**CONTENTS ON CARDS EXERCISE**

**Background:**

Physical objects can sometimes be useful to help clients interact with their thoughts and feelings in a more practical manner. In this exercise, cards are used to represent disturbing cognitive content (e.g., thoughts feelings, sensations, memories, urges). The use of a physical object takes advantage of the natural distance between objects and the people observing them.

**How to do the exercise**

Begin by eliciting a variety of thoughts or emotions that the client is struggling with and writing them on note cards. For example, the cards might say,“I’m going to have a panic attack if 1 go to the store,” or “I’ll never be able to quit drinking,” “I can’t stand this loneliness,” or "anxiety."

Now that you have created that cards, there are a variety of ways that client can be led to interact with them, depending upon how the client is struggling with this content.

**Variation 1)** Tell the client that the task is to make 100% certain that none of the cards touch his or her lap. Then flip several of the cards toward the client, one at a time, while the client attempts to deflect them away. Next, ask the client to let the cards land wherever they will and merely to watch them as they do. Flip several more cards, one at a time, landing each on the client’s lap. Help the client to contrast the effort required to batting the cards away versus just noticing where they land. In future sessions, you can refer back to this exercise by saying “OK, here comes the thought that ... [describe the content]” and flipping an imaginary card at the client.

**Variation 2)** Take a card with a particularly disturbing thought, hold it in the palm of your hand, and ask the client to push against the card. Tell the cli­ent to hold the thought away, then push the card toward the client. After a few seconds, ask the client how much effort this takes. Then hand the card to the client, ask him or her to hold it**,** and then to notice the difference in effort. Ask the client to notice that in both instances he or she is equally in contact with the card. This provides a physical metaphor, showing how avoidance increases effort without delivering on the promise of reducing contact.

**Variation 3)** You can add in a focus on valued action to any of the above variations by imagining that engaging in some action (e.g., walking out the door) is equivalent to engaging in some valued activity (e.g., caring for their child). The client can be asked to notice how difficult it is to engage in the valued activity while struggling with the cards.

**Possible ending for exercise.** Sometimes therapists will end this exercise by having the client carry several cards with dis­turbing thoughts in their pocket between sessions. Again, this physical metaphor shows that negative content can be carried even while the client is engaging in other purposeful, constructive behavior.