

Metaphors for Getting Unstuck

When trying to over-control your internal experience

Imagine you are in a pool, playing with a beach ball. The ball is your thoughts, memories, and feelings. At some point, you decide you don't want the beach ball anymore, so you try to push it under the water and out of your consciousness. Every time you push the ball under, it pops back up so you have to keep pushing it down and holding it under. Struggling in this way keeps the ball close to you and you become tired and frustrated. Imagine yourself letting go of the ball and allowing it to just float on the surface of the water. It may float nearby or float away. Either way, your hands are free and you can now enjoy a swim in the pool.

Clarifying your values

A professor stood before a class with a large jar on the table in front of the room. The professor filled the empty jar with ping pong balls and asked the class if the jar was full. They all agreed that it was.

Then the professor picked up a container of small rocks and poured them into the jar so they filled the space between the balls. Again, the professor asked the class if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous yes.

Next, the professor picked up a bag of sand and poured it into the jar, filling the spaces between the rocks and balls. When asked if the jar was full, the classroom agreed it was.

The professor said, "This jar represents your life. The ping pong balls are the important things- your family, physical health, friendships, passions—things that if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. The small rocks are the other things that matter, like your career, your home, and your car. The sand is everything else- the little stuff. If you put sand in the jar first, you won't have room for the rocks, let alone the ping pong balls. The same goes for life. If you fill all your time and energy on the little stuff, you won't have space for the things that are the most important to you. Make time for things that are crucial to a meaningful life. Play with your pets. Call your grandmother. Take time to get a checkup. Laugh with your friends. Go on vacation. There will always be time to do the chores around the house and change the light bulbs. Prioritize the ping pong balls first, the things that really matter. The rest is just sand."

You are greater than your internal experiences

Imagine yourself as the sky and that your thoughts, feelings, and other internal experiences are the weather. The weather changes continuously, but no matter how bad it gets, it can't hurt the sky. The mightiest thunderstorms, hurricanes, and blizzards rage through the sky and yet the sky remains unharmed, unchanged. And no matter how big the storms get, the sky has room for it. Plus, sooner or later, the weather always changes, leaving the same beautiful blue sky in its wake.

Committing to Action

Imagine you are the driver on a bus that is on the route of your life. Passengers, like thoughts, memories, feelings, get on and off, and you continue to drive. Some of the passengers are scary. Maybe they shout "You're useless!" or "You're going the wrong way!!" What if they start threatening you, telling you they'll hurt you unless you do what they say?

It's as if you've made a deal with the passengers, and the deal is, "You sit quietly in the back of the bus where I can't see you, and I'll do whatever you say." So, you drive the bus on a different route, one that keeps the scary passengers quiet. You can almost forget they're there. At some point, you get tired of this route and try to turn onto a new street. Immediately the scary passengers jump up, shouting and threatening again. They seem bigger and scarier than before, and you immediately keep going where they want you to go.

What if you turned anyway? The scary passengers haven't ever hurt you. In fact, they can't hurt you without stranding themselves. Imagine you decide to turn. You brace yourself, check the mirror, and turn onto a new street. The passengers yell, threaten, and get right up in your face. And you keep driving. You make it back to the route you truly wanted to be on, and the passengers eventually get tired of yelling and sit back down. Everyone once in a while one of the passengers tries to threaten you again, but you don't allow it to push you off course. This is your bus, and you want to get back to living your life, to driving on the route you have chosen for your life.