

Unhooking from thoughts

We experience our thoughts in the form of words, images, memories and predictions. Our mind is designed to constantly evaluate, judge and comment. It is like a football commentator chattering away all the time – we can't help thinking!

When we get hooked by our thoughts, they can boss us around and dictate our actions. Sometimes, this can be helpful. Very often, however, it is not. For example, getting hooked by the thought "I'm boring" can get in the way of making friends because we might say no to social invitations. Getting hooked by the thought "the pain is going to be unbearable tomorrow" can get in the way of us enjoying whatever it is we are doing in the present moment.

'Unhooking' means getting some space from our thoughts and seeing them for what they are – thoughts that don't have to dictate what we do or don't do. We aren't used to relating to our thoughts in this way but it is a skill we can develop.

Step back and watch your mind doing its job producing this chatter without buying into it. Relating to your thoughts in this way can help you take actions in line with what you care about, rather than what the thoughts are pulling you to do or not to. Practise the steps below to help you do this:

- 1) **Get familiar with your 'hooks'.** These are often thoughts that get in the way of doing what matters, thoughts that pull you do things in a certain way, thoughts that feel like they are engaged in a battle, thoughts that have a repetitive quality to them, and thoughts that take you away from the present moment. Look out for these qualities and try the following when you notice them:
- 2) **Label the thoughts.** For example, say to yourself "there are the 'I'm not coping' thoughts again". Or "there go the 'I'll let them down' thoughts".
- 3) **Use one of these unhooking techniques:**
 - Contact that part of you that can observe your thoughts and say to yourself "I'm noticing I'm having the thought that....."
 - Treat your mind as a well-meaning, but misguided friend. Simply thank it for its comments without having to buy into them
 - Treat the mind as something external – like a little gremlin sitting on your shoulder
 - Watch your thoughts as though they are objects that you don't need to involve yourself with – like football commentary, words on a TV screen, or actors on a stage
 - Repeat the thought in your mind in the voice of a funny character e.g. Bugs Bunny or Homer Simpson. Notice what happens when you do this a few times
 - Notice what happens if you replace the word 'but' with 'and'. For example, "I want to go out with my friend, *but* I'm tired"
 - Remind yourself there is a difference between *having* a thought and *buying into* a thought

These are just examples. Be creative and develop your own techniques to notice, label and unhook. Experiment with this and see what doing so means for your actions. Remember the aim is not to stop your mind producing thoughts (after all, that is its job!). Rather it is to have more choice in how you respond to them.

You can use the space below to note down situations when 'unhooking' from your thoughts might be helpful to you:

Opening up to emotions

- Identify an emotion that comes up as you consider taking an action in line with your values.
- This exercise can be done at home or out, and it might help if you sit down. Today you can have your eyes shut, or open and looking down if you're not comfortable with that.
- Step 1: Notice where you feel, or felt, the emotion most in your body. Emotions are often centred in your stomach, chest, throat, or head area. Use your imagination, if you have to, to describe it. Or pretend you're relating what this emotion feels like to someone who's never had an emotion.
- To yourself, describe the physical aspects of your emotion (or sensation) in terms of: where is it, ... what's its shape, what's its colour, size, form, density, temperatureetc. (e.g., it's in the chest, pulsing, tight, round , heavy, hollow, fluttery, red, hot or cold etc.).
- Name the emotion if you can.
- Step 2: Breathe through your nose gently (or just a little slowly and deeply) in and around the physical place of the feeling. (pause)
- Now repeat to yourself "I'm willing to have this emotion". You don't have to like it or want it.
- You can also say to yourself "I can make room for it, I can open up to it." (wait 20 seconds or more)
- Notice where the feeling *is not* in your body. It's probably not in every part of your body. So you can remind yourself that you can still talk, walk, make decisions and act on your values and goals, even with strong feelings. (wait 10 seconds or so)
- Step3: Now breathe gently *into* the emotion area. Again, say to yourself, "I am willing to have this emotion, I can open up to it". You don't have to like it.
- Remember you are not trying to relax or get rid of the feeling – this is about opening up, letting go of any struggle with it. Keep doing that for 30 seconds or so.
- Now you can wriggle your fingers and toes and open your eyes.

Adapted from ACBS resource