Defusion techniques

Exercises to help you “de-fuse” or detach from your thoughts, allowing you to distance yourself from negative or worrying thoughts rather than taking them on as truths or fact.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **Milk Milk Milk**

Close your eyes and imagine you’re opening a container of fresh, cold milk (or another beverage of your preference). Feel the texture of the container. Is it cold? Is there condensation? Then imagine pouring some milk into a glass. See the white, creamy stream bubble up and fill the glass. Smell the milk, and then take a sip. Dwell on this sequence until it becomes very clear to you. At this point you may have the faint taste of milk in your mouth or feel thirsty. This is how powerful our brain is. It can take imaginary or fictional thoughts and turn them into reality—similar to how anxious and fearful thoughts can consume our bodies and minds and feel real and true.

Now, take 45 seconds and say the word milk out loud over, and over again. Say it as fast as you can while still pronouncing it clearly. After these 45 seconds, reflect on what happened to the meaning of the word and what your reactions were. Most likely the word began to sound like nonsense, not sounding like what it describes, and you may have even questioned why it is called that. You took the power away from the word milk, rendering it meaningless. Try this strategy with negative thoughts you have about yourself. Sum them up into one word, like “failure”, “slow”, “doomed”, “stupid”, etc. And repeat as needed.

1. **Leaves in a Stream**

This is a meditative practice to help with letting go of thoughts rather than taking them on as truth. Sit with your eyes closed and imagine you’re sitting on the bank of a slow moving stream on a warm, peaceful autumn day. Occasionally a leaf falls into the water and floats away on the current, drifting out of sight downstream. See the leaves, hear the water, and feel it moving over your toes or fingers. Give yourself time to form a clear picture of this. Then start noticing your thoughts. Whenever a thought comes to mind, sum it up in a simple word or phrase: “boring”, “not smart enough”, “dumb exercise”, and so on. Then take this word or phrase and put it on a leaf and let it float away… out of sight, out of mind. If thoughts arise as images, without words, then place the image on a leaf and let it float away… out of sight, out of mind. Don’t try to make the current flow faster or slower, and don’t try to change what’s on the leaves in any way. Don’t worry if the stream won’t flow or if you find yourself stuck on a leaf along with your thought. Just notice all these things and then return to the scene beside the stream. And begin again. Do this for five minutes. Then, open your eyes, and record your reactions.

1. **Thank you, mind**

Every time an unpleasant though pops up, say “thank you, mind” to yourself. This is a way of reminding yourself that this is only a thought, and to remind you that you are not your thoughts, you are stronger, so thank you. It may take several thank yous to defuse from a persistent train of thought. Just keep saying it until you mind gives up trying to convince you that these negatives thoughts are truth. Example: “You’re not going to do well”, “thank you mind”; “other people are better than you”, “thank you mind”; “you’re going to fail”, “thank you mind”, and so on.

1. **How old is this?**

Each time you have a familiar negative thought, as yourself “how old is this?” Recall the earliest time you can remember having the thought. Remind yourself that this is just a thought that comes up from time to time, and you will continue to survive it, carry on with your life, and let it go, as you have done before.

1. **Card Carrying**

Write your most typical bothersome or negative thoughts on an index card, or on a note on your smart phone and carry these with you wherever you go. When your mind comes up with one of these thoughts, dismiss it by saying to yourself, “I’ve got that one already, it’s written down.” You don’t need to once again dwell on it, or worry about potentially new instances of it. You’ve already spent time doing that before and you’ve got it on your card or note, so you can let it go.

1. **What’s that in service of?**

When a negative or worrisome thought bothers you, ask yourself “What’s that in service of? What is my mind trying to get me to do?” For example, if you worry about failing a test, or that you have so much homework to do that you’ll never be able to get it all done, ask yourself these questions and brainstorm what your mind is trying to get you to do or realize by having this thought? In this instance, while these thoughts may have intended to motivate you to study or get started on your homework, your brain’s over exaggeration of these thoughts is now trying to get you to give up until it’s too late to study or start our homework. Seeing the purpose of these thoughts are different than buying into them and realizing this can allow you to see them not as truths, but as your mind trying to get you to do (or not do) something.

Now ask yourself, “And how has that thought worked for me?” Chances are giving up on studying or starting your homework has only led you to not do well on a test or homework, only leading to more stress, anxiety, and work on your part. By seeing and exposing the consequences of taking on your thoughts as truths (being your thought rather than just having a thought) this can help you to gain some distance from your thoughts and create space between what you think and who you are.

Now that we’ve defused these thoughts, whenever we have these thoughts, we can remind ourselves of what this thought is trying to do and not buy into these thoughts and say, “I’ll take this thought with me and still…”. In this example, “I’ll take this thought with me and still study and relax, and work on my homework.”

This is the realization you can carry with you: that you can have negative thoughts, but not have it stop you from living life and doing well. That these things will come up, but that you will keep moving forward.

Cognitive Flexibility

These exercises are geared at broadening your thinking to lessen the power that your negative or worrisome thoughts have over you.

1. **Using big picture awareness**

Focusing solely on the negative means we fail to notice, remember, or anticipate anything that feels good. Stepping back and taking a look at the big picture (both negative and positive) is a way to overcome this cognitive habit. For this exercise, after your brain has brought up a negative thought about yourself, an experience, or situation, add some positive assessments to help balance your perspective. For each negative thought, acknowledge two things you liked, appreciated or that you did well.

1. **Worst Case Scenario Coping Plan**

If a worry or fear is causing you stress or anxiety, play it through to the end. Assume your worst case prediction or thought comes true. Follow through with what would happen and how you would cope. Make a plan or brainstorm how you could deal with the worst case situation. Ask yourself, “What specifically would you do to face a crisis?” Brainstorm actions steps of what consequences you would have to navigate and possible alternatives and adjustments of your expectations. Also brainstorm and ask yourself how you could deal with the emotional and cognitive consequences of your worst case? What defusion, mindfulness, and other coping mechanisms could you use? Finally, think about interpersonal coping strategies. List any friends, family, or community that might be helpful in this scenario and how you would talk to them about this.

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*To discuss or incorporate these techniques into your routine, come meet with a learning specialist for an Individual Consultation Appointment (ICA)!*

1. Techniques in this handout have been adapted from: McKay, M., Fanning, P., & Zurita, O. P. (2011). *Mind and emotions: A universal treatment for emotional disorders*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)