

# Acceptance and commitment therapy in groups

Eric Morris, PhD



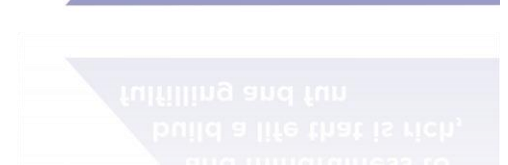
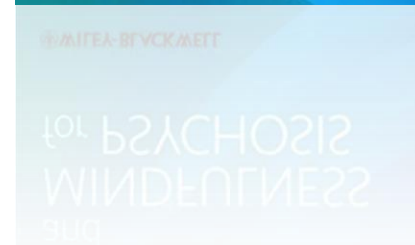
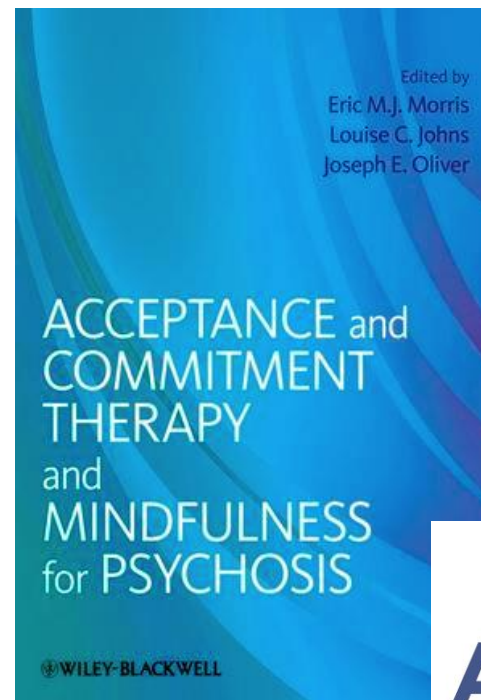
Eric.Morris@latrobe.edu.au



@morriseric

Resources:

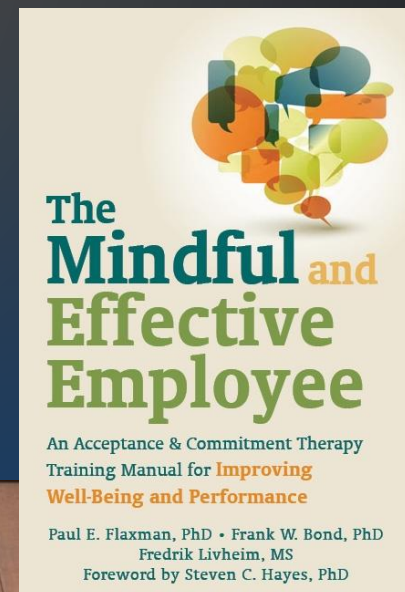
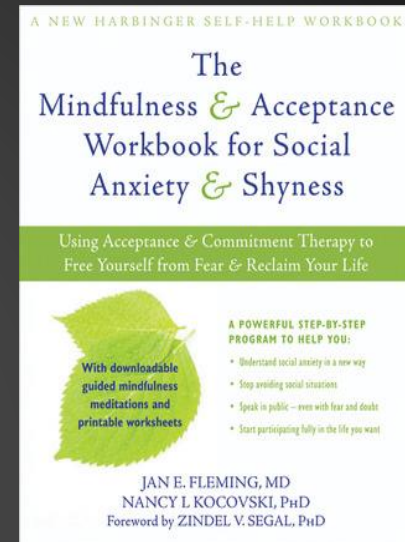
[drericmorris.com](http://drericmorris.com)



# ACT in groups: recent experience

Running and evaluating groups using these protocols:

- ACT for Life / Recovery (<http://goo.gl/m8Dx6l>)
- The Mindful and Effective Employee  
(<http://www.mindfulemployee.com/>)
- ACT on Social Anxiety  
([http://www.actonsocialanxiety.com/pdf/Treatment\\_Manual.pdf](http://www.actonsocialanxiety.com/pdf/Treatment_Manual.pdf))





# Group ACT for psychosis

Advertised to the community as workshops to support personal recovery.

Designed to reach those people who would not engage in individual psychological therapy.

Co-led with peer facilitators (ACT for Recovery)



# ACT in groups - rationale

- Many ACT metaphors are interactive and benefit from more people (e.g. Passengers on the Bus)
- Listening to reactions and responses of others can increase learning
- Often easier to notice others getting hooked (fused)

## ACT in groups – rationale 2

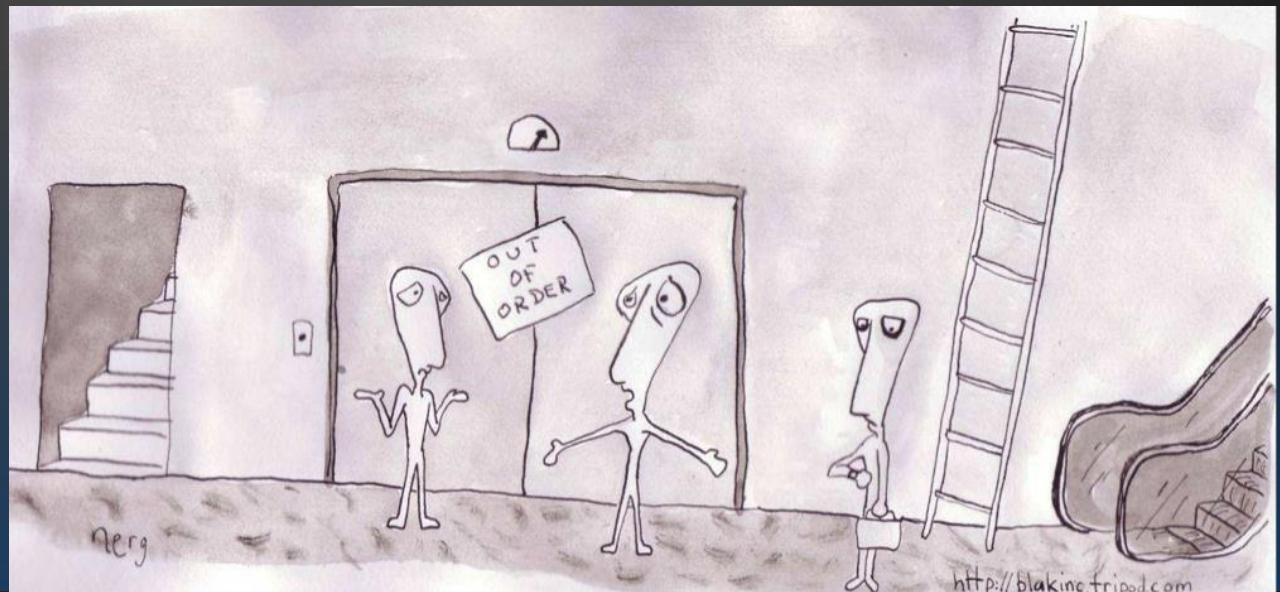
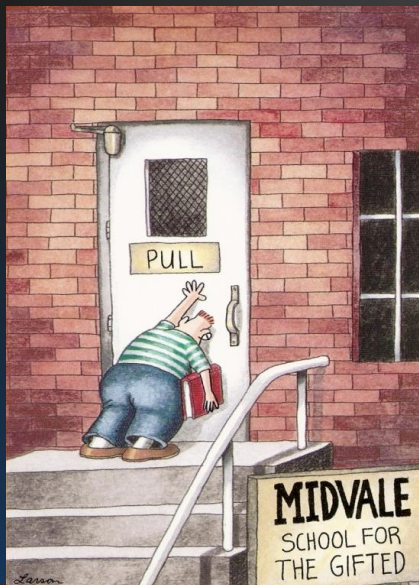
- Making commitments in social context likely to strengthen action
- Observing others being present and willing can promote these processes in self and can be a powerful experience
- Reduce stigma and increase self compassion – “I’m not the only one!”



# What are we trying to do?

## Promote **flexible sensitivity to context**

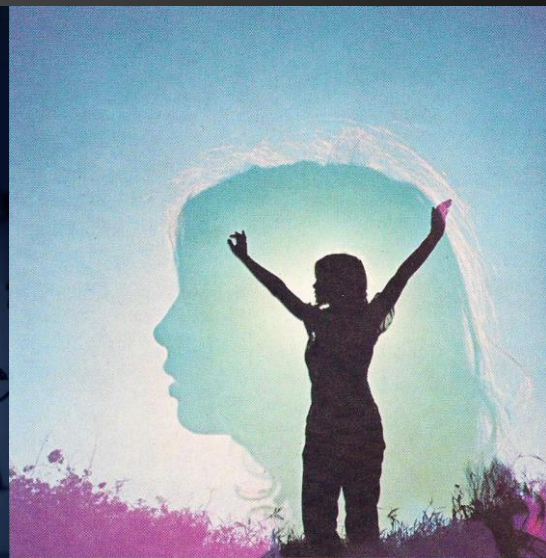
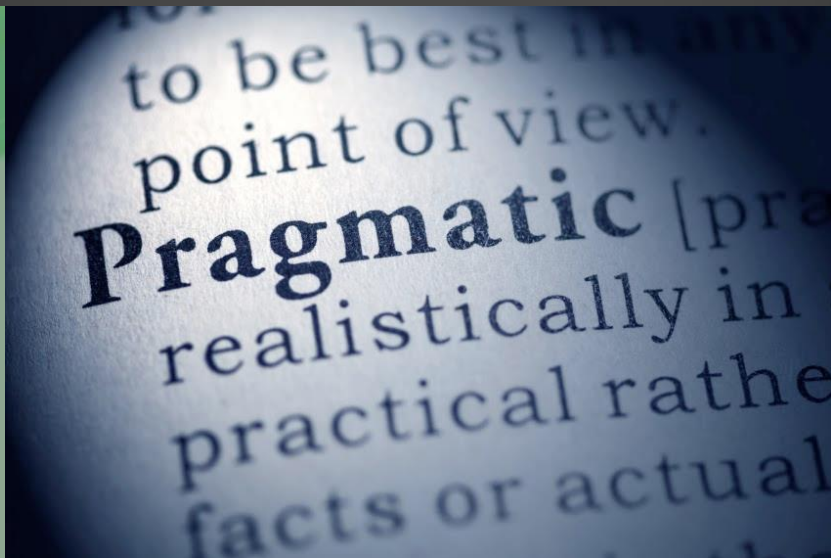
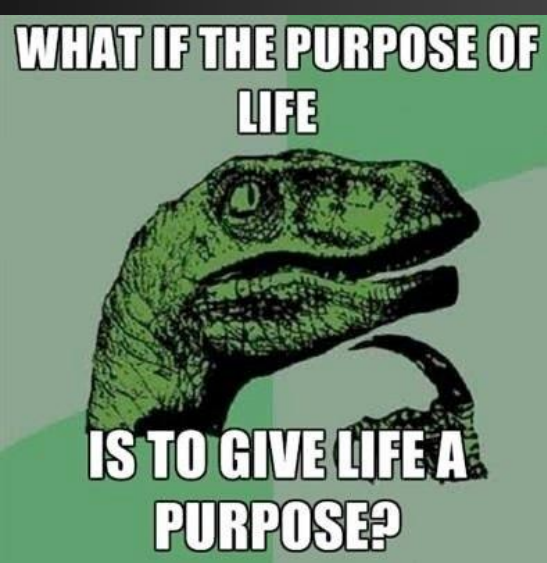
- help participants to increase contact with a variety of influences, that:
- increase the chances of effective behaviours being chosen



# What are we trying to do?

## Promote **functional coherence**

- help participants to make choices based on wholeness and effectiveness
- help participants to integrate experiences flexibly; actions about meaningful living





# Simpler ACTs

Ways of presenting the model to participants without getting caught up in jargon, being overly-technical etc.



# **MINDFULNESS**

Present moment awareness training

Untangling from difficult thought and emotion

Finding your resilient sense of self

# **VALUES-BASED ACTION**

Clarifying your most valued life directions

Using values as a guide to goals and daily behaviour

# SAFETY MODE

Safety behaviours

Focus on Social Danger

Resisting anxious feelings

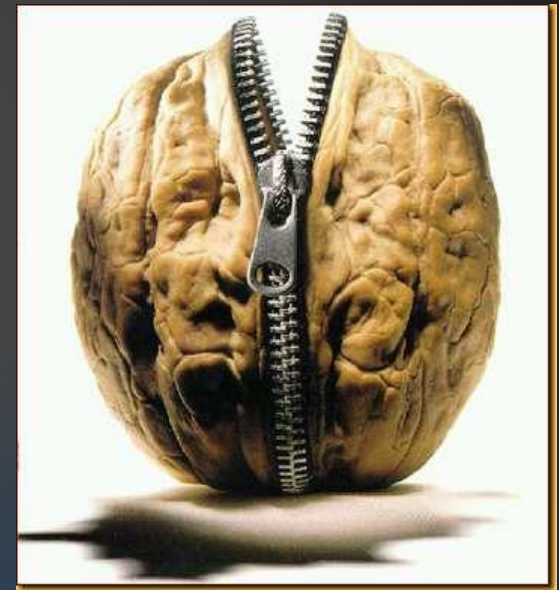
Buying into anxious thoughts



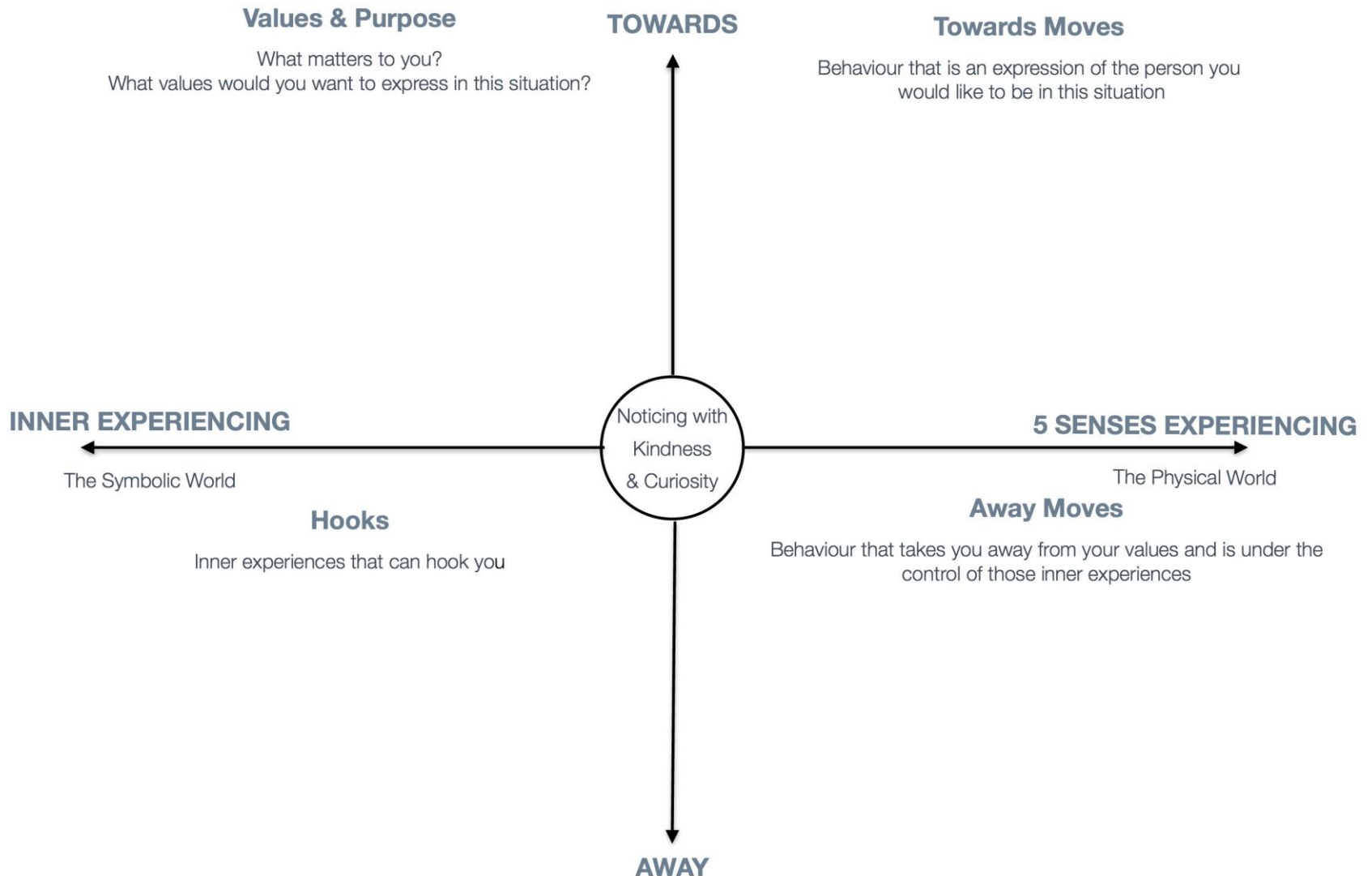


# VITAL ACTION MODE

- Being fully present in social situations
- Bring acceptance and compassion to difficult feelings
- Gaining distance from worries
- Getting in touch with your values and goals



# Pause, Notice, Choose





Louise Hayes & Joseph Ciarrochi, 2015



# Tips in presenting ACT

- Show, rather than Tell
- It's the group experience that matters
- Always be shaping
- Do participants need to know technical terms to become more psychologically flexible?
- And when you see greater psychological flexibility... get out of the participants' way



# Group Interactions

Forming – Storming – Norming – Performing  
(Tuckman, 1965)

Group formation – through a common purpose (highlighted by facilitators), sharing, participating in the group culture

Group cohesion – fostered by sharing of experiences and values-based actions as common goals. Connection strengthened by going through similar experiences (such as exercises) and language (e.g., “my passengers”)

Facilitators progressively shape a **culture of psychological flexibility**

- Highlight common struggles
- Reinforce noticing, openness, sharing vulnerability
- Make the group the process

# Tending to the budding of psychological flexibility





# Working with Participants' Material

Find a balance between being respectful and keeping it light when using participant thoughts.

- ✓ Use your own, truthful material first
- ✓ Always practice kindness and non-judgment
- ✓ Emphasize the ubiquitous nature of negative thoughts and distressing emotions (we are all swimming in the same verbal soup)
- ✓ Give choices when it comes to protecting participant material
- ✓ Keep groups small

# Self-disclosure with skill

Sharing personal experiences as a means of furthering the group

connecting at an authentic, emotional level (vulnerability) and ask: who is this for?

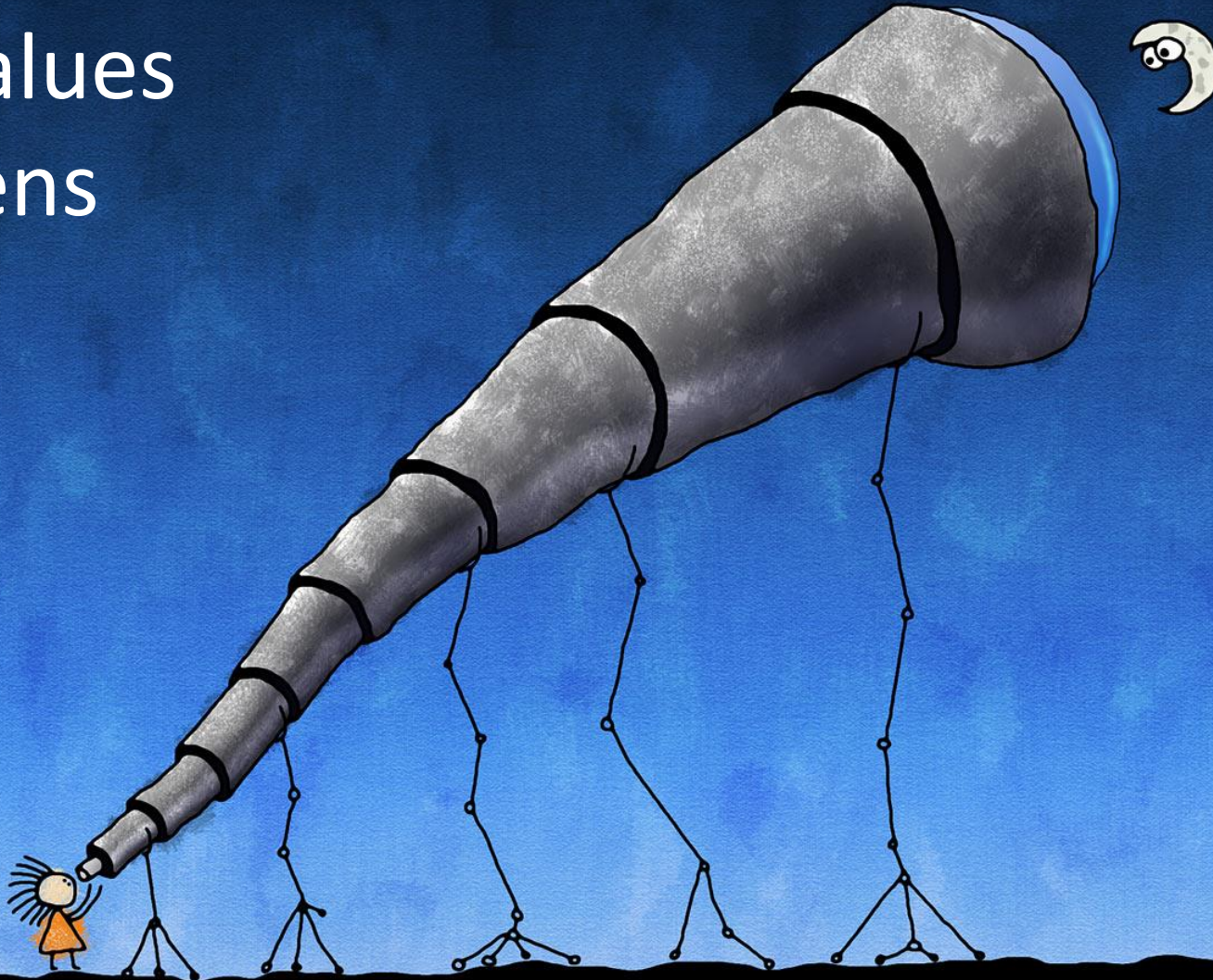
Two ways:

- Share what you are currently experiencing
- Share examples from your personal life





# The Values Lens





# Identifying values

- Be prepared for participants not to know or struggle with identifying values
  - “If this workshop could be about something important just for you”
  - “If this group could really be about doing something important, if magic could happen, and you leave the group and just do this thing... what would it be?”
  - “Think of times when you felt open, vital or engaged”
- Acknowledge distress associated with contacting values



# Flexible mindfulness exercises

- Generally keep it simple
- Avoid long eyes-shut exercises initially
- Creatively use mindfulness
- Forms of mindfulness: sitting down, moving around, short periods, different senses
  - Mindful eating
  - Mindful walking
  - “B.I.F.” – notice something Beautiful, Interesting, Funny
- Be clear that there is no “right way”
- Reinforce all sorts of “noticing”

# Mindful enquiry

- An ad-libbing challenge!
- General principles:
  - We reinforce all sorts of “noticing”
  - Content is less interesting than the process
  - Promote that being in the present is something we **do**
  - Practice in all sorts of ways is how “noticing now” becomes an option
- As the group goes on, take chances with letting the participants strengthen each other
- Take chances with asking less vocal participants about their experiences



# Using Open/ Aware/ Active Skills

- Noticing skills are used throughout the group.
- Capitalise on opportunities for modeling:

*Part. “I felt really bad during the mindfulness exercise. All the anxieties of the week just flooded me.”*

*Trainer. “As you say this I notice my tricky mind rushing in, urging me to do something to help with those anxieties. ‘Quickly, get rid of those passengers’.”*

# Group Process

A group is ideal for noticing others getting 'hooked' in thoughts.

## Dialogue example:

- *Part.1. "I guess I'm not mindfulness material. I just can't sit still- It's similar with other things, I am very fidgety."*
- *Part.2. "Yes, I had a similar set of passengers. I kept thinking 'I can't just sit here doing nothing for half an hour' I did it though, turns out I could still do the exercises a few times."*

These folk are working hard... really.



# Introducing metaphors

- Telling the story
- Using cartoons, images, videos
- Physicalising and acting out the metaphor



An ACT metaphor is like a joke...





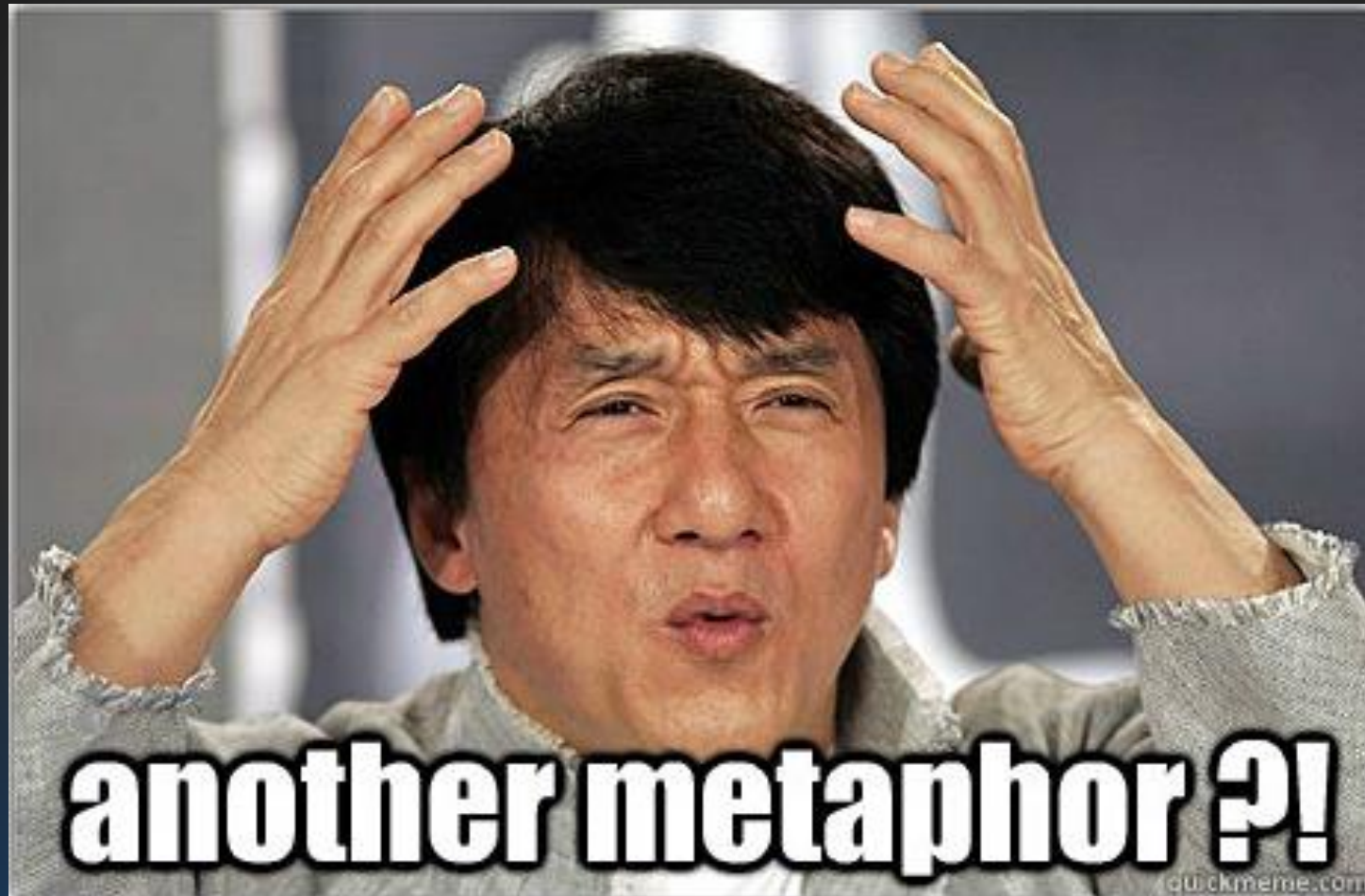
# Using metaphors



- As a central scaffold for the group
  - Development of a “micro-culture”
  - By providing a common language
  - Repetition and multiple formats increases fluency
- Group process supports functional coherence
  - Multiple examples
  - Differing experiences can be functionally similar



Avoid metaphor abuse!



# Avoiding “metaphor abuse”

- You can load sessions with too many metaphors!
- In our experience, better to use one or two each time
- Focus on what the session is in the service of
  - Experiential process of change rather than sense-making
  - ACT is about promoting **values-driven behaviours** rather than “working things out”



# CLASSIC ACT EXERCISES

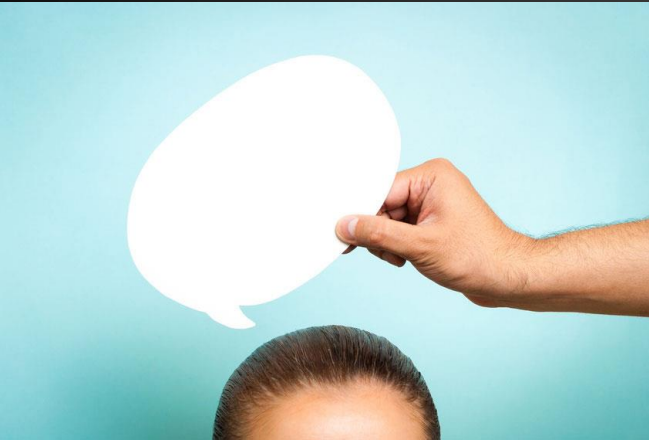
As Group Experiences

# Show rather than Tell

- Careful not to get 'entangled in over-explaining'.
- Involve your body in interventions to avoid getting entrapped in language.



# Experiences as pieces of paper



- Promoting distance/ contact/ observing by writing/ drawing out experiences on paper
  - And trying various responses – pushing away, eyes-on, in your lap, held by another



- **The Post-It note is your Friend**

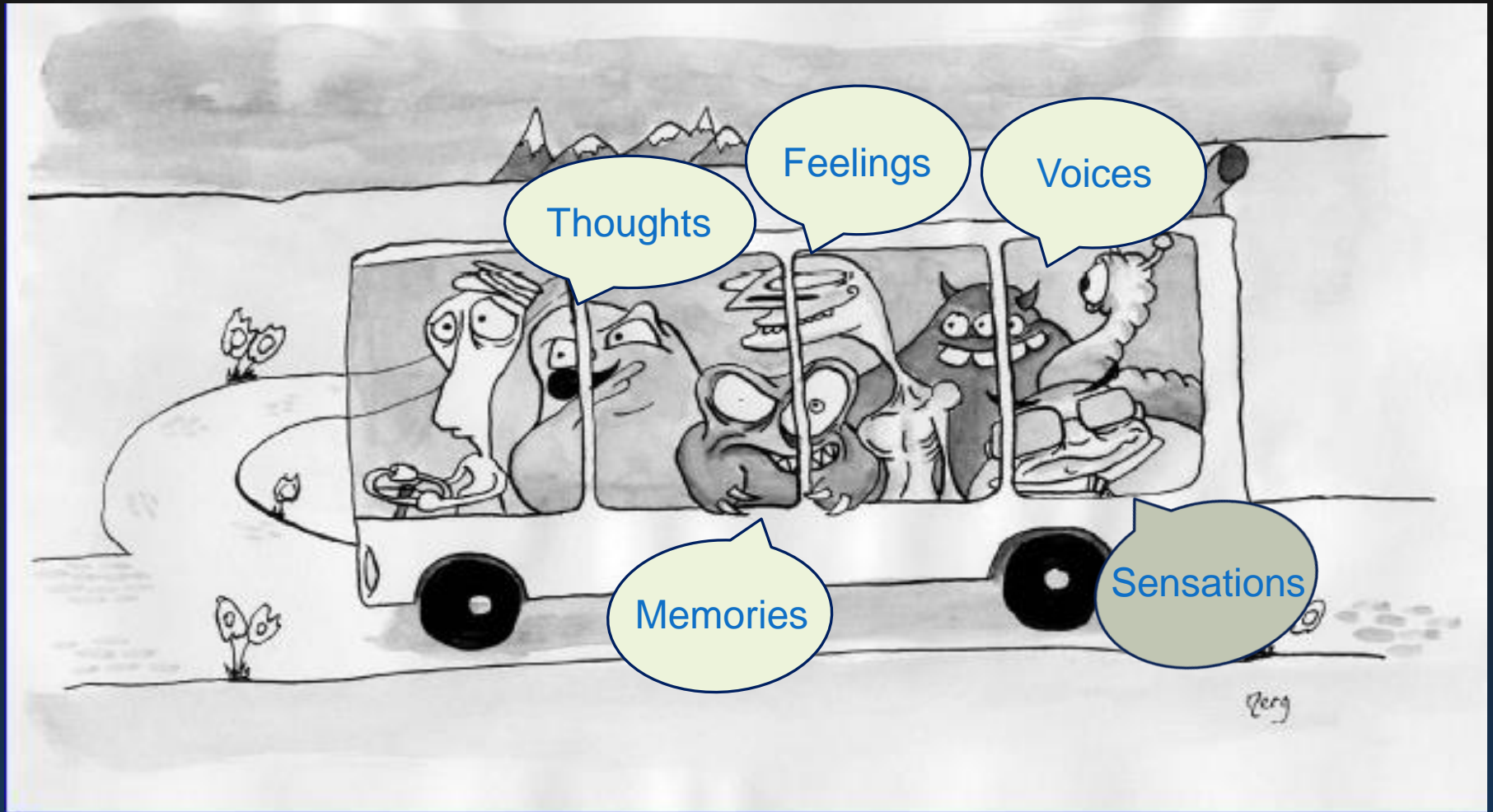
- Small
  - usually doesn't overwhelm to write or draw on
  - Easy to carry
- Encourages brevity
- May have playful quality
- Can stick it on people!







# PASSENGERS ON THE BUS



# Open up

- Noticing passengers, what they say, how they look, when they get rowdy, demanding, commanding
- Noticing workability of struggling with passengers
- “Adding in” alternative ways of being with passengers
  - Making space
  - Inviting along for the ride
  - Noticing without necessarily engaging with
- Noticing opportunities to base actions on values, rather than what passengers want



# Passengers - animation



# Acting out “passengers...”





# Tug of War





# Tug of War



# Mind Volleyball





# Committed action





# Open and Aware while Active

Help the participants to notice their actual experiences (sensations, thoughts, emotions) while engaged in values (overarching goals & qualities of action)

Encourage participants to observe and describe experiences with performing actions.

- especially those associated with satisfaction in engaging in a meaningful direction
- this may increase intrinsic reinforcement and help engagement

**Methods:** break into small groups: use participant description, slowing down and appreciating, imaginal exercises, facilitators noticing shifts in posture in session etc.

**AUTHENTIC, VULNERABLE,  
CONNECTED**



**BEST. SESSION. EVER.**

# Further resources

- Passengers Animation

<http://drericmorris.com/resources/>

- How to run Passengers as a Group Exercise

<http://drericmorris.com/2015/09/13/how-to-do-acceptance-and-commitment-therapy-in-groups-passengers-on-the-bus-metaphor/>