

Appendix F

See the Wood for the Trees (And Other Helpful Advice for Living Life)

Dr Ross White

Clinical Research Fellow, Mental Health and Well-being, University of Glasgow, UK,
Ross.White@glasgow.ac.uk

In developing an ACT protocol for distress following psychosis, the allegory featuring a character called 'Jeremy' was created to help produce some coherence between various metaphors that are used by practitioners of ACT. The protocol has been influenced by the Matrix approach pioneered by Kevin Polk, Mark Webster and colleagues. It is hoped that the use of an extended metaphor featuring Jeremy will help the patient retain a memory of the information discussed in the sessions and the various learning points. The allegory also serves as a story of hope, which the individual may be able to relate to when thinking about their own journey towards a meaningful life.

Chapter 1 The Difference between Sensory Experience and Mental Experience

Jeremy has been travelling with a party of tourists through the rainforests of Brazil. The vehicle on which they have been travelling has broken down. Wandering into the forest to check out some of the exotic plant life, Jeremy slips off a ridge and tumbles down 100 feet into the dense jungle. He lies there unconscious for some time. Coming round, he calls out for other members of his party, but no one

calls back. He is bruised and sore, lost and disorientated. He has only what he is carrying with him: his pen-knife with a built-in compass. For 2 days, Jeremy wanders around the jungle without water trying to find his friends. Although he is able to eat fruit from the jungle trees, he is absolutely parched. All he can do is think about water. In his head, he can imagine what running water sounds like; how it feels when you drink it down; and how it runs away from you when you try to hold it in your hands. But, unfortunately, no matter how much Jeremy runs these thoughts about water through his head, the water never reaches his throat. Desperately dehydrated, he suddenly stumbles on a stream. Dropping to his knees, he hurriedly drinks down the cold, pure water flowing in the stream. He sits back and thinks about how the experience of thinking about drinking water differs from actually drinking the water.

The purpose of this extract is to highlight the distinction that Kevin Polk and colleagues make when socialising people to the Matrix between internal mental experience (imagining, worrying, dreaming, thinking etc.) and five-sense experience (seeing, tasting, hearing, touching and smelling). Whereas we can get lost in internal mental experience (cognitive fusion), engaging with our five-sense experience can help connect us with the present moment. Kevin Polk introduces this notion by asking if the individual can distinguish between these two types of experience. Jeremy is able to clearly make this distinction between what it is like to imagine water and the actual experience of having water.

Chapter 2 The Drawbacks of Trying to Avoid the Things we Struggle With

Jeremy follows the stream that he had been drinking from. Now that he has found it, he wants to stay close to this source of drinking water. He makes slow progress, but he eventually comes to a point where the stream meets a mighty river. He remembers that the truck on which they were travelling had taken a small ferry across a big river. He knows that he should try to cross the river, but he fears that the river might be infested with crocodiles. He is also concerned that the river current might be unpredictable and dangerous. Rather than risk swimming across the river, he decides instead to journey along the river bank. The undergrowth is dense and the branches scrape at him as he tries to get through them.

This section of Jeremy's journey demonstrates how we can all get caught living our lives in the confines of fear. In discussions with patients, it is important to acknowledge that worrying – and the avoidant behaviours that stem from this – might keep us safe in the short-term, but you should also point out that these avoidant behaviours (e.g. isolating ourselves, taking drugs or alcohol) can cause problems of their own and only serve to keep us distant from our values.

Chapter 3 Moving towards Your Values and Carrying the Anxiety with You

Jeremy is sore from where the thick undergrowth has been scraping at his face, arms and legs. He knows that his best chance of getting back to civilisation lies with him heading east to the coast. He consults the compass on his Swiss army knife and sees that by following the river, he is actually heading north. He knows that, despite the dangers, he has to cross the river. Looking around, he finds an old hollowed-out tree trunk. He decides to try and use this to float across the river.

This extract illustrates the importance of taking stock of the direction in which our lives are moving. This can provide an opportunity to appreciate what it is that we consider important in life. We will all face anxiety, worry and discomfort at times (that is part of what it is to be human). Maybe this anxiety, worry and discomfort will be worth having if we are moving towards what it is we value in life. By committing to act in a way that is consistent with our values, we can lead a life that is vital.

Chapter 4 Getting Distance between You and the ‘Story of your Life’

Jeremy kneels on the tree trunk and pushes himself out in the river. He uses a couple of branches as paddles and attempts to cross the river. As he crosses, all kinds of fearful thoughts enter his head: ‘I’m a fool for getting myself into this situation’, ‘I’m going to fail’, ‘I don’t know what’s beneath me’. Jeremy notices that he is nervously saying these thoughts aloud. To help himself cope, he decides to sing these thoughts out loud, mixing the fearful words with a happy tune. He notices that this helps take some of the sting out of the thoughts. Changing the way you think about worrying thoughts can help change their impact.

As Jeremy floats across the river, a beautiful tropical bird flies low over the river’s surface. As it passes right before Jeremy, it seems to tip its wing as if to say hello to him. For a split second, Jeremy forgets all his worries. The brilliant blue feathers of the Macaw and the gracefulness of its flight have taken his breath away. Jeremy reflects on how appreciating the beauty of this moment seems to leave no room in his mind for worry.

This section of the story provides an opportunity to demonstrate how patients might cope with acute experiences of anxiety and worry. This can be done by either defusing with the content of the anxious thoughts (through changing the context in which this content is experienced, for example by singing the thoughts to a happy tune) or connecting with the

present moment through engaging with five-sense experience (e.g. getting out of your head by really noticing what it is that you are seeing).

Chapter 5 Control is the Problem, not the Solution

A little shaken, but still in one piece, Jeremy finally reaches the other side of the river. Clambering off the tree trunk on to the muddy river bank, Jeremy realises to his horror that he is sinking into the mud. He is in quicksand. Jeremy struggles against the rising quicksand and tries to step out of it. However, the instinctive response of struggling against the quicksand only increases the downward pressure and worsens the situation. A memory from a distant documentary on the Discovery Channel flashes into Jeremy's head. Jeremy recalls that the only way to get out of quicksand is to stop struggling against it. Relaxing, Jeremy stops resisting, and as he lies back into it, his legs gently start to rise. As if swimming across the top of the quicksand, he grabs at a branch of a tree and moves free to safety.

Jeremy's experiences in this section of the story are intended to illustrate to patients how struggling with their suffering can inadvertently drive them deeper into it. The counterintuitive approach of leaning into the suffering and exploring it can help free them to move on with their lives.

Chapter 6 Letting Go of Thoughts

Jeremy sits under a tree to rest. As he looks out over the river, he watches the leaves that have fallen from the trees floating on the water's surface. His eyes follow the leaves as they flow downstream. Jeremy notices that as quickly as these leaves disappear around the bend of the river, they are replaced by a seemingly never-ending stream of other leaves. Jeremy reflects on how the anxious thoughts that he was experiencing not so long have now floated out of sight, just like the leaves on the surface of the river. Other thoughts have flowed in to take the place of the anxiety. Jeremy concludes that he much prefers to watch the flow of the leaves down the river than to get caught up in the current and being carried away by it. Similarly, noticing your thoughts can be a better position to take than being swept away with them.

It is hoped that this passage of Jeremy's story, incorporating the 'leaves-on-the-stream' metaphor (Appendix B), will illustrate to patients that we are constantly experiencing a stream of consciousness and that at times we can all get caught up in this and swept up by our thoughts. Noticing the flow of our thoughts can free us from getting caught up in them. Mindfulness exercises are highlighted as a way of observing our thoughts without getting caught up in reacting to them.

Chapter 7 Seeing the Wood for the Trees

Lying back on the forest floor, Jeremy glances up to see a beautiful bird perched atop a very tall tree. If only Jeremy had wings, perhaps he could fly out of this place and get back to his own life... With a jolt, Jeremy sits up, a smile spreading across his face. He can't fly, but he can try to get a bird's eye view. Why hasn't he thought of this before? Jeremy grabs the trunk of the nearest tree and slowly but surely begins to climb. Nearing the top, he is able to see for miles over the surrounding area. Looking east, he can see the coastline in the distance. Running his eyes along the coast in a northerly direction, he sees a town. From this new way of looking at things, he is able to broaden his horizon and see how where he has been relates to where he wants to go. Jeremy now has a sense of being able to place himself within the wider scheme of things. At long last, Jeremy is able to see the wood despite the trees.

See the wood... not just the trees.

This extract of the story is intended to illustrate the 'observer self/self as context' perspective that patients are encouraged to develop over the course of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Rather than becoming disorientated by the immediacy of the suffering that the person may be experiencing, this is about helping them to see how this suffering might relate to the larger picture of where they want to take their life.

Chapter 8 Coping with Worries

Jeremy is wandering in the forest and the wind has picked up. The trees sway and bend in the wind. He can hear the boughs creaking and he worries that a branch might break off and fall on his head. This brings back a memory from Jeremy's childhood. He was about 9 years old and he was out walking with his father. It was a wet and windy day, but they needed to take the family dog out for its evening walk. In an attempt to get some shelter from the wind and the rain, Jeremy's dad suggested to Jeremy that instead of walking along the main road they should take the slightly longer route of walking through the wood. A bit worried about this, Jeremy turned to his dad and protested: 'We shouldn't do that. The wind might blow a tree over and knock it on our heads.' Smiling down at his son, Jeremy's father replied, 'Yes, but it might not'. Thinking about this memory, Jeremy smiles to himself. There are so many things in the world that we could worry about, but worrying about them won't make them any less – or more – likely to happen.

This passage is intended to highlight how fruitless an endeavour worrying can be. For all the energy that patients invest in worrying, sometimes circumstances are outside their control, and this energy could instead be directed towards achieving goals consistent with their values.

Chapter 9 Review of the Importance of Values and Committed Action

To help stay on track, Jeremy climbs trees twice a day – once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Sometimes when he is up a tree, the wind blows and the tree sways. At these times, Jeremy finds it difficult to look out over the horizon, because he has to cling to the tree for safety. But when the wind settles, he is able to look out once again. Being able to get a broader perspective on things, rather than always staring at the trees straight in front of him, allows Jeremy to make good progress towards the sea. When Jeremy climbs a tree, he picks out certain features in the landscape that he can aim for. This helps to break his journey into manageable blocks and lets him know that he is still on course. For example, he might set himself the task of getting over a hill that lies between him and the ocean, or he might try to get to a particular clearing in the forest that he sees up ahead before nightfall. Sometimes he achieves these goals, other times he does not. The most important thing however is that he continues to let his journey be guided by a desire to get back to his friends and family.

This passage is intended to reiterate to the patient the importance of utilising the ‘observer self’/‘self as context’ perspective. It should be emphasised that this will be an ongoing process that the patient can engage in as they move forward with life. There will be difficulties and stress at times, but this is part of living a vital life and should not detract from the task at hand.

Chapter 10 Review of ‘Noticing We Can Notice’ Work

Reaching the sea shore, Jeremy has some troubling thoughts to contend with. All the difficulties that he has experienced over the last few days seem to run through his head. Jeremy wonders what his recent experiences say about him as a person. Is he someone who has managed to get themselves lost? Is he someone who struggles to overcome challenges put in front of him? Is he someone who makes bad decisions? As he ponders these thoughts, he looks up and sees a rainbow rising up from the sea. Seeing this rainbow helps Jeremy find an answer to these questions. Smiling to himself, he realises that just as a rainbow is a blend of different colours, he is a blend of many different qualities. Focusing on one particular colour doesn’t capture the richness of the rainbow. Similarly, Jeremy’s dwelling on things that he feels he hasn’t coped with well doesn’t do him justice as a person.

This extract is aimed at helping patients to see how a preoccupation with the labels that have been used by themselves and others to describe their lives can never do them justice. A narrow focus on particular aspects of our selves prevents us from appreciating the wonder of all the other aspects of our lives.

Chapter 11 Looking to the Future

Walking along the shore, Jeremy spots a collection of brightly coloured fishing boats pulled up on the beach. The palm trees that line the shore arc over the boats, protecting them from the hot sun. A sense of relief washes over Jeremy. He has managed to find his way out of the jungle and for the first time in a week he can see other people. Although his journey may not be quite finished yet, he knows that he is another step closer to where he wants to be. Jeremy is offered hospitality by the residents of the fishing village that he has stumbled across. Over the next few days he gets an opportunity to rest and recuperate. The inhabitants of the village use their radio to contact the coast guard, who send a boat down the coast to pick Jeremy up. Jeremy is looking forward to seeing his family and friends again. Reflecting back on the adventure he has been on, Jeremy wonders for a moment what other adventures might lie ahead. The future will always be uncertain, but after what Jeremy has been through, he is able to see that there is no clear path to leading a meaningful life – leading a meaningful life is the path!

Jeremy's progress in this passage is intended to highlight to patients that there will always be uncertainties in life. But rather than getting too preoccupied with this uncertainty, it's about appreciating that the uncertainty is part of leading a life that is meaningful.

The end (...of the beginning).