




## “Thanking the Mind” – A Cognitive Defusion Exercise

### ACT

 Exercise

 45-60 min

 Client or group

 No

Cognitive defusion is a core process of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and refers to altering the way one relates to unhelpful thoughts, so they are less triggering of uncomfortable or distressing feelings and have less influence over behavior [1, 2]. Unlike traditional cognitive-behavioral approaches that seek to challenge or replace negative thoughts, defusion teaches clients to take a step back from thoughts and observe them as transient mental events, rather than truths, facts, or commands [2, 3].

When clients are fused with their thoughts, they identify with the content of their thoughts automatically. For example, the thought “I’m a failure” results in the belief that I am a failure. This cognitive fusion fuels avoidance and suffering, particularly in those struggling with anxiety, trauma, or substance use disorders [4, 5]. However, defusion interrupts this process by promoting a mindful and non-literal relationship to cognition, thus creating a space between thinking and behavior [6]. The gap created by defusion techniques undermines reactivity and permits a more nuanced responsiveness [2, 6]. This provides an opportunity to choose values-aligned behaviour that is the foundation of flourishing and psychological flexibility [1, 3].

This “Thanking the Mind” exercise uses humor, irony, and personification to help clients detach from the literal content of thoughts. By responding to internal commentary with gentle humor by thanking their mind and naming the story, clients practice recognizing thoughts as automatic, habitual, and often unhelpful narratives the mind generates, regardless of their truth or relevance. This shift supports the broader ACT goal of living intentionally in the presence of inner discomfort [7, 8].

This deceptively simple practice can help clients become aware of unhelpful storylines (e.g., “You’re not good enough,” “It’ll go wrong”) and respond with self-compassion rather than resistance or compliance. When combined with other ACT defusion metaphors, and acceptance practices like *Willing Hands* or *Expanding Space*, it strengthens the foundation for choosing committed, values-based action over experiential avoidance.



### Author

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



## Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients develop cognitive defusion skills by noticing 'pop-up' thoughts and internal narratives, then responding with non-judgmental awareness using the phrase "Thanks, mind, for the [...] story!" This can be said aloud or mentally to reduce the influence of unhelpful thoughts and enhance psychological flexibility.



## 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 7*).
- Before using this exercise, normalize the experience of having automatic, intrusive, or irrational thoughts. Emphasize that the mind's job is to constantly narrate, predict, warn, and judge. It's not broken, it's just doing what minds do [1].
- Clients may initially find the exercise silly or artificial. That's okay. Encourage them to treat it as an experiment in relating differently to their thoughts, rather than believe them or silence them. The goal is not to get rid of the thought, but to create *space around it*.
- This practice is especially helpful when combined with values work or acceptance practices that permit emotional exposure. You can use it as a cue in-session (e.g., when a fused thought appears, pause and say "Thanks, mind!" together), and encourage clients to use it throughout their day as a defusion habit.
- For clients with trauma or perfectionism, use sensitivity to ensure that the exercise isn't misused to mock or invalidate emotional pain. It's a way to disempower unhelpful thinking, not dismiss lived experience.



## References

1. Hayes, S. C. (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. 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.
4. Haller, H., Breilmann, P., Schröter, M., Dobos, G., & Cramer, H. (2021). A systematic review and meta-analysis of acceptance- and mindfulness-based interventions for DSM-5 anxiety disorders. *Scientific Reports*, 11(1), 20385. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-99882-w>
5. Berman, B. M., & Kurlancheek, K. (2021). The choice point model of acceptance and commitment therapy with inpatient substance use and co-occurring populations: A pilot study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 758356. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.758356>
6. 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>
7. Byrne, G., Ghráda, Á. N., O'Mahony, T., & Brennan, E. (2021). A systematic review of the use of acceptance and commitment therapy in supporting parents. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 94, 378-407. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12282>
8. Han, A., Yuen, H. K., & Jenkins, J. (2021). Acceptance and commitment therapy for family caregivers: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 26(1), 82-102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105320941217>



# “Thanking the Mind” – A Cognitive Defusion Exercise

## Introduction

This practice teaches your client:

- **Defusion:** stepping back from your thoughts instead of getting entangled in them.
- **Mindfulness:** noticing without judgment.
- **Self-compassion:** treating your mind like a well-meaning friend, not an enemy.
- **Values-based action:** reconnecting with what truly matters.

You can introduce it using the script below:

“Your mind is a master storyteller. It runs 24/7, offering you thoughts, judgments, predictions, memories, and warnings. Some of these are helpful and others... not so much. In ACT, we often say the mind is like a radio always playing, whether you like the station or not. You can’t turn it off, but you can change your relationship with what it’s saying.

In this exercise, you’ll learn a simple yet powerful cognitive defusion technique called “Thanking the Mind.” It helps you create space between you and your thoughts so that you can choose your actions based on your values, rather than feeling pushed around or compelled by automatic reactions.”

### Step 1: Noticing the thought

This technique is really useful when clients have a regular default storyline they revert to when describing their responses to problems, or if they begin a negative commentary about themselves in a session.

In either situation, suggest your client take a breather, gently pause, and check in with themselves. Ask:

“What thoughts are showing up in your mind right now?”

**Tip:** Common self-critical thoughts include: “I can’t do this.” “They think I’m stupid.” “This will never work.” “I’m a failure.”

Encourage your client to step back by saying:

“How about whenever this shows up, you don’t try to change, fix, or argue with it. Just notice it.”



## Step 2: Labelling thought

This step involves guiding the client to defuse gently by labelling the thought. You can say:

“Now you’ve noticed the thought, try creating a bit of space by gently repeating the thought beginning with *I’m having the thought that...*”

**Tip:** common examples might be: “I’m having the thought that I’m going to mess this up.” “I’m having the thought that no one likes me.”

“Labelling can help you see the thought *as a thought*, not a truth or command.”

Ask your client:

“Did you feel any shift take place?”

**\*Optional deepening: naming the story:** If it’s a familiar pattern or recurring theme for your client, they can name the story.

“If this is something that shows up often when you’re facing challenges or tough times, it can help to name the story, like:

- Ah, here’s the ‘I’m not good enough’ story.
- Looks like the ‘people always leave’ story is back.

What would you call your story?”

## Step 3: Thanking the mind

Your client might find this ridiculous or silly. It is a bit, but humor promotes defusion. Be careful to normalize them feeling a bit self-conscious, but encourage them to give it a try.

“Now you’ve noticed your thoughts, reply to your mind with kindness and humor, like you’re speaking to a well-meaning, overprotective friend. Try saying out loud ‘thanks, mind’ and you can use add-ons, like:

- “Thanks, mind. That’s a classic.”
- “Thanks, mind. You’re trying to protect me.”
- “Thanks, mind. You’ve been rehearsing that thought a lot lately.”
- “Thanks, mind, for that catastrophic prediction.”

Now try it...”



When your client has given it a try, explain:

“This phrase helps you stop struggling with the thought. You’re not agreeing with it or pushing it away, just noticing it and acknowledging it.”

#### Step 4: Refocusing on what matters

This step involves reminding your client that they can choose to do what matters despite the internal commentary.

“Now that you’ve created some space, bring your attention back to the present. Given what you care about, when these thoughts show up again, what’s a step you take toward what matters to you anyway?”

If your client struggles then you can suggest the following prompts:

- Taking a small action toward a goal
- Continuing the task at hand
- Reaching out to someone
- Taking a mindful breath

Remind your client:

“You are learning to act in service of your values, not your mind’s comments.”

#### Step 5: Practice in daily life

Assure your client that the more they practice this, the easier it gets, and share the journalling worksheet with them in *Appendix* as homework.

To close the exercise, suggest the following:

“When you’re practicing at home, try saying “Thanks, mind!” whenever:

- A self-judgment pops up
- You feel anxious or avoidant
- Your mind starts spiraling with worst-case scenarios
- You notice a familiar storyline playing again

Like any skill, it grows stronger with use. You’re not trying to eliminate thoughts; you’re practicing choosing how you relate to them.”



### Step 6: Reflect

At the end of the exercise, you might ask your client to share their reflections with the following questions:

- “What happened when you noticed and labelled the thought and just thought, not fact?”
- How did it feel to acknowledge your thoughts with kindness and humor?
- What happened when I didn’t buy into your thoughts or try to fight them?”

Wrap it up by reminding your client:

“Your mind means well, but it’s not always helpful. It evolved to keep you safe, not happy. By learning to thank it and naming its stories, you become freer to live with more presence, choice, and purpose. So next time the “I can’t” or “What if” thoughts start up, take a breath and try: Thanks, mind. I hear you. Now, what do I want to do?”



## Appendix: Thanking the Mind & Naming the Story: A Journaling Worksheet

### Step 1: Notice the thought

What's a thought you've been struggling with today?  
(It might be a worry, judgment, prediction, or self-criticism.)

### Step 2: Label it as a thought

Gently rephrase it using "I'm having the thought that..."

"I'm having the thought that \_\_\_\_\_"

If it's a common theme - name the story (e.g., "I'm not good enough," "The world is dangerous," "People don't care")

"This is the ' \_\_\_\_\_ ' story."

### Step 3: Thank your mind

Now respond with kindness and humor like your mind is a well-meaning but overprotective friend by saying "Thanks, mind!"

"Thanks, mind, \_\_\_\_\_"

Examples:

- "Thanks, mind. That one's a classic."
- "Thanks, mind. You really want me to stay safe."
- "Thanks, mind. I hear you, but I've got this."
- "Thanks, mind, for reminding me of the same old 'people don't care' story. How many times have I heard that?"





#### Step 4: Refocus on what matters

Ask yourself: "Given what I care about, what's the next right step?"

#### Step 5: Reflect

At the end of the day, reflect on these questions:

1. What thoughts did I thank my mind for today?

2. How did it feel to treat thoughts as just thoughts?

3. What changed when I didn't fight or believe the thought?



4. Did I act in line with what matters to me? If so, how?

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

**Practice tip**

Use this worksheet daily or whenever you feel stuck, anxious, or self-critical. As you practice, you'll get better at noticing unhelpful thoughts and storylines and making choices based on your values, rather than the avoidance of uncomfortable inner experiences.