

Observing Anxiety Mindfully

Guide the client through the following script:

Think of an issue or situation that causes you to struggle with anxiety. It could be an upcoming doctor's appointment, job interview, college presentation, or party. Anything that arouses anxiety that also involves some self-judgment is suitable.

First notice where you're sitting; feel the sensation of your body touching the furniture. Then, close your eyes and go within to map the sensation of your body where it touches the seat.

Second, focus your attention on the breath coming in and out of your nose. Notice the temperature of your breath as you exhale. Does it change? Is it cooler or warmer?

Next, notice there's a part of you noticing these sensations you're experiencing. Your body didn't notice itself touching the chair, and your breath didn't notice itself entering and leaving your body. There's a part of you that is noticing these things.

Now you are in touch with the part of you that watches and observes. Keep your eyes closed, and get in touch with the issue or situation that arouses anxiety. In your mind's eye, metaphorically put it on your lap.

Then, just let it sit there, as a collection of thoughts that you have, feelings that you have, and urges that you have. Next, from that part of you that observes and watches, have that part of you metaphorically leave your body and stand in front of yourself, and look at yourself sitting there, remembering and sensing all these feelings and thoughts that are unpleasant and painful.

What do you think of that person sitting there? There's a whole person there, struggling with anxiety. Then, visualize observing yourself from the opposite side of the room. Although you know what is going on inside, look at what is happening outside. Can other people see the struggles that you have? What do you think of this person?

Then, you realize you're not looking at yourself as you are now, but at a memory of yourself. Life has gone on ten years from now in a healthy and fulfilling way. You're now older and wiser and you remember yourself as this anxious person, sitting there struggling. Try to see yourself sitting there struggling with this issue and answer the following question:

If you could speak to your struggling self from the point of view of ten years on, what wisdom would you want to share with the struggling person sitting there now? If you could write a little note across the ages what would it be?

Then, let's come from the other side of the room, back into your body, and sense yourself sitting back in your chair. Remember what you just said to yourself about all those struggles.

Finally, pick up that anxiety, take it off your lap, and place it back in your body, then open your eyes."

When the client opens their eyes, ask them about the wisdom they shared with this struggling part of themselves, and how they felt about themselves when they observed themselves from ten years on. Often, clients feel a lot of compassion for themselves, and see their anxiety as a much smaller, more manageable issue than before, once it is placed in the context of a whole person and whole lifetime of experiences.

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