

DROPPING ANCHOR

At any point in a session where our client seems to be experiencing emotional distress, it's useful to bring her into contact with the present. For example, we could say, "I can see you're distressed. What are you feeling right now? Where are you feeling it?" We could then go into her physical sensations and do some work with acceptance. Or we could move to defusion: ask her to notice what she's thinking. Or we could ask him to contact the external world: "Can you have this feeling and also stay present in the room? See if you can allow the feeling to be there, and also notice what you can see and hear around you. See if you can really be present with me—fully here with me—even while you're having this feeling."

A useful metaphor/mindfulness technique/exercise for working with distressed clients is Dropping Anchor. In the transcript below, the client has been talking feverishly about her partner's intention to leave her, and is clearly very distressed.

- Therapist:* This is clearly a very stressful situation, so it's hardly surprising that you're feeling distraught. The thing is, right now you're caught in an emotional storm. All these thoughts and feelings are whirling around your body, dragging you here, there, and everywhere. And you can't do anything useful until you drop an anchor.
- Client:* (*talking very fast*) What d'you mean? There's nothing I can do. He's going to leave me. He's not going to change his mind now. He's got someone else. He's already taken most of his stuff. And there's no way I can pay the rent by myself. Plus everything's in his name—the gas, the electricity, the phone, the ...
- Therapist:* Please excuse me for interrupting you, but it's important to notice what's happening here. Your mind's pulling you all over the place. You're being tossed around in a storm of thoughts and feelings and while that's going on, you can't think effectively or act effectively. There's one thing you need to do before anything else: you need to drop an anchor.
- Client:* What do you mean?
- Therapist:* Okay. Push your feet hard into the floor. Feel the ground beneath you. Now sit up in your chair, and notice how you're sitting. And look around the room, and notice what you can see. Notice what you can hear. Notice what you're doing right now—notice that you and I are in this room, talking to each other. Now take a few deep breaths, and see if you can breathe down into your feet. And keep them firmly pressed into the floor. And notice how your mind keeps trying to pull you somewhere else, and see if you can stay present. Notice the room around you. Notice what we're doing here, right now.

When a client attends in crisis mode or becomes highly emotionally aroused during a session, these are valuable opportunities for teaching him how to ground himself: an essential first step in responding effectively to the challenge at hand.