

Metaphors can help us look at situations from a different perspective and untangle our experience from our thinking about our experience.

Children live daily with figurative language: metaphor, fables, and thinking imaginatively and creatively. They love ACT metaphors and finding new ways to look at the world. Helping a child step back from his or her thinking can be powerful and liberating. And by developing these insights and habits early on, future psychological inflexibility can be precluded.

*Sourced and adapted from ACT Therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change.  
Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson (1999)*

## Passengers on a Bus

The bus each of us is driving is different from the average bus. It has a steering wheel but no gas pedal or brakes and only moves at one speed – the speed of life. Passengers get on and off the bus all the time. Once they are on, they aren't able to get off. Some passengers invite their friends or family along for the ride, and a number of them can be very unruly, restless, noisy, and disrespectful – which makes it difficult to pay attention to where we are heading. For us, as the bus driver, this can create a problem. We can either keep driving and focus on the road ahead (our life) or allow ourselves to be distracted by the passengers. Getting caught up in the struggle to try to get them to behave is easy. As we struggle with them, we no longer pay much attention to where we're headed and may even get lost for a while before we find our way again.

## Theme Park and Swamp Metaphor

Suppose you are beginning a journey to a magical theme park with water rides, roller coasters, playgrounds, and all the delicious park food you can eat. You can clearly see and hear it in the distance. No sooner do you start your walk over there; you step into a swamp that extends as far as you can see in all directions. You say to yourself, "Yikes, I didn't realize I would have to go through a swamp. It's all smelly, and the mud is mushy in my shoes. It's hard to lift my feet out of the muck and put them forward. I'm wet and tired. Why didn't anybody tell me about this swamp?" When that happens, you have a choice: abandon the journey or enter the swamp. Life is like that. We go into the swamp, not because we want to get muddy or like the smell, but because it stands between us and where we are going.



## Path up the Mountain

Imagine you are hiking in the mountains. The mountain trails wind back and forth; they are steep and often have "switchbacks," which make you literally walk back and forth. Sometimes a trail will even drop back to below a level you had reached earlier. If I asked you at a number of points on a trail like this to evaluate how well you are accomplishing your goal of reaching the mountaintop, I would hear a different story every time. If you were in switchback mode, you would probably tell me that things weren't going well and that you were never going to reach the top. If you were in a stretch of open territory where you could see the mountaintop and the path leading up to it, you would probably tell me things were going very well. Now imagine that we are across the valley with binoculars, looking at people hiking on this trail. If we were asked how they were doing, we would have a positive progress report every time. We would be able to see that the *overall direction of the trail, not what it looks like at a given moment, is the key to progress*. We would see that following this crazy, winding trail is exactly what leads to the top.

## Tug of War with a Monster

The situation you're in is like being in a tug-of-war with a monster. It is big, ugly, and very strong. In between you and the monster is a pit, and so far as you can tell, it is bottomless. If you lose this tug-of-war, you will fall into this pit and will be destroyed. So you pull and pull, but the harder you pull, the harder the monster pulls, and you edge closer and closer to the pit. The hardest thing to see is that our job is not to win the tug-of-war.... Our job is to drop the rope.

## Quicksand

Acceptance involves moving towards the pain, rather than away from it; towards the emotions, thoughts, and feelings we dislike. Suppose you were caught in quicksand. Naturally, you'd try to get out. But if you try to walk, jump, climb or run, you just sink deeper, because you end up trying to push down on the sand. If you struggle, wiggle, push with your hands, or crawl, you sink in deeper. Often as people sink, they get panicky and start flailing about and down they go. In quicksand, the only thing to do is to create as much surface area as possible: to lay out on the quicksand, getting in full contact with what you've been struggling with, but without more struggle....

