

Cognitive Defusion and Mindfulness Exercises

Cognitive defusion is the technique of becoming untangled from our thoughts. While cognitive *fusion* is the process of believing that our thoughts are literally “true,” cognitive *defusion* is the ability to regard thoughts simply as thoughts. The result of defusion is usually a decrease in the thought’s power over us as we loosen our attachment to the thought. The thought would not be something you had to believe or disbelieve, but would be only something you would notice. The goal of practicing defusion is to become a little bit more flexible around the thought, and to have a little more distance from it.

Defusion exercises work well when we have:

Depressing thoughts;

Thoughts about low self-worth;

Ruminative thoughts (mentally replaying something that happened in the past); or

Worry thoughts (imagining something scary happening in the future).

1. “Thank the mind” for the thought, but don’t resist the thought or try to suppress it. Don’t struggle with it, interpret it, elaborate on it, or try to process it. The thought is seductive – it will *appear* that if you just think about it a little longer, you’ll have some clarity and then be able to let it go, but that rarely happens. Trust me.

2. Redirect your focus to some meaningful activity. Physically move into a different room, listen to music, go for a walk, read a book, etc. Redirecting your focus isn’t the same as “thought suppression” (which never works). Instead, becoming absorbed in something new is a form of mindfulness where you are paying attention to something real in the present moment, and in a non-judgmental way.

3. Become an Observer by saying, “I’m having the thought that _____,” and finish saying the thought that you were just having. Or, “I’m having the feeling that _____.” Becoming a witness of your thoughts creates some distance between you and your mind.

4. Just name things: Say, “worry, there is worry.” Or, “that’s catastrophizing,” etc. (if you are familiar with the names of cognitive distortions). Don’t put an evaluative label on the thought as being good or bad. The reason for this is that we will always try to use escape or avoidance if we think something is “bad,” but this strategy doesn’t work when it comes to our internal experiences. All we can do is notice our experiences until they lose their power.

5. Notice when you are judging. Instead of perceiving a thought or feeling as “good or bad,” use more descriptive words, like, “helpful or unhelpful,” “adaptive or maladaptive,” “encouraging or discouraging.” Get more specific. Try to see your private experiences just as they are, as information (perhaps even misinformation) – but don’t judge them as having positive or negative qualities (for the reason explained above).

6. Come back to the present by saying, “Back to now,” or “It’s not happening right now.” The truth is, past and future imaginings really aren’t happening right now! Don’t think of this strategy as simply trying to make yourself feel better. Think of it as being actually true. Then, redirect your focus to the present moment.

Cognitive Defusion for OCD Thoughts.

If you have scary, intrusive thoughts, and they tend to recur with a predictable “theme,” you may be experiencing obsessive thoughts. Research has shown that we intuitively try to help ourselves by *suppressing* the thought, which requires switching to different thoughts in order to cancel it out. However, this strategy backfires and creates a “rebound effect,” making the intrusive thought even more persistent. To avoid this rebound effect, eventually settle on just one of these techniques, and use it each and every time your obsessive thought occurs:

- 1) Come up with a “replacement” image – something arbitrary and neutral, like a red Volkswagen, a pink balloon, whatever – and always replace your thought with that same image each time the thought occurs. Don’t switch around to different images, make the image always the same.
- 2) Visualize the thought appearing in your inbox on the computer. Notice the subject line, read the message once, but don’t delete it – just let it hang out in your inbox as a “read” message. Here you are deliberately agreeing not to suppress the thought. Don’t even think about replying to it. See if you can tolerate it just sitting there. Make a decision not to delete it.
- 3) See the thought appearing as a new message on your cell phone. Picture listening to the message once but not deleting it, allowing it to remain forever in your imaginary voicemail. Accept the discomfort around it. Just say, “Yep, it’s still there.” Don’t check it and make a decision to not delete it.
- 4) Picture your thought, feeling or image as an unwelcome guest, something you would rather turn away if it actually appeared at your door. Open the door and let it in. Let it be unpleasant, noisy, or scary. Imagine “making room” or “creating space” for it by letting it sit next to you or take up space in the room. It sounds hard but it’s an effective strategy. Pretty soon it will stop trying to get your attention.
- 5) Imagine you have a “willingness dial,” where you allow yourself to be 100% willing to be with the thought or image. Turn the imaginary dial up all the way to 100 while you also turn your “resistance dial” close to zero. Say, “I want this feeling.” Or, “I want this thought.” You can also say, “Bring it on,” or “I’m willing to be uncomfortable.” I believe that this technique works better than all the others, because it goes after the anxiety and turns it on its head.

Remember the saying, “What we resist persists.” Do the opposite of what your intuition wants you to do.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a separate practice you will do on purpose, with or without symptoms or triggers, to train your mind and body to become more balanced and peaceful. It's good if you set aside quiet time to do this every day, but some people work on being mindful throughout many of their waking moments (for example, tuning into your senses while you are bathing, doing dishes, stroking your pet, taking a walk, putting gas in your car, or cooking a meal).

Mindfulness encourages you to have ongoing, non-judgmental awareness with internal and environmental events as they occur on a moment-by-moment basis. Remember that the present is moving, so you will try to stay present with each new moment as it emerges. Think of it like exercise: you aren't expected to do it continuously, but you can make an effort to do it intentionally at various designated times. There are different mindfulness practices, but the one that will translate best into your everyday life is the ability to become an Observer and just make contact with each experience as it shows up, noticing things in a neutral, compassionate, or curious way.

Set aside time for mindfulness, and just watch each thought, physical sensation, or feeling as it comes into and out of awareness. Lower your expectations: it's probably not going to feel glamorous, euphoric, totally quiet, or even like an "Aha!" experience. But it will feel better to simply have more distance from your thoughts. Just practice noticing your thought instead of analyzing it, getting lost in it, or pushing it away. If you do this over time, the thought will just come in and out of consciousness – it will just move on. But the mind is sneaky and will eventually take over again, so as soon as you notice you are suddenly lost in a thought, thank yourself for noticing this and come back to the Observer position. Simply start over again and don't be discouraged. Remember, this is why they call it a "practice." If you get lost a hundred times, just come back a hundred times.

If this seems too unstructured or vague, you might enjoy using some of these techniques to help you feel that you are "doing" something with your thoughts. By using visualization, you can gently interact with your thought, thereby giving your practice a little more structure. Although I'm giving you some different visualizations to choose from, settle on just one of these for the duration of your meditation session.

Mindfulness Exercises:

- ◆ Imagine each thought appear as a drop that emerges and then disappears into a calm lake. Wait for the next thought to appear, and then watch it drop and disappear in the same way. Just notice.
- ◆ Picture yourself sitting above a stream, place your thought on a lily pad, and watch it float gently by. When the next thought appears, do the same thing until it flows away from you and out of sight.
- ◆ Imagine spray-painting your thought on the side of a car, and watching the car drive down the street until it disappears. When the next thought appears, do it again.

- ◆ Imagine yourself driving a car and seeing your thoughts appear above you on billboards. Each time a thought appears on a billboard, imagine driving under or past it, leaving it far behind.
- ◆ Imagine sitting in a field watching your thoughts float away on clouds. See this happening each time a thought appears until it eventually drifts away.
- ◆ Imagine seeing your thought written in the sand before a wave washes over it and smooths it away. When the next thought appears, watch how it is erased in the same way.

Make up your own mindfulness exercise! But don't switch around during an exercise – just keep to the one you choose for that day and keep practicing until you feel some distance from your thoughts.