

**Coping**

Meditation



5 min



Client



No



Dropping Anchor

The process of identifying one's thoughts is a basic premise of traditional CBT [1]. In traditional CBT, dysfunctional thoughts are identified, and the content of those thoughts is altered [1]. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (or ACT), which is considered a third-wave CBT approach, also involves thought identification, though rather than aiming to change the content of one's thoughts, ACT aims to change one's relationship with his or her thoughts and feelings to alleviate suffering [2].

Dropping anchor is a well-known ACT technique [3]. Often used to manage "emotional storms," dropping anchor was designed to help people ground themselves and stay present rather than become swept away by strong, challenging emotional experiences. Dropping anchor involves two key processes: expanding one's awareness of what is here in the present moment and exerting self-control over one's physical actions (i.e., breathing, physical movement, body posture, etc.). In line with traditional CBT, thought identification is incorporated into the process of expansive awareness, along with the identification of any feelings, memories, urges, and sensations that are also present, teaching clients about the interaction between these inner experiences.

This tool includes a script for the complete dropping anchor technique, which can be taught to clients and practiced in sessions. It also includes a brief version of the technique using the abbreviated ACE [3] to emphasize the three key steps that clients need to remember.

Author

This tool was created by Lucinda Poole (Psy.D.).



Goal

This tool teaches clients to ground themselves in the present moment to manage strong, challenging emotions.



Advice

- This technique can be used to help clients with the following: managing difficult thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, urges, and sensations more effectively; switching off auto-pilot and engaging in life; grounding and steadying themselves in difficult situations; disrupting rumination, obsessions, and worries; focusing their attention on the task or activity they are doing; developing more self-control; and as a 'circuit-breaker' for impulsive, compulsive, aggressive, addictive or other problematic behaviors.
- When introducing the technique to clients, it is recommended to practice first with medium intensity thoughts and feelings (i.e., 5 out of 10) rather than high-intensity emotional experiences (i.e., >8 out of 10), allowing them first to build their skill levels. Advise your clients that over time, they will feel equipped to use this technique to manage more difficult thoughts and feelings outside of the session.
- Emphasize to your client that emotional storms may pass quickly, or they may pass slowly, or they may even get worse before it gets better. Dropping an anchor will hold your client steady during this time, so the "storm" does not sweep him or her away.
- It should be noted that dropping anchor is not a distraction technique. The intentional focus on the body, the breath, or what one can see or do (or whatever anchor has been chosen to drop) is a way to ground oneself in where they are and what they are doing as they acknowledge and lean into the difficult situation or emotional experience (rather than distract or lean away from it).



References

1. Beck, J. S., & Beck, A. T. (1995). *Cognitive therapy: Basics and beyond* (No. Sirsi) i9780898628470). New York: Guilford Press.
2. Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (2011). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change*. Guilford Press.
3. Harris, R. (2019). *ACT made simple: An easy-to-read primer on acceptance and commitment therapy*. New Harbinger Publications.



Dropping Anchor

Introduction

Imagine that you are in a boat and out to sea when wild stormy weather arises. The first thing you would likely do is drop your anchor so that you and your boat remain steady and the storm does not sweep you away. This exercise, called Dropping Anchor, is a way for you to hold steady during an emotional storm. An emotional storm is when you are in the throes of one or more strong, challenging emotions, such as anger, panic, or sadness. To drop an anchor in this sense, you can use things that you can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell; your breath; your body posture; body movements; or anything else that can help you stay present, stay grounded, and stay in contact with where you are and what you are doing.

You can drop an anchor using a simple formula: ACE

A: Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings

C: Come back into your body

E: Engage in what you are doing

Use the following script to guide you through the Dropping Anchor technique. We recommend that you first practice this with your therapist. Once you have practiced it in session, go to dropping anchor using the ACE acronym when strong emotions show up for you outside of the session.

Script for Dropping Anchor

Step 1: Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings

Gently acknowledge whatever is happening inside you--the thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, urges.
[10-second pause]

Step 2: Come back into your body

Now come back into and connect with your physical body. Push your feet firmly into the ground. Press the soles of your feet into the ground below. *[10-second pause]*

Press your hands into your thighs. Stretch your fingers out as wide as they can go and grip your thighs firmly. Feel this sense of contact between your hands and your legs. *[10-second pause]*

Slowly stretch your arms out wide. Roll your shoulders backward and then forward. Repeat this as many times as feels good. *[10-second pause]*

Take three deep, slow, intentional breaths. *[10-second pause]*



Now, acknowledge again those painful thoughts and feelings that are present. *[10 second pause]*. As you do this, notice that there is a body around these thoughts and feelings... a body that you can move and control. Notice your whole body - press your feet into the ground, grip your thighs with your hands, roll your shoulders backward and forward.

Step 3: Engage in what you are doing

Now, get a sense of where you are and refocus your attention on what you are doing. Look around and notice five things that you can see. *[10-second pause]*

Notice 4 things that you can hear. *[10-second pause]*

Notice 3 things that you can touch or feel. *[10-second pause]*

Notice any painful thoughts, memories, and feelings here along with your body in the chair, which you can move and control. A body that is bigger than these thoughts and feelings is housing. *[10-second pause]*

Now we will finish this exercise. Remember, you can practice this grounding technique at any time. It is a good idea to practice it often and when you are experiencing lower intensity emotions so it can become ingrained and natural to you when a big emotional storm hits.

Reflection

Discuss the following:

- What thoughts did you notice during this exercise?
- What were you feeling? What emotions were present?
- How do you feel now? Do you feel less caught up in the emotional storm you were experiencing?
- How could this exercise help you in your everyday life?