Self as Context

ACT: Noticing the Part of You That Notices

Self as context is the idea that you are more than your thoughts, feelings, and labels: you are also the one who notices them. It is one of the six core processes of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), developed by psychologist Steven Hayes and colleagues. ACT trainer Russ Harris calls this part of you the noticing self. This worksheet helps you find it and use it when a story about yourself starts to take over.

1 The sky and the weather

Think of your thoughts and feelings as weather. Some days bring sunshine, and other days bring storms. The sky holds all of it, and no storm can hurt the sky. However bad the weather gets, the sky is still there when it clears. In ACT, the noticing part of you is like the sky.

Why does this work? *When you treat a thought like "I'm a failure" as the whole truth about you, it can drive what you do. Noticing that there is a you who is having the thought gives you a little distance from it. From there it is easier to choose what to do based on what matters to you.*

2 The stories you carry

Everyone carries labels and stories about who they are, some kind and some harsh. Write a few of yours on the left. On the right, rewrite each one so it shows the noticing self is having it.

A story I tell about myself	Seen from the noticing self
I'm a mess.	*I notice my mind telling me the story that I'm a mess.*
I'm the responsible one.	*I notice the story that I always have to be the responsible one.*

Which story hooks you most often? What does it push you to do when it does?

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Notice who is noticing

Read these steps, then try them for two or three minutes with your eyes closed or resting on one spot.

- Notice the sounds around you. Then notice that there is a you who is hearing them.
- Notice what your body is touching, like the chair or the floor. Notice that you are the one aware of it.
- Notice whatever thoughts show up, and watch them come and go. Notice that you are the one watching.
- Sounds, sensations, and thoughts keep changing. The part of you that notices them stays the same.

What did you notice?

4 The you that has always been there

Your body, your roles, and your beliefs have all changed over the years, but the you who noticed your life then is the same you noticing it now. Write one memory from each time.

A memory from when I was a child:

A memory from my teens or early adulthood:

Something I noticed today:

When might stepping back to the noticing self help me this week?

This can feel strange at first, and that is normal. An ACT therapist can guide you through these exercises and help you use them with harder thoughts and feelings.

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