxiety symptoms

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to Ms. Rose Tingate who put this document together adapted from a variety of sources including, IBSclinic.org.au and the treatment manual developed by Boyce et al. (2000). Cognitive-behaviour therapy as a treatment for Irritable Bowel Syndrome: A pilot study. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 34, 300-9.

If you have any questions or suggestions, please feel free to email Dr Simon Knowles: sknowles@swin.edu.au

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