

Thought Defusion Exercise

Thought defusion is a technique borrowed from acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), which has proven to be a very successful treatment for emotional distress.

When distressing thoughts keep repeating, it's often easy to get "hooked" on them, like a fish biting on a bait hook (Chodron, 2003). In contrast, thought defusion will help you mindfully observe your thoughts without getting stuck on them. With practice, this skill will give you more freedom to choose which thoughts you want to focus on and which thoughts you want to let go of instead of getting stuck on all of them.

Thought defusion requires the use of your imagination. The object of this skill is to visualize your thoughts, either as pictures or words, harmlessly floating away from you without obsessing about them or analyzing them. Whichever way you choose to do this is okay. Here are some suggestions that other people have found helpful:

- Imagine sitting in a field watching your thoughts float away on clouds.
- Picture yourself sitting near a stream watching your thoughts float past on leaves.
- See your thoughts written in the sand and then watch the waves wash them away.
- Envision yourself driving a car and see your thoughts pass by on billboards.
- See your thoughts leave your head and watch them sizzle in the flame of a candle.
- Imagine sitting beside a tree and watch your thoughts float down on leaves.
- Picture yourself standing in a room with two doors; then watch your thoughts enter through one door and leave through the other.

If one of these ideas works for you, that's great. If not, feel free to create your own. Just be sure that your idea captures the purpose of this exercise, which is to visually watch your thoughts come and go without holding on to them and without analyzing them. Remember to use the concept of radical acceptance while doing this exercise. Let your thoughts be whatever they are and don't get distracted fighting them or criticizing yourself for having them. Just let the thoughts come and go.

Read the instructions before beginning the exercise to familiarize yourself with the experience. If you feel more comfortable listening to the instructions, use an audio-recording device to record the instructions in a slow, even voice so you can listen to them while practicing this technique. When you are first using thought defusion, set a kitchen timer or an alarm clock for three to five minutes and practice letting go of your thoughts until the alarm goes off. Then as you get more accustomed to using this technique, you can set the alarm for longer periods of time, like eight or ten minutes. But don't expect to be able to sit still that long when you first start. In the beginning, three to five minutes is a long time to use thought defusion.

To begin, find a comfortable place to sit in a room where you won't be disturbed for as long as you've set your timer. Turn off any distracting sounds. Take a few slow, long breaths, relax, and close your eyes.

The Script:

Now, in your imagination, picture yourself in the scenario that you chose, watching your thoughts come and go, whether it's by the beach, near a stream, in a field, in a room, or wherever. Do your best to imagine yourself in that scene. After you do, start to become aware of the thoughts that you're having.

Start to observe the thoughts that are coming up, whatever they are. Don't try to stop your thoughts, and do your best not to criticize yourself for any of the thoughts. Just watch the thoughts arise, and then, using whatever technique you've chosen, watch the thoughts disappear. Whatever the thought is, big or small, important or unimportant, watch the thought arise in your mind and then let it float away or disappear by whichever means you've chosen.

Just continue to watch the thoughts arise and disappear. Use pictures to represent the thoughts or words, whatever works best for you. Do your best to watch the thoughts arise and disappear without getting hooked into them and without criticizing yourself.

If more than one thought comes up at the same time, see them both arise and disappear. If the thoughts come very quickly, do your best to watch them all disappear without getting hooked on any of them. Continue to breathe and watch the thoughts come and go until your timer goes off.

When you've finished, take a few more slow, long breaths and then slowly open your eyes and return your focus to the room.