Leaves on a stream

Practising letting thoughts come and go.

Allow five to ten minutes. You can read this through first and then try it, or record yourself reading it slowly.

1. Sit comfortably. Close your eyes, or rest them on a spot in front of you.
2. Imagine you are sitting beside a gently flowing stream. Leaves are floating past on the surface.
3. For the next few minutes, take each thought that comes into your mind, place it on a leaf, and let it float by. Do this with every thought: pleasant, painful or neutral.
4. If your thoughts stop for a while, just watch the stream. They will start again.
5. Let the stream flow at its own speed. Do not try to hurry the leaves along. You are not trying to get rid of thoughts. You are letting them come and go in their own time.
6. If your mind says "this is silly" or "I cannot do this", put those thoughts on leaves too.
7. If a leaf gets stuck, let it stay until it is ready to move.
8. If a difficult feeling comes up, acknowledge it. "Here is boredom." "Here is frustration." Put that on a leaf.
9. From time to time you will get hooked by a thought and find you have left the stream. That is normal. As soon as you notice, gently come back and carry on.
10. When you are ready, let the image go and bring your attention back to the room.

Afterwards

What kinds of thoughts turned up?

Which ones hooked me and pulled me away?

What was it like to let thoughts pass without following them?

If you find pictures hard, imagine thoughts as cars passing on a road, or clouds crossing the sky. From Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson).

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