

Cognitive Defusion: An Empirically Supported Strategy to Change Your Relationship with Problematic Thoughts

In this module, we will:

Define cognitive defusion (hereafter labeled as CDef)

Explain the difficulty with cognitive *fusion*

Describe how CDef works

Identify when CDef can be particularly useful

Offer two metaphors to help get unstuck (defused) from painful and self-defeating thoughts

Outline four CDef techniques

What is Cognitive Defusion (CDef)?

CDef (originally called cognitive distancing by the founder of cognitive therapy, Dr. Aaron Beck) is a process where -- under certain circumstances -- we choose a different relationship with the stream of thought that flows through our heads. This different relationship can be characterized by:

more **distance** from negative thoughts

more **mindful** i.e. observing our thoughts rather than swept up with them

less willing to take our thoughts seriously i.e recognize thoughts don't often correspond to the breadth and depth of reality

more focus on direct experiences e.g. feelings, observations, sensations

The Problem With Cognitive Fusion

To appreciate the benefits of CDef, we first need to understand the qualities of cognitive fusion.

Cognitive fusion refers to the pairing together of thoughts and direct experience so you can't distinguish between the two. Almost everything we see and experience is labeled, categorized, dissected, compared and evaluated. These mental processes contribute to cognitive fusion.

This is what the mind naturally does; and it works for most types of problem solving. Indeed, at times our cognitive capacities can produce the desirable and fulfilling **state of flow**, which erases the boundary between the self and some absorbing, challenging task. This higher level thinking mode is the basis of our scientific, technological and artistic achievements.

But when this mind machine, the machine that labels, compares and judges, is turned on ourselves, we often have a different outcome. Not infrequently these labels and

judgments are negative and global (e.g. I'm worthless, I'm a failure...he's selfish...they're mean). We then become fused with these judgments. They come to define ourselves and our experience in a manner that doesn't do justice to complexity or nuance. Nevertheless the negative judgments *become* our reality. If we use the metaphor of life as a journey, a journey that involves meeting challenges, enjoying the scenery and leading a valued life; then these judgments are like road signs(e.g." You're lazy", Why try?") that distract us from the journey and prompt us to drive into a ditch. CDef enables us to not obey these road signs even if we still observe them.

How Does CDef Work?

The assumption in applying CDef is: problematic thoughts themselves are not the problem; but the **fusion** with those thoughts is the problem. CDef highlights the following question: *Who is going to take charge of your life? You or your mind?*

CDef works by promoting this mindset and offering a set of skills.

The mindset is one of having a partnership relationship with our thoughts; particularly our negative recurring thoughts. The partnership relationship means we don't try to suppress or vanquish the difficult thoughts that pop up in our heads; but nor do we defer to them. This relationship means that we determine which thoughts are workable i.e. help us solve problems and proceed down our chosen road of life. If the thoughts are workable, fine; if not, don't let them drive you into a ditch.

The set of skills promoted by defusion strategies include:

Evaluating thoughts as to their workability i.e. are some set of thoughts enabling you to live a rich, meaningful and valued life? Or are they creating needless pain?

A more acute sense of viewing thoughts as thoughts. This produces less entanglement with problematic thoughts. Also, greater flexibility in behavior.

Staying in the present. Defusion gets us out of our head and more into direct experience.

When is CDef Particularly Useful?

For trains of thought that are long-standing and repetitive. Especially for fused conceptualizations of the self, such as "I'm worthless", "I'm broken," etc. Such thoughts may have a stale quality, but they continue to have a significant impact on our mood.

CDef can lessen that impact.

When we have struggled to challenge the accuracy of our negative thoughts (cognitive restructuring) but remain stuck. CDef can reduce the impact of such thoughts without having to change the content or even the frequency of the thoughts. In CDef we don't battle difficult thoughts; we let them come and go.

When we see our thinking is a barrier to moving in a positive direction, CDef can help us bypass such thoughts as “What if?” and “I couldn’t stand it if” and take risks in line with what we deeply want. CDef helps us move in the direction that might bring us fulfillment. When we are dealing with a chronic stressful situation and very well may be dealing with it in a realistic way; but don’t want to focus on the stress and sense we have the option of more vitality, more flexibility in the situation.

Defusion Metaphors

The following metaphors can facilitate an understanding of fusion and defusion. They can also be used as exercises to experience defusion.

Hands in Front of Face Metaphor/Exercise

Put your hands in your lap, side-by-side as if they are pages in a book. Your hands represent your thoughts, particularly your repetitive, negative thoughts. Now slowly bring your hands up to your face to where they are almost touching your face and covering your eyes, so you can only see between the gaps of your fingers.

Notice how hard it is to see much other than your hands. You’re entangled by them. You’re cut off and disconnected from your environment. Very little information can get in.

Imagine what it would be like to go around all day like this. How difficult it would be to act effectively or respond to life’s challenges. This is what we meant by fusion.

Now, slowly lower your hands and return them to your lap. Notice what happens as the space between you and your hands (thoughts) increases. Notice what happens between you and the room; how much more information is coming in, how much easier it is to engage in the world and take effective action. This is what we mean by defusion.

Notice also that your hands (thoughts) haven’t disappeared: they’re sitting right there. And if there is something useful and workable you can do with them, by all means use them. If not, just let them sit there.

This is what we mean by defusion. We get some space from our problematic thoughts, some flexibility in our behavior.

Passengers on the Bus Metaphor/Exercise

Since we see people or things as separate from ourselves, another way to defuse language is to imagine thoughts as people or objects. The Passengers on the Bus metaphor capitalizes on this method. It also highlights two other therapeutic processes: acceptance of difficult feelings and value-driven action.

Let's see if we can look at some of the thoughts and feelings you have been struggling with through a different perspective.

Imagine your life journey is like driving a bus. Now picture the bus and yourself as the driver. There are passengers in the bus and you are picking up additional passengers

Think of these passengers as your thoughts, feelings, bodily states, memories, fantasies, and so on. Some of these passengers (thoughts) are quite lovely like, "I have great kids." But a whole bunch of them? Not so much.

In fact many of them are thoroughly obnoxious: bullying, intimidating, shaming, etc. ("Don't do it, You'll make a fool of yourself", "Deep down, you're just a selfish person," "Why bother?" "No one who really knew you could love you.")

These passengers don't hesitate to speak up and criticize you. Furthermore, they start telling you how to drive, "Turn left here, pull over, slow down, speed up."

So, as the bus driver, what do you do? You could argue with them or tell them to quiet down, I suppose. You could even stop the bus and really try to reason with them. But notice: You're not driving the bus anymore, you're dealing with them and there can be a lot of them; and some of them are pretty strong. Chances are -- instead of bowing to reason -- they will tell you to do what they say, or else they might have to get right in your face. If you do obey them, they say, well maybe they might back off.

But here's the thing: You are the driver of the bus. You may not be able to silence or totally control them, but the passengers can't make you do anything. Are you going to obey them, try to control them? Or keep driving the bus, making the stops you want to make, moving toward your destination?

CDef Techniques

These techniques can be used in our moment-to-moment stream of thought, particularly when it is repetitive or self-sabotaging.

Or you can practice these techniques. To practice the techniques, you should first take the following step:

Think about the typical negative story you have about yourself. Crystallize that story into a short phrase. This is typically a harsh self-judgment, such as "I'm a loser," "I'm incompetent,". Focus on that phrase, for a minute or two in order to elicit a sense of

fusion with the phrase. Then let that phrase be a target for practicing the defusion techniques.

Technique #1 “I notice...”

This involves adding the phrase “I notice I am having the thought..”to your recurring difficult thoughts. Adding this phrase frequently to your repetitive painful thoughts will begin to change your relationship with that thought.

Technique #2 Label your Thoughts

This involves labeling the kind of thought you are having. There are two options or levels with this technique, both of which are effective.

- (1) Label your thoughts as *descriptive* or *evaluative* (almost all thoughts fall into one of these two categories).

Descriptive thoughts point to direct experience. Descriptive thoughts point out any aspect of something that we can perceive with one of our five senses i.e. see it, hear it, taste it, smell it, touch it.

Evaluative language pretends to derive absolute truth about the implications of that experience (i.e. that it is good-bad, fair-unfair, right-wrong, weak-strong, etc.)

- (1) Label the *kind* of thought you are having e.g. “I notice my mind machine producing a memory” (or an image, a fantasy, a question, a qualification, a blame statement, a should statement)
- (1) Label the possible *nm* in your thinking. You may be aware of the labels cognitive therapists teach their clients such as catastrophizing, mind reading, all or none thinking, jumping to conclusions, filtering, personalizing, etc. If so, use them as labels e.g. “I notice my mind is catastrophizing (or jumping to conclusions, personalizing, etc).
- (4) Come up with short phrase for your repetitive, sticky thoughts (e.g. “there’s my I’m incompetent thought”)

Technique #3 “Thank you Mind”

The spirit here is to not take your difficult thoughts too seriously; or get into a struggle with them. When your mind generates harsh and painful thoughts, you “thank” your mind in a somewhat sarcastic manner, perhaps similar to how you might respond to a rebellious teenager who is saying something provocative to get a rise out of you.

Technique #4 Practice Mindful Watching

Mindfulness involves paying attention to your thoughts with an attitude of acceptance, openness and curiosity. Set aside time (at least five minutes) when you try to notice thought after thought after thought without trying to control or evaluate. If you find yourself controlling or evaluating then notice that and then notice what thought comes next.

There are a couple of imagery strategies that can help mindful watching. These are closed eyes techniques.

- (1) Thoughts on a screen. Imagine yourself in a movie theatre or in front of your television and picture your thoughts -- words or pictures -- on the screen, like rolling credits.

- (2) Leaves on a stream. Imagine yourself in a forest sitting on a bank next to a beautiful slow moving stream. It is the fall so there are leaves floating down the stream. Notice the leaves floating down the stream. Then pay attention to your thoughts. Then when a thought (word or picture) pops up, imagine putting it on a leaf floating by. Put the next thought on the next leaf. Try to sit by the stream for at least five minutes and notice the leaves with your thoughts on them float by.

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