

Defusion: How to Detangle from Thoughts & Feelings

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Do you ever feel as if your thoughts dictate how your day goes?
Or how you interact with others?
Does it sometimes feel exhausting trying to shut off your thoughts?

[Acceptance and Commitment Therapy \(ACT\)](#), poses an interesting idea for thoughts; instead of trying to change, fight, or repress our inner experiences (e.g., thoughts, emotions, sensations, etc.), we can focus on changing how we *relate* to them.

Our minds tell us different stories because that's what minds do. Using an [ACT framework](#), the content of the thought is *not problematic*, it's how we relate to it that can create a problem.

For example, if a person has the thought "I'm useless," and is completely *fused* with it (i.e., giving it their full attention, believing it, getting caught up in it), then they might feel sad or bad about themselves and avoid doing things that are important and/or meaningful to them.

When we are fused with our thoughts, we might believe them as an absolute truth thus, thoughts dictate/rule our behavior. Believing thoughts such as "I'm useless" is *not helpful* and it will not be conducive to living as we want.

Additionally, while *fused* with our thoughts/emotions, we have difficulty separating them from reality and our direct experience; which leads to labeling, evaluating, categorizing, judging, comparing, etc. On the contrary, viewing thoughts for what they are (i.e., passing words, pictures, sensations), facilitates letting them go and being able to be present and focus on your broader experience. This is what the skill of defusion is essentially about.

What is defusion?

Defusion is a skill or technique that is primarily used to *detach, separate, or get some distance from* our thoughts and emotions. Please note that when we use the word 'thought' it also encompasses other internal experiences such as beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, memories, etc.

Defusion

(noun)

A skill or technique that is primarily used to *detach, separate, or get some distance from* our thoughts and emotions.

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According to Russ Harris in [ACT Made Simple \(2009\)](#), cognitive defusion is:

- Looking *at* thoughts rather than *from* thoughts
- *Noticing* thoughts rather than becoming caught up in thoughts
- Letting thoughts come and go rather than holding on to them

“You cannot stop the waves, but you can learn to surf”

-Jon Kabat-Zinn

The aim of defusion is to:

- Decrease our attachment to our inner experiences
- Reduce the believability of thoughts
- Decrease the influence of thoughts on our behaviors and experiences
- Increase our ability to be present and take effective action
- Facilitate psychological flexibility

With defusion techniques you do not battle difficult thoughts, instead, you choose how much attention you pay to them. It also helps to ask yourself:

- Is holding on to this thought/belief helpful?
- Is doing so causing me suffering or keeping me from being effective?
- Am I being pushed around by my thoughts?

These questions aid in better understanding the *workability* concept. This is assessing if what we are doing is *working* to live a meaningful life, and it's also choosing to take action based on what works instead of what is true.

Here is an experiential example to better understand the concepts of fusion and defusion.

How Defusion Works: Hands as Thoughts Metaphor

Put your hands together, palms facing upwards, as if they were pages on an open book. Imagine that your hands are your thoughts. Now, slowly raise your hands up toward your face until you are covering your eyes and can only see through the gaps of your fingers.

Take a look around and notice how this impacts your view and connection with your environment.

Notice it is difficult to see much other than your hands (thoughts), so what would it be like to go through your day this way? Would you be limited or miss out on things? Would it be challenging to respond to others or the world around you?

This is a good representation of *fusion*. We become so entangled with our thoughts that we get disconnected from our environment and the present (here and now) experience. Similarly, our thoughts also have a big impact on our behavior and capacity to be effective.

Now, slowly begin lowering your hands and notice the difference.

Notice as the distance from your hands (thoughts) and your eyes increase, you are able to take in more information and it is easier to connect with others or your environment.

This is a good representation of *defusion*. Your hands (thoughts) are still there, and you can look at them without becoming entangled with them. If the thoughts are useful/workable you may use them; if they are not, you notice them and let them sit there. This aids in becoming flexible and taking effective behavior.

Adapted from: [Harris, R. \(2009\) ACT made simple](#). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Defusion Techniques

You may feel silly at first but these defusion techniques work. Try them and see for yourself. You can use whichever technique or techniques work for you. These are not meant to be done in order.

1. Just Noticing

Saying to yourself “I notice I’m having a thought of...”

You may use labels to describe your inner experience. For example, “there is that ‘I’m unlovable’ thought,” or “I see you [mind] catastrophizing again,” etc.

2. Thanking the Mind

Telling your mind “Thanks for the feedback,” or “Thank you for this interesting thought” when having difficult thoughts.

It aids if you do it in a somewhat sarcastic manner so that you don't take your thoughts too seriously. Remember that your goal is to change your relationship to our thoughts.

3. **Mindful Watching**

Looking at your thoughts with curiosity and openness, just noticing how they come and go (flow), without attempting to control or change them.

Here is a helpful exercise for mindful watching using imagery:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1C8hwj5LXw>

4. **Repeating the Thought**

Use a silly voice when repeating the thoughts out loud (e.g., using Bugs Bunny's voice), sing your thoughts, or repeat the thoughts out loud and over and over until only sound remains.

Who would benefit from defusion skills?

Anyone who struggles with recurring 'negative' thoughts, or thoughts that significantly impact mood and behavior.

Defusion is a particularly helpful technique for those who struggle with depressive and anxiety symptoms. Furthermore, this actually is a skill that is useful for *anyone*, regardless of having or not having a psychological condition, as it is not uncommon to get tangled up and fused with our thoughts from time to time