

Tug of war with the monster worksheet

Purpose of the exercise

The Tug of War metaphor helps clients recognise the exhausting and unhelpful nature of struggling with their difficult thoughts and feelings. It introduces the concept of letting go of the struggle (acceptance) as a way to create space for valued actions. This exercise is interactive and experiential, and it can be physically acted out for greater impact.

Therapist instructions

Preparation

1. Materials: You'll need a piece of rope to use during the session.
2. Setup: Familiarise yourself with the client's current struggles, such as specific worries, fears, or unwanted thoughts. These will be used to personalise the exercise.
3. Environment: Ensure there is enough space to safely act out the tug of war.

Step-by-step guide

Introduce the metaphor

- Therapist:
"Imagine that your struggle with your difficult thoughts and feelings is like a tug of war with a big, strong, ugly monster. This monster represents all your worries, fears, and unwanted thoughts. To make it even more dramatic, there's a bottomless pit between you and the monster. If either of you loses, you fall into the pit."
- Personalise the monster by asking the client to name their struggles.
"Let's make this monster specific to your experience. What are some of the thoughts or feelings you've been struggling with?"
- Write down their identified struggles on sticky labels and stick them onto yourself (or a stand-in object if preferred).
"Now, I'll represent your monster, made up of these difficulties. Here I am with a rope, ready to play tug of war."

Begin the tug of war

1. Therapist: Hand one end of the rope to the client and hold the other end yourself.
 - "What's the natural, automatic thing you would do in this situation?"
2. Client: Likely responds, "I'd pull on the rope."
3. Therapist:
 - "Okay, let's try that."
Begin pulling the rope back and forth. Match the client's strength so the struggle feels equal and ongoing.
4. As the tug of war continues, ask:

- "What do you notice while you're pulling?"
(Client may say things like, "It's exhausting," "I'm not making progress," or "It's frustrating.")

Explore alternatives

1. Therapist:
 - "What else could you do to win the struggle?"
(Clients may say, "Pull harder," or "Try a new strategy.")
2. Allow the client to try their ideas:
 - If they pull harder, match their effort.
 - Discuss what they notice:
 - "How does it feel to pull harder? Is it working? What's happening over time?"
3. If the client does not suggest dropping the rope, prompt them gently:
 - "What would happen if you let go of the rope? What might that feel like?"

Drop the rope

1. Therapist: Ask the client to drop the rope.
 - "Let's try dropping the rope. Notice that I'm still here as the monster. I haven't disappeared, but you're no longer in the struggle with me."
2. Reflect on the experience:
 - "What do you notice now that you've dropped the rope?"
 - "What has changed for you? How does this feel compared to pulling?"
3. Highlight the freedom that comes from letting go:
 - "By dropping the rope, you're no longer stuck in the fight. This creates space to focus on what really matters to you."

Demonstrate how easy it is to return to the struggle

1. Flick the rope back towards the client:
 - "Notice how easy it is to pick up the rope again, without even thinking about it."
2. If the client picks it up, resume the tug of war briefly and then pause to reflect:
 - "What do you notice about how automatic this is? How quickly we can fall back into the struggle?"

Summarise key insights

1. Summarise the metaphor:
 - "It makes total sense to engage in the struggle. The monster loves it, and it might even feel productive in the short term. But in the long term, it keeps you stuck in a draining, time-consuming battle."

- "Dropping the rope doesn't mean the monster goes away—it's still there. But it allows you to move freely and focus on what truly matters to you."
- 2. Tie it back to values:
 - "What could you do with your time and energy if you weren't stuck in this tug of war? What's one small action you could take right now that moves you closer to your values?"

Reflection prompts for the client

Before the exercise

- What do you currently do when difficult thoughts or feelings show up? How well is that working for you in the long term?

During the exercise

- What did you notice while pulling on the rope?
- How did it feel to let go of the rope? What changed for you?

After the exercise

- How might this metaphor apply to your daily life?
- What could you do differently the next time you notice yourself in a 'tug of war' with your thoughts or feelings?

Therapist notes

- Common client responses: Clients may initially find the idea of letting go counterintuitive or even scary. Normalise these reactions and gently guide them to explore the alternative.
- When clients struggle to engage: If the client is hesitant or confused, slow down the process. Use additional metaphors or examples to clarify the concept.
- Safety and comfort: Be mindful of the client's emotional state. If the exercise becomes too overwhelming, pause and provide grounding exercises.