

The “What” and “How” Skills of Mindful Awareness

from a concept by Marsha Linehan

There are six skills of mindful awareness in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). They are divided up into “what” skills and “how” skills. The “what” skills are what you do to be mindful, and the “how” skills are how you do what you do to be mindful. This worksheet lists and briefly describes each of these skills.

The “What” Skills of Mindful Awareness

Observing

When we are preoccupied with thoughts of the past or the future, we are in thinking mode. Thinking mode takes us away from experiencing the world directly with our senses. In thinking mode, we are living in our heads instead of living in the moment.

Mindful Awareness teaches us to focus on the world experienced directly by our senses: touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. Experiencing life in sensing mode introduces us to a richer world. It’s impossible to be bored or apathetic if you treat each experience as if it is happening to you for the first time, through your senses.

The skill of observing involves shifting out of thinking mode and into sensing mode by observing what you are experiencing in the present moment through all of your senses.

Describing

This skill of Mindful Awareness involves observing the smallest details of an object, event or activity, then describing the experience in a non-judgmental fashion. Describing means approaching each daily activity as if you are experiencing it for the first time. Explore as many dimensions of it as you can. When we gain experience with this technique, we can apply it to other areas of our lives as well.

For example, by looking at your negative thought processes, and identifying and labeling them as such, you are better able to recognize them simply as processes, and not as part of who you are as a person. DBT teaches you to describe experiences without judging them or labeling them as “good” or “bad.” Instead, you can label them as merely thoughts or feelings, while remembering that thoughts and feelings are not facts.

Participating

Mindful Awareness allows you to experience every aspect of an activity. We have a tendency, when in thinking mode, to see things and activities as either “all bad” or “all good.” This is not necessarily an accurate depiction of reality. Most activities aren’t inherently good or bad. We’ve taught ourselves to think of them in such terms, but we can also teach ourselves to think in a different way.

Think about an unpleasant activity that you have to engage in on a regular basis, such as washing the dishes or taking out the trash. Can you think of any pleasant aspects of these activities? There are enjoyable aspects to every experience, if we train ourselves to look for them. Even if we find ourselves caught in an activity in which we can find no pleasure at all, at least we have the pleasure of thinking about how good we’ll feel when the activity is over!

Life occurs in the present moment. Mastering the art of participation allows us to get the most out of life in the present.

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The “How” Skills of Mindful Awareness

Non-judgmental

Mindful Awareness teaches us the art of acceptance. Emotional reactions to our circumstances are natural, but that doesn’t mean that we have to respond to these emotions. There’s no such thing as a “wrong” feeling. What may be “wrong,” or less effective, is how we choose to *respond* to the feeling.

The mindful skill of being non-judgmental teaches us that we can experience emotions without engaging in cycles of behavior that lead us to negative consequences. We can choose which thoughts and emotions we wish to respond to, and which just to sit quietly with, in “being mode.”

Being non-judgmental means seeing the world as it is, without judgments or assumptions. When we can do so, we have achieved *Beginner’s Mind* or *Child’s Mind*, which is the art of experiencing everything as if seeing it for the first time, without judgment.

One-mindful

Being “one mindful” simply means focusing on one thing at a time. Being one-mindful allows us to live in the present moment.

Emotional dysregulation often occurs because we tend to focus on all the emotionally overwhelming aspects of a situation while thinking we have to do something to fix it. Wanting to fix it is “Doing Mind.” Being one-mindful allows us to shift to “Being Mind” and just be with the emotion without having to do anything about it.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. If you focus on the thousand-mile journey you’ll become so emotionally overwhelmed you’ll never take the first step; but if you instead just focus on the step that’s in front of you, and then the next step, and then the next, you will eventually complete the entire journey.

The most effective way to do this is to first ask yourself, “What is the smallest thing I can do in this situation that will make a difference? Do that, and then if you have any energy left over you can focus on the next step, and so on, until the journey is completed.

When you learn to do this, you will have learned to be one-mindful.

Effective

This is probably the most important skill of mindful awareness because it teaches us to focus on solutions, not problems. We can talk about problems all day, but until we start talking about solutions, nothing will ever get solved. The way to solve a problem is to take positive, intentional steps towards finding a solution.

A mindful life is a life lived deliberately and effectively. It is a purposeful life. Being effective means solving problems in a purposeful, intentional manner. The way to be effective is to begin by asking two questions:

1. What is my intention in this situation?
2. Are my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors going to help me to achieve this intention?

When we live in mindful awareness, our thoughts, behaviors, and actions always support our intention. When we learn to do this, we have learned how to be effective.