

LEAVES ON A STREAM

1. Find a comfortable position, and either close your eyes or fix your eyes on a spot, whichever you prefer.
2. Imagine you're sitting by the side of a gently flowing stream, and there are leaves flowing past on the surface of the stream. Imagine it however you like—it's your imagination. (*Pause 10 seconds.*)
3. Now, for the next few minutes, take every thought that pops into your head, place it on a leaf, and let it float on by. Do this regardless of whether the thoughts are positive or negative, pleasurable or painful. Even if they're the most wonderful thoughts, place them on the leaf and let them float on by. (*Pause 10 seconds.*)
4. If your thoughts stop, just watch the stream. Sooner or later your thoughts will start up again. (*Pause 20 seconds.*)
5. Allow the stream to flow at its own rate. Don't speed it up. You're not trying to wash the leaves away—you're allowing them to come and go in their own good time. (*Pause 20 seconds.*)
6. If your mind says, *This is stupid* or *I can't do it*, place those thoughts on a leaf. (*Pause 20 seconds.*)
7. If a leaf gets stuck, let it hang around. Don't force it to float away. (*Pause 20 seconds.*)
8. If a difficult feeling arises, such as boredom or impatience, simply acknowledge it. Say to yourself, "Here's a feeling of boredom" or "Here's a feeling of impatience." Then place those words on a leaf, and let the leaf float on by.
9. From time to time, your thoughts will hook you, and you'll lose track of the exercise. This is normal and natural, and it will keep happening. As soon as you realize it's happened, gently acknowledge it and then start the exercise again.

After instruction 9, continue the exercise for several minutes or so, periodically punctuating the silence with this reminder: "Again and again, your thoughts will hook you. This is normal. As soon as you realize it, start the exercise again from the beginning."

Afterward debrief the exercise with the client: What sort of thoughts hooked her? What was it like to let thoughts come and go without holding on? Was it hard to let go of any thoughts in particular? (Clients often want to hold on to positive thoughts, but that defeats the purpose of the exercise; the aim is to learn how to let thoughts come and go.) What feelings showed up? Was acknowledging the feeling (as in instruction 8) useful? (This is an acceptance technique.)

Did she speed up the stream, trying to wash the thoughts away? If so, she's probably turning it into a control technique, trying to get rid of thoughts. This is not the aim. The aim is to observe the natural "flow of thoughts," allowing them to come and go in their own good time. That's why I've put instruction 5 in there.

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You can end the exercise with a simple instruction such as this: "And now, bring the exercise to an end ... and sit up in your chair ... and open your eyes. Look around the room ... and notice what you can see and hear ... and take a stretch. Welcome back!"

Practical Tip Some people find visualization very hard. I'm one of them. So it's a good idea at the start of any exercise requiring imagination to say, "Different people imagine in different ways. Some see very vivid pictures as on a TV screen. Other people imagine with words, sounds, feelings, or ideas. However you imagine is absolutely fine."

For the Leaves on a Stream exercise, I always offer the alternative of imagining a "moving blackness" or a "moving black strip"—just a sense of something black and expansive that just keeps on rolling gently by. You place your thoughts on the moving blackness rather than on the leaves.