



Princess and the Pea (Expansion) – Dr Kristy Potter

Princess and the Pea (Adapted from Expansion, Russ Harris): introduction to clients, exercise and close / reflections

This is a well-known fairy-tale that I used as an analogy for a client and had a good outcomes, so I combined with the expansion exercise to offer an alternative way to consider this exercise. In all honesty, I don't know how I came up with this!

Introduction to clients:

- Do you remember the Princess and the Pea fairy-tale?
- If you're not aware of the fairy-tale, there was a Prince who was looking for a Princess. This one night, this Princess came I think in the middle of a storm, and the queen didn't believe that she was a real Princess. So, they placed a pea underneath 20 mattresses. In the morning the Princess said that she had a bruise where she had slept, and so they decided she must be real princesses as she was so very delicate.
- I'm not going to comment on the actual fairy tale itself as that is irrelevant, but this is an interesting analogy. It shows that there may be something that could impact us, our sleep, etc., that could make us uncomfortable. This 'thing' doesn't need to be something we can see, something like a boulder in a bed, but shows even a pea can cause significant discomfort.
- *Note, here you are using this to buy in, we are just saying all types of sensations can have impacts on us, not to get into a discussion about big vs small etc., it's just showing anything can have an impact on us and our wellbeing and can lead to suffering.*
- So in this case, the pea was tiny and well covered under these 20 mattresses, but as she lay on her back it stopped her from sleeping all night.
- The hope is we can try and change the impact of the pea on the princess's sleep, but like how we can change your approach to your pain.
- If you'd be open to it, we can try and exercise next to see if you can just allow your pain, discomfort, whatever the feeling is, just for a few minutes. Much like I would have liked the Princess to have allowed the pea to be there and relax around it. Would you be open to trying this?

Note, before we begin the exercise, this is merely the expansion exercises with a few tweaks to draw it back to the analogy. This is based on Russ Harris's Expansion, but likely amalgamated with many others along the way!



Exercise script (expansion, adapted):

- To start the exercise, I'd like you to start by sitting upright if you can with your back straight and your feet flat on the floor, this is because most people feel alert and awake, they're sat like this. However, if this is too uncomfortable for you, that's ok, just try a position that works for you with your specific difficulties.
- You can either close your eyes or you can fix them on the spot whichever feels more comfortable for you.
- I'd like you to start by taking a few slow deep breaths ... as you do this I'd like you to really notice the breath as it flows in and out of your lungs...*pause 10 seconds...* now I'd like you to just scan your body from head to toe.... start at your scalp... head... throat... shoulders... chest... so on and so forth... *pause 10 seconds...* now one of those areas maybe an area where you experience pain and that's OK, I'd just like you to just zoom into any part of your body where you're feeling whatever feeling showing up for you most intensely.
- If that feels OK let's stop there just for a second... observe that feeling...observe that sensation like you're an alien or curious scientist who's just never seen this sensation before.... Observe it with curiosity, much like the princess with the pea...
- If any thoughts, judgements or urges show up, just let them come and go like passing cars or clouds in the sky... if you notice yourself starting to make judgments on this feeling or notices urges to push it away.... just draw your attention back to the feeling and notice it as if you've never experienced this before.
- Notice the feeling and think where does this feeling start... is this feeling on the inside of my body or the outside...if it is inside how far inside does that go ... whereabouts in your body is it that you feel this most intensely... where is it weakest... always observing this feeling with curiosity.
- Again, if you notice yourself getting hooked or distracted by thoughts as soon as you realise just draw your attention back that sensation always with curiosity.
- Notice if this sensation is all the same... or the differences in different parts of it ... so how is it different edge versus the middle ... are there different layers to it ... does the sensation move or does it stay still... vibrate what temperature is it... would you say it has any hot spots or cold spots... notice all of the elements that are within it and notice that it's not just one sensation there are sensations within the sensations layers of sensation



- How would you describe this feeling? Think back to our princess, would it be like a pea? If you could imagine it, what would it look like?
- *Pause here for 15-30 seconds as appropriate for your client*
- Now, I'd like to take a slow deep breathing... as you're breathing in, I'd like you to imagine your breath flowing in and around this feeling, the sensation... wherever it might be in your body then as you're breathing into it it's as if in some sort of magical way fairytale way, it opens a space inside... so you open up around this feeling.... your breath has made room for this feeling, the sensation and just made space for it within your body... somehow you expand and make room for it in your body.... You don't have to like it, or want it, but you've somehow made space for it... however you make sense of that...
- Now see if just for a few moments you can just allow that feeling to be there... so you don't have to like that feeling or sensation or the pain... you are just going to breathe into it, open up around it and then just allow it to be ... you may feel really strong urge to get rid of that feeling push it away so that you can no longer feel that sensation... and that's ok... just notice that and draw your attention back to the breathe opening up this space around this feeling, perhaps using the object from earlier to make sense of that....
- We're not trying to change the sensation change the feeling or change the pain, we are not trying to throw the pea away... we are just breathing and making room for it for just a few minutes... if it changes by itself that's OK, but if it doesn't that's also OK... changing it, getting rid of it, reducing it, is not the aim... it's not the goal we had... it's just to allow it... to let it... be expand around it...
- Now we're going to imagine that this feeling is an object... so ever that might be in your body... what shape would it be... is it liquid, solid or gaseous... does it say still does it move around within your body... is it transparent or opaque... is it wet or dry ... if you were to be able to touch it what do you think it would feel like... would it be rough or smooth.... Cold... hot... hard... soft...
- Again, whatever object came up, we are going to be curious and continue to breath into it around it... allowing this space to open up around that object and remembering we don't have to want it.... but just allowing it to be there for a few more moments... noticing this object.
- I want to draw your attention to the the size of this object... much like the small pea in the fairy-tale... how big is it compared to you... notice that you are bigger than this object... no matter how big this object is, it can never be bigger than you because you contain it... so you are always bigger than this object.
- Regardless of what the sensation or feeling was that you picked it tells us something important... it tells us that you're human and that you feel things... it



tells us that there are things that you care about... there are things in life that matter to you ... so whenever your mind starts to make judgments about this feeling ... breathe into it ... allow it to be there and remember that you are bigger than it

- Now I just like you to take your hand and just place it on the part in your body where you feel this feeling most intensely, and as we did earlier, imagine that that hand is the hand of somebody caring ... perhaps a parent, partner, friend ... imagine that that hand is somebody caring ... just notice your hand is placed on this feeling... continue to breathe in to expand around and allow that feeling to be there and just notice what happens when you place your hand on this feeling
- Now for last few minutes we've been focussing our attention completely and wholly to this feeling, sensation, whatever it was that you picked... we've been shining a spotlight on it ... So what we're going to do is just turn up the rest of the lights... I want you just to look around the room and notice where you can see, what you can hear, smell, taste and touch.... And when you are ready, come back to the room.

Debriefing / follow up:

What showed up?

What was the object? Be curious here, get them to describe it.

How did the pain / sensation change over the experience? *Note, aim isn't for it to change but it may do on its own.*

What did they expect to happen when focusing their attention on this sensation?

What urges? Thoughts? Feelings?

Bring it back to the fairy-tale – what do they think would have happened to the princess if she had done this exercise?

This can be a good one to help find language to use with the client. If it was a particular object, they can use this to refer to their pain for future sessions, as a Defusion technique.