

**Workshop Protocol: ACT for Academic Procrastination in Students**

**Rationale:** *The following protocol describes a one-session (approximately one-hour to one and half hours in length) ACT protocol for academic procrastination in students. The protocol specifically targets reason-giving in procrastination and aims to build awareness of fusion to reasons as contributing to procrastination and proposes defusion as a way of disrupting this.*

**Introduction (2 minutes)**

I'm very pleased to welcome you all here to this workshop on : "evacuation from procrastination". My name is xyz.

Today, I'm going to be talking about procrastination. In particular, we'll be looking at how certain thoughts and feelings can play a part in procrastination. We'll also look at evidence-backed ways you can break free when you find yourself struggling with thoughts and feelings that turn you towards procrastination and away from what matters to you.

**Be Present, Open Up, Do what matters...& the recipe for procrastination (5 minutes)**

You might wonder how our thoughts and feelings might form the perfect recipe for procrastination. Often, particularly in the academic context, we are grappling with concepts, ideas, academic tasks which are new and challenging. We are constantly required to step outside of what we know and is comfortable for us. For just about every human, leaving that comfort zone brings all sorts of thoughts and emotions that can be tough and uncomfortable to experience to the fore. When we aren't connected to what we really care about in life, in education, coupled with these difficult thoughts and feelings, then the pull of procrastination can be powerful.

Take the example of someone who has an important essay due. They might be having thoughts like:

"I'm useless at essay writing"

"I never do well in assignments"

"I don't know how to do this"

"I'm not smart enough"

Up pop uncomfortable feelings-fear of failure, shame about missing a deadline and so

These thoughts can be difficult to have and often seem quite convincing. We can also have a lot of uncomfortable feelings show up that we want to avoid. When these thoughts/feelings pop up, it's very tempting to avoid doing the essay, a report, presentation (even if doing well in college is something that matters to you). In this way, our thoughts/feelings can block us from doing what is important to us.

By the end of this evening, I'm hoping that you'll be a bit more aware of the ways you are entangled or caught up in your thoughts, struggle with difficult feelings and how this might be influencing your actions, and learn about some ways you can do something different with your thoughts so they don't steer us away from the life we want to live.

### Passengers on a Bus

**(15 minutes)**

I want us now to begin to notice our thinking a little and to begin to be aware of the types of thoughts that may be playing a part in our procrastination. So we are going to do a little exercise to help us with this.

*You are the driver of a bus along the road of your life. Things are generally pretty good on your bus. As you drive along, you turn the bus toward a new destination. Soon, you notice that some passengers in the back of the bus start to become unruly. They stand up and make noise, demanding you change course back to the other path. When you don't comply, they get louder and more obnoxious, using name calling and threatening language to get you to change course away from this new destination. The closer you get to the destination the more obnoxious and threatening they become. Reasoning with them doesn't work; they won't shut up and they won't leave the bus. Unable to get rid of them, your only option for restoring peace is to give in to their demands and change course. As soon as you steer away from the destination they didn't like, they begin to simmer down, eventually retreating quietly to the back of the bus.*

The unruly passengers represent uncomfortable and unwanted thoughts and feelings triggered by a task; steering away from the task, or procrastinating, temporarily relieves the stress of experiencing these sensations. The desire to get to the task remains, however, so the pattern repeats; as the driver steers once more toward the task, noisy and belligerent passengers begin heckling until the course is again changed away from the task. Eventually, either the driver gives up trying to get to that destination or decides to speed over to the destination as quickly as possible, yelling at and arguing with the bellicose passengers all the way. Neither giving in to the passengers' demands nor fighting with them leads to a satisfactory result. The passengers stay on the bus, repeating the cycle whenever triggered by a similar destination.

I want us now to begin to take note of some of the passengers on each of our buses. We're going to work through a little worksheet (which should be on your seats). As best you can I want you to bring to mind a current or recent task you were procrastinating with. On the worksheet I want you to note what the passengers on your bus were shouting, screaming, and cajoling you with.

Allow five minutes for participants to complete worksheet

Now I'd like you to spend a few moments talking to the person beside you about how you found that. You don't need to share what kinds of passengers/thoughts you identified but I invite you to share how it was to do that exercise.

Allow a few more minutes.

How did people get on? What did you notice?

*Perhaps begin my modeling disclosure e.g. by sharing own experience types of thoughts etc.*

Reason giving

**(15 minutes)**

At the start when I talked about my example of putting off working on a paper, you might have noticed that a number of my thoughts were reasons- “you’re not good enough”, “your work is not good enough”, “no one will want to publish it”. We’re all very good at making up reasons for why we can’t or shouldn’t do things that take us out of our comfort zone. The trouble is, the things that matter almost always live outside our comfort zone.

Our minds are amazing things but they’re also reason-giving machines. Here is a picture of a wild reason-giving machine (slide of ACT Aunty Reason Giving Machine). As we mentioned earlier, the mind is excellent at throwing up reasons not to engage in what is important to us and to procrastinate instead.

*I’m too tired...it’s too hard...I’ll fail...It’s too expensive...It’ll take too long...I’m too depressed/anxious...My parents/friends/partner wouldn’t approve...It’s not the right time...I shouldn’t have to do this...It’ll all go wrong.*

Before I go any further, I just want to clarify that I’m not saying that the reasons we have for how we behave are never valid, justified, or helpful. What I’m saying instead is that sometimes the ease at which our minds generate reasons for staying in our comfort zone limits us and blocks us from doing what matters in life.

On your seat should be an A4 worksheet. The worksheet describes the actions of three people: Alex, Michael, and Jane. Your job is to give as many reasons as you can come up with for why they might have behaved as they did.

*Alex ate the entire packet of chocolate biscuits.*

*Michael argued with his partner.*

*Jane shouted at her secretary after making a minor clerical error.*

I'll just invite you to chat to your neighbour now. taking stock of your responses.

*(Allow five minutes)*

I'll just invite you all back to the larger group now again. Would anyone like to share how that was for them, or perhaps any observations, responses, reactions you might have had.

What I do want to emphasize though, is that although we may have many many reasons to procrastinate, to not do what matters to use, we can still choose to do what is important and meaningful. But to help us in this, we need to find a way to unhook when we find ourselves caught in thoughts and really believing the reason-giving machine.

## Unhooking/Defusion **(15 minutes)**

So you may be sitting here saying to yourself “okay Joseph, it’s all well and good telling me my thoughts don’t need to control my actions and our minds are a reason-giving machine, what can I actually do to stop my thoughts dictating what I do?”

I’m going to begin by inviting you to do a mindfulness-based exercise with me where we’re just going to begin to observe our thoughts.

(1) Sit in a comfortable position, placing the feet flat on the floor, allowing the eyes to close if that feels comfortable or resting them gently on a fixed spot in the room. Perhaps moving your back away from the chair so that it is self-supporting. Pinching the shoulders up towards the ears and allowing them to drop back down again.

(2) Once you’ve found a position that feels comfortable, Visualizing yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream with leaves floating along the surface of the water. **Pause 10 seconds.**

(3) For the next few minutes, just taking each thought that enters your mind and placing it on a leaf... letting it float by. Doing this with each thought regardless of whether it is positive or negative – pleasurable or painful. Even if you have the most wonderful of thoughts, placing them on a leaf and letting them float by.

(4) If you find your thoughts momentarily stop, continue to watch the stream. Sooner or later, your thoughts will start up again. **Pause 20 seconds.**

(5) Allowing the stream to flow at its own pace. Not trying to speed it up or rush your thoughts along. Our intention isn’t to rush the leaves along or “get rid” of your thoughts. You are allowing them to come and go at their own pace.

(6) If your mind says “This is stupid,” “I’m bored,” or “I’m not doing this right” place those thoughts on leaves, too, and allow them pass. **Pause 20 seconds.**

(7) If a leaf gets stuck, allowing it to hang around until it’s ready to float by. If the thought comes up again, simply watching it float by another time. **Pause 20 seconds.**

(8) If a difficult or painful feeling arises, gently acknowledging it. So if there’s boredom saying to yourself, “I notice myself having a feeling of boredom/impatience/frustration.” And again placing those thoughts on leaves and allowing them to float along.

(9) From time to time, your thoughts may hook you and distract you from being fully present in this exercise. This is normal. As soon as you realize that you have become side-tracked, gently bringing your attention back to the exercise and back to the stream.

Continue the exercise for several minutes, periodically punctuating the silence: Again and again your thoughts will hook you and take you away from the exercise. When you notice you've been hooked, compassionately reminding yourself that this is normal, acknowledging the thought that brought you away, and gently bringing yourself back.

**END**

Thank you once again for being so open to doing something different with your thoughts. I'd like you to pair up. Again just taking a moment together to note how it was for you to engage in that exercise. What was it like to let go of thoughts without holding on? Was it harder to let go of some thoughts more than others. If it feels okay, what thoughts and feelings arose for you? Was acknowledging these thoughts/feelings useful?

*(Allow up to five minutes)*

Would anyone be willing to share anything they noticed about the exercise? Any observations, responses, reactions etc.

*(Allow five minutes)*

Another way we can unhook from thoughts and reasons is by noticing that these are just thoughts and putting the prefix "I'm having the thought that...". This can give us a little distance from a thought. Supposing I'm having the thought that I'm stupid, I might now say "I'm having the thought that I'm stupid".

"I'm having the thought that I'm too tired to start my essay".

"I'm having the thought that I'm too upset to study for my exam".

We can extend this even further by adding "I'm noticing". So "I'm noticing that I am having the thought that I'm too stressed to work on my project".

Academic Values Clarification

(10 mins)

So far we've talked a lot about doing what matters to us. Here we mean our values.

But what are values?

Values are qualities of action that reflect what is most important to us in life. They are the qualities that we want to bring to each thing we do. Values are those things that make your heart sing! For example, someone might value academic achievement. Others might value challenge etc.

Thinking about your best academic self, what qualities does that version of you have? List three of your values (the qualities your best self has) in the box below.

How was that for people? What did you notice? Any thoughts, responses?

Choice Point \_\_\_\_\_ 5 mins

As we move on for today I want to encourage you as best you can to notice when your actions are taking you away from what is important toward procrastination. I invite you as best you can to move toward what is important. To move toward your values. Let them be your compass. As best you can, try to unhook from the reason-giving machine so that you may untangle from reasons and other difficult thoughts to do what matters.

(Supplement this with choice point diagram on slide).

Thanks & Feedback \_\_\_\_\_ (2 mins)