**Cognitive Defusion**

Do you remember internet pop-up ads? In the days before pop-up blockers, you would be surfing the internet, minding your own business, when a pesky advertisement would suddenly appear on your screen. Most of the time, the pop-up is spam and you don’t really want to pay attention it. You have to find that tiny little “X” hidden in the top right-hand corner. Once you find it and get it to go away (sometimes it takes a few tries), you can get back to what you were doing before it popped up.

We can learn a lot from pop-up ads when it comes to our thoughts.

**Stop Fighting Your Thoughts**

Most people try to change their thoughts. They get advice to “just think positively” or “make your thoughts more realistic.” But thoughts can be like quicksand. The more you try to fight them, ignore them, or suppress them, the more they suck you in.

Before I found this skill, I spent a lot of time trying to fight my thoughts. Whenever I thought I was “stupid” or “a failure,” I would spend tons of time analyzing the thought. I would pore over reasons why I wasn’t stupid or a failure, trying to convince myself. It was exhausting. I ended up just wasting my energy. I found it was much easier to stop playing tug-of-war with my thoughts and drop the rope. And I found this strategy worked a lot better to free up my mental space.

**What Is Cognitive Defusion?**

Originally developed by Dr. Aaron Beck (then called cognitive distancing) and refined by Dr. Steven Hayes, cognitive defusiion is all about accepting thoughts for what they are: just thoughts. Many of us with anxiety are too attached to our thoughts. We believe that just because we have a thought, it’s true. But did your loved one get in a car crash that time you thought they might? Do you automatically become a failure just because you think it? Most likely not.

Our anxiety tricks us into thinking that these thoughts are real. In reality, they’re just thoughts. Just spurts of electricity fired by our neurons. It’s so easy to get wrapped up in our thoughts, assuming they represent reality. But that doesn’t serve us well.

Science supports this idea. Cognitive defusion can educe general distress, decrease self-criticism, and increase self-compassion. Cognitive defusion allows us to live our lives, despite our thoughts.

So how do we put the skill into practice?

**Specific Strategies to Practice Cognitive Defusion**

Practicing cognitive defusion is definitely not as easy as it sounds, but it offers a useful strategy for anyone who finds themselves constantly battling their thoughts. You can practice cognitive defusion by doing anything that puts space between you and the thought. There are so many different ways to do this. Here are a few, but this is definitely not a comprehensive list. You can create your own ways to distance yourself from your thoughts as well.

**Just noticing**

Use the word “noticing” when talking about your thoughts. A simple formula is, “I’m noticing (the thought).” This subtle linguistic difference can have an impact. There is a big difference between saying “I’m a failure” and saying, “I’m having the thought that I’m a failure.” That space can give you some big relief from the constant barrage of negative thoughts. You can also use this strategy for feelings or urges. Saying, “I’m noticing I’m feeling sad right now” can give you the little bit of distance you need.

**How old is this thought?**

Most of us have had the same thought patterns for years and years. It is so hard to change our thoughts . Because if it was easy, you would have done it already. A thought may be 1 or 5 or 20 years old—that doesn’t mean you need to keep believing it. When you’re convinced a thought is true, stop and ask yourself, “How old is this thought?” Ask yourself if you need to continue to "buy into" this thought or pattern of thoughts because you always have. The answer is no! Just because you’ve always done it this way doesn’t mean it’s the best way. And it’s important to know that you can have these thoughts and continue to engage in meaningful behaviors, despite how old the thought is.

**Treat your thoughts like pop-up ads**

This is my favorite cognitive defusion strategy. At the core, this skill teaches you to treat your thoughts as what they are — spurts of electricity that sometimes pop up inconveniently. When a thought comes up, visualize it as a pop-up ad. Acknowledge the thought — don’t suppress it, but just notice it and acknowledge that it’s there — find the X, and refocus your attention on whatever you were doing before the thought came. You can even visualize a big red X in your mind and “click” the button to minimize the thought. You can even **label it**. You can say, “Oh, there is my anxiety spamming me again.” Or, “I’m noticing this ad is trying to sell me on the thought that I’m a failure. But I don’t have to buy it.”

Don’t buy what the pop-up ad is selling you — don’t buy into the thought as truth. Just move on with your life, just like you do when you come across a spammy advertisement. If you buy into the spam, you let the virus spread. But if you accept that your computer is going to be spammed sometimes, the virus that pops up is a small nuisance, but it doesn’t control your life. If you can acknowledge the thought, and distance yourself from it, you can live your life. You can be your own antivirus software.

**In Summary**

Cognitive defusion is an effective strategy to help you live your life, even when you experience frustrating, distressing, spammy thoughts. Remember to take your thoughts for what they are and label them as “thoughts only.”

By not assigning extra meaning to your thoughts, you can let go of the stories you’ve been telling yourself. All the thoughts that you aren’t good enough, smart enough, or loveable enough are just stories. And just because you’ve always believed those thoughts doesn’t mean you need to buy into them now. If you get caught up in the spam, you can’t live your life.

You are not your thoughts, and you may be spending too much mental energy fighting with your thoughts. The more you try to struggle with them, the more they keep coming back. Because that’s what spam does — the more you interact with the pop-up ad, the more it tries to pull you in.

Stop fighting. And don’t let the spam hold you back.

Hit the X.