

A Useful Metaphor For Observing Observe as if you are a *friendly* scientist encountering a new phenomenon. As a friendly scientist, you are not trying to interfere with or destroy it. You are simply studying it; observing it with curiosity; trying to find out as much about it as you can. (This is a particularly useful metaphor for observing unpleasant sensations.)

Emphasizing Self-as-Context (The ‘Observing Self’)

In mindfulness exercises, we are observing all manner of experiences; thoughts, feelings, urges, memory, sensations, sights, sounds, smells, actions etc.. The question is, *who is doing the observing?* That aspect of ourselves which observes our experience, but is separate from it, is often referred to as 'The Inner Observer' or 'The Silent Witness'. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy it is referred to as 'Self-as-context' or 'The Observing Self'. While our thoughts, feelings, sensations etc. constantly change, the observing self does not. It can be very powerful to draw attention to this transcendent aspect of self.

To enhance awareness of the observing self, add phrases into mindfulness/ acceptance exercises such as: "And as you're noticing that, be aware that you're noticing....." Or "As you're observing this, notice who's doing the observing."

The Observing Self Exercise

The aim of this exercise is to increase awareness of self-as-context, or the Observing Self: that aspect of us which is experientially distinct from whatever event is being observed. The basic formula is:

- 1) Bring your attention to X.
- 2) As you notice X, be aware that you are noticing it.
- 3) There is X, and there you are, observing it.
- 4) X changes.
- 5) The you that notices X does not change.
- 6) Once again, notice X, and be aware that you're noticing. There's X, and there's you.
- 7) I always conclude this exercise with the sky/weather metaphor. (See the section on metaphors, later).

X can include: thoughts, feelings, sensations, urges, memories, body, the roles you play.

When you get to part 4) in the above formula, improvise a bit about how X changes.

Eg, your feelings change constantly. Sometimes you're sad, sometimes you're happy. Sometimes you're calm. Sometimes you're angry. Etc. etc.

Eg your body changes continuously. It's not the same body you had as a baby, as a child, as a teenager, as a young adult. You may have had bits put in or bits cut out. You have scars, and wrinkles, and moles and blemishes, that weren't there ten or twenty years ago. You get a whole new set of skin every 6 weeks. Over a period of 7 years, every single cell in your body gets replaced by new cells. At the atomic level, 95% of the atoms in your body are replaced by new ones in the space of one year.

Eg your roles change continuously. Now you're in the role of a client. At other times, you're in the role of a mother/father/son/daughter/ brother/sister/friend, rival, citizen, customer, worker, employer, employee etc.

Using this formula, you can make this exercise as long or as short as you like. The main ACT book (Acceptance & Commitment Therapy, by Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson) has a detailed and lengthy script for this on p 193-195. Many ACT therapists like to use that script. I personally find it is too long, and that clients often drift off into la-la land. (Don't tell Steve I said that!)