Leaves on a Stream Script

Mindfulness: Stepping Back From Your Thoughts

Leaves on a stream is a short exercise where you picture your thoughts floating away on leaves, one at a time. It comes from acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), developed by psychologist Steven Hayes and colleagues. The aim is to watch your thoughts come and go without arguing with them or following them. Read the script slowly, or record it in your own voice and play it back.

1 Before you start

- Set a timer for 5 minutes. As the exercise gets easier, you can build up to 10.
- Sit comfortably with your feet on the floor. Close your eyes or rest your gaze on one spot.
- Every thought is welcome, including pleasant ones, boring ones, and painful ones. You are not trying to get rid of them.
- You will get caught up in a thought at some point. Each time you notice and come back, you are practicing the skill.

Why does this work? *Most of the time we look at the world through our thoughts, so they feel like facts. This exercise lets you look at your thoughts instead, as words and pictures passing through. ACT calls this defusion. Studies of defusion techniques have found that they can make upsetting thoughts feel less believable and less distressing.*

2 The script

1. Settle in (about 1 minute). Take a few slow breaths. Notice the weight of your body on the chair and your feet on the floor.

2. Picture the stream. Imagine you are sitting beside a gently flowing stream. Leaves of different shapes and colors drift past on the water. Take a moment to see it, and to hear the water if you can.

3. Place each thought on a leaf (3 to 8 minutes). Whenever a thought comes into your mind, whether it is a word, a picture, or a worry, place it on a leaf. Watch it float down the stream and out of sight. Then wait for the next thought. If the same thought comes back, put it on another leaf.

4. When you get pulled in. Sooner or later you will notice you have stopped watching and are inside a thought. That is normal. Notice it, say to yourself *there goes a thought about work* (or whatever it was), and put it on a leaf.

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

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3 The script, continued

5. Feelings and urges go on leaves too. If you feel bored, restless, or impatient, place that feeling on a leaf. The thought *this is not working* can go on a leaf as well.

6. Let the stream set the pace. Leave the water at its own speed, even when you want a thought gone faster. If the stream stops or the leaves disappear, notice that and gently picture them again.

7. Close (about 1 minute). Let the picture of the stream fade. Notice your body in the chair, the sounds in the room, and then open your eyes.

4 After the exercise

Jot down a few of the thoughts that showed up. A word or two for each is enough.

Thoughts I put on leaves	Thoughts that pulled me in

What was it like to watch your thoughts float by, instead of following them?

If painful thoughts keep pulling you in, a therapist trained in ACT can help you practice this skill and others like it.

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