

INTRODUCING THE PASSENGERS ON THE BUS

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“The Passengers on the Bus” is a well-loved ACT metaphor that describes how the decisions you make in response to your inner 'passengers' can either take you toward a life that you love or move you away from what's important. Use this worksheet to explore your unhelpful passengers, in particular your inner critic.



“The Passengers on the Bus” was originally published by Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson (2016). The metaphor goes like this:

Imagine you are on a bus and you are the driver. This is your bus and only you can drive it; you determine the speed and direction. Down the road ahead is a life that you love: full of all the kinds of things you value such as loving relationships, satisfying and challenging work, and making a contribution to others.

On your bus are a bunch of passengers. These passengers are made up of your thoughts, emotions, sensations, and memories, and they have all hopped on your bus at some point in your life. Some of these passengers are helpful and kind, and they happily come along for the ride. These passengers don't bother you.

Unfortunately, you have other passengers that are much meaner, bossier, and louder. They tell you when to turn left or right, when to stop, and when to go. One of these passengers is your self-critic. Your self-critic is always evaluating and criticizing your performance. Its voice is cold and harsh. It comes right up the front of the bus to lean in and insult you. This passenger is persistent and can be extremely loud.

Imagine your passenger is seated next to you right now. What would this passenger look like?

Give your Self-critic a name. Find something that captures its essence, such as "The Bully," "The Mean Girl," or "The Dictator". Or simply, "the critic".

Write your passenger's name here:



This passenger sounds so horrible that, naturally, you try to keep it quiet. There are several ways you might be doing this. Let's look at each.

1) Doing What Your Passenger Says

Do you believe what your passenger says? It can seem like your passenger will stay quiet if you just do what it says. The passenger offers you a deal: follow its instructions and hopefully it will stay quiet. In the short term, this seems to work. Each time you follow the passenger's instructions, it quiets down, but it does not stay quiet for long. While you are busy doing what the passenger says, how much progress are you making down the road? Doing what the passenger says keeps you stuck on a road you don't want to go down. Safe, predictable, and familiar, perhaps, but not the road towards what's important.

2) Fighting with Your Passenger

Another way to keep the passenger quiet is to fight with it. You're determined to stop it from being so critical, so you argue with the passenger, reason with it, try to outwit it using logic, or plead with it to leave you alone. You believe that if you could just win the argument, the passenger will be quiet or get off the bus.

Fighting with the passenger takes a lot of energy, and when you think about it, have you ever convinced your passenger it's wrong? Perhaps, you make a few good points, but have you ever won the argument? Does your passenger ever run out of energy? The more you fight with your passenger, the more energy and focus you are giving it. Your passenger knows how to fight, and you are playing its game. You get worn out, but your passenger does not, and for as long as you fight, you are giving it more airtime.

How much progress do you make toward your valued future while you are busy fighting with your passenger? This strategy usually gets you nowhere. Your bus may even feel like it has stopped by the side of the road.



3) White-Knuckling

Another common strategy I've seen people use to manage their passengers could be called white-knuckling. You grit your teeth and put your foot to the floor, pushing hard to make progress toward your valued goals. When the passenger tries to threaten or intimidate you, you actively push it away, telling it, "Shut up" or "Leave me alone". To drive this way, you must have one hand tightly gripped on the wheel (giving you the white knuckles) while the other hand is pushing back the passenger. How well can you drive with one hand?

What kind of progress do you make down the road while you are driving like this? This white-knuckling approach is a much more difficult way to drive, and progress is difficult to sustain. This strategy can get you places but doesn't work well in the long term. It's difficult to enjoy life down the road while you are driving this way.

Your Passenger Will Never Get Off the Bus

The truth is that your passenger will never get off the bus, no matter which approach you use. Your passenger has been learned, and you can never unlearn them. Your passenger is always going to be hanging around somewhere, with the potential to cause trouble. Fortunately, there is one way you can respond to your passenger that makes a substantial difference to how much it intrudes in your life. This way of driving uses the skills of 'mindful awareness'.

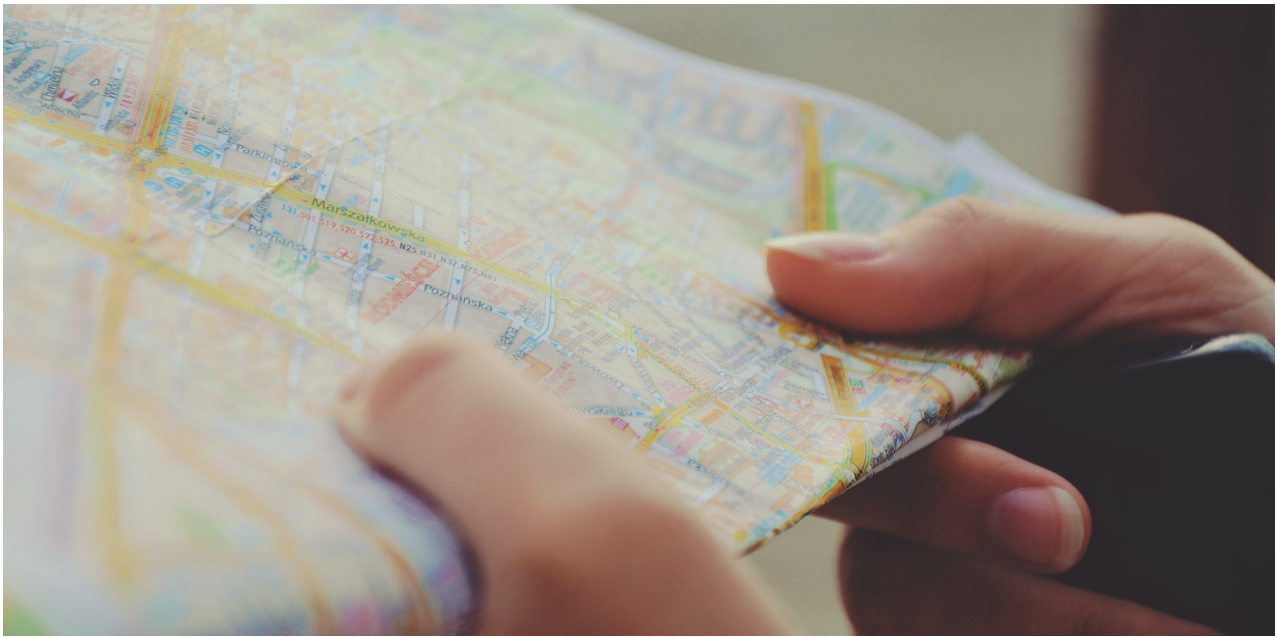


Building the Skills of Mindful Awareness

Mindful awareness means unhooking from your critical inner dialogue and not believing or reacting to the thoughts. Mindful awareness is the ability to:

1. Let your thoughts come and go from your awareness in their own time.
2. Not get tangled in your thoughts by treating them as real or something you must act upon, but instead, treat them as noise your mind gives you while you drive the bus.
3. Let the uncomfortable feelings that come with the critical thoughts rise and fall in their own time without fighting them.
4. Keep doing what's important, even though your mind might tell you to stop.

By practicing mindful awareness, your thoughts will become much less of a problem in your life even if they are still there. Learning to accept the presence of your passenger in this way will take practice. At times you might get pulled back into the struggle with your critical passenger. When this happens, take some time to regroup, refocus, and return to what's important.



Activity: Mindful Awareness of Your Critical Passenger

Write down three criticisms that your passenger would often say to you:

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Now, copy these three thoughts onto a small piece of paper; something small enough that you can fit it into your wallet or the back of your phone case. Over the next week, carry this little scrap of paper around with you.

As you go about your week, notice every time you have one of these thoughts, or something similar. don't try to change or fight these critical thoughts. Instead, every time your passenger says one of the things listed above, remind yourself that:

1. You can let the thought come and go without having to fight it.
2. Just because you have the thoughts doesn't make it real or something you need to act upon. You can treat it as background noise.
3. You can let any uncomfortable feelings that come with the thoughts pass without fighting them.
4. You can keep doing what's important even when the thoughts are loud.

Notice what happens to the frequency and intensity of your critical passenger over the week. How might the way you reacted to these thoughts have changed across the week?

The more you practice these steps to mindful awareness, the less your thoughts will interfere with how you feel and the closer you'll move toward your valued life, even if the passenger continues to be loud.

Source:

This worksheet is an edited excerpt from **The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism** by Jennifer Kemp.

References:

Hayes, S, K Strosahl, and K Wilson. 2016. *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change (Second Edition)*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Stoddard, J. A., and N. Afari. 2014. *The Big Book of ACT Metaphors*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.

About Jennifer Kemp MPsyCh(Clinical)

Jennifer is a Clinical Psychologist who works with clients who are struggling with perfectionism and the mental health problems perfectionism facilitates and maintains. Jennifer is the author of The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism. She integrates Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), behavior analysis, exposure, and Compassion-Focused Therapy approaches in her therapeutic and consultation work. Jennifer presents internationally on the topic of perfectionism and is available for public speaking, conferences, and workshops. Find out more at www.jenniferkemp.com.au.

Other Resources:

The Passengers on the Bus has been made into some fantastic video formats.

This YouTube includes the metaphor in its entirety:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z29ptSuoWRC>

This has a "Choose Your Own Adventure" format:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huVc6SphzC0>

