

Activity 4.2

ACT: Distancing Yourself from Negative Thoughts

ACT uses a number of basic core principles to develop psychological flexibility, and **cognitive defusion** is one example. For instance, we are often caught up in language in a way that makes us believe that our thoughts are the literal truth, are rules that must be obeyed, or events that require our full attention. In other words, we “fuse” with our thoughts in a way that gives them importance in the way we behave and react. One way to distance ourselves from negative or distressing thoughts is to practice cognitive defusion, and this will allow you to step back and observe language rather than be reflexively influenced by it.

Here’s a simple exercise in cognitive defusion for you to attempt:

Step 1: Bring to mind an upsetting and recurring negative self-judgment that takes the form ‘I am X’ such as ‘I am incompetent’, or ‘I’m stupid.’ Hold that thought in your mind for several seconds and believe it as much as you can. Now notice how it affects you?

Step 2: Now take the thought ‘I am X’ and insert this phrase in front of it: ‘I’m having the thought that . . .’ Now run that thought again, this time with the new phrase.

Notice what happens. In Step 2, most people notice a ‘distance’ from the thought, such that it has much less impact. Notice there has been no effort to get rid of the thought, nor to change it. Instead the relationship with the thought has changed—it can be seen as just words.

(From Harris H (2006) *Embracing your demons: An overview of Acceptance & Commitment Therapy*. *Psychotherapy in Australia*, 12, 2-8).