

The "Itch you don't scratch" script

A metaphor for insomnia

This metaphor is aimed at helping clients struggling with insomnia to understand the futility of control strategies and the importance of acceptance in dealing with their sleep difficulties.

I'd like to share a little metaphor with you today. Have you ever had an itch that you decided not to scratch?

[Pause for answer, often clients might say "yes" or explain an experience.]

You know, maybe it was because you were in a situation where scratching wasn't appropriate, like during a meeting or while holding something delicate. Or perhaps someone told you not to scratch it because it would make it worse.

What happens when you decide not to scratch?

[Pause to allow client reflection. Responses might include "It gets worse," "It's all I can think about," or "It eventually goes away."]

Exactly. At first, the itch might feel unbearable. It grabs your attention, and it's really tempting to just give in and scratch. But sometimes, when you resist the urge to scratch, you might notice a strange thing happens. The itch doesn't immediately go away, right? It might even feel more intense for a bit. But if you let it be, over time, the itch starts to fade on its own. And eventually, it disappears without you needing to do anything.

Now let's think about insomnia for a moment. Struggling to sleep can feel a lot like an itch you can't scratch, can't it?

[Pause for client reflection.]

When you're lying in bed and sleep isn't coming, what do you tend to do? Maybe you try really hard to relax, or you tell yourself you must sleep because you've got a big day tomorrow. Or you might check the clock, worry about how little time you've got left to sleep, or even try different positions, hoping to force yourself into sleep.

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But here's the thing, it's like scratching that itch. The more you scratch, the more irritated the skin becomes, and the more uncomfortable you feel. With sleep, the more you try to control or force it, the more stirred up and frustrated you become — and that's exactly what keeps sleep further out of reach.

So, what if you treated your sleeplessness like an itch you don't scratch? What if, instead of trying to force sleep and inadvertently working yourself up, you allowed yourself to just be with the itch? To notice the sensations of restlessness, the thoughts about needing sleep, the feelings of frustration, and just let them be there, without needing to scratch at them or fight them?

It might not feel easy at first, just like resisting the urge to scratch doesn't feel easy. But over time, you might notice that the itch (the struggle with sleep) starts to fade on its own. And even if sleep doesn't come right away, you'll likely find more peace in simply being present with what's here, rather than exhausting yourself with the fight to control it.

What do you think about trying this approach the next time you're struggling to sleep?

[Encourage discussion and reflection on how the client feels about applying the metaphor to their experience.]

This metaphor helps the client shift their perspective from control and struggle to acceptance and willingness, which are key components of ACT. By relating insomnia to something tangible and relatable, like an itch, it becomes easier to understand the counterintuitive nature of acceptance in promoting change.