

Circle of Awareness

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Using the body as a mirror for thoughts:
a psychotherapeutic approach

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for Sultana

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Preface

Identifying, challenging, and correcting dysfunctional opinions and behaviors is the core business of Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). Recent developments such as Mindfulness Behavioral Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Meta-Cognitive Therapy (MCT) emphasize replacement of the challenging aspect by awareness and acceptance (which are, in my opinion, different ways of challenging). These new developments have been identified by some authors as 'third generation CBT'.

Willem Fonteijs is an independent and creative cognitive behavioral therapist. Being different from MBCT, ACT or MCT, his *Circle of Awareness* is all about awareness and acceptance. The 'modus operandi' of the *Circle of Awareness* is illustrated by descriptions of a huge range of real patients and clients with recognizable and more or less prototypical problems like panic, addiction and pain. They offer a rich source of inspiration for those psychotherapists who take an interest in awareness and accep-

tance, as well as for persons who take interest into enlarging their own personal awareness. As a 'COMET therapist' my own interest was particularly caught by the role attributed to the body and its motor and physiologic responses in Fonteijn's work.

At the moment, my personal positive impressions of the *Circle of Awareness* are based on the personal experiences and anecdotic reports of the author and his patients and clients. While I expect these experiences to trigger the interest of many others including practicing therapists as well, I hope that these same therapists are interested in the results of future studies that should investigate the *Circle of Awareness*' efficacy in a more scientific empirical way.

Prof. dr. Kees Korrelboom, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist.

Introduction

There is more wisdom in your body than in your deepest philosophy. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

In this book we circle around one topic only: awareness. All the issues raised and explored in this book point in one direction: awareness. This book is all about awareness. What started as an experiential group training approach resulted in a practice of awareness. This book can be used as a practical guide to applying awareness in daily life. Whatever comes to awareness and is attended to in a friendly and accepting way will flourish and grow. Several topics are explored from different perspectives. They are all rooted in a common ground: awareness. Small adjustments will be made for exploring topics in a different way, and even those adjustments are expressions of the same process; awareness exploring awareness.

The circle of awareness is an invitation to self-exploration. People sit together in a circle. Then one of the participants steps into the circle and raises an issue of importance. The other participants focus their attention on the person in the circle. The circle works as an open space revealing the hidden features of the issue.

The trainer facilitates the structure of the circle and supports the person in further exploring his or her issue. Because of the nature of the circle, all participants are able to observe the person in the circle; observe the expression of the body as the mind is raising an issue and the body is expressing its reactions to the issue involved. The body is compelled to react. The body inevitably shows its appreciation of the issue. Participants listen to and observe the person in the circle, and they too react to the issue involved. They will notice a reaction that is instantaneous; likeable, unlikeable, or neutral. The circle works as an amplifier of the process of self-exploration. The circle has no beginning and no end as with awareness and this book. It only has a center: awareness.

This book too is an open invitation to self-exploration. You can start reading at any page and whenever you like. You can step in and out of the circle whenever you want. There is only one requirement. As soon as you step into the circle, your self-exploration starts, just like with this book. You can start at any page and allow the hidden awareness in this book to happen. Simply ask yourself while you are reading these words, what you are aware of. What are the sounds around you? What is the posture of your body? Are you aware of your breathing in and breathing out? Can you observe the rising and falling of your thoughts? What are you aware of? This simple question is all it takes to start the process of self-exploration. What are you aware of in this moment? As you will notice, it all starts here.

In this book there is an inevitable element of repetition. The theme awareness will be explored from different angles and perspectives. The message of this book is not to be found in its form, in the exact

meaning of the words. Words are used as limited tools to express what is experienced. The issues explored in this book can lead to deepening of insight of awareness. The examples themselves will not provoke this deepening. Just let your own awareness speak with the awareness hidden in this book and awareness will reveal what is of use to you.

In the beginning is awareness.

The story of Cynthia

Cynthia is a young woman in her late twenties. She works as a psychologist. She came to group psychotherapy as part of her training to become a cognitive psychotherapist. The training program consisted of five days in the form of a mindfulness retreat. The circle of awareness is an important part of the program. Formal mindfulness meditation practice is included. On the second day of the program, Cynthia stepped into the circle and stated that she felt very depressed and thought about leaving the program. The other participants were shocked by her disclosure and felt sympathy for her sad mood. Cynthia walked around in the circle, and everyone saw her sad posture. She moved slowly, spoke softly with hanging shoulders and tears in her eyes. Everyone was touched. I validated her depressed feelings warmly by saying that I saw her sad posture and heard what she was saying. I asked Cynthia very gently if she wanted to try an experiment. Cynthia hesitated and then reluctantly agreed to participate. I asked Cynthia to say whatever came into her mind about her depressed mood and while talking, to hop around in the circle. Cynthia looked bewildered and then I asked again in a gentle and compassionate way to explore what will happen. Cynthia started with a few hops while saying that she felt depressed. Then she stopped and explained it didn't work for her. She decided it might be better to just go home. I asked her again in a slightly

more insistent way to continue the experiment. Cynthia went on hopping around and explaining how sad she was. Then after a few rounds she started to smile and stated that this was fun for her. The issue she raised seemed to be of less importance. She went on hopping around, and the whole group began supporting her for her bravery in exploring how this might work for her. During the remainder of the training Cynthia stayed in a calm mood with a smile on her face. A few years later when I met her at a conference, she shared her enthusiasm for the experiment and told me how it was a breakthrough in her self-destructive way of thinking about herself.

Circle of awareness

Awareness is the greatest agent for change. (Eckhart Tolle)

The structure of the circle of awareness is as old as humankind. People come together in a circle and share their stories about personal issues, drama, disappointment, and success. Spontaneously and in an open atmosphere, they give feedback. There is a tangible and inspiring energy in the circle. In the circle we observe the wisdom of the body in the moment. We read the body just as it shows itself in the circle. The body clarifies the true story. We observe and listen carefully, there is no room for misunderstanding. The body knows.

The circle is an invitation to self-exploration. The circle follows a number of rules, and a further experience occurs, largely spontaneous, organic, and sometimes almost magic. The trainers provide the necessary security, support, incentive, and encouragement. As a participant you can present whatever has priority for you in this period of your development. You learn to observe yourself in a neutral and accepting way, without judgment. From that self-compassionate stance you can come to the right choices

for you. Prior to the circle there is a warm-up in the form of meditation exercises to help you activate an accepting attitude.

The circle in its basic form lets participants explore their bodily sensations, emotions, and cognitions. The training starts with learning to observe bodily sensations in a neutral way. Observing how the breath moves through the body, how the breath moves the nostrils, chest, and belly. We bring our attention to this continuous movement and just observe this movement as it is. Whenever we are distracted by perceptions or thoughts — this will happen all the time — we gently bring our attention back to the movement of the breath in the body. By doing this, we train our attention to develop a neutral attitude to the bodily sensations that accompany the movement of the breath through the body. It is a continuous movement that will stay with us our whole life. The awareness of this movement forms a neutral referential point to return our attention to over and over again. By doing this we develop a neutral and calm state of mind. Our mind calms down and then will be able to sink into this endless state of awareness. There is really nothing special to be done and nothing special to get involved in. Just by noticing the movement of the breath in the body, we gradually become more aware of this always-available neutral and calm state of mind. Then we can apply this neutral attitude to other situations. For instance we can observe how emotions like anger or fear are moving through the body, how fear creates tension in our limbs, raises our heart rate, and makes us sweat.

The circle as a structure is about exploring and exchanging experiences. It is not about exchanging ideas. There is no debate going on in the circle. The circle is an experiential structure. The mind, even though it has its use in daily life, has a secondary role in this

game. In the circle we explore the experiences that consciousness has. We use the body as our ultimate reference of reality. The mind is used to having leadership in our life; in the circle we ask the mind to step back and leave the stage to give room to awareness and the body, to allow feelings to float freely and to explore them just as they are – another experience. By disconnecting feelings from stories, we can see what feelings actually induce. Fear induces safety behavior and seeks security. Fear induces catastrophic stories that justify the appearance of fear. And they are stories that will be told over and over again. Fear provokes the mind to make a set of rules that will help to prevent a threatening situation from appearing again. The mind will execute these rules rigorously.

The circle of awareness is like a laboratory. In the circle, we explore issues of participants by inviting them to explore their feelings. We allow feelings to appear in an open and compassionate atmosphere and validate feelings when they appear. An issue is raised and while raising the issue, feelings arise. The body shows the feelings while the person tells about the issue. Thoughts and feelings are connected and cause each other. If there is a strong feeling, a thought will appear to justify the strength of the feeling. Feelings don't just appear. There is always a cause for them. Thought claims to be the cause. In the circle we explore this connection.

Awareness and conditioning

The strengthening of behavior which results from reinforcement is appropriately called conditioning. In operant conditioning we strengthen an operant in the sense of making a response more probable, or in actual fact, more frequent.

(B.F. Skinner)

Things appear in a moment. This moment is all there is. Before anything appears, there is nothing. Things appear in the awareness of this moment. We can't see this moment as such. We can only see what we perceive in this moment. We are only aware of this moment because of the things that appear in this moment. We perceive things and things appear to us as perceptions. If we look carefully we can see that there are no real things as such. All that appears are the perceptions of the so-called things. We perceive visions, smells, textures, sounds, and tastes. And even though things appear as solid forms that can be recognized as the same form over and over again, with the same sensual features, all that we can be aware of are the perceptions of these so-called things. They are the things that appear in a moment, over and over again. We can sit in a chair and watch the table and notice the same table over and over again from moment to moment.

And of course, by the repetition of the perception of the table, we conclude that the same table will appear in a next moment. This kind of knowing is the result of conditioning. We know from our experience that if the conditions do not change, the table will appear in the next moment. The perceptual world outside, the world of things and objects which appear to us as perceptual sensations, is the result of conditioning. We know from our experience that things will appear depending on the circumstances.

What is happening before things appear? Nothing is happening. Before anything can appear there is nothing. Everything appears in this moment and before this moment there is nothing.

Everything that appears, appears in our awareness. Awareness is always there. We are aware of the objects through our perception of the objects as we are aware of our thoughts, images, bodily sensations, and feelings. We are aware of them. It is the same awareness we have of different objects. Awareness is the basis for everything that appears. When we look anywhere, inside or outside, we will find awareness. We are aware of the inside and outside world in a moment, and yet we almost certainly know that, if the circumstances remain the same, the same things will appear in the next moment. Part of our awareness is conditioned. That part structures its content depending on the conditions perceived. It perceives a sequence of incidents and structures a contingency. The conditioned part of our awareness is also known as mind. Mind is a very useful part of our awareness. It helps us, from moment to moment, to find our way through time and space.

We can ask ourselves how this conditioning actually happens? Do we condition ourselves to believe in the appearance of ob-

jects like tables and chairs? Do we order the objects to appear out of nothing? Of course this is counterintuitive. The objects are just there and will be there independent from our conditioned mind. The existence of the objects is not the result of conditioning. Objects are not provided by the mind. Only the appearance of the objects can be connected to the mind. And for the mind, this is all there is. Wherever we look we will not find any object as such. We can only be aware of its appearance. The mind has conditioned itself, and by doing so, the mind can predict the occurrence of new events. It is our own awareness that is conditioned so that we can create expectations about a future moment and in that future moment compare the appearance of objects with our expectations.

Our mind is stuck in the moment. Even though we can predict with reasonable certainty the appearance of objects in the future, our expectations or predictions are what exist in this moment. This type of awareness of the moment is time and space limited. By the nature of the conditioning process our momentary awareness is time and space limited. This does not mean that awareness itself is time and space limited. On the contrary, many scholars claim that awareness is unlimited in time and space, and numerous individuals speak of an unlimited state of awareness. Here we explore the nature of the conditioned mind and then maybe the mind will reveal part of its true nature by observing and exploring itself very carefully.

All living creatures adapt to their environment by following their conditioning. Life itself is full of change. In adapting to their environment, living creatures are conditioned and live a more or less predictable life. This process of conditioning is executed automati-

cally. It is happening without the interference of awareness. We don't need consciousness to be conditioned. For instance, if we experience a severe trauma under a specific set of circumstances, even a small part of the original circumstances is enough to relive the traumatic experience. Exposed to some features of traumatic environment, we observe the fearful reactions of the body; muscle tension, fast breathing, sweating, trembling etc. This just happens.

Conditioned awareness is limited by its nature. It can only exist in the moment. By first placing itself in a sequence of events and then reaching out for future events and evaluating the past, the mind is *a fortiori* convinced of the truth of the momentary experience as being the only possible experience. We can fantasize about time travel or non-local connection, but we know from our daily experience that we only live this moment in this specific space. Maybe that's why this conditioned awareness tries to escape the moment by filling itself with thoughts about future and past. Evaluating the past and making plans for the future is how the mind constantly tries to improve. The conditioned awareness, the mind, also known as the separate self, is always busy doing something. The separate self or conditioned awareness, as we state here, is a state of awareness. Awareness in a state of conditioning narrows the perspective of awareness itself and creates an illusion of limitations. If we let go of this narrow perspective, we can experience awareness in its true nature, unlimited in time and space. If we look around from this perspective we will find no boundaries, no beginning, no end, just this experience. We find ourselves in this moment not as a result of searching but as recognition. This recognition is not restricted to this moment and this place, this here and now. This recognition is the revelation that we are always there and will always be there. For us it is

unimaginable and unexperiential not to be where we are. Whenever awareness is, we are there. We are always there, independent of the circumstances. The only constant factor is our own presence in time and space. Whatever is happening and appearing is due to conditioning. Nothing can appear to us outside the realm of time and space. The so-called outside world is filled with objects. All objects have features, and conditioning restricts all the appearances of objects. All things appear in this state of conditioned awareness. In this state of conditioned awareness, we know how A and B are connected. If A happens, B will follow. We can predict the occurrence of B by noticing the occurrence of A. In the outside world nothing happens by coincidence. The existence and occurrence of things in time and space are contingent and logically connected. All things influence each other, even if this influence is barely detectable. The conditioned world is logically closed. Everything follows logic. Outside the logical world nothing is possible. Even though we can talk about a square circle, we will not find anything like that in the world.

Here we talk about things with distinguishable features. Things with distinguishable features can be manipulated. From the occurrence of A we can predict the occurrence of B. If B happens, this does not necessarily mean that A has occurred. For instance, if Peter drops a pen to the ground and as a result the pen is lying on the ground, this does not necessarily mean that if a pen is lying on the ground, Peter dropped the pen. Anna could have caused this fact by bumping the table, for example. Different events can cause the same effect. And one event can unchain a cascade of effects. If we look at the conditioned world, we see a well-ordered world with predictable events; a logical world with all kinds of conditioned behaviors; an automated world where

everything and every event is logically connected. In such a world, it does not really matter much whether we are aware or not. Everything just happens by itself and for itself.