




“I’m Having the Thought That” – A Cognitive Defusion Exercise

ACT

 Exercise

 45-60 min

 Client or group

 No

Cognitive defusion is a core Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) process that helps clients reduce the impact of unhelpful thoughts by altering their function rather than their content [1, 2]. Rather than attempting to suppress, debate, or replace unhelpful thoughts and narratives, practicing cognitive defusion invites clients to observe their thoughts as transient events in the mind rather than facts or commands.

The “I’m Having the Thought That” exercise is a classic and empirically supported method of teaching cognitive defusion. It works by encouraging clients to observe their thoughts mindfully and prefix them with the phrase “I’m having the thought that...” which creates psychological distance, greater perspective, and emotional regulation [3]. By repeating the phrase multiple times, clients begin to notice thoughts rather than identify with them. This promotes psychological flexibility, presence, and alignment with core values.

A process-based analysis of defusion highlights its role in disrupting cognitive fusion, where individuals over-identify with their internal experiences [3]. Defusion techniques have been shown to alleviate anxiety, depression, relationship functioning, and trauma-related symptoms [4, 5, 6]. This is especially relevant in family and interpersonal contexts where rigid or automatic beliefs can lead to entrenched maladaptive behavior [4].

Hayes [7] emphasizes that ACT’s ultimate objective is to promote a life of vitality and values-alignment, not symptom elimination. From a process-oriented perspective, cognitive defusion is not about controlling thoughts but gaining freedom from their dominance so that clients can act effectively in service of their values and what matters most to them.



Author

This tool was created by Jo Nash, Ph.D.



Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients reduce the dominance and believability of unhelpful thoughts by practicing cognitive defusion. Through mindfully noticing and repeated rephrasing, clients learn to recognize thoughts as mental events not truths, thereby increasing psychological flexibility and their capacity for values-driven behavior.



Advice

- This exercise can be introduced in a one-to-one session with a client, then given as a homework exercise using the worksheet attached. You can also offer the exercise in a workshop using one worksheet per person, with a group sharing at the reflection stage (see *step 5*).
- Practitioners should model the exercise first and invite curiosity rather than judgment. If clients feel skeptical or silly, normalize this reaction. It's part of the process. What matters is whether the exercise shifts their *experience* of the thought, not whether they "believe in" the technique at first.
- Encourage clients to choose thoughts that are personally relevant and emotionally charged, as the contrast between fusion and defusion will be more palpable. After the exercise, guide clients through gentle reflection.
- It's important to highlight that defusion doesn't make a thought go away or feel better immediately. Instead, it helps the client step back, notice the thought for what it is, and pause before choosing how to respond.



References

1. Hayes, S. (2019). *A liberated mind: How to pivot toward what matters*. Avery.
2. Ruiz, F. J., Gil-Luciano, B., & Segura-Vargas, M. A. (2023). Cognitive defusion. *Oxford handbook of acceptance and commitment therapy*. pp. 206-229. Oxford University Press.
3. Assaz, D. A., Tyndall, I., Oshiro, C. K., & Roche, B. (2023). A process-based analysis of cognitive defusion in acceptance and commitment therapy. *Behavior Therapy*, 54(6), 1020-1035. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2022.06.003>
4. Gao, F., Cong, Y., Xiao, M., Xu, Y., Dong, S., Yu, Z., & Han, L. (2024). The relationship between cognitive defusion, marital satisfaction, and the parent-child relationship: an analysis through APIM and CFM. *Current Psychology*, 43(45), 34511-34522. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-06995-2>
5. Harris, R. (2022). *Trauma-focused ACT: A practitioner's guide to working with mind, body, and emotion using acceptance and commitment therapy*. New Harbinger Publications.
6. Larsson, A., Hartley, S., & McHugh, L. (2022). A randomised controlled trial of brief web-based acceptance and commitment Therapy on the general mental health, depression, anxiety and stress of college Students. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 24, 10-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcbs.2022.02.005>
7. Hayes, S. C. (2025). Idionomic analysis, a process-based approach, and the ultimate purpose of acceptance and commitment therapy. *Psychiatric Clinics*. [https://www.psych.theclinics.com/article/S0193-953X\(25\)00033-4/abstract](https://www.psych.theclinics.com/article/S0193-953X(25)00033-4/abstract)



“I’m Having the Thought That” – A Cognitive Defusion Exercise

Introduction

In ACT we distinguish between helpful and unhelpful thoughts. Sometimes, we get caught up in unhelpful thoughts, especially negative self-talk or self-criticism, for example, ‘I’m not good enough’ or ‘you’re such an idiot’. When we get hooked by unhelpful thoughts we may believe in them and treat them like facts or orders. In ACT this is called ‘cognitive fusion’.

This tool is designed to unhook you from unhelpful thoughts by stepping back and seeing your thoughts for what they really are: just words and images passing through your mind. In ACT, getting unhooked from unhelpful thoughts is called ‘cognitive defusion’.

Practicing cognitive defusion when experiencing unhelpful thoughts can help alleviate anxiety and other unpleasant emotions by creating space between your feelings about yourself and your thoughts.

This exercise introduces a simple cognitive defusion method that can be used anywhere, at any time, called “*I’m Having the Thought That...*” There are step-by-step instructions below and a log template attached in *Appendix*.

Step 1: Choose a sticky thought

Write down a distressing or repetitive thought that has been bothering you. It could be something like:

- “I’m a failure.”
- “I’ll never get better.”
- “I can’t do this.”
- “I’m just not good enough.”

Try to pick a thought that feels emotionally charged or believable.

Step 2: Say it as you normally would

Repeat the thought aloud or in your mind just as it is. Notice how it makes you feel. Do you believe it? Does it seem like a fact?



Step 3: Add the defusion phrase

Now, say the same thought again, but add in front of it:

"I'm having the thought that..."

So:

"I'm a failure," becomes "I'm having the thought that I'm a failure."

Say it slowly and mindfully.

Step 4: Repeat with a twist

Say it a third time, this time even slower.

Now try adding a second layer: "I notice that I'm having the thought that..."

So:

"I'm having the thought that I'm a failure," becomes "I notice that I'm having the thought that I'm a failure."

As you say it, tune in to how your body feels. Has anything shifted?

Step 5: Reflection

You will find it useful to reflect on this practice each time you do it and share the reflection with your coach, counsellor, therapist, or in your group. Here are some prompts, but you can write them as you wish using the log template:

- How believable is the thought now at the end of the exercise? You can score it: where 0 is not believable at all, and 10 is totally believable?
- How believable was the thought at first? You can score it: where 0 is not believable at all, and 10 is totally believable?
- What changed (if anything) in your emotional or physical response?
- What could you do now that you weren't able to do before you did the exercise?



Step 6: Practice and apply

You can use this practice whenever an unhelpful thought arises that triggers a stress response or stirs up uncomfortable feelings.

You can also:

- Keep a defusion log.
- Share observations with a therapist or coach.
- Combine with a 2-3 minute mindfulness check-in for greater impact.



Appendix: “I’m Having the Thought That” log template

Step 1

Choose a sticky thought and write it down below.

Step 2

Say it as you normally would in your mind or aloud. How does it make you feel? Do you believe it? Does it seem like a fact? Jot down your responses below.

Step 3

Now, say the same thought again, but add in front of it: “I’m having the thought that...” slowly and mindfully. How do you feel now? Is there any shift? Note it below.



Step 4

Say it a third time, this time even slower. Now add a second layer: "I notice that I'm having the thought that..." What are you feeling? Is there any further shift? Note it below.

Step 5

Reflection space:

How believable is the thought now at the end of the exercise? You can score it: where 0 is not believable at all, and 10 is totally believable?

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

Not believable at all

Totally believable

How believable was the thought at first? You can score it: where 0 is not believable at all, and 10 is totally believable?

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

Not believable at all

Totally believable

What changed (if anything) in your emotional or physical response?



What could you do now that you weren't able to do before you did the exercise?

A large, empty rectangular box with a light beige background and a thin orange border, intended for a user to write their response.