



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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SELF AS CONTEXT

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Definition: Helping people see that they have thoughts which can change, and because they can notice that change, they themselves are more stable than the shifting thoughts they notice.

Elements: The therapist helps a client contrast the ever-changing content of one's thoughts and feelings with the constant perspective of one's self which perceives those. For example, a client may be asked while noticing something to notice who is noticing that thing. A client thus learns that her view of her shifting thoughts and feelings etc is always from the same continuous perspective; in other words, that thoughts, feelings, and sensations are always viewed *there* and *then* from a perspective of *I*, right *here*, and right *now*.

Related procedures: Cognitive defusion, mindfulness, meditation, metacognitive awareness, distancing, giving perspective, some mystical practices.

Application: In individual or group ACT (acceptance and commitment therapy).

1st Use? Hayes et al (1999) in ACT, long preceded by related procedures in other therapies and religious observances e.g. psychosynthesis (Assagioli 1971) and mystical practices (Deikman 1982).

References:

1. Assagioli R (1971) *The act of will*. New York: Viking.
2. Deikman AJ (1982) *The observing self: Mysticism and psychotherapy*. Boston: Beacon Press.
3. Hayes SC (1984) Making sense of spirituality. *Behaviorism*, 12, 99-110.
4. Hayes SC, Strosahl KD, Wilson KG (1999) *Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change*. New York: Guilford.

Case Illustration (Blackledge, unpublished)

Jim was distressed by the thought that he was a “bad father” for having been unsupportive of his children, especially as he felt they mattered very much to him. The idea consumed Jim so much that he was reluctant to interact more with his children for fear that his “ineptitude” as a father might further harm them. To help Jim get distance from the thought “I’m a bad father”, the therapist said “*I’d like you to look at a few items around this room. Just look around, and when something catches your eye, tell me what it is.*” Jim: “The lamp”. Therapist: “*As you look at that lamp, is that lamp you or something that you are noticing?*” Jim: “It’s something I’m noticing” “*Now look at that table. Is that table you, or something you are noticing?*” Jim: “It’s certainly not me - it’s something I’m noticing”. The therapist repeated the exercise with a chair, the humming of an air conditioner, and tension in Jim’s shoulders (“*Is that tension you, or something you are noticing?*”). In all cases Jim said the object (or sensation) was indeed not him, but something he noticed. Therapist: “*Write the thought ‘I am a bad father’ on an index card and place it on the table in front of you*”, and once Jim did this, asked “*Is that thought you, or something you notice?*” Jim: “It’s just something I’m noticing, but

it sure does describe me really well.” Therapist: “Write that thought down - ‘It sure does describe me really well’. As you look at that, is that thought you, or something you are noticing?” Jim: “It’s not me - I’m just noticing it”.

Therapist: “So, you’re still the same Jim who walked into my office 30 minutes ago? You’re still ‘you’, right? Look at all the different things, sounds, sensations and thoughts you’ve noticed over the past few minutes. As you do so, notice that you are the one noticing them. So many different things to notice, and you’ve told me repeatedly that none of these things are you? What if you are the one who’s doing the noticing, if this thought ‘I’m a bad father’ isn’t you any more than that lamp, or that tension in your back? What if you could notice that thought and carry it with you while you interact with your kids, just like you could carry that lamp or muscle tension with you while you interact with your kids?”.