



Refraining from Compulsions through Writing

While it may seem redundant or scary, there is plenty of research confirming that externalizing your thoughts and feelings via writing them down is beneficial to your mental and emotional well-being.¹

You'll need a small notebook to carry with you everywhere to write about what you notice happening within you as you encounter scrupulosity storms and refrain from compulsions, especially private ones.

Just like with cubbyholing, you will be acknowledging your internal events, except in this case, you'll be writing about what you notice going on in your body and mind. Your goal is to **refrain from engaging in compulsions (public and private)**. If you are not able to write in the moment of being hooked by the mind, practice another cognitive-defusion skill (e.g., "I'm noticing the thought I'm not good enough." "I'm noticing a pain in my chest.") and gently get back to what matters in the present moment. Take the stance of an observer and narrate what you notice. Make sure this doesn't turn into rumination.

When you are able to write, become an observer of the internal event, noticing what it feels like when you have the urge to engage in a compulsion (public or private). You might experience more anxiety, uncertainty, and/or unpleasant bodily sensations. That's okay. Write down what you are thinking, feeling, and what urges you wish to act on. Then write what you notice when you refrain from the urge instead of succumbing to it. Acknowledge this by writing what it's like to **not** engage in the compulsion, especially a private compulsion (e.g., rumination or figuring things out).

Just write and notice if you get caught up in details or with questions (e.g., "Am I doing it right?"). Just write what you notice. Below is an example of a client's entry.

My obsessions and compulsions are killing me! I'm standing here in front of food I want to purchase. I'm noticing the urge to read all the labels to ensure I don't eat any animal products. I'm noticing the thought that it takes me forever to buy groceries. There's that feeling I hate. I am writing so I won't engage in my normal compulsions, but this is hard. There is the anxiety. It's rising. I don't like this. There's a thought about just stopping my writing. There's the urge to just stop now. There's another thought. I'm noticing the thought. I'm wasting my time now. There's the nausea. My hands are sweaty. There's the thought, "I don't know if I can do this."

Darn. I gave in and read a label. I'm noticing relief. Now I'm noticing guilt. I want to obsess about it. Dang it, I'm noticing the urge to ruminate. Okay, I'm noticing the thought that _____."

The writer continued to write and notice and do their best to prevent themselves from engaging in avoidant and/or compulsive behaviors.

Notice your internal events and refrain from engaging in the compulsions. Don't get stuck trying to write accurately or neatly. It doesn't matter. And make sure you don't reread or analyze what you wrote. This writing exercise is to help you externalize the unhelpful thoughts, feelings, and private experiences and, most importantly, refrain from engaging in the compulsion (private or public).

As you practice this writing exercise, you'll be able to enhance your awareness.

Invitation

Decide to do what matters most to you each day of your life instead of engaging in unhelpful behaviors. When unpleasant internal events show up, notice how willing you are to experience them. Practice willingness skills and watch your it go up to 100 percent. Write as often as you'd like. Discover the power of writing and noticing!

References

1. Bridget Murray, "How Writing Improves Your Brain and Helps You Heal," The American Psychological Association, June 2002, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/jun02/writing.aspx>; see also <https://www.bookmeditationretreats.com/news/writing-brain-health>; see also Nancy Olson, "Three Ways That Handwriting with a Pen Positively Affects Your Brain," ForbesLife, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nancyolson/2016/05/15/three-ways-that-writing-with-a-pen-positively-affects-your-brain/#14ccf2385705>; see also Carl Zimmer, "This is Your Brain on Writing," *New York Times*, June 20, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/19/science/researching-the-brain-of-writers.html>; see also Suzanne Baruch Asherson, "The Benefits of Cursive Go Beyond Writing," *New York Times*, April, 30, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/04/30/should-schools-require-children-to-learn-cursive/the-benefits-of-cursive-go-beyond-writing>.