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Defusion and Acceptance

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What we think and how we act upon our thoughts contributes to the fear of public speaking. To alleviate that process, we can identify our cognitive distortions and replace them with rational alternatives. However, there are other useful methods for dealing with unhelpful thoughts as well.

You can use the ones you are now about to learn, as an extension to what you already know about dealing with cognitive distortions.

You are already familiar with mindfulness and will now learn about two more techniques that are effective in overcoming the fear of public speaking. Remember how we made a differentiation between the Thinking Self and Observing Self? Keep those in mind while reading about the techniques.



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You Are Not Your Thoughts

... You are much more than that!

Defusion, as a technique, represents distancing yourself from what you feel and think. That doesn't mean that you are running away from your inner world, but rather that you are approaching it in a different, more constructive way.

Blending into Your Negative Thoughts

For example, if you firmly believe that your forthcoming public speech will be a disaster, and you are acting as if it has already turned out that way, then you are in fusion with the thought that you'll fail. As a result of what The Thinking Self creates beliefs, thoughts, assumptions. This could lead to you feeling trapped in a spider web of your thoughts, believing and acting upon anything your mind serves you. But, if you employ your Observing Self, you can open the doors of defusion.

A Different Perspective

The opposite of fusion is defusion, which involves looking at your thoughts, from the perspective of your Observing Self. You can observe these thoughts without getting caught up in them. In this way, you can provide yourself with an alternative perspective on your thoughts, rather than trust them blindly.

Defusion will not serve as a way to abolish your negative thoughts, but to reduce their influence on what you do and how you feel. It is a process that consists of getting some distance from your thoughts and gaining a new perspective on them. In addition to thought, the goal of defusion is also to do the same for passing sensations and other content of your inner world.

How to Defuse from Your Thoughts?

Here's the simple exercise that can help you discover what defusion has to offer.

What Are You Thinking?

First, engage in mindful acknowledgment of what is happening around, and then inside you. Close your eyes and focus on your current thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, memories, and mental images. Notice how you interpret their meaning and how the interpretation affects you.

For example: "I am afraid of speaking in front of an audience. That why I think I can't do it. I remember that one time when I thought I'd pass out. I was so frightened..."

Are These Thoughts Negative?

Now focus on all of your unhelpful thoughts. Observe them and say them out loud, in a non-threatening way, or write them down.

For example: "I notice that I think I cannot do well while speaking in front of an audience." Write that down, or say it aloud. "I recall my previous frightening experience, and I am assuming, this time, it will be the same." Write that down as well.

What Are the Emotions?

Identify the accompanying emotion and label your unhelpful thoughts. Are they an evaluation?

Or a memory? Maybe a prediction? You can find a lot of these thoughts categorized as cognitive distortions - a pattern you follow after one of them emerges.

For example: Fear might lead you to jump involuntarily to conclusions; a memory of a previous experience could result in overgeneralizations.

After you've identified your thoughts, the second step is to do something about them. You can try to find more rational alternatives, or you can accept these thoughts.

Accepting Your Thoughts

Instead of trying to fight or get rid of your thoughts, emotions and sensations, you can accept them. Acceptance involves contacting your inner events fully, directly and without a struggle.

When fighting against what you think or feel, you are feeding these thoughts and emotions; you are investing your time and energy, making them stronger. Instead, you can mindfully notice them, without tricking yourself into following them blindly.

Quicksand of Thoughts

Imagine you are stuck in quicksand. Your first, instinctive impulse is to fight to get yourself out. But as you may already know, that is precisely what you shouldn't do. The more you fidget and struggle, the deeper you sink. Instead, you can choose to remain calm and stop moving aggressively. In this way, you'll spread your weight evenly across the surface, and you'll stop sinking. The same goes for your thoughts - as long as you are trying to fight them off (which is a natural, but not adaptive response) you are engaging negatively. You are allowing the proverbial quicksand to do with you as it will, while you are rendered helpless.

Let It Be

The alternative is to allow your thoughts/emotions/sensations to be there. Give them permission to be where they are. Make peace with them and let them be. Allow them to exist and resist the urge to suppress them. After defusion or identifying your cognitive distortions, you'll know which thoughts and emotions you should let go of. If you are afraid that your next public speech will be disastrous, just notice that thought and make room for it. Let it be present, without taking control of you and then see what happens.

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