

# Squirrel In Hell

2017-01-07

## *Applied Rationality Exercises*

I was just about to run an introductory workshop around applied rationality, mindfulness, effective communication etc. in Warsaw, Poland when I got the flu, which forced me to stay in bed for a few days. A friend agreed to replace me at the event, and I wrote up the following notes for him.

The notes are not comprehensive, and do not include any background information or explanations. However, the availability of this kind of materials seems to be low, so there is a chance someone will at least take some inspiration from this.

The event was around 2 hours, with 5 exercises planned as below (short meditation, followed by 2 individual and 2 group exercises). They are not particularly intense as a way to transfer knowledge, I was thinking more of "getting the foot in the door" and having some fun with a group of people.

### **1. Eye Meditation**

Total time: 5-10 min

1. Ask everyone to sit comfortably and close their eyes. Explain that this will be a quick mindfulness meditation, but it doesn't require doing anything special or difficult (mention benefits and relation to applied rationality).
2. Say "I invite you to let your breath come to your attention". Wait 30 seconds.
3. Say "I invite you to let everything that you hear, to come to your attention". Wait 30 seconds.
4. Say "I invite you to let the blackness you see with your closed eyes, to come to your attention". Wait 30 seconds.
5. Say "I invite you to move your eyes without opening them... as if you wanted to look left and right... to the top left, and bottom right... top right, and bottom left... and up and down...".
6. Say "I invite you to now look straight ahead, with your eyes still closed, and feel the movements of your eyeballs. You might try to relax them, so that they don't move at all." Wait 2 minutes.

### **2. Look at the Audience**

Total time: 5 min + 3-5 min for each person

1. Explain that this will be a multi-purpose exercise, which will help to break the ice before other exercises, train the skill of being calm when speaking in public, and also continue the theme of awareness of one's eyes.
2. Say that everyone will do the exercise in front of the group, and that you will start to demonstrate.
3. Explain that the first step is to stand straight in front of the group, and say your name. Say your name.
4. The next step is to choose something that happened to you today or yesterday (it can be whatever, doesn't have to be funny or interesting). Now the task is to describe it to the group in a few sentences. However after saying each sentence, you will pause to do the following procedure:

#### Blog Archive

[January 2018](#) (3)  
[December 2017](#) (3)  
[November 2017](#) (1)  
[October 2017](#) (2)  
[September 2017](#) (1)  
[August 2017](#) (2)  
[July 2017](#) (1)  
[May 2017](#) (2)  
[April 2017](#) (1)  
[March 2017](#) (2)  
[January 2017](#) (2)  
[November 2016](#) (1)  
[October 2016](#) (1)  
[September 2016](#) (2)  
[August 2016](#) (1)  
[April 2016](#) (1)  
[March 2016](#) (1)

#### More by SquirrelInHell

- [AI Safety Comics](#)
- [Android Apps](#)
- [Be Well Tuned](#)
- [Rationality Updates](#)

1. take a deep breath,
2. choose one person from the audience,
3. catch eye contact with them, and hold it for 2 seconds,
4. smile at that person.

Explain these steps, and say that it's OK if this takes a long time to do. The purpose is to slow down, and feel comfortable about it.

Demonstrate by saying something about your day, and pausing to perform the steps above after each sentence.

5. Invite the next person to do the exercise, until everyone is done.

### **3. Pulling All Stops**

(Credit: this is a very slight modification of "Focused Grit" by CFAR)

Total time: 10-15 min

1. Ask everyone to take a sheet of paper and individually list as many of their unsolved problems or issues as they can. Say that the lists are private, and no one will ask about what they wrote. Set a timer for 5 minutes.
2. Ask to pick one of the problems that is important to solve, and write it on a separate sheet of paper.
3. Ask to imagine that the only thing that matters to them is solving this one problem: they have no other goals or desires, and can use all of their resources for this one problem if it helps at all. Now with this mindset, write as many ideas for solutions as they can (even if they are not practical). Set a timer for 5 minutes.

### **4. Confidence in the Neck**

Total time: 25-30 min

1. Ask everyone to form pairs, and for each pair to secure the following objects: one coin, one pen (these two must be actual physical objects), and something to write on.
2. Phase I. Put the following instruction somewhere so that everyone can see it: "Heads = Coin, Tails = Pen"
3. Have one person from each pair stand with their back to the other. The person in the back takes the coin and the pen, and repeats the following procedure so that nothing of it can be seen by their partner, who is facing the other way:
  1. flip the coin once and write down the result (e.g. "C" for coin/heads, or "P" for pen/tails),
  2. according to the result above, use the coin or the pen to lightly touch the back of the neck of their partner,
  3. ask the partner which of the two they think they have just been touched with, and write down their answer,
  4. ask them about the confidence in their answer (in percent), and write down their answer.
4. Have the pairs switch roles and repeat everything, so that the other person is guessing this time.
5. Discuss the theory (Bayes and priors, strength of evidence). Give everyone 5 minutes to check their results and talk about them in pairs.
6. Phase II. Put up the following instruction: "2 x Heads = Coin, other = Pen"

7. Have all pairs repeat the experiment, but this time the person in the back flips the coin two times before each touch. If they get heads on both throws, they touch with the coin, and in all other cases they touch with the pen.
8. Repeat with the other person guessing.
9. Discuss the theory again (correctly including new priors). Give everyone 5 minutes to check their results and talk about them in pairs.

## 5. Social Theatre

Total time: around 35-40 min

1. Ask if there are any people present who know each other, and they can remember having at least one heated discussion or argument with each other. Ask those people to pair up, and everyone else to form pairs randomly.
2. Ask those who got paired randomly to think of some situation when they said something that they later regretted, or thought it could have been handled better. They will explain it to their partner, so it's better to avoid topics they would rather not talk about.
3. Now the task for each pair is to recreate an argument by playing out the conversation between them. Ask them to keep it as close to their memories as they can, but within the limits of keeping the conversation flowing and avoiding very long and complicated explanations. If something is unclear, just improvise while following the general stance and approach of that side. The pairs that don't have a common argument will have to first let one person explain the details of the situation to the other (they will switch later). Set a timer for 5 minutes.
4. Now give everyone 5 minutes to brainstorm about how to better approach this situation, and in particular - how to return it to a state that feels safe, friendly, and cooperative, in which no one gets defensive or aggressive.
5. The next part of the exercise is act out improved versions of the argument, in which one person is trying out the ideas they had to smooth out the communication, while the other is trying to maintain the previous (non-cooperative) stance. The partner can be extra sensitive and pretend to react really badly to anything that they perceive as a threat, cheap shot, something unfriendly, unpleasant, patronizing etc. It is crucial to test ideas by actually saying them aloud, not just considering them. Set a timer for 5 minutes.
6. Give the pairs 5 minutes to switch roles, and have the other person explain some argument they had, and then act it out with their partner. The pairs who share an argument can discuss it in more depth, or pick some other situation that they have in common.
7. Set a timer for 5 minutes, for the person who was explaining this time to think about how to restore safety from their side of the conversation.
8. Set a timer for 5 minutes to let the other person try out their ideas, and act out different variants with their partner.

### 2 comments:



**Gunnar Zarncke** Sunday, January 08, 2017

Cool exercises. Would you like to share how well your friend could run the workshop (just?) from these notes?

[Reply](#)

[Replies](#)

**クリス** Sunday, January 08, 2017



My friend was also discussing this with me before he went there. However I'd guess that with a bunch of LW-oriented people who can fill in the gaps in theory, it is entirely possible (and fun) to run an event using just the notes as written above.

---

**Reply**

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)