

The Observer Within: Self-as-Context and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy

Page 1 of 9

An ACT and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy Worksheet

Self-as-Context is the ACT process of developing a sense of self that is larger than and separate from the thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, and experiences that come and go throughout life. Instead of defining yourself by what you are experiencing, Self-as-Context allows you to notice your experience from the perspective of the observer.

For example:

“I am anxious.”

can become:

“I notice that I am experiencing anxiety.”

The difference may seem small, but it creates psychological space. Anxiety is something you are experiencing; it does not have to define who you are.

Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy (MBE) provides a natural setting for practicing this perspective. MBE uses mindfulness and intentional connection with nature to help you observe thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and experiences without becoming overwhelmed by them. Nature can also provide metaphors for understanding the distinction between the changing contents of experience and the larger context in which those experiences occur.

This worksheet focuses on developing the capacity to notice experience without becoming defined by it.

Part 1: “I Am” or “I Notice”?

Think about something difficult you have experienced recently. What thoughts accompanied it? What was it about the thought that made it difficult? With that in mind:

Complete each sentence:

“I am _____.”

Now reframe it:

“I notice that I am experiencing _____.”

What difference do you notice between these two statements?

The Observer Within: Self-as-Context and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy

Page 2 of 9

The process of *externalization* happens when we see the problem or the thought as separate from ourselves. When we master this skill, we have externalized the problem.

Try these examples:

Instead of...	Try...
<i>"I am anxious."</i>	<i>"I notice that I am experiencing anxiety."</i>
<i>"I am depressed."</i>	<i>"I notice feelings of sadness and heaviness."</i>
<i>"I am angry."</i>	<i>"I notice anger arising."</i>
<i>"I am a failure."</i>	<i>"I notice the thought that I have failed."</i>
<i>"I am broken."</i>	<i>"I notice that I am experiencing pain."</i>
<i>"I am afraid."</i>	<i>"I notice fear is present."</i>

Now, based on the examples above, rewrite one of your own statements:

"I am _____."

becomes:

"I notice _____."

Part 2: What Am I Experiencing?

Find a quiet place. If possible, practice this exercise outdoors.

Take several slow breaths and notice what is happening within you.

Thoughts

What thoughts are present?

Emotions

What emotions are present?

Body

What physical sensations are present?

The Observer Within: Self-as-Context and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy

Page 3 of 9

Memories

Are any memories present?

Surroundings

What do you notice in the natural environment around you?

Now complete:

"I am noticing thoughts, feelings, sensations, and experiences, but I am more than any one of them."

What is it like to observe your experience rather than define yourself by it?

Part 3: Nature as the Observer

Find something in nature that can serve as a metaphor for Self-as-Context.

Consider a tree. Leaves may appear and disappear. Branches may grow and break. The tree may experience storms, drought, seasons, insects, and changing temperatures. Yet there is a larger context (the tree itself) in which these changing experiences occur.

Consider:

Leaves = thoughts

Branches = feelings and experiences

Roots = deeper aspects of self

The tree = the observing context in which experience occurs

The Observer Within: Self-as-Context and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy

Page 4 of 9

What element of nature best represents your observing self? Why?

What changes around it (your observing self) when you think of your sense of self in this larger context?

What remains relatively stable?

How might this metaphor help you understand your own experience?

How might this metaphor change your sense of self?

The Observer Within: Self-as-Context and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy

Page 5 of 9

Part 4: The Sky and the Weather

Another way to understand Self-as-Context is to imagine yourself as the sky.

Thoughts and emotions are like weather. Some days are sunny. Some days are cloudy. Sometimes there are storms. The weather changes, but the sky provides the space in which the weather occurs.

Think about something difficult you are experiencing now.

My emotional “weather” is:

If this experience were a storm, what would it look like?

Now imagine that you are the sky rather than the storm.

Complete:

“I am noticing _____.”

“This experience is here, and I can observe it.”

“This experience is part of my life, but it does not define the whole of who I am.”

What changes when you imagine yourself as the sky instead of the storm?

The Observer Within: Self-as-Context and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy

Page 6 of 9

Part 5: The MBE Observer Practice

Use this practice when you notice yourself becoming overwhelmed or defined by an experience.

1. Pause

Stop what you are doing for a moment.

2. Notice

What is happening inside me?

3. Name

"I notice _____ about my experience."

4. Connect

What do I notice around me?

5. Observe

Can I allow this experience to be here without making it my identity?

6. Remember

"I am the one noticing this experience. I am not limited to this experience."

7. Choose

Given what I am experiencing, how do I want to respond?

The Observer Within: Self-as-Context and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy

Page 7 of 9

Part 6: From “This Is Me” to “This Is Happening”

Think about a label you sometimes place on yourself.

Examples might include:

“I’m a failure.”

“I’m an angry person.”

“I’m an anxious person.”

“I’m not good enough.”

“I’m damaged.”

“I’m a loser.”

My label is:

Now separate yourself from the label.

Instead of:

“I am _____.”

Try:

“I notice that I sometimes experience _____.”

What does this change allow you to see that the original statement did not?

What possibilities become available when an experience is no longer your entire identity?

The Observer Within: Self-as-Context and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy

Page 8 of 9

Part 7: My Observer Perspective

When I am caught up in my thoughts and feelings, I tend to say:

When I step back and observe, I can say:

A natural metaphor that reminds me that I am more than my experiences is:

When I notice myself becoming fused with an identity or label, I will remind myself:

"I am noticing _____. I am not limited to _____."

One thing I want to remember about myself is:

The Observer Within: Self-as-Context and Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy

Page 9 of 9

Key Takeaways

- You are more than your thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, and experiences.
- Self-as-Context allows you to observe experience without making it your identity.
- “I am anxious” can become “I notice that anxiety is present.”
- Thoughts and emotions can change without changing the larger observing perspective.
- Nature provides useful metaphors for understanding Self-as-Context.
- Like weather moving through the sky, experiences can move through awareness without defining the whole of who you are.
- Mindfulness helps you notice experience; Self-as-Context helps you recognize that you are the one noticing.
- The goal is not to get rid of difficult experiences. It is to develop enough perspective to respond to them rather than becoming defined by them.

A Final Reflection

Find a natural object and observe it quietly for several minutes.

Notice what changes.

Notice what remains.

Then turn your attention inward.

Thoughts change.

Feelings change.

Sensations change.

Memories change.

Circumstances change.

Yet there is a part of you capable of noticing all of these changes.

Pause and remind yourself:

“I am the observer of my experience. My experience is part of my story, but it is not the whole of who I am.”