The “What” Skills

What do we do to get into Wise Mind? We use our Observe, Describe and Participate skills. We use these “What” skills to gather information so that we can understand the situation, make planned decisions and to help us use skills effectively (Linehan, 1993b).

Observe

When we Observe, we simply notice, or pay attention.

We can notice external events. External events are noticed through our five senses:

- Sight
- Taste
- Sound
- Touch
- Smell

We can also notice internal events. Internal events are things that happen inside your own mind or body. They include:

- Thoughts
- Body sensations
- Emotions
- Urges

When we Observe, we pay attention to external and internal events without holding on to them. This means we notice information and then let it go.

When we Observe, we decide where our attention goes.

This means we are making the decision to pay attention and not get caught up in one thought, emotion or experience.

Observing means watching our thoughts come and go, like clouds in the sky or waves in the ocean.

Describe

When we Describe, we give words to what we noticed.

Using words to Describe what we noticed help us communicate our experience to others and helps us to make sense what is happening.

It is important to avoid judgments when we Describe. Use words to describe the facts and make sure to call a thought a thought, a feeling a feeling, an opinion an opinion and so on.

A thought is a statement that runs through our head, such as, “I’m so dumb.” This is just a thought and not a fact.

When using Describe, state, “I had the thought of ‘I’m so dumb.’”

Describing a thought as a thought will keep you from mistaking a thought for a fact.
To Describe a feeling, use an emotion word, such as happy, sad, scared or excited. Sometimes when we feel an emotion, we skip the emotion word and jump right to what the emotion means to us. For example, we might say, “Math is the worst subject” when we feel frustrated.

When using Describe, state, “I feel frustrated with math.”

Describing a feeling as a feeling will keep you from mistaking an emotion for a fact.

Opinions are views or thoughts that people have about something. Opinions are not facts, and people can see the same thing differently. Opinions are not right or wrong—they are just preferences. An example of an opinions is, “Video games are the best way to relax.”

When using Describe, state, “It’s my opinion that video games are a great way to relax.”

Describing an opinion as an opinion will keep you from mistaking an opinion for a fact.

**Participate**

*Participate* means using the information we gathered with Observe and Describe to make effective decisions.

When we participate, we become a part of our experience. We are no longer just noticing—we are now acting.

Using our skills can be a way we participate.

It is common to Participate without using Observe and Describe, which means making decisions without first pausing to notice what is happening inside and outside of yourself.

Learning to first stop to Observe and Describe will help you Participate more effectively and make decisions from Wise Mind.
Observe, Describe & Participate: Put It Together

Here is an example of how Observe, Describe and Participate skills can be used together:

Observe—Internal
Kaitlin noticed her body tensing up and that she had the urge to go to the bathroom to self-injure.

Observe—External
Kaitlin saw a “D” on the top of an assignment she got back.

Describe
Kaitlin said to herself, “I’m ashamed for getting a ‘D,’ and I want to hurt myself.”

Participate
Kaitlin avoided the bathroom, took several deep breaths and asked her friend Hailey to describe her prom dress to help distract her from thoughts and urges.

Notice that Kaitlin avoided self injury because she was able to slow down to Observe and Describe her emotions, body sensations and thoughts. Observe and Described then helped her Participate with DBT skills.
The “What” Skills: Keep It Going

It is helpful to use your Observe, Describe and Participate skills even after you have Observed, Described and Participated. In other words, keep your “What” skills going!

Continuing to use the “What” skills will help you:

• Notice what worked and what did not work the first time.
• Continue to be aware of your emotions, body sensations, thoughts, urges or triggers.
• Apply more skills.

• ___________________________________________________________________
• ___________________________________________________________________

Take a look at the following example and how Kaitlin kept her “What” skills going:

Participate
Kaitlin avoided the bathroom, took several deep breaths and asked her friend Hailey to describe her prom dress to help distract her from thoughts and urges

Observe—Internal
Kaitlin noticed that her body relaxed, and although her thoughts were less intense, she was still thinking about self-injury

Describe
Kaitlin thought to herself, “I’m doing better, but I still want to hurt myself”

Participate
During a break from class, Kaitlin made a coaching call to her therapist

Remember that you can keep your “What” skills going for as long as you need to!
Worksheet

One Minute to Observe & Describe

This worksheet will help you practice the Observe and Describe skills.

Observe and Describe skills require lots of practice. It works best to practice the Observe and Describe skills when we are calm and can really dedicate time and focus. Practicing when we are calm will make Observing and Describing more difficult situations easier.

During this exercise, think of your mind like a conveyor belt and do not let your mind get stuck on any one thing that you notice. Remember not to judge or evaluate what you notice. Instead, you are just taking the information in as it comes.

Follow these steps and then answer the questions below.

1. Get out a stopwatch or timer. (Tip: most cell phones have timers.)
2. Find a place to sit alone. Pick a location where you are not likely to be disturbed.
3. Set the stopwatch or timer for 1 minute.
4. Spend that minute using Observe and Describe. Try to pay attention to everything, notice things around you and notice what you are thinking or feeling. Remember to use your five senses.

When the timer goes off, answer the following questions to help you reflect on how Observe and Describe went.

What did you notice about your thoughts?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What did you notice about your body sensations?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What did you notice about your emotions?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What did you see?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________