

Cognitive Defusion

Changing Your Relationship with Thoughts Worksheet

What is Cognitive Defusion?

Cognitive Defusion focuses on changing how we relate to thoughts rather than trying to change the thought content itself. It involves observing thoughts without becoming attached to them or treating them as absolute truths.

Thoughts are just words and images in the mind—they are not commands, threats, or absolute truths. By defusing from thoughts, we reduce their power to control our behavior and emotions.

Key Characteristics:

- Stepping back from thoughts and seeing them as mental events
- Recognizing thoughts as transient occurrences, not facts
- Creating psychological distance from persistent negative thoughts
- Reducing the literal impact and emotional weight of thoughts
- Observing thinking as an ongoing behavioral process

| Exercise 1: "I'm Having the Thought That..."

Duration: 2-3 minutes per thought | Difficulty: Beginner

Purpose: Create distance from thoughts through language

Instructions:

1. Identify a difficult or unhelpful thought you've been having
2. Write it down as you normally think it
3. Then rewrite it with increasing distance

Original thought:

Now add a prefix - "I'm having the thought that..."

Add more - "I notice I'm having the thought that..."

Finally - "I notice my mind is telling me the story that..."

Practice with another thought:

Original thought:

[Empty dashed box for original thought]

"I notice my mind is telling me the story that..."

[Empty dashed box for rephrased thought]

Reflect:

How did the thought feel different with each version?

[Empty dashed box for reflection on feeling]

What happened to the thought's power or believability?

[Empty dashed box for reflection on power/believability]

Exercise 2: Leaves on a Stream

Duration: 10 minutes | Difficulty: Beginner to Intermediate

Purpose: Practice observing thoughts without getting caught up in them

Instructions:

1. Sit comfortably and close your eyes
2. Imagine you're sitting beside a gently flowing stream
3. Visualize leaves floating on the surface of the water
4. For the next 10 minutes:
 - Each time a thought arises, place it on a leaf
 - Watch the leaf float downstream
 - Let it drift away at its own pace
 - Wait for the next thought
 - Place that thought on a leaf
 - Watch it float away
5. If you notice you've gotten caught up in a thought:
 - That's okay—this is normal
 - Acknowledge it: "I got caught up in thinking"
 - Gently return to the stream
 - Place that thought on a leaf
 - Continue watching

Remember: All thoughts go on leaves—judgments about the exercise, worries, plans, memories, everything.

After Practice - Reflect:

What was it like to watch your thoughts float by?

How many times did you get caught up in thinking?

What did you notice about the nature of thoughts?

Exercise 3: Thank Your Mind

Duration: Ongoing practice | Difficulty: Beginner

Purpose: Acknowledge thoughts without being controlled by them

Instructions:

When you notice an unhelpful thought, say (internally or aloud):

- "Thanks, mind!"
- "Thank you, mind, for that thought"
- "Thanks for sharing, mind!"

Examples:

- Mind says: "You're going to fail" → You respond: "Thanks, mind! I know you're trying to protect me"
- Mind says: "Everyone thinks you're boring" → You respond: "Thank you, mind, for that opinion"
- Mind says: "You should just give up" → You respond: "Thanks for sharing, mind!"

The tone should be:

- Gentle, not sarcastic
- Acknowledging, not dismissive
- Appreciative of your mind's efforts (even if misguided)

Practice with your own thoughts:

Unhelpful thought:

Your response:

[Empty dashed box for notes]

Unhelpful thought:

[Empty dashed box for writing]

Your response:

[Empty dashed box for writing]

| Exercise 4: Passengers on the Bus

Duration: 10 minutes | Difficulty: Intermediate

Purpose: Understand that thoughts don't have to control behavior

The Metaphor:

Imagine you're driving a bus (your life). You have passengers (your thoughts and feelings). Some passengers are pleasant and quiet. Some passengers are loud, critical, or scary:

- "You're going the wrong way!"
- "You're a terrible driver!"
- "We're all going to crash!"
- "Turn around! This is dangerous!"

You have three choices:

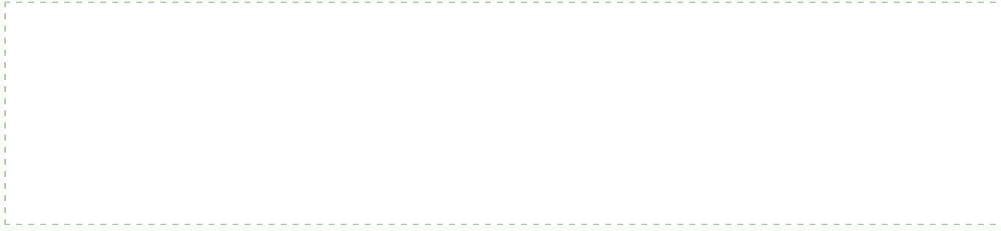
1. Stop the bus and argue with the passengers (fusion)
2. Let the passengers drive (being controlled by thoughts)
3. Acknowledge the passengers but keep driving toward your destination (defusion)

Reflect on your life:

What "passengers" (thoughts) have been trying to control your direction?

Have you been arguing with them or letting them drive?

Where do you actually want to go (your values)?



Practice saying: "I hear you, passengers, and I'm driving toward what matters to me"

Practice Tips:

- Use defusion techniques whenever you notice unhelpful thoughts
- You don't have to believe the thought is false—just recognize it as a thought
- Getting caught up in thoughts IS part of the practice with Leaves on a Stream
- Your mind is trying to help (even when it's not helpful)
- You don't have to agree with thoughts to thank your mind for them
- Passengers don't have to be quiet for you to drive
- You can hear thoughts without obeying them
- This creates space between you and your thoughts