

Leaves on a Stream

- Find a comfortable position, sitting or lying, and either close your eyes or fix them on a spot.
- Imagine a gently flowing stream.
- Imagine there are leaves floating on the surface of the water.
- For the next several minutes, take every thought that pops into your head, whether it's a picture or a word, place it on top of a leaf, and let it float on by.
- If you find visualization hard, or you can't get the stream to look the way you want it to, then instead imagine an expanse of black space. And imagine there's a gently-blowing breeze. Take each thought that pops into your head, release it into the breeze, and let it float off into blackness. Alternatively, you could imagine a moving black strip, like a conveyor belt, and place your thoughts on that.
- Do this for each and every thought, whether it is happy or sad, positive or negative, optimistic or pessimistic. You may find yourself trying to hold on to the happy, positive, optimistic thoughts. If so, remember the purpose of the exercise is to improve your ability to unhook yourself, to let go of your thoughts, so if you want to get good at this, you need to practice on every thought that arises, both pleasant and unpleasant, helpful and unhelpful.
- You are not aiming to get rid of your thoughts. You are aiming to step back and watch their natural flow. (So, if you start speeding up the stream, trying to wash them all away, you are defeating the purpose.)
- If your thought stop, just watch the stream. It won't be long before they start again.
- If your mind says, "This is silly," or "It's too hard," or "I can't do this," put those thoughts on leaves too.
- Most people get hooked early on by thoughts like "I'm not doing it properly," or "It's flowing too fast," or "I can't get the stream to look the way I want," or "That fish just ate my leaf." When you notice that you've been hooked by such a thought, simply restart and put THAT thought on a leaf and watch it flow past.
- If a leaf or thought gets stuck and doesn't move on, let it stay. Don't fight with it. Sometimes thoughts hang around for a while before they eventually move on.
- If an uncomfortable feeling shows up, such as boredom, frustration, impatience, or anxiety, just acknowledge it. Silently say to yourself, "Noticing a boring thought," or "Noticing a thought about frustration." And then place those words on a leaf.
- From time to time you'll get hooked and pulled out of the exercise: you'll get stuck planning for class, thinking about lunch or dinner, running through your to-do list, or rehashing the quarrel you had last night with your partner, or thinking about that show you saw last night, or the really cute workshop leader today. This is only natural; our minds are experts at hooking us. The moment you realize you have been hooked, silently acknowledge it: "Hooked again." Then, without judging yourself, just return to the stream, and put these thoughts on a leaf.