

Shaping Bravery and Flexibility Using Values and Perspective-Taking: A Process-Based Approach to Anxiety and OCD



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Conflicts of Interest

Learning Objectives

1. Describe psychological flexibility as a set of behavioral skills that can be shaped as a target of contextual behavioral ACT intervention.
2. Describe the DNA-V model and how to use it to shape flexible perspective-taking and behavioral variability in avoidance-based disorders.
3. Explain how to shape the processes involved in psychological flexibility, including valuing and perspective-taking, to engage child and adolescent clients in exposure-based treatment.

Skills Underlying Psychological Flexibility

Overview and Theoretical Underpinnings of CBS

- CBS has behavior analytic roots
- We cannot understand behavior outside of its context
- Interested in pragmatic understanding of behavior (i.e., how behavior “works”)
- CBS is a cognitive-behavioral approach
- We relate to our world based on the meanings we derive about it
- “Disorder” is engagement in rigid avoidance-based behavior

Processes Targeted in Treatment

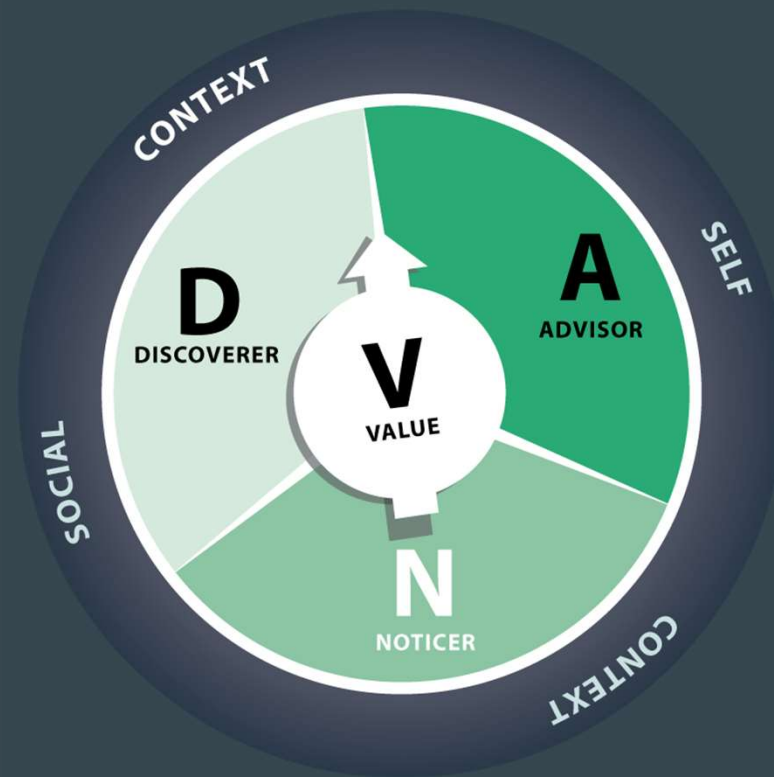
- Acceptance and Mindfulness Processes
- Commitment and Behavior Change Processes
- Treatment Target?
 - Shaping robust practice of psychological flexibility over one's lifespan
 - Psychological Flexibility: engaging in flexible, varied, values-guided behavior regardless of the presence of unwanted private events
- What is psychopathology?
 - Persistent engagement in narrow, rigid, avoidance-based behaviors

Evidence Base for ACT with Youth

- Evidence suggests that ACT improves
 - Clinician, parent and self-reported measures of symptoms
 - Quality of life outcomes
 - Psychological flexibility with many studies demonstrating further gains at follow-up assessment
 - Reductions in clinically meaningful anxiety and psychological inflexibility
- Some methodological weaknesses limit conclusions, including
 - Small samples
 - Some non-randomized designs, and few alternative treatment or control comparisons
 - Measurement issues with regard to psychological flexibility.

The DNA-V

Overview

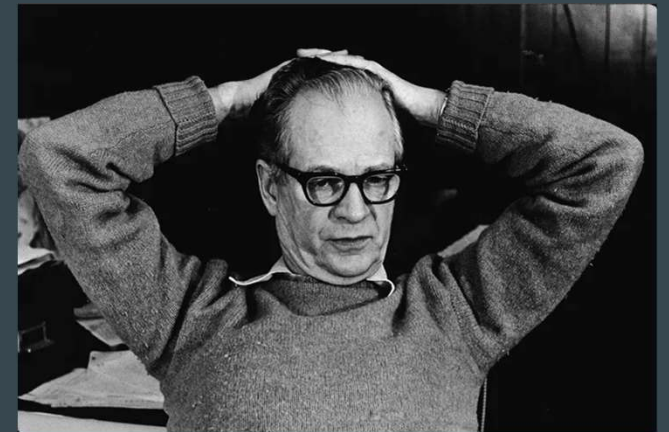


One Theory to Explain Them All

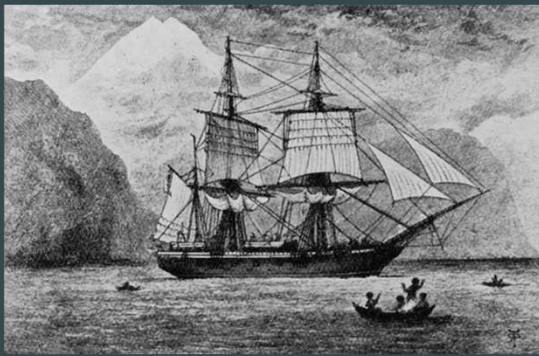
Evolutionary Theory

- Variation: We try out different behaviors
- Selection: These are reinforced or punished
- Retention: We repeat what has worked for us in the past

Purpose: To adapt to context and survive



Core Tenets



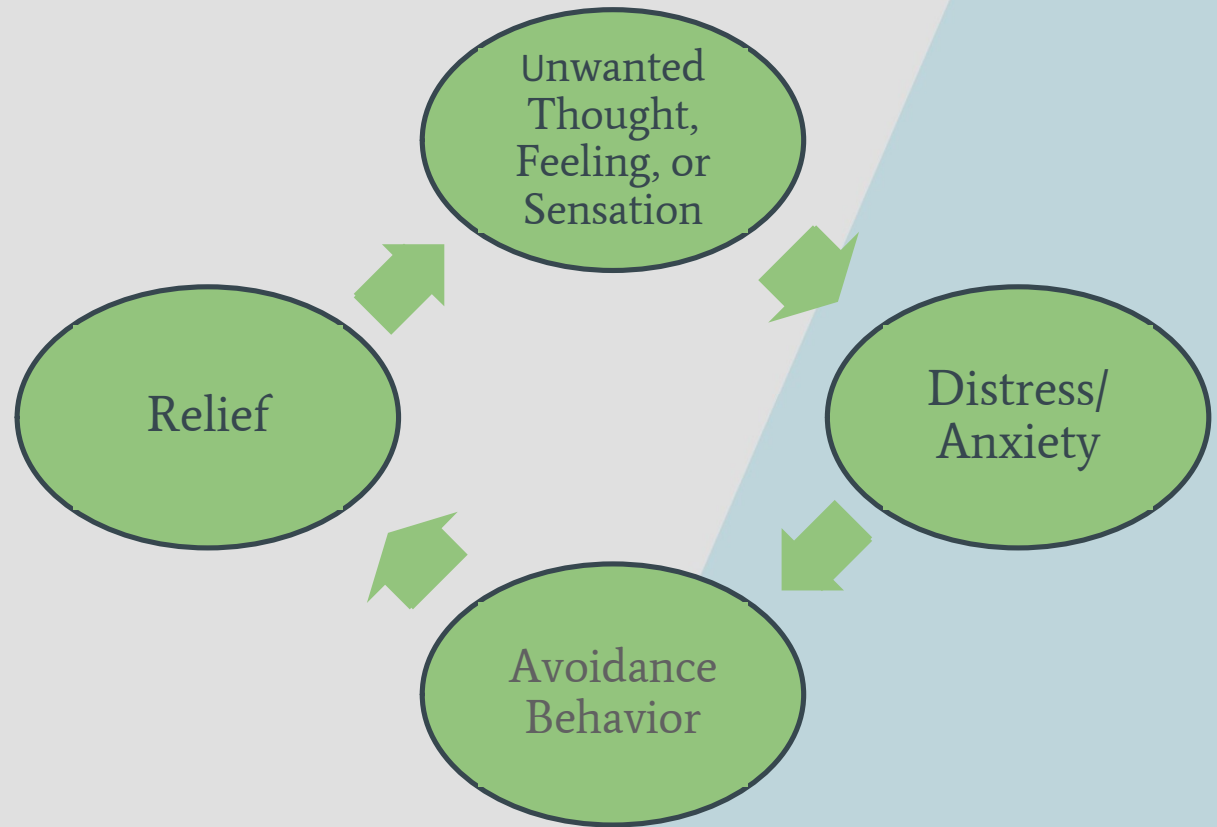
- All behavior makes sense
- Context means the dynamic stream of events that influence behavior
 - Internal and external
 - Interpersonal, intrapersonal, situational
- All behavior is an adaptation to a specific context

Children who rely on experiential avoidance are often dominated by their inner experience.



When dominated by inner experience, there is little variation in behavior.

A BEHAVIORAL MODEL OF EXPERIENTIAL AVOIDANCE: THE NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT SPIRAL



**What do we do
with avoidance of anxiety?**

The Spider in the Room



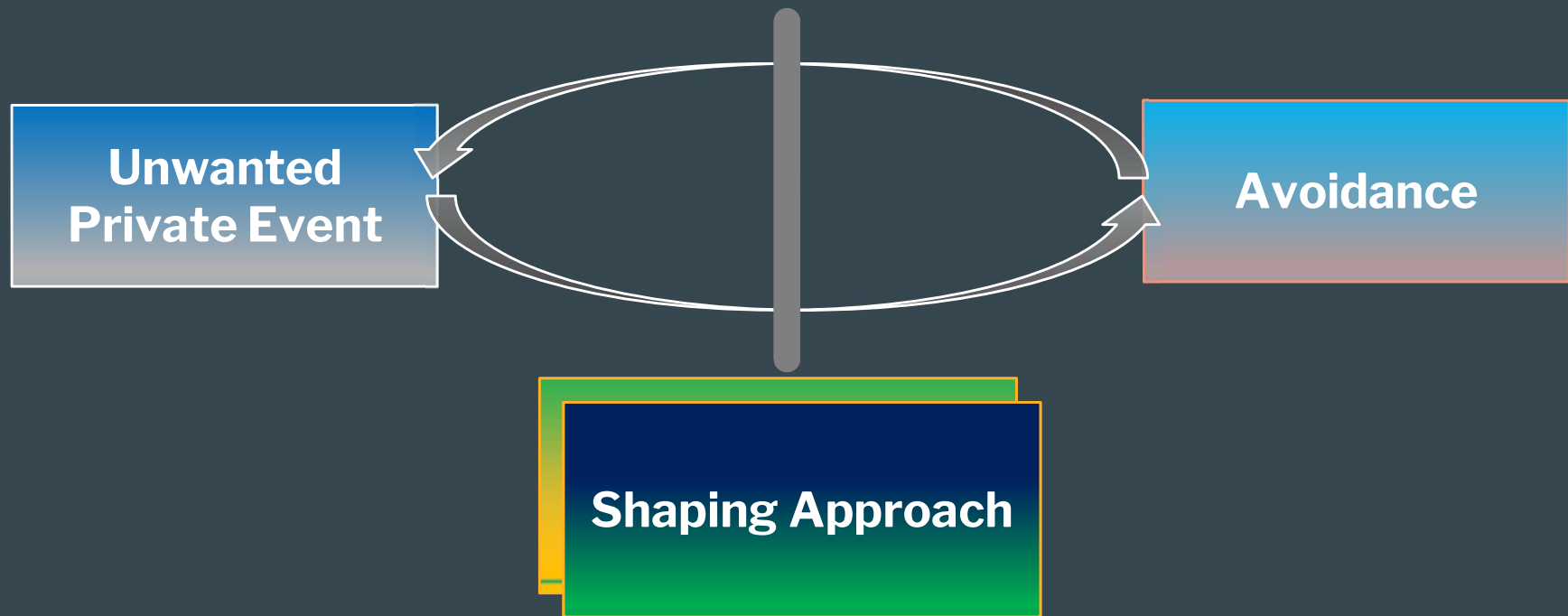
SPIIDER



EXPOSURE-BASED TREATMENT

- Ingredients of Exposure-Based Treatment:

- “Approach” to obsessive thoughts, mental images, or feelings (i.e., exposure)
- Resisting engagement in compensatory avoidance behaviors (i.e., response prevention/reducing safety-seeking behavior)



How Exposure Works

Shaping flexible, adaptive, effective behavior
in the presence of OCD/anxiety cues



Goal of Treatment:

Increasing variability of behavior
In the presence of inner experience

DNA-V Goal: Shaping Flexible Shifting Across 3 Classes of Behavior...

Purpose of DNA-V: To support young people in developing values and living with vitality; this provides a “compass” for behavioral choices (V)

- **Advisor:** How we use “relating” to make sense of the world in the absence of direct experience (self talk, predictions, our “mind;” often, OCD or anxiety)
- **Noticer:** Connection with feelings, our body, 5-senses experience (awareness of the body, one’s actions, reinforcers in the physical world, a way to detach from one’s “Advisor” when stuck in one’s thoughts)
- **Discoverer:** Behaviors related to exploring and testing the world; trying new things, learning from direct experience

The Goal: To support shifting awareness across these perspectives as is helpful, in context

What Do We Mean by Valuing?

- Valuing is a *motivative augmental*: engaging in values-consistent behavior is thought to be intrinsically reinforcing.
- Framing doing hard things in the context of values can be helpful
- Creates a bigger reinforcer that can compete with the adversity



1. Values are behaviors. They are not words.
2. Values are freely chosen
3. Values are life directions that are Immediately available (goals are not)
4. Values are things you move towards, not away from

...Within a Social Context: Self-View and Social View

Self-View: the ability to see oneself across different contexts; discrimination between *you* as an observer and *you* as an actor (eg, me vs. my OCD/Anxiety/Depression etc.)

Social-View: the ability to take the perspective of other individuals and groups; supports development of relationship-building (eg, noticing the effects of my behavior on my family/friends)

Self-View and Social-View arise from practicing DNA-V skills, and in turn, influence the use of these skills

DNA-V: Shaping Perspective



DNA-V teaches increasing variability in behavior through *Discovery*.

Example: Child with Social Anxiety

- Contacts physical world (exposure/response prevention)
- Natural reinforcers shape behavior
- He starts speaking up (variation)
- Learns how best to do that (selection)
- Keeps doing what works (retention)

Functional Analysis & the DNA-V: Assessing Skills Deficits

DNA-V Skills Deficits: What to Look For

Valuing: Is your client in touch with their values? Is their behavior consistent with those values?

Advisor: Is your client stuck in their heads, adhering to Advisor rules? Are they experiencing their thoughts as literal truths? Is that attachment serving them well, or poorly, and when?

Noticer: Is your client in touch with their 5-senses experience? Are they able to express awareness of, and allow that experience, without reactivity? Are they willing to be curious about that experience?

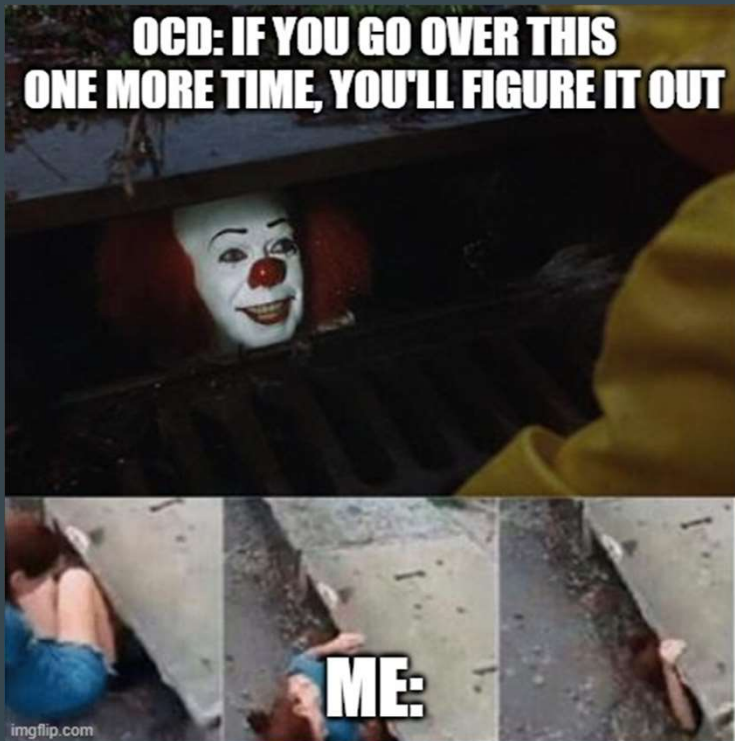
Discoverer: Is your client able to try novel behaviors? Are they flexible, or is their behavior part of a narrow, rigid, and unhelpful repertoire?

Skills Deficits in Trial and Error Learning: Valuing & Discovery

- Difficulty adapting behavior to context
- Narrow, rigid repertoires
- Lack of curiosity and willingness to explore
- Difficulty with trial and error learning
- Adherence to unhelpful patterns
 - Patterns that have functional equivalence
- Unwillingness to make room for risk and discomfort



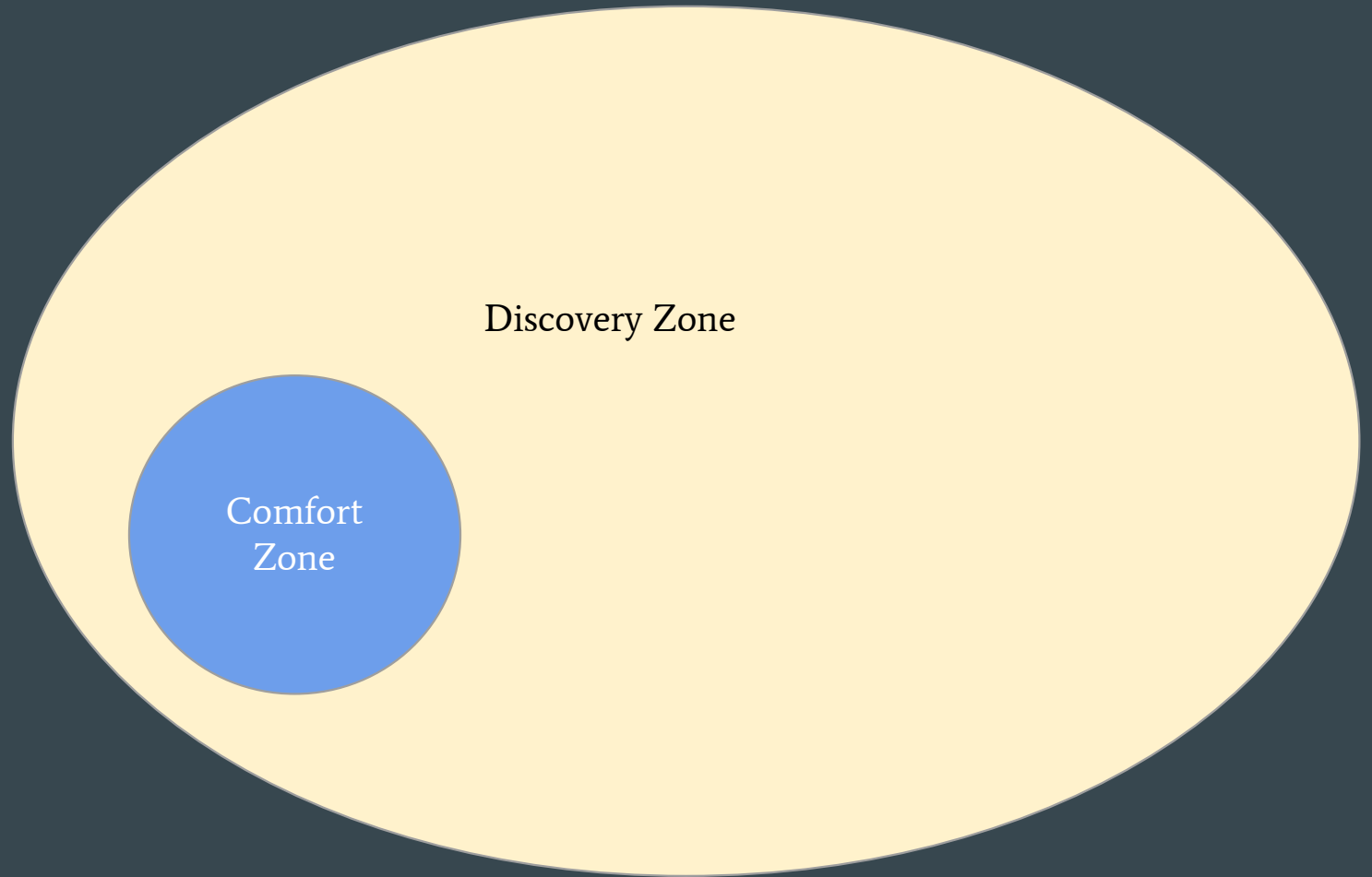
Skills Deficits in Perspective-Taking



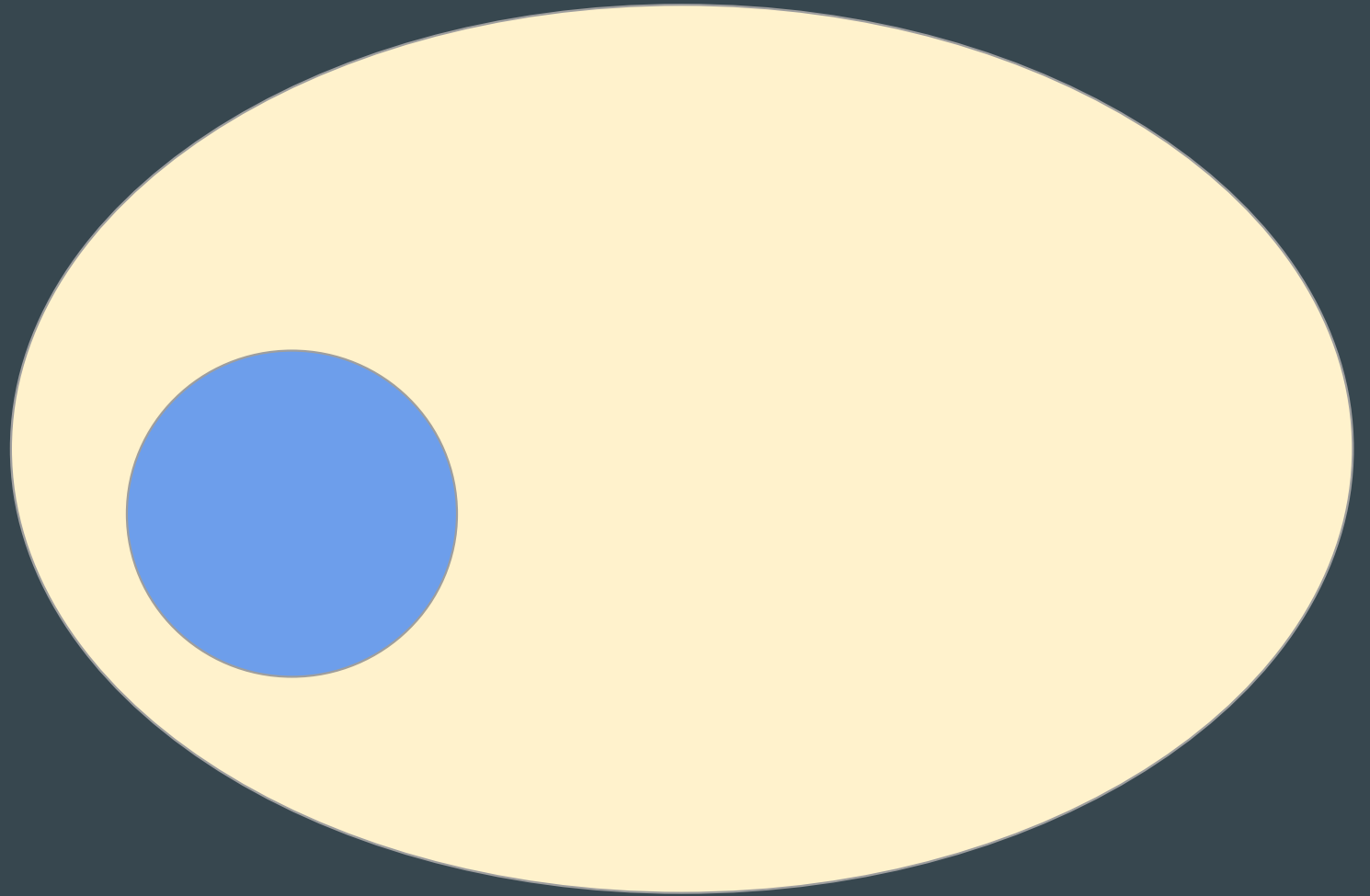
- Attachment to self-stories
- Inability to notice those stories as part of, not the whole, of who we are
- Experience of stories as self-fulfilling prophecies or rules
- Difficulty taking perspective on these stories
- Difficulty discriminating when these stories serve us well and when they do not
- Treating these stories as dangerous

2. Using Valuing to Shape Discovery

What gives me
vitality:



The Comfort vs. Discovery Zone Model



The Comfort vs. Discovery Zone Model



What gives you vitality?

1. Can you think of something you did that was really fun, and that made you feel really alive?
2. Who is the liveliest person you know? Even a TV character? What makes them so alive?
3. If you had 24 hours left on the planet before you were moving to Mars for good, what would you spend that time doing? Who would you be with?
4. Who is someone you really admire?
Write words to describe this in the box
labeled “things that give me vitality”

Exercise: What
makes
a good life?



Practice I: Fictional Character Valuing Exercise

Instructions: Imagine you are writing a novel about a really cool main character -one you who admire, one who you'd be totally fascinated by and wanting to read more about. One who would hold your interest, and who inspires you. This can be a character based on someone you know, or a celebrity, or could be someone you just make up in your head. Once you have that person, please do the steps below:

1. Write down 8-10 adjectives that describe that character's personality or characteristics. Take your time.
2. Once you have these down, pretend you can only keep three of these. Choose three that you aspire to embody yourself.
3. What are some ways that you could embody these characteristics?
4. When you embody these characteristics, what are the effects on you?
5. When you embody these characteristics, what are the effects on people around you?
6. What is one thing you could do every day to embody these characteristics?



How to use the comfort zone vs discovery zone model

- 1. What's something that you are struggling with - it could be your anxiety or OCD, or something else?*
- 2. When you are worried about feeling that, what are things that you do to keep yourself in your comfort zone? Write it in the small circle*
- 3. How comfortable are you in your "comfort zone"?*

4. What are things that would really like to do, or are important to you, that you don't do or can't do while you are working on being in your comfort zone? Write these in the "Discovery Zone."

5. What are some small things that you might choose to practice doing, outside of your comfort zone, to take a step towards these things that matter to you? Write them on the worksheet, and rate how willing you would be to experience discomfort in order to do them.



Creating a Flexibility Practice Menu Using the Comfort/Discovery model

Areas of vitality in my life: *__My friends, playing football, learning science*

Comfort Behaviors to resist	Discovery Behaviors to explore	Willingness (0-8)
Not speaking up in math class	Asking questions in class when I don't understand	3
Avoiding trying my best at soccer practice	10 minutes mindful practice daily where I really show up	5
Video games by myself when I feel anxious	Meeting a friend to practice football, texting a friend	6

3. Shaping a Flexible Self

The Importance of Taking Perspective

PERSPECTIVE 101

1. Something happens.
2. It means nothing.
3. We make up a story about what it means.
4. The story we make up creates our reality, it creates our world, it creates what's possible and not possible.

*"Now I think it's one of the most useless questions an adult can ask a child—
What do you want to be when you grow up? As if growing up is finite. As if at
some point you become something and that's the end."*

-Michelle Obama, Becoming

Why the Self Becomes a Problem



- We construct a “self” based on our learning history in a social context
- Self-concept is helpful when it drives us to broad repertoires of valued behaviors
- It is unhelpful when it tries to “solve” our history
 - This entails getting “stuck” in the Advisor perspective
- It is unhelpful when it tries to “solve” core beliefs about competence, capability, possibility, *before* leaning in to do hard things (like exposure)

Example: Iara and Anxiety & a Narrow Self-View

Context: Iara values connection with her friends, and a sense of belonging

Antecedent: She goes to a football match looking for her mates, and they blow her off

Consequences:

- She feels anxious
- She believes *I am unlikable, I am unworthy, I am an anxious person*
- She leaves and avoids going to football matches after that

How these work:

- Short Term: Escape/avoidance, short term relief
- Long Term: Increasing social disconnection, impossibility of corrective learning experiences
- Pursuit of values becomes *unworkable*

Example 2: Malik and Anxiety & a Broad Self-View

Context: Malik values social connection and invites a friend to a football match

Antecedent: The friend turns him down because he's going with another teen

Consequences:

- He notices he's anxious
- He notices his Advisor saying *I am unlikable, I am unworthy, I am an anxious person*
- He remembers that the Advisor is his threat detector, and although these thoughts might have been helpful in the past, they might not be helpful at present
- He chooses to hang out at the match anyway, even while anxious
- He moves into his Discoverer space later and talks to the friend about his disappointment and asks why he chose to go with the other friend
- Short-term: Risk of social rejection, embarrassment
- Long-term: Development of social skills, chance at deeper relationship with the friend

What is a Flexible Self-View?

- Seeing one's behavior as a part of oneself and not a literal truth about oneself
- Youngsters are *more than* their anxiety or OCD
- Understanding that we are always becoming and learning, and we are not the sum total of our past experiences
- Noticing that when we have a story of who we are, we can choose to step out of that into the Discoverer perspective/Discovery zone at will
- Letting go of stories like “I have to be less anxious/not have OCD before I engage in valued pursuits”
- When we are in our Noticer space, we can *choose* our next steps; we don't need to let the Advisor choose for us.

Supporting a Growth Mindset: The Discovery Zone

- Support kids to notice and self-reinforce around effort, not outcome
- Remind them that “yet” is a tiny but important word
 - I can’t do this...yet
 - I’m not good at this...yet
- Help them notice that self-statements like “I am not good enough” are the Advisor talking

Untangling Kids from Rigid Rules

Goal: Supporting adolescents in using language flexibly to support workable, values-driven behaviors

- Revealing what choices are possible - try using a metaphor for the Advisor as an OCD or Anxiety Monster, or Committee, or Mean Teacher
- Return the teen's attention to the workability of their behavior in terms of supporting a broad repertoire of valued behavior
- Encourage moving into the Discovery Zone and trial and error learning
 - This entails willingness to make errors and learn from them, and acceptance of challenging feelings that arise to teach how to shift strategy

Two Perspective-Taking Exercises to Facilitate Discovery

The Anxiety Monster



How would you support younger you?





DNA-V: Shaping Discovery when Things Feel Ofaert