



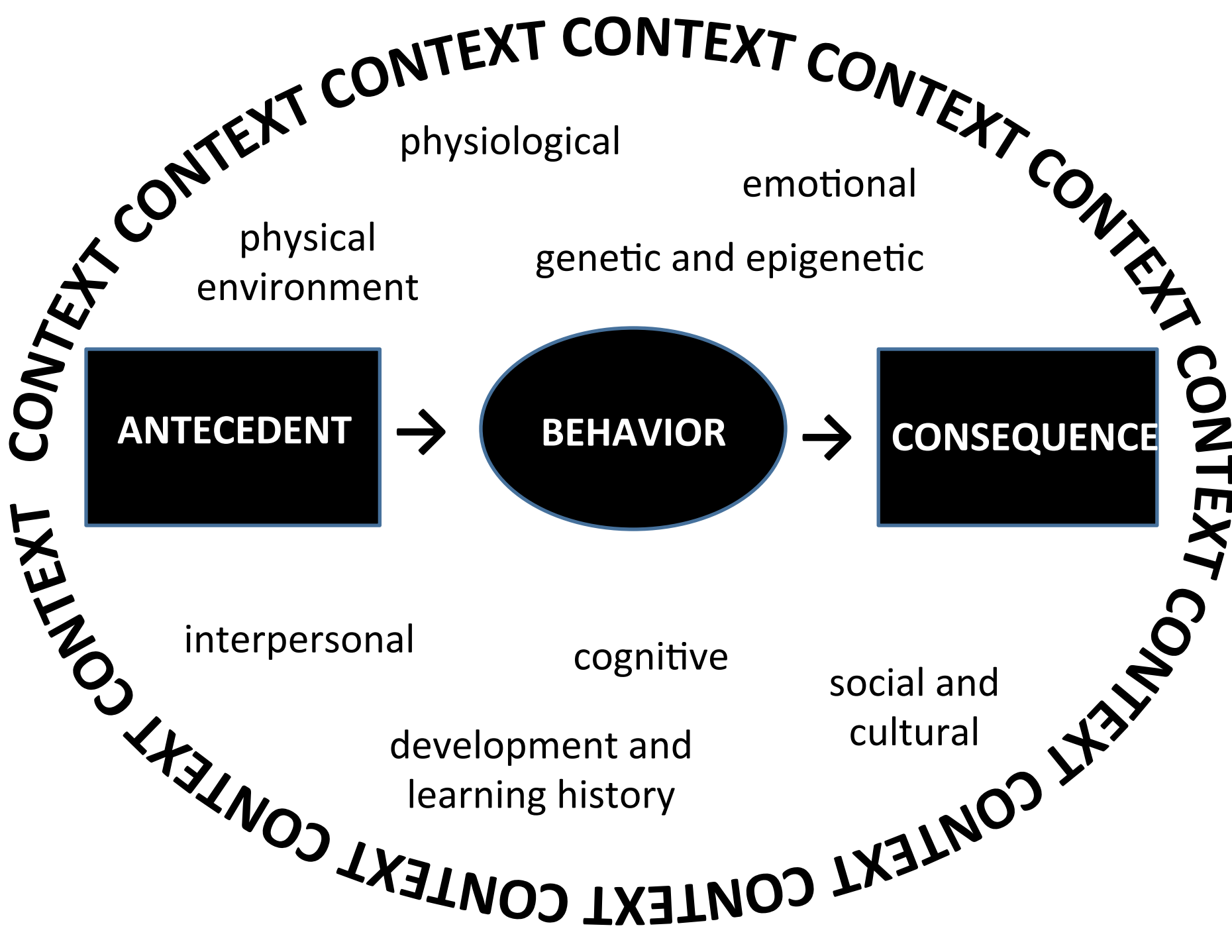
Wielding the Double Edged Sword

Using language with intention and
purpose in psychotherapy

Matthieu Villatte, PhD

**Theory is
where art
and science
merge**





**If our actions are controlled by the context,
then we need to change the context in order to change our actions.**



Two main ways of changing the context

Concretely



Symbolically

**For the most part, psychotherapy
relies on a *symbolic* alteration of the
context.**

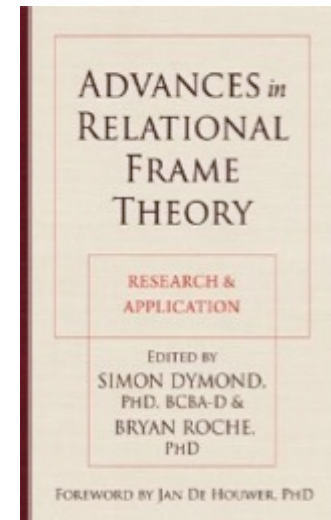
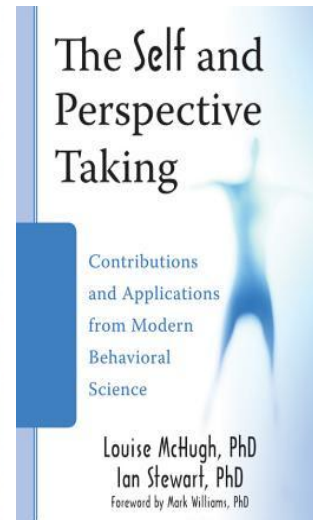
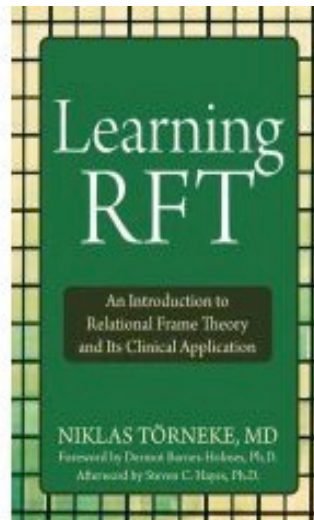
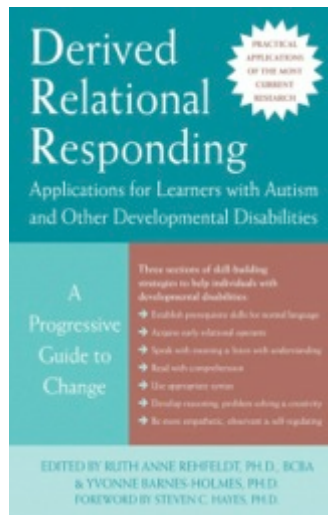
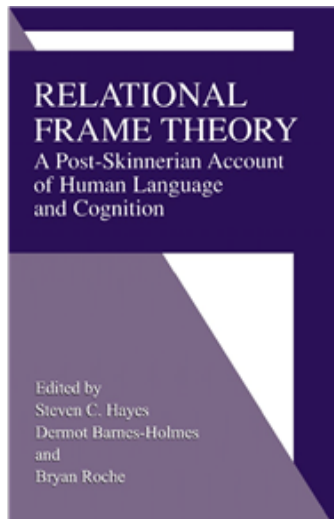


Observe alteration of context to transform functions in session

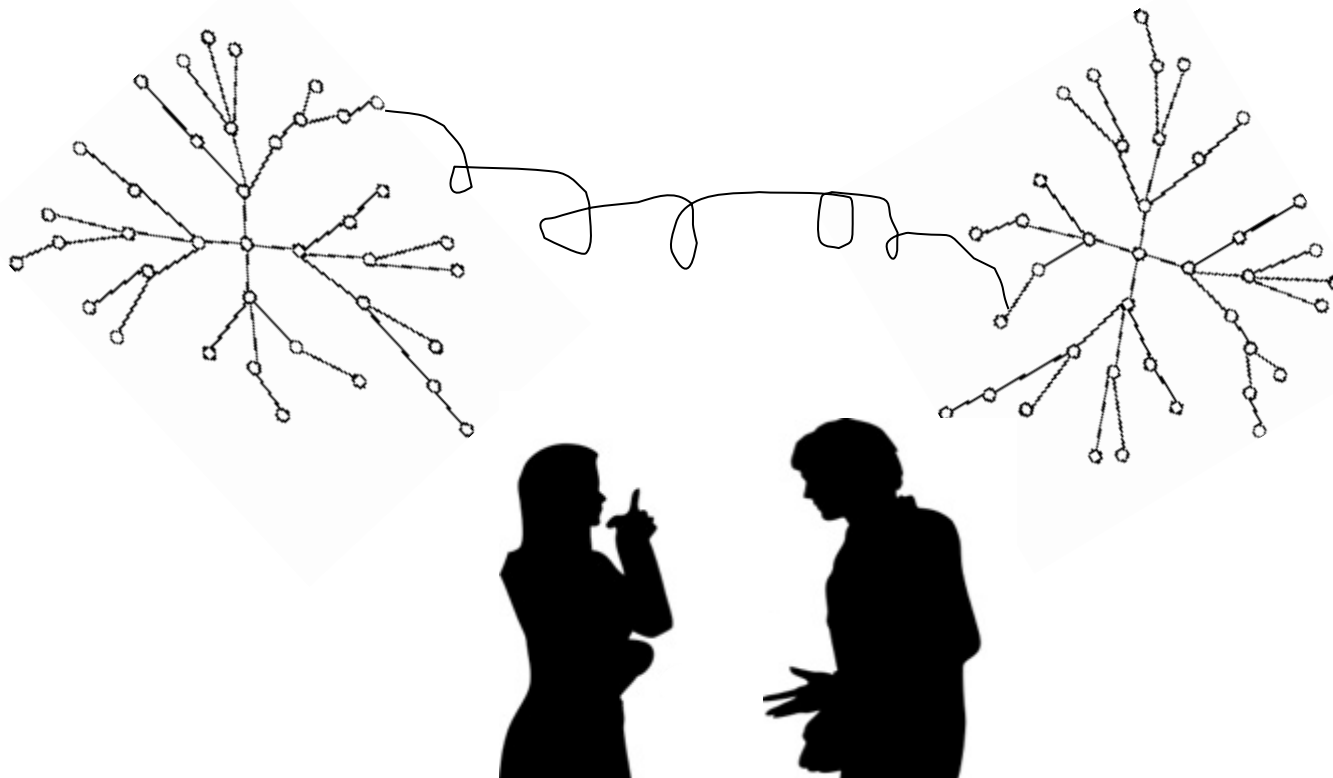
What aspects of the context is the client attending to? What functions are dominant?

What does the therapist do to alter the context?
How does this alteration impact functions?

Key things to know about language in order to use it well in therapy



Language is the learned behavior
of building and responding to
symbolic relations.



**Language works only by expansion,
not subtraction.**



**Language is
not logical,
it's
psychological.**



Relational frames are symbolic tools for altering the context



Coordination Framing • = •

I **am** stupid.

This workshop **is** useless.

Crying **means** weakness.

Rejection **is like** death.

Forgiving **is a sign of** weakness.

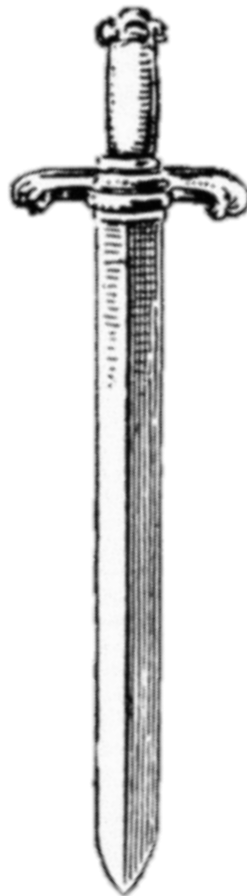
Anxiety **is** overwhelming.

Coordination Framing • = •

“I” framed in
coordination with
thoughts and feelings

Alexithymia

Evaluations become
equivalent to the
things evaluated

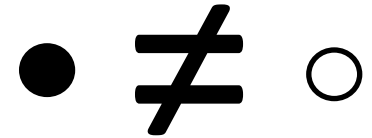


Noticing and
describing with
precision

Facilitates
communication

Better self-regulation

Distinction Framing



I'm **not** smart.

It **is different** for girls.

Telling jokes **is unlike** me.

Passing **is not the same** as succeeding.

Her smile **doesn't mean** she likes me.

Distinction Framing



Distinction that
leads to isolation or
specialness

Distinction that
leads to dismissing
feedback
("yeah, but...")



Noticing and
describing with
precision

Reduces
overgeneralization

Oppositional Framing



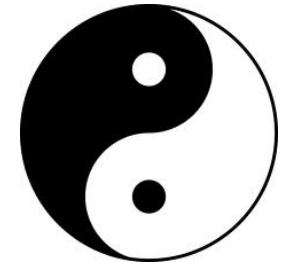
Someone **like** me could **never** do that.

My depression **prevents** me from leaving the house.

I can't go to the party. **I'm too** anxious.

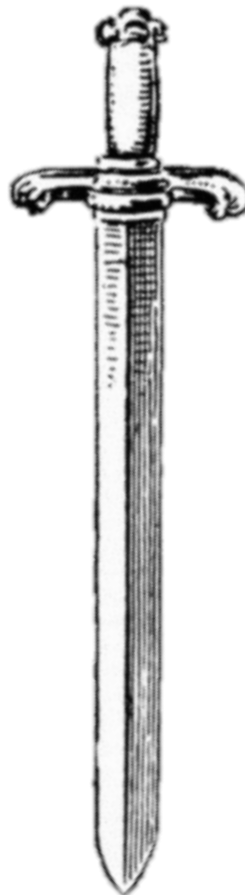
I want to be kind, **but** I'm so angry.

Oppositional Framing



Psychological experiences framed in opposition to values and goals

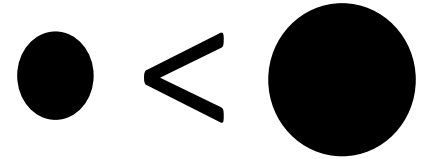
Attachment evokes loss, pleasure evokes pain



Transforming barriers into opportunities for action

Discovering meaning in pain

Comparative Framing



Being alone is **better than** being rejected.

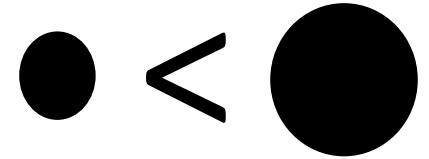
This is the **worst** day ever.

This time was **not as bad as** last time.

Why can't I be **more** confident?

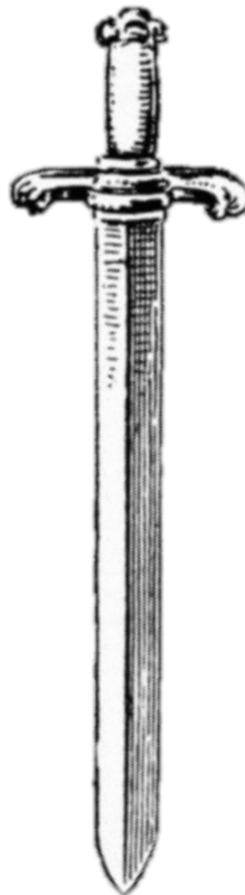
Everyone is **happier than** me.

Comparative Framing



Comparisons that fuel dissatisfaction, envy, shame

Comparisons that lead to evaluation or devaluation



Noticing and describing with precision

Evaluating effectiveness

Discovering meaning

Conditional Framing ● + ○ = ⊙

If I stop worrying **then** something terrible could happen.

I'll get sick **if** I stop washing.

Given how smart I am, I should be more successful.

I should be stronger **because** I'm a man.

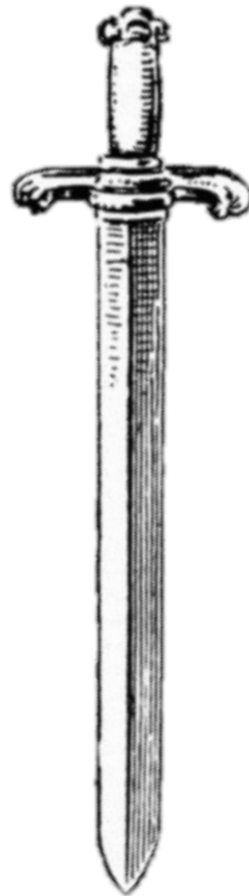
What will happen **if** you quit your job?

I drink **in order to** forget.

Conditional Framing ● + ○ = ⊙

Satisfaction that's conditional on controlling the uncontrollable

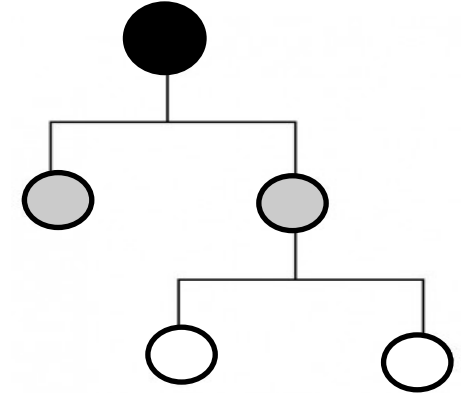
Incomplete or inaccurate descriptions of contingencies



Evaluating effectiveness

Normalizing and validating responses

Hierarchical Framing



My stuttering is **part of** the problem.

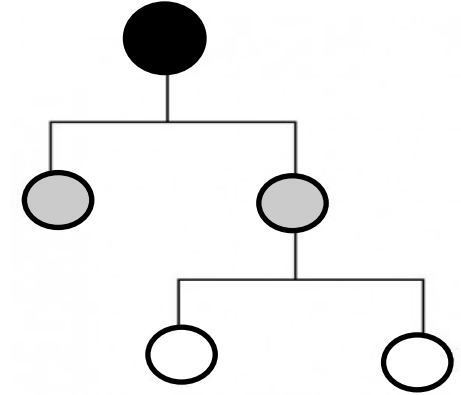
Includes

How would that **contribute to** your family's well-being?

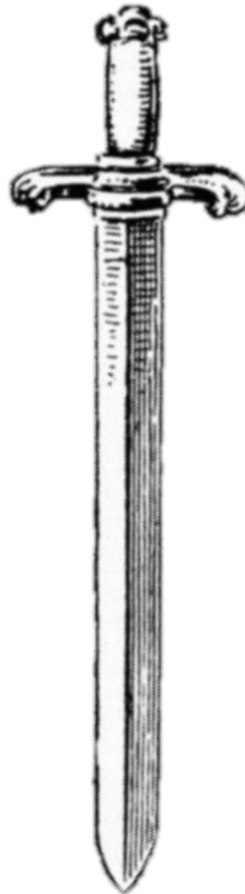
I'm **having** the thought that...

That's just **one of** my many flaws.

Hierarchical Framing



Overgeneralization
through mislabeling

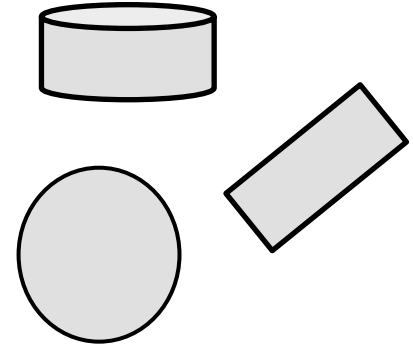


Resolving conflicts or
opposition

Flexible and stable
sense of self

Establishing meaning
and motivation

Deictic Framing



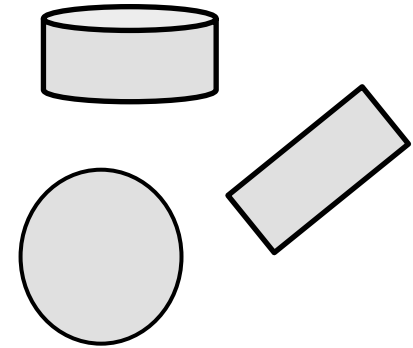
If I were **you**, I'd feel terrible.

When you are 80 and **look back at this moment**, what will you think about your decision?

Are you looking **at** your thoughts or **from** your thoughts?

What do you think Michele Obama would do in **this situation**?

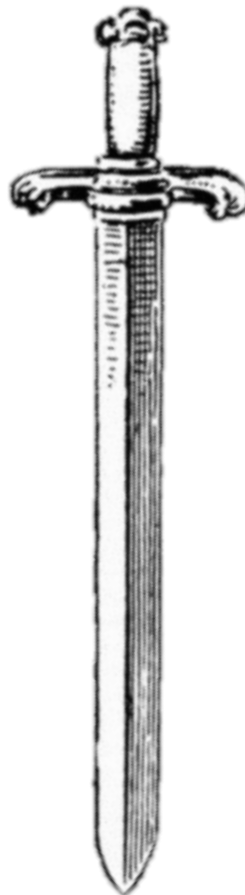
Deictic Framing



Poor social skills

Weak self-awareness

Rigid or unstable sense of self

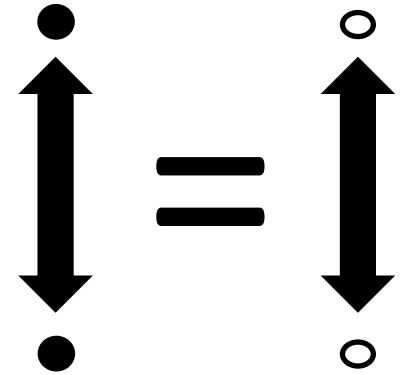


Psychological distancing

Empathy and Compassion

Flexible sense of self

Analogical Framing



Rejection **feels like** all the air is sucked in out of the room.

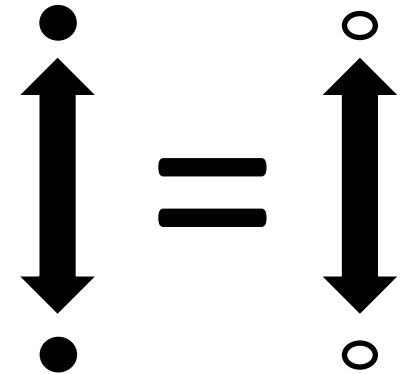
Life **is** a journey.

How **is this like** that?

My anger is **tying me up in knots**.

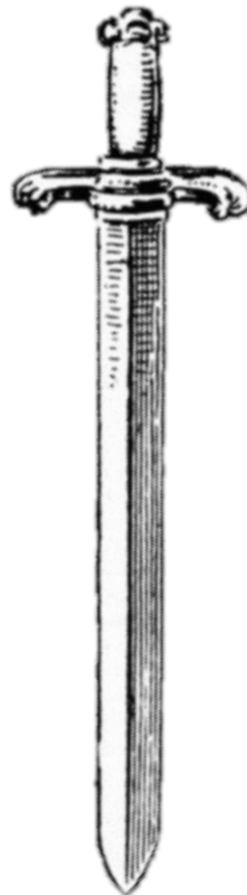
Does that feeling **remind** you of anything?

Analogical Framing



Catastrophizing

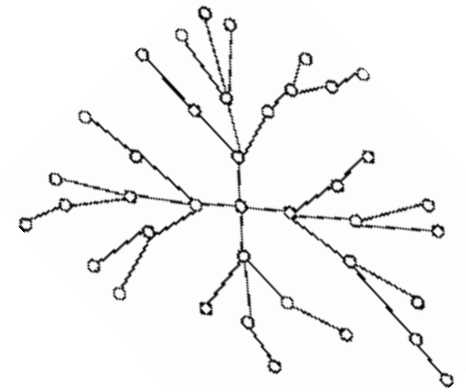
Overgeneralizing



Experiential
learning

Generalization
of therapy
↔ real life

Combinations of framings



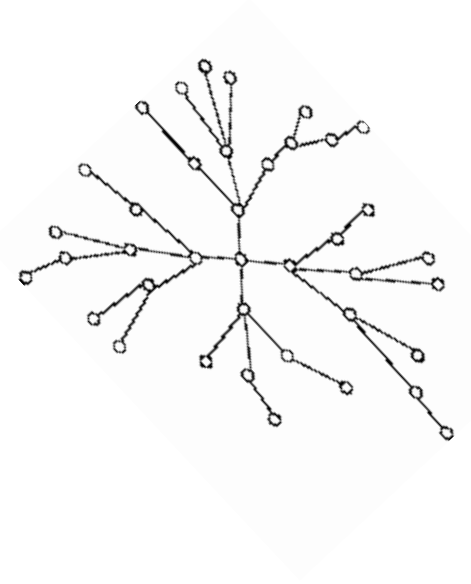
I have to stay home and take care of my kids **because** that's what a mother does.

Notice the movements of your chest as you breathe in and out.

Ever heard the **story** of Victor Frankl in concentration camps?

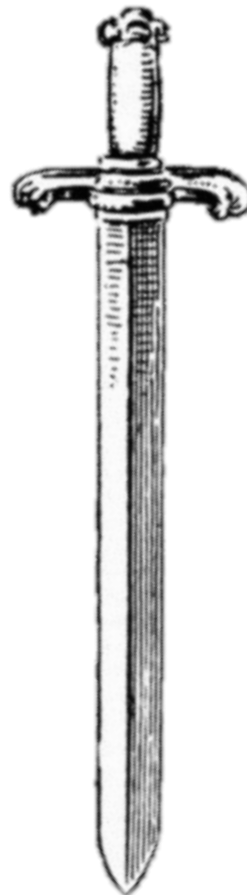
I have **always** been a very shy person. When I was a kid, I wouldn't talk to people. I think this is **because**...

Combinations of framings



Pliance

Stuck in stories



Psychoeducation

Inspiring stories

Video

- Observe client's framing
- Observe therapist's framing

**Practice framing to alter context and
change functions**

What are we aiming for in functional contextual therapy?



Context sensitivity



Functional coherence

Improving Context Sensitivity

**Without context sensitivity,
responses become overgeneralized and resistant
to change.**

thought → belief

memory → story

emotion → mood

behavior → habit

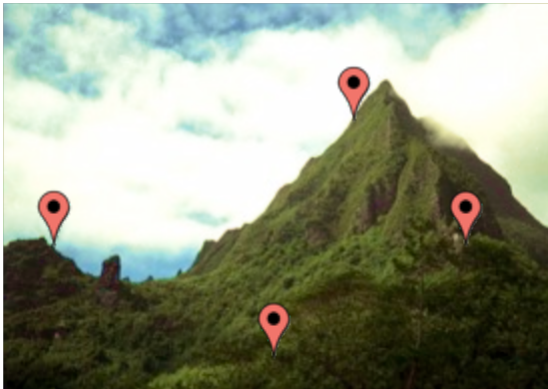
I'm a failure.

I'm a failure at _____.

I'm a failure at _____ when I do _____.

I'm a failure at _____ when I do _____,
which results in _____.

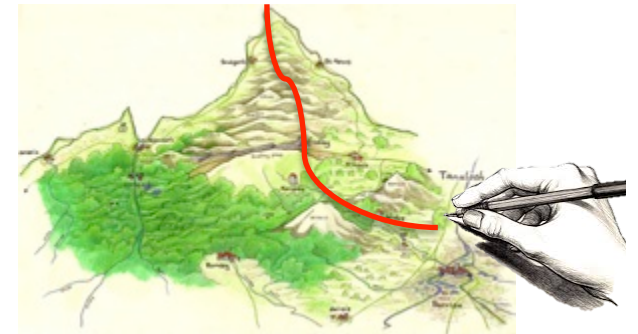
Improve context sensitivity by mapping language to experience



OBSERVING



DESCRIBING



TRACKING

Improve context sensitivity: evoke observation of experience



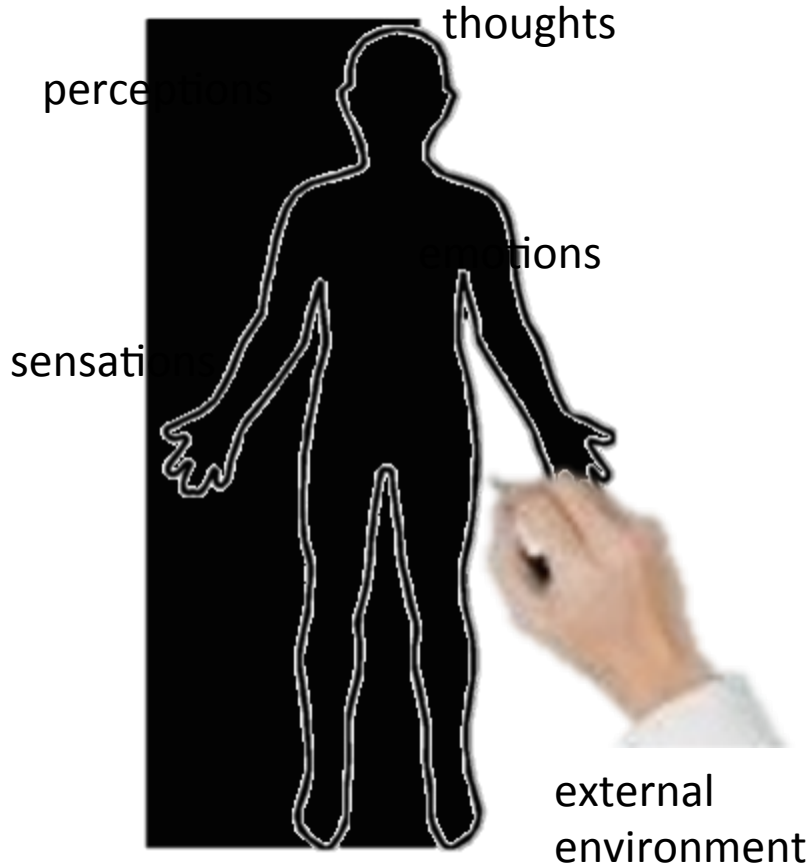
Nonverbal orienting

- Tactile cues
- Visual cues
- Auditory cues

Verbal orienting

- Space and time
- Analogy
- Perspective taking

Improve context sensitivity: evoke description of experience



Shift from evaluating to describing

- Naming
- Neutral labeling

If client gets stuck

- Analogy
- Perspective Taking

More precision and nuance

- Distinction
- Comparison

Role play

practice is NOT performance



**play at your
edge**



hit sour notes



try, taste, tweak

Mary doesn't talk about her emotions

- 36yo woman. Comes to therapy to “change and have a better relationship with her partner”
- History of child abuse. Past self harm but not current
- Difficulties with noticing and talking about her emotions and internal experiences in general
- When asked how she feels, she says she doesn't know or “stressed out”

“I am not used to talking about myself”

practice: observe and describe

Handout

Client:

- struggle to observe and describe what you experience now
- respond naturally to therapist

Therapist:

- help **orient to context** that is being ignored or missed
- help shift from evaluating to **naming** and **neutral labeling**
- if client is stuck, use **analogy** and **perspective taking**
- then get more precise with **comparing** and **distinction**

Observer:

- note when therapist does any of the above

feedback:

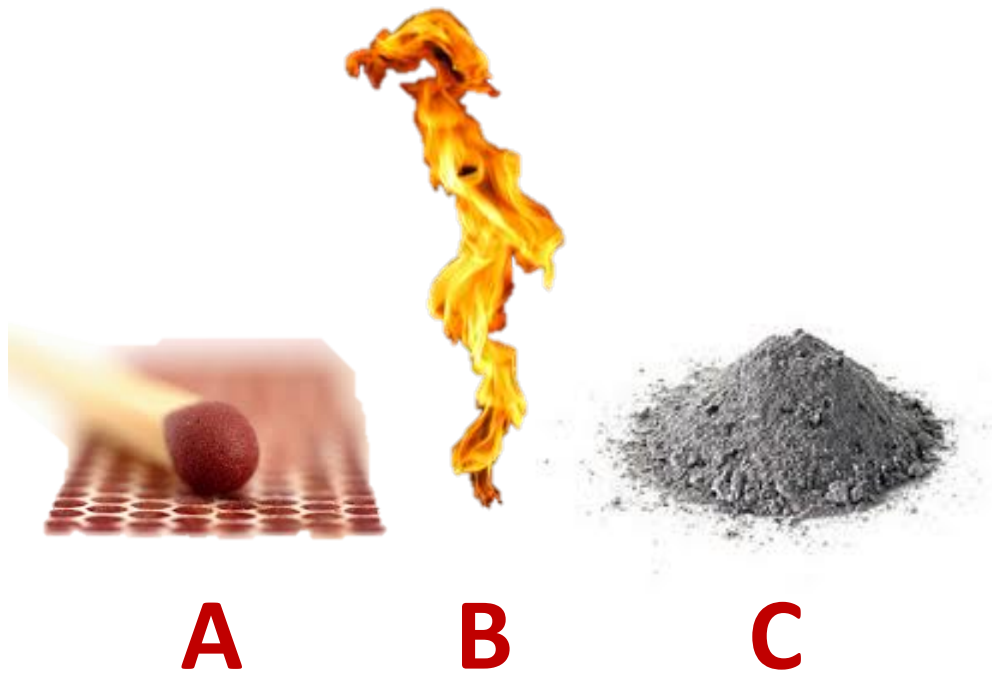
5 minutes

Observer { Specific instances of target skills
ONE thing to practice for improvement

Client { Responses others couldn't see?
Did you experience a shift at any point?

Therapist { Questions for client and observer
Stuck points- ideas for further practice

Improve context sensitivity: evoke tracking of contingencies



Specify complete contingency

- Antecedent
- Behavior
- Consequence

Discover hidden contingencies

- Analogy
- Perspective Taking

Draw out additional consequences

- Over time
- Other domains

Video: tracking

Note when the therapist:

- Evokes observation/description of experience
- Evokes tracking
- Evokes observation and description of additional consequences

Note also if he gets off track!

- Tells the client what he is experiencing
- Gives answers too quickly
- Provides imprecise or arbitrary descriptions

Mary shared about her emotional life with her friend

- She spent one hour on the phone talking with a friend
- Shared personal and emotional content and enjoyed it
- She told her partner, who didn't like that because he doesn't want "people to know everything about their lives"
- She now wonders if it was a good idea.

"Perhaps I shouldn't talk about my personal stuff anymore."

practice: tracking

Handout

Client:

- struggle to identify the different contexts and impacts of sharing about personal life
- at first, limit your view of the situation to “perhaps that was not a good idea in the end”

Therapist:

- help **specify antecedent, behavior, consequence**
- if client is stuck, use **analogy, gestures, perspective taking** to discover unobserved antecedents/consequences
- draw out **additional consequences** across time and domains

Observer:

- note when therapist does any of the above

feedback:

5 minutes

- Observer** { Specific instances of target skills
ONE thing to practice for improvement
- Client** { Responses others couldn't see?
Did you experience a shift at any point?
- Therapist** { Questions for client and observer
Stuck points- ideas for further practice



Context sensitivity

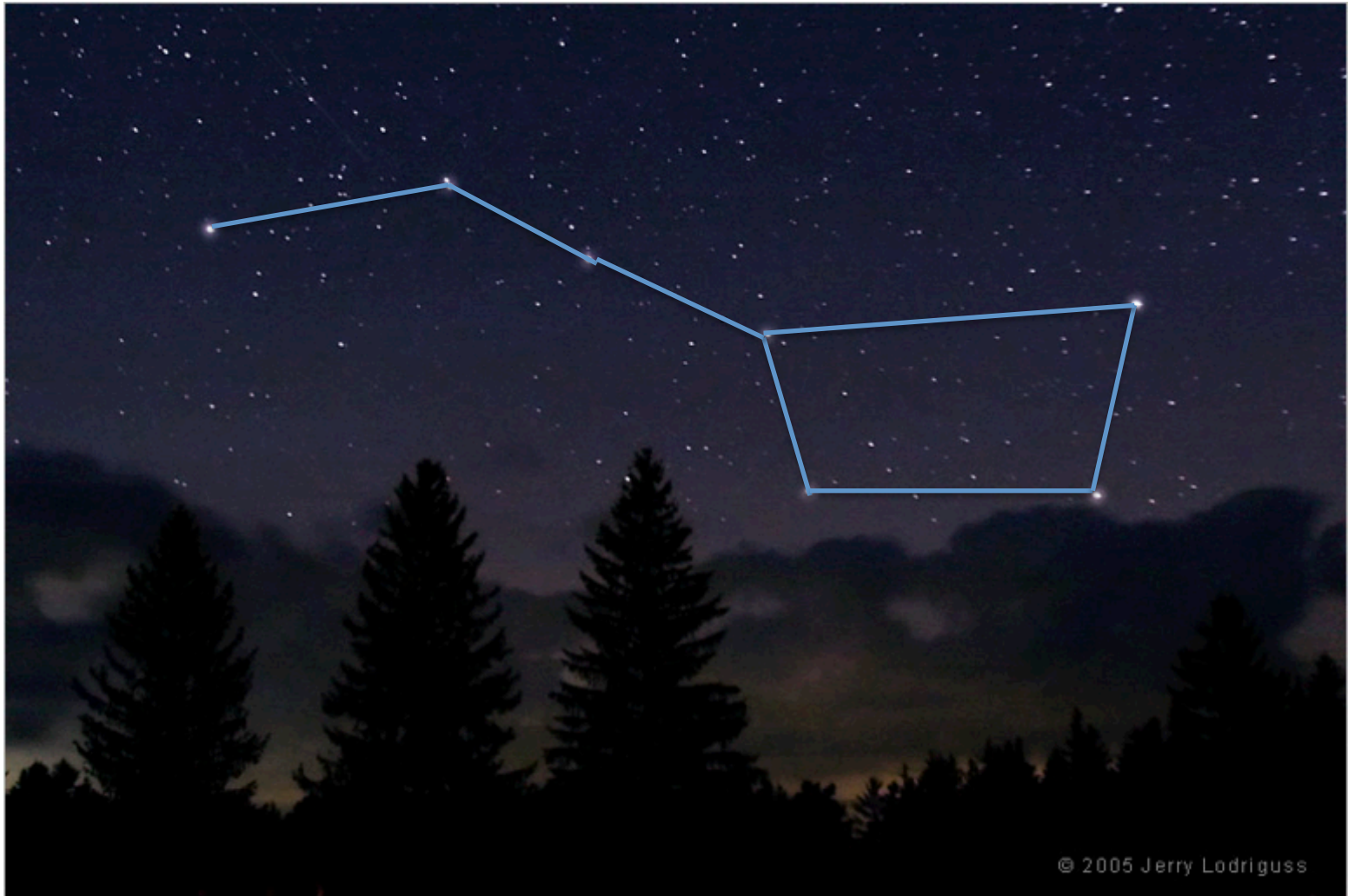


Coherence

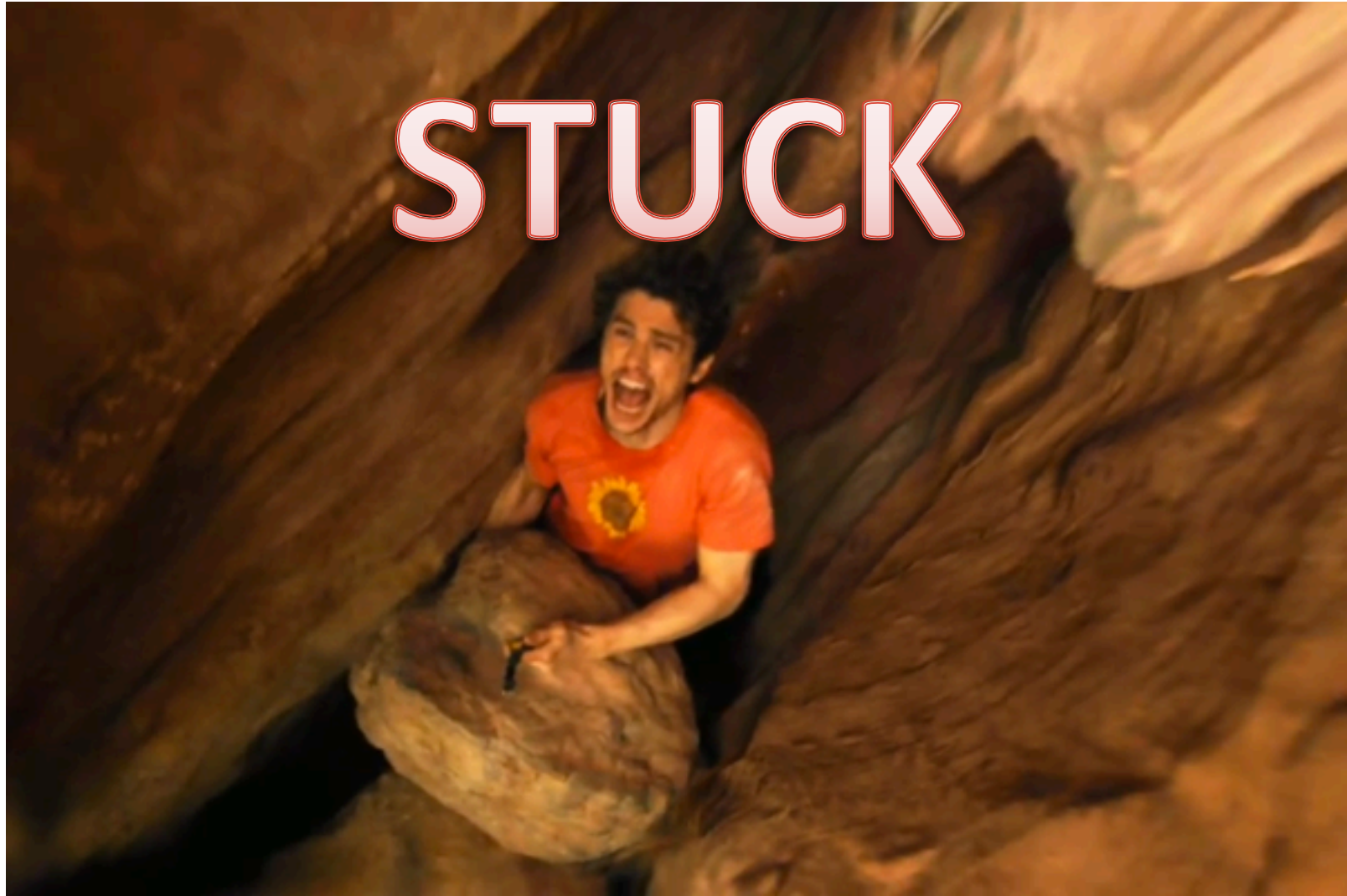
“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

-- Victor Frankl

We organize our experiences into networks.



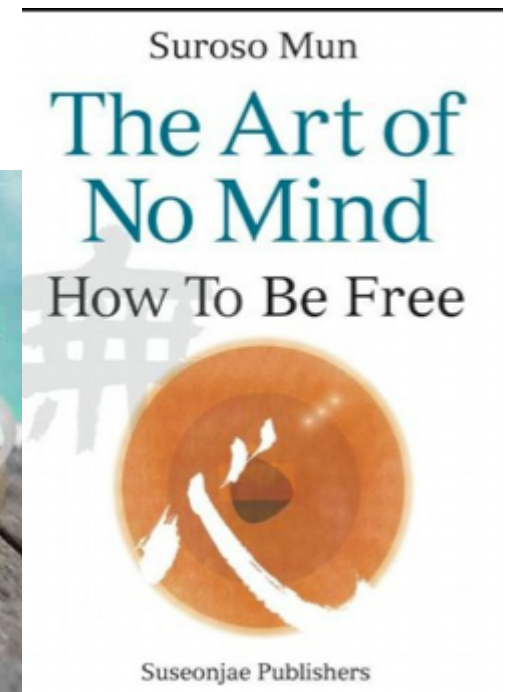
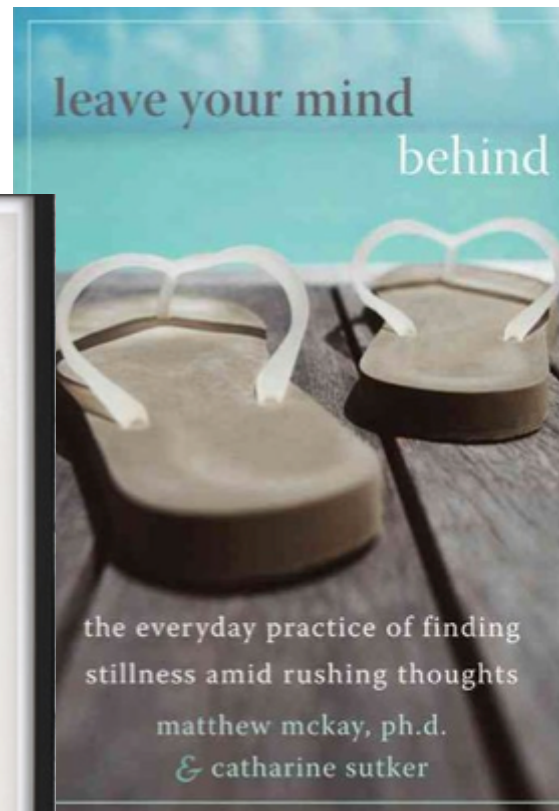
STUCK



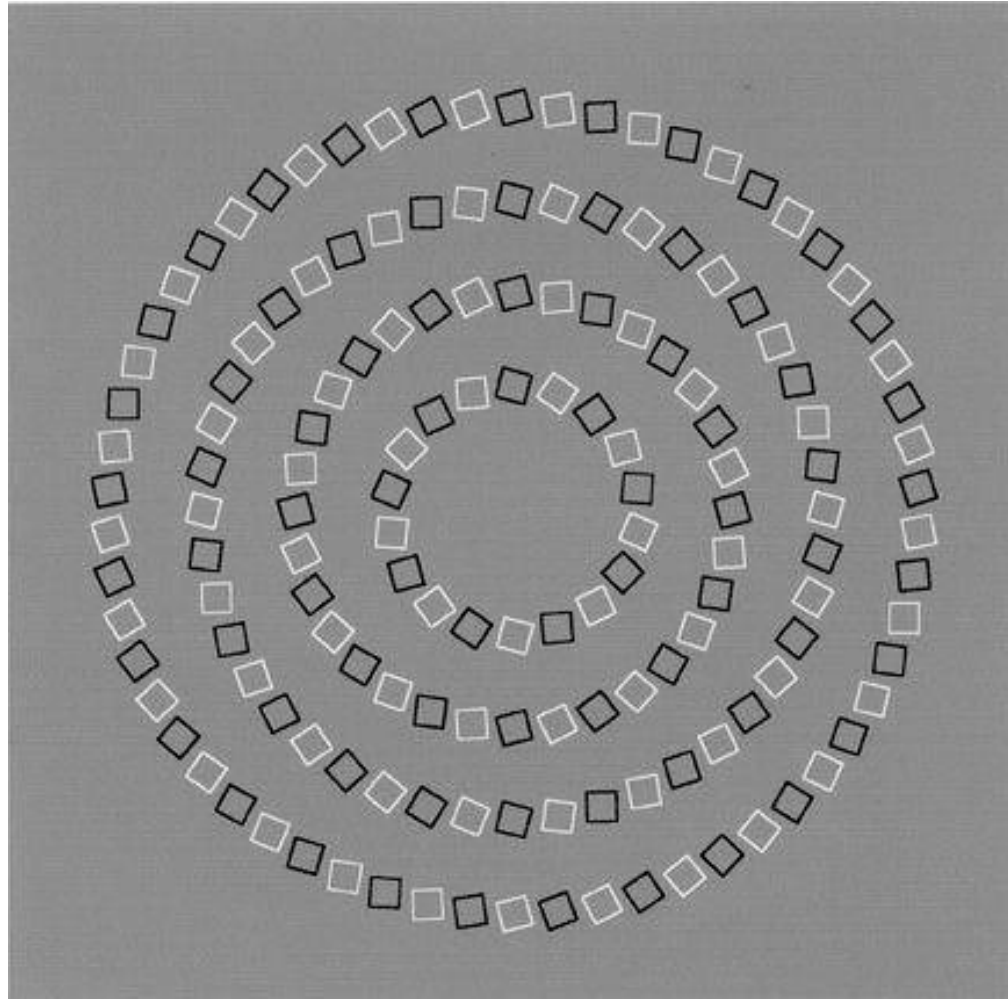
Where are you stuck?

- Think of **one behavior** that you have been **trying to change without success**
- **Why** have you **not changed** so far?

Stuck? Get out of your mind.



Hmm...



Ok, so let's use our mind, then...



**But to use it well, we need to
know how it works.**

Language is coherent (for a good reason).

A=B

B=?

It doesn't make sense. Really?



"I carry a log - yes. Is it funny to you? It is not to me. Behind all things are reasons. Reasons can even explain the absurd."

-- The log lady, Twin Peaks.

It always makes sense.

But coherence can be misguided

→ Essential coherence



But coherence can be misguided

→ Social coherence



Undermining making sense and reason giving?



That would make sense!
Oops...

Here is a better idea.

→ Functional coherence

- Need good context sensitivity
- Need relational flexibility
- Need some essential coherence
- Can use some social coherence



How to influence coherence?

Try this...



Another approach



- Relational flexibility
- Values
- Normalization
- Tracking
- Flexible self

Relational flexibility



- **Coordination**

What else could it be?

- **Distinction**

Is it different from...?

- **Comparison**

Is it more...? Less...?

- **Condition**

What would happen if...?

- **Deictic**

If you were in her shoes...?

One week from now...?

- **Hierarchy**

Could it be part of something?

- **Analogy**

Is it like...?

Dealing with meaninglessness

ilk Milk Milk Milk Milk Milk Milk



Finding meaning

“The very meaninglessness of life forces man to create his own meaning”

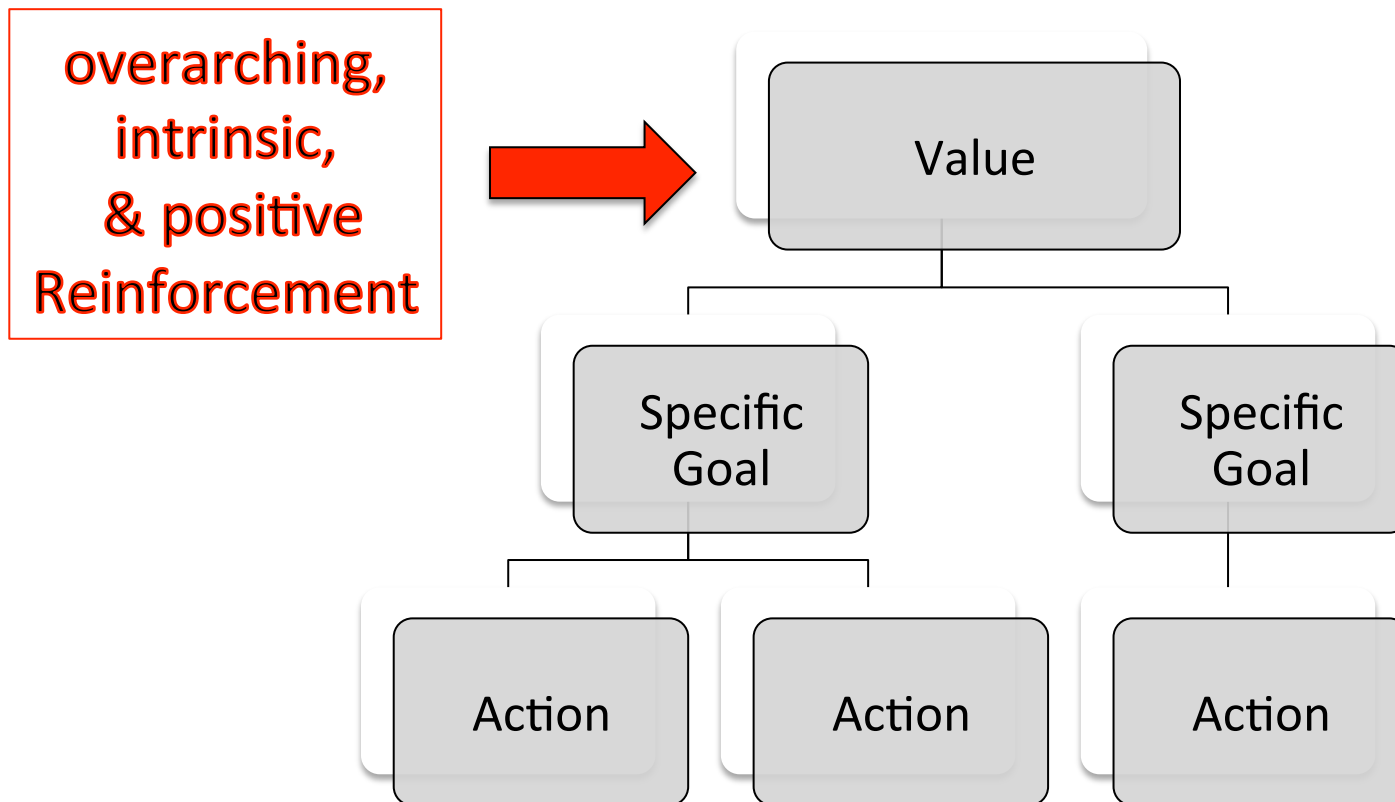
-- Stanley Kubrick



That behavior you want to change...

Why is it **important for you** to change that behavior?

Conceptualizing the meaning of life with RFT



Building values

- **Hierarchical/conditional/comparative framing**
 - *What is this action part of?*
 - *And if you did that, then what difference would it make?*
 - *Why this particular goal rather than another?*
- **Distinction/opposition framing**
 - *What if nobody knew? What if ___ (symptom) was not a problem?*
- **Deictic framing**
 - *Let's go back to a time when you were happy.*
 - *Who is the famous person you like most? What do you like about their personality, about what they stand for?*

Video



Mark is depressed

- 40 year-old; single; no children.
- Used to work in a bank. Lost his job 2 months ago.
- Spends days watching TV and sleeping on the couch.
- Believes that nothing is meaningful, that people lie to convince themselves that they are happy.

“Life is a cruel joke.”

practice: Build values

Handout

Client:

- struggle to find something interesting in your life now
- but be open to talking about past interests

Therapist:

- Derive top levels of the hierarchy from specific actions and goals (**condition, hierarchy, comparison...**)
- Use **opposition** or **distinction** to identify the source of positive intrinsic reinforcement
- Reconnect with meaning through **perspective taking**

Observer:

- note when therapist does any of the above

feedback:

5 minutes

Observer { Specific instances of target skills
ONE thing to practice for improvement

Client { Responses others couldn't see?
Did you experience a shift at any point?

Therapist { Questions for client and observer
Stuck points- ideas for further practice

Dealing with incoherence

Why do I do react this way?



I shouldn't feel this way.

→ Normalization

“Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood.”

-- Marie Currie



That behavior you want to change...

How is it that current problematic behavior
normal and **justified**?

→ Normalization

- **Coordination framing**
 - *That's perfectly normal*
- **Conditional framing**
 - *It makes sense given the circumstances*
 - *What benefits does this bring to you?*
- **Deictic framing**
 - *If I were in your situation I would feel the same way...*

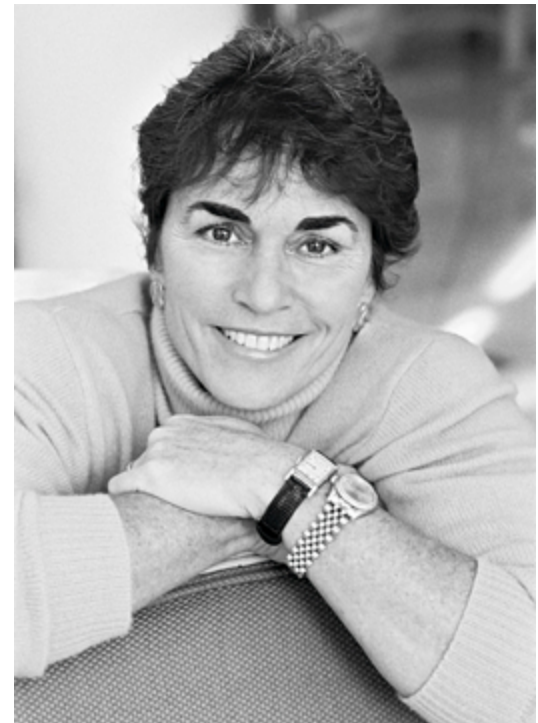
Dealing with “poor judgment”



→ Tracking

“Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.”

-- Rita Mae Brown



That behavior you want to change...

What happens **as a result of** that **current** problematic behavior?

What happens/would happen **as a result of** the **alternative** behavior?

→ Tracking

- **Conditional framing**
 - *What happens when you do _____?*
- **Comparative framing**
 - *What happens when you do _____ instead?*
- **Hierarchical framing**
 - *Which option is most in line with what you care about?*

Jane's dilemma

- 32 year-old client.
- Had an argument with her sister 2 years ago and hasn't talked to her since then.
- Would like to reconnect with her but is afraid of being rejected.

“I don't know if I'll ever have the courage to talk to her.

practice: Normalization & Tracking

Client:

- Express ambivalence
- Be upset about your own indecision

Therapist:

- Normalization (Coordination, Conditional, Deictic framing)
- Tracking (Conditional, Comparative, Hierarchical framing)

Observer:

- note when therapist does any of the above

feedback:

5 minutes

Observer { Specific instances of target skills
ONE thing to practice for improvement

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Did you experience a shift at any point?

Therapist { Questions for client and observer
Stuck points- ideas for further practice

Dealing with rigidity and instability



→ Flexible Self

“Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.”

-- Toni Morrison



That behavior you want to change...

What would be **different / the same** about you if you changed that behavior?

→ Flexible Self

- **Deictic framing**
 - *Can you see this thought? Can you see that you see it?*
- **Distinction framing**
 - *If you can see it, then can you be your thought?*
- **Hierarchical framing**
 - *What if your thought was a part of you, and you were more than your thoughts?*
- **Conditional framing**
 - *What difference would it make to have thoughts instead of being thoughts?*

Using, creating, and delivering METAPHORS



Using metaphors... Why?

Metaphor is a form of alteration of the context that transforms functions.

It increases our sensitivity to parts of the context we were missing.

Which leads us to reconsider the way we conceptualize the world.

Function:

Counter-productive

**Struggling in
quicksand**



Conditional Relation



Sinking even more

Most effective behavior:

*Accepting contact with the
sand, not struggling*

Function:

Counter-productive

**Struggling with
anxiety**



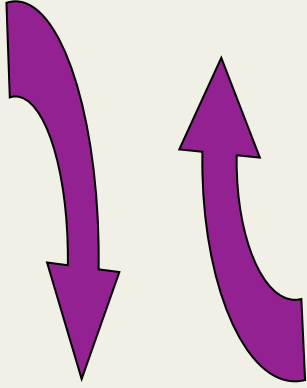
Conditional Relation



Feeling even more anxious

Most effective behavior

*Accepting the emotion, not
struggling*



Relation of equivalence



How to choose and build metaphors

- Find a good functional match between the metaphor and the client's situation
- Find a metaphor that uses the client's culture

Clinical example

- Joe works is a carpenter. He builds houses.
- Joe is depressed.
- When he feels depressed, he withdraws and then feels even more depressed.

Choose or build a metaphor for Joe

- Quicksand metaphor? Feeding the tiger?
- Why not, but let's use Joe's culture.
- Let's find a situation that matches the **counter productivity** of withdrawing. Something that seems to make sense but actually has problematic consequences.
- Maybe:
Building a fancier house than the others in the same neighborhood to increase its value.

Function:

Counter-productive

Building a fancier house than the others



Conditional Relation



Value decreases

Most efficient behavior:

Match the house to the others

Function:

Counter-productive

Withdrawing when feeling depressed



Conditional Relation

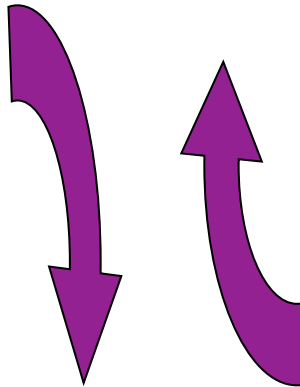


Feeling even more depressed

Most efficient behavior

*Going out, talking to people,
doing stuff*

Relation of equivalence



Function:

Doing more

h



Conditional Relation



Getting less

!

Match the house to the others

Function:

Counter-productive

Doing less



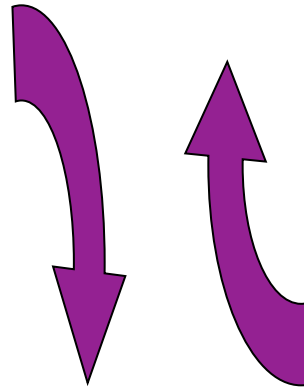
Conditional Relation



Getting more

Fee

Going out, talking to people, doing stuff



Relation of equivalence



Let's build a more fine-grained metaphor

- We used Joe's culture and made a functional match but we could match the two networks even better
- We need a situation related to building houses where doing something less increases what is avoided...
- Any ideas?

Function:

Counter-productive

Not spending much money on isolation material



Conditional Relation



Having even more expenses in heat

Most efficient behavior:

Making an effort now to have a more energy efficient house

Function:

Counter-productive

Withdrawing when feeling depressed



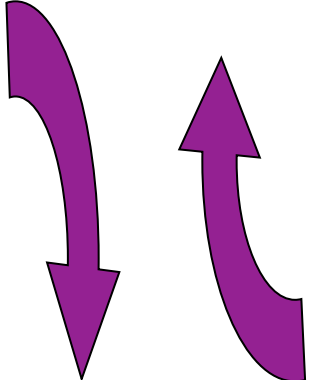
Conditional Relation



Feeling even more depressed

Most efficient behavior

Making an effort to go out, talk to people, do stuff



Relation of equivalence



Delivering metaphors

- Explain or not explain? Didactic or experiential?
- How to deliver experiential metaphors?
 - **Deliver as a role play** (e.g. “imagine you step in quicksand”)
 - **Use present tense** (e.g. what do you feel in that moment?)
 - **Mix vocabulary from the two situations** (e.g. “and when you sink in your anxiety...”)
 - **Evoke observation, description, tracking** (e.g. “what do you feel?” “what happens next?”)

Want more?

- Check the resources in the handout
- Join the RFT ACBS listserve
- Join the RFT facebook page
- More questions? Interested in consultation?
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