

More bits and pieces about Cognitive Defusion

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 true. Then, redirect your focus to the present moment.

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