

# How to Practice the “What” Skills

## DBT: Mindfulness Skills

This worksheet provides multiple ideas and a tracker for practicing the mindfulness “What” skills: observing, describing, and participating. For more detail on the skills, see our [“What” skills handout](#).

### Observing: Ideas for Practicing

Remember that observing is the practice of taking in your environment and your internal experience. Recall that we can only observe what we can sense *directly* (e.g., what we can see or hear; our own thoughts or emotions; not others’ opinions or intentions).

#### Seeing

- Watch the sky for clouds, the sun rising or setting, rain or snow, birds and airplanes flying by, etc.
- Look at something familiar to you, but pretend you’re seeing it for the very first time.
- Sit somewhere busy and look straight ahead. Take in everything moving in front of you.
- Challenge yourself to look at the details of something (like a flower or leaf) for a full minute.
- Watch someone in real life, or watch a video of someone. Try to focus just on what your eyes are seeing (rather than taking guesses about what they are doing or thinking).
- Look at objects around you and how they catch the light. Notice the highlights and shadows.
- Look at the texture of objects around you. What visual cues are associated with each texture?

#### Hearing

- Be still for a moment and listen to the sounds around you. Try not to identify where the sounds are coming from; instead, focus on the qualities of the sound (is it rhythmic? high-pitched? loud?).
- Listen to a recording of someone speaking. Try to forget the words and focus on what it is that makes their voice uniquely theirs (speed, pitch, cadence, clarity, resonance, rhythm, etc.).
- Listen to familiar music as if you’re hearing it for the first time.
- Listen to a type of music that is completely new to you. Let it wash over you.

#### Smelling

- Pause for a moment and notice any smells around you.
- Smell things (bath products, spices) that are familiar to you. Do they smell the way you expect?
- Pay special attention to what you can smell at places like restaurants, bakeries, salons or barber shops, coffee or tea shops, gardens, the laundry room or laundromat, etc.
- Pay special attention to what you can smell while cooking, showering, cleaning, gardening, etc.

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### Tasting

- Eat foods that are familiar to you, and slow down and pay close attention to the taste. Do they taste exactly the way you expect?
- Try a food you’ve never tried before. Try to ignore whether you like or dislike it, and instead focus on its taste qualities (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, umami).
- Try to eat a bite, portion of a meal, or an entire meal focused only on observing tastes.

### Feeling

- Lightly scratch your skin with a fingernail. How long does it take for that sensation to fade away?
- Pause and take stock of anything touching you (your body touching your shoes, clothes, the chair you’re sitting on, glasses you’re wearing, etc.). Try to notice everything.
- Purposely touch something with your fingertip (e.g., your shirt collar, your pet’s fur, a couch cushion). Notice how the sensations on your skin tell you about the texture of the object. If you touch the object again with the back of your hand, are the sensations quite the same?
- When walking, notice the feeling of your feet against the ground, the air on your skin, your clothes moving against your body.
- “Scan” your body for parts that feel tense, relaxed, warm, cold, etc.

### Breathing

- As you breathe in and out, notice the sensations in your diaphragm, chest, nose, and lungs.
- Notice the small pauses that naturally occur at the end of an inhale and the end of an exhale.
- Notice your breath while on a walk. Breathe normally. How many footsteps long is your inhale? Exhale? How does it feel if you lengthen your exhale by one step? Two steps?

### Doing

- Pause right before doing something and notice the urge to do it. What sensations do you feel when you have the urge to check your phone, swallow a bite of food, avoid something or someone?

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### Thinking

- “Watch” your thoughts from a distance. Which thought comes first? Which thoughts follow? Where do they come from? Try not to ignore any thoughts or get stuck in any thoughts.
- Get more familiar with “watching” your thoughts from a distance, imagine your mind is:
  - A thought factory. Put each thought on the conveyor belt into its own box, then put the box onto another conveyor belt. Don’t miss any!
  - A railroad track, and thoughts are train cars. Don’t jump onto a train car, just watch them pass.
- When your thoughts are very anxious, attend to your body sensations. What happens to your worries if you keep your focus on your body?

### Expanding awareness

- Notice your breath. Then, notice your breath while attending to the sounds around you. Then, notice your breath, sounds around you, and the feeling of your body against your chair. Hold all three in your awareness at once. You can try other groups of three sensory experiences.
- Focus carefully on doing one thing (e.g., doing the dishes). After a while, open your awareness to the space around you. Hold both in your attention at the same time.



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### Describing: Ideas for Practicing

Describing is labeling your observations with words. Remember to describe the facts (the who, what, where, and when), not your interpretations or assumptions about the experience (the why and how).

#### Describe your environment or other people

- Look at a group of houses, trees, clouds, leaves, rocks, or similar with someone else. Describe one “member” of the group, and see if the other person can tell which one you’re describing.
- Imagine you’ve met an alien who knows nothing about human emotions. How would you describe the movement and shapes of someone’s facial features when they are sad? Angry? Happy? Etc.
- Watch someone doing some sort of action or behavior. Imagine that you need someone else to replicate that behavior exactly - but you can’t *show* them what the behavior looks like. What words would you use? Remember to avoid describing things you can’t *directly* observe (their thoughts, emotions, intentions, motivations, etc.) - just what you can see with your eyes.
- Imagine that an artist needs to paint something (like a leaf, an animal, a landscape) that you can see, but they cannot. How would you describe this thing to the artist?

#### Describe your internal experience

- When you feel an emotion, describe it to yourself (e.g., “An angry feeling just showed up”).
- When you feel an emotion, describe your thoughts (e.g., “I’m having thoughts about my job”).
- When someone does something, describe the feelings (e.g., “When you call me that, I feel annoyed”) and thoughts (“And I think, ‘I don’t like that,’”) you have in reaction.

#### Describe your breathing

- Count your breaths. When you inhale, think, “I am inhaling, 1,” and when you exhale, think, “I am exhaling, 1.” When you reach 10 (or if you lose count), start again at 1.
- Vary your breaths. When you breathe normally, think, “I am inhaling/exhaling normally.” Purposely breathe more slowly and think, “I am breathing in a long inhalation/exhalation.”
- Note where in your body you can feel your breath. For example, “I can feel my breath in my nose, throat, chest, and diaphragm.”

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### Participating: Ideas for Practicing

Participating is being “one” with what you are doing. It’s going with the flow, acting spontaneously and unselfconsciously.

- Focus on where your body meets your environment (e.g., the air, your clothes, your chair, your bed, the floor, etc.). Focus on what in the environment is physically supporting you. Think about that object in a new way - how it is holding you up, accepting you, and imagine its kindness towards you.
- Dance to your favorite music. Throw yourself into the experience as much as you can.
- Sing to your favorite music in the car, shower, while preparing for the day, with friends, at karaoke, in a choir, etc.
- Play an instrument alone, or in a group.
- Play a board game, party game, or videogame with other people. Allow yourself to give all your attention to enjoying the game with the people around you.
- Throw yourself into a solo physical activity (e.g., running, yoga), group exercise class, or team sport.
- Take a dance or improv class.
- Revisit activities you loved as a child. What activities were so fun or interesting that time just seemed to slip away from you?
- Have dinner with loved ones without your phone. Throw yourself into conversation.

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Use this page to record your practice of the “What” Skills.

Which Mindfulness skill did you practice?	Specifically, how did you practice this skill?	Rate how focused you felt on the skill	Any benefits? (e.g., insights; feeling more connected, more present, less reactive) Did you experience any challenges?
<input type="checkbox"/> Observing <input type="checkbox"/> Describing <input type="checkbox"/> Participating		☆☆☆☆☆	
<input type="checkbox"/> Observing <input type="checkbox"/> Describing <input type="checkbox"/> Participating		☆☆☆☆☆	
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# Additional Resources to Support Your Mental Health Journey

It can be hard to know where to begin looking for support in your mental health journey. Getting a referral from a primary care physician is a reliable first step. Also, sometimes family and friends have experienced similar issues and have professionals they would recommend. The experts at ChoosingTherapy.com are here to help as well, with resources we have reviewed and recommend. Our [strict editorial standards](#) ensure our reviews are fair, honest, thorough, and based on firsthand experience.

## You Can Trust ChoosingTherapy.com



**325+**  
Companies Reviewed



**3,625+**  
Hours of Firsthand Experience



**1,545+**  
Data Points Analyzed



### [Best Online Therapy](#)

Online therapy is a convenient way to connect with a licensed therapist to address mental health issues, reduce unhealthy behaviors, develop effective coping skills, and get more satisfaction out of life. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.

### [Best Online Psychiatry](#)

Online psychiatry providers enable patients to consult with licensed psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. They can evaluate, diagnose, and prescribe medication to help manage mental health issues. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.



### [Best Mental Health Apps](#)

Apps can be great way to monitor mood, track sleep, journal, and practice healthy coping skills like mindfulness and meditation. There are apps specifically designed to help people reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, chronic stress, and burnout.

### [Therapist Directory](#)

When you're looking for a mental health provider with a very particular skill set, level of experience, or personality type, a therapist directory can be very helpful. Using the filters, you can refine your search until you find a therapist who feels like a perfect fit.





# Tools for Self-Assessment and Psychoeducation

Figuring out the next step in your mental health journey can be overwhelming. Developed by psychologists, the tools at [ChoosingTherapy.com](https://choosingtherapy.com) can help. Our mental health self-assessment quizzes can help you explore common symptoms of mental health concerns, as well as find the best therapy style for you. Our mental health worksheets can guide you through therapy concepts and how to use them in your life.

## [Learn More with Mental Health Quizzes](#)

Our collection of psychologist-developed mental health quizzes can help you learn if you are experiencing mild, moderate, or concerning levels of anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, and more. Each quiz also provides targeted resources based on your answers. These self-assessments are designed to offer insight, not diagnoses, and can be a helpful first step in recognizing symptoms and deciding whether to seek further support. If you have concerns about your mental health or your quiz results, we recommend you reach out to a licensed mental health professional.



## [Free Mental Health Worksheets](#)

Search our collection of therapy worksheets by mental health topic, therapy modality, or demographic group. Our free, psychologist-developed worksheets make therapy exercises understandable and relevant to daily life. Find worksheets for help with ADHD, anxiety, depression, relationship difficulties, and other common mental health challenges.