Ice Cube Exercise

At some point in our lives, we will probably all experience an event, situation, or problem that we just can’t fix. Maybe it’s a break-up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Maybe we have to move to a different city. Maybe we get sick or have a painful operation or other medical procedure. Sometimes difficult home situations can be out of our control. Or, maybe it’s having to give a class speech or presentation, even though we are really afraid of public speaking. There may be ways to help the situation, but sometimes the best we can do is just wait it out.

The Ice Cube Exercise is a helpful practice that serves 3 purposes:

1. It can give us temporary distraction from upsetting thoughts and emotions in situations we can’t change (similar to cutting or self-harm, but in a way that isn’t dangerous and doesn’t cause long-term damage).
2. It can remind us that the pain we feel in these situations doesn’t last forever.
3. It can help us practice other coping skills for when things are difficult, such as mindfulness and acceptance.

Directions:

Have students sit or stand with one palm facing up. Place an ice cube in each student’s palm. Encourage them not to move it, drop it, or stop the exercise, but rather to turn their awareness to the physical and emotional sensations they experience.

Ask aloud:

- How does it feel?
- Where do you feel it? Is it painful or just uncomfortable?
- Do you feel tingling, numbness, temperature?
- Are you in real danger? Is there a risk of a significant injury?
- What coping skills are you using to get through the pain you are feeling?
- What do you think will happen to your hand?
- What helps? What makes it worse?
- Rate the pain you are experiencing on a 1-10 scale.
- How long do you predict the pain will last after you put down your ice cube?
- How long do you think it will be until you feel back to normal?
- Can you compare this pain to other things you’ve felt before?

After about 3 minutes, have them put their ice cubes in the trash or in a cup. They may warm up their hand in any way they like. Ask students to silently raise their hands when their palm no longer hurts.

Discuss:

- Sometimes when we experience something difficult, a worry is that our suffering might never end or that we won’t be able to tolerate it. These worries can make the actual experience even harder.
- What coping skills did you use?
- Did you think that the pain would eventually go away? If yes, was this helpful?
- How could this exercise help you the next time you are experiencing discomfort?