



Mind as Balloon Metaphor & Exercise

Direct your client to sit comfortably and visualize the following:

You are standing in the middle of an open field, green grass all around you. The sky above you is bright blue with a few fluffy white clouds floating gently. The weather is just right, neither too hot nor too cold. Next to you is a balloon which you're holding onto by its string. What color is your balloon?

Client: . . . **it's purple.**

Yes. This purple balloon is floating there just above your shoulder. Suddenly you let go of the string, and as soon as you do the balloon shoots off into the air, rising higher and higher, being carried by the wind. You watch it as it floats away, up into the sky. It goes up, and up, until it's almost so high you can't even see it anymore. But the color of that balloon, that purple, is so vibrant, that you can always pick it out against the blue of the sky.

And then, somehow, someway, the string of that balloon is infinitely long. It has no ending. So even though the balloon is miles up in the sky by this point, you simply reach out your hand, grab ahold of the string. . . and gently begin pulling the balloon back down towards you. Lower, and lower. Until eventually the balloon is back by your side again.

Can you imagine this?

Client: **Yes.**

*This balloon **is** your mind. Keeping your mind down here in the present requires conscious effort. We have to physically keep hold of that string. When we let go of the string, our mind wanders off and can encounter all sorts of thoughts, memories, images. Up there the sky contains anything, all of our past history, all of our desires for the future, the things we should have done this way instead of that way, the way your favorite meal tastes, it's all up there.*



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And just like that balloon no matter how far your mind goes you can always pinpoint it against the background of the sky. And just like that balloon, the string of your mind is infinitely long, and you can always reach out and pull it back down again. Therefore, it's actually impossible to ever lose your mind. You can always find it and pull it back in, it may take some time to do it, but it's always within your grasp.

Now we're going to use this idea to practice a skill if you're willing. We're going to practice first one way, and then another, and compare the two. Then we'll talk about how it might be useful in your life.

I'm going to set a timer for two minutes, and what I want you to do is let that string of your mind go, on purpose, you'll notice your mind start to float freely, bumping into all kinds of thoughts, memories, other stuff. Anything goes. Your only job is to breathe naturally, and to simply observe your mind as it floats around. You can do this with your eyes open or closed, whichever is more comfortable for you.

Complete 2 minutes and then check in with client.

Okay, that was two minutes. First of all, were you able to do that? Were you able to let your mind go and wander freely?

Client: Yeah, I was.

What did you notice during that experience?

Client: My mind was just thinking about all kinds of stuff. It kept bouncing around.

That's right, it's kind of random, isn't it? Your mind is not like a file cabinet full of files where you're picking out "Okay, what do I want to think of next?" It's much more fluid than that.

And what was the experience of just watching your mind floating like for you?



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Client: It was relaxing. Like I was thinking some of the same things that stress me out, but I wasn't feeling stressed.

Interesting. Okay, just be aware that this was your experience. We're going to try it out a slightly different way, and we'll see how your experience compares.

I'm going to set another two minute timer, and this time we're going to start exactly the same way. You're going to intentionally let go of that string and allow your mind to float freely. Then, at a moment of your choosing, you're going to reach out, on purpose, and grab ahold of that string, and gently pull your mind back down to you. To do that, you're going to find some place on your body to be a focal point. It can be anywhere. It can be your breathing, it can be the sensation of your body on the chair, it can be your feet inside your shoes. Anything. Just choose a focal point, and when you pull that balloon back down you're going to gently shift your attention to your focal point. Keep it there for as long as you can. If your mind floats away again, simply reach back out and gently pull it back in going back to that focal point.

In two minutes you could do this a hundred times, but if you can do it even just once that will be fine.

Complete two minutes.

Okay, that was two minutes. Were you able to do that?

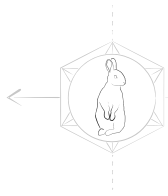
Client: This one was harder. I did it but my mind kept wandering.

And were you able to bring it back in each time?

Client: Yeah I was, but only for a few seconds.

Cool! That's exactly what we're looking for. It is really hard to keep it held down. And what was the experience of gently pulling your mind back in like for you?

Client: It was also kind of relaxing, but challenging at the same time.



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There's actually two different processes going on here with the balloon. We as humans have the ability to intentionally let our minds float freely while we simply observe, and we have the ability to grab ahold of that string and pull our minds back in. Why do you think it's important to be able to do both of those things?

Client: Letting your mind go lets you think of all kinds of stuff, and bringing your mind in lets you focus on one thing at a time?

Sure, those are great examples of how each side has different uses. Sometimes it's beneficial to let our mind float into the sky, sometimes it's beneficial to reign it in so we can focus on something in the here and now. Sometimes we don't realize our mind has floated away until it's thirty miles up in the sky.

Both parts of this practice can be strengthened, just like exercising. The more you practice, the more easily and longer you'll be able to watch your mind floating without getting caught up in the content of the thoughts, and likewise, you'll be able to hold your mind's attention down here longer and with less effort.

Is this something that you'd be willing to try outside of this office?



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Tips

This exercise is highly flexible and can be extended out and combined with many other activities, and it can be used to contact all of the psychological flexibility processes.

Once clients have the basic skill down, this metaphor can be called upon at nearly any time. For example as a client begins to get tangled up with some cognitive content, you can gently point this out and ask them to shift into that observer on the ground watching their balloon. Alternatively, you can practice bringing the balloon back in to prevent excessive dysregulation or dissociation.

There is a midpoint between allowing the balloon to float freely and reeling it in, and that is of placing a hand on the string while still allowing the balloon to be in the air, holding as you would a kite. You can imagine feeling the vibrations of the string as the balloon is moving. Metaphorically, this is a sense of safety, self-control ("I have the power to hold onto this"), and of knowing that they are a part of this entire context.

Self-Compassion can be integrated into the exercise easily, especially during the "reeling in" of the balloon. A compassionate phrase can be repeated as a source of strength as a client pulls their mind back down and gently refocuses. This can also prevent clients from trying to yank their mind back down roughly.

Example Processing Questions

How often do you catch your mind wandering? How often do you catch your mind working over some old situation that's long gone, or worrying about something that might happen down the road? What do you normally do after you catch your mind?

How can you see yourself using this skill? What places or situations might it be useful?

After you pull your mind back in, what would be an easily accessible way to reconnect to what matters to you?