

Hands As Thoughts Metaphor :: Cognitive Fusion & Mindful Defusion

Imagine for a moment that your hands are your thoughts. When you reach the end of this paragraph, I'd like you to put this writing down and hold your hands together, palms open, as if they're the pages of an open book. Then I'd like you to slowly and steadily raise your hands up toward your face. Keep going until they're covering your eyes. Then take a few seconds to look at the world around you through the gaps in between your fingers and notice how this affects your view of the world. Please do this exercise now, before reading on.

So what would it be like going around all day with your hands covering your eyes in this manner? How much would it *limit you*? How much would *you miss out* on? How would it reduce your ability to take workable action and respond to the world and really notice and attend to the people you love? This is like "*cognitive fusion*" with our mind's stories, our omnipresent human narratives and never-ending evaluations :: we become so caught up in our thoughts that we lose contact with many aspects of our here-and-now experience, and our thoughts have such a huge influence over our behavior that our ability to act effectively (behave functionally) is significantly reduced.

Now once again, when you reach the end of this paragraph, I'd like you to cover your eyes with your hands, yet this time, lower them from your face very, very slowly. As the distance between your hands and your face increases, *notice how much easier it is to connect with the world around you*. Please do this now before reading on.

What you just did is a visual experiential metaphor for defusion. How much easier is it to take effective action without your hands covering your eyes? How much more information can you take in? How much more connected are you with the world around you?

I like to use this metaphor (Harris, 2009) with clients to help explain what ACT, Acceptance Commitment Therapy, means by **Cognitive Fusion & Defusion**. This metaphor demonstrates the purposes of defusion: to engage fully in our experience and facilitate effective action. People often feel better when they defuse from painful thoughts and memories, but in ACT we consider this a bonus or by-product; it's not the intention or goal. (Remember, with ACT we are no longer going to battle with our psychological distress. we're not trying to reduce or eliminate our symptoms. We're trying to fundamentally transform our relationship with distressing, intrusive thoughts, distressing sensations, memories, worries and unwanted emotions. You see, we sort of transform our perspective mindfully . . . so we no longer perceive such psychological distress as symptoms to be struggled with, suppressed or banished from our experience. We watch the mind.

Thus, defusion is not some clever tool to control emotions: it's a means to become present and take effective action – dedicated to actually live, in a behavioral sense, the life you most desire. I want to be sure to make defusion skills clear to my clients, because if you start using defusion techniques to try and control your emotions, you'll soon be disappointed!

Through teaching you the ACT therapy model, I aim to help you learn *functional defusion skills*. We'll engage in experiential exercises, and I'll prescribe practice for you to take with you and rehearse between sessions. If I try to explain all of this . . . *fusion and defusion banter* . . . conceptually, before delivering this experientially, we'll probably get bogged down in all sorts of time-wasting intellectual discussions. Since I've taken you experientially through some defusion metaphors (some of our in-session exchanges), as a next step, I want to clarify and simplify the conceptual meaning of "*cognitive defusion*" in basic outline terms. The below outline summary will help you grasp and functionally rehearse life enhancing & mindful cognitive defusion skills:

Please strive for a strong intellectual AND experiential grasp of these practices. Defusion is a Vital Mindfulness Skill

A Simple Summary to Help You Remember & Grasp Meaningful Distinctions :: Cognitive Fusion vs. Mindful Defusion

In a State of Cognitive Fusion (Awareness of Language-Story Driven Self Rules):

- . . . a thought in a mental construction (largely verbally construed) that can really, really seem like . . . something that . . . is actually real . . . and something that masquerades as . . .
- the absolute truth;
- a **command** you have to obey or a **rule that** you naturally must follow;
- a threat you need to obliterate . . . and get rid of as soon as possible;
- something that's happening right here and now even though it's about the
- past or . . . the historical reality of your conditioned learned . . . experience
- you may be mindlessly fused to your mind's . . . predictions . . . and fabrications of your entirely . . . dreamed up . . . and vividly imagined . . . future;
- some critical perspective . . . very important that requires all your attention;
- some idea or conclusion that . . . you won't let go of even if it worsens your life.

In a State of Defusion:

- . . . you can see a thought for what it is: nothing more or less than a bunch of words or pictures "inside your head." In a state of defusion, you recognize that a thought . . .
- may or may not be true;
- is definitely not a command you have to obey or a rule you have to follow;
- is definitely not a threat to you;
- is not something happening in the physical world—it's merely words or pictures inside your head;
- may or may not be important—you have a choice as to how much you believe (ACT calls this "believability" our own mind's judgments and interpretations)
- can be allowed to come and go of its own accord without any need for you to hold on, control the experience or repress, deny . . . or attempt to push it away.

The above is largely quoted verbatim from Russ Harris (2009). Russ kindly makes available the first couple chapters of each of his books. Simply click the following link to explore his brilliantly useful workbooks and texts:

<http://www.actmindfully.com.au>

