**FEELING BETTER DESPITE UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Many of us experience unhelpful thoughts, such as “I think I will fail this task” or “I am hopeless at parties”. Whenever we strive to distract ourselves from these thoughts, and orient our attention to something we like, these thoughts often return, sometimes even stronger than before. This document shows how we can feel better despite these unhelpful thoughts.

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| **The notion of fusion and defusion** |

Sometimes, our thoughts dominate our awareness or actions. For example, we might pretend, for a moment, that we are film star. We almost feel like a film star. Our mood improves. We walk with an air of confidence. This circumstance in which our thoughts dominate our awareness or actions is called cognitive fusion.

Occasionally, cognitive fusion might elicit problems. For example, if we feel like a film star, we might, for a moment, fail to study. We feel too important to study. So, our live actually deteriorates.



On other occasions, our thoughts do not dominate our awareness or actions—even if we know these thoughts are true. For example, we know that eventually we will die. But, we often do not act as if we will die. We do not worry about death frequently. This thought does not dominate our awareness or actions, called cognitive defusion.

Often, cognitive defusion can be helpful. To illustrate, we might feel that we are very shy. Because of this shyness, we shun social gatherings, compromising our lives. But, if we engage in cognitive defusion, this thought does not dominate our awareness or actions. We might appreciate that we are shy, but might attend social gatherings anyway.

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| **Techniques to promote cognitive defusion** |

The following table presents a series of techniques you can apply to foster cognitive defusion. These techniques diminish the extent to which thoughts will dominate our feelings and behaviour, ultimately enhancing our lives and wellbeing.

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| Activity | Details |
| When distressed or overwhelmed, apply an acronym called STOPP:   * Stop and pause for a moment * Take a breath, perhaps slower than usual * Observe your thoughts and sensations in your body for a moment * Pull back and adopt a broader perspective * Proceed and apply a suitable action | To adopt a broader perspective, consider   * another perspective to this situation * what advice you would offer a friend in a similar circumstance * what advice a friend would offer you * how important this issue would be in six months |
| When we become aware of a thought, repeat silently “I am experiencing the thought that…” and describe the thought. | You might repeat to yourself “I am experiencing the thought that I will not finish on time” |
| Adopt the perspective of a stranger, observing the thoughts in your mind |  |
| Imagine your thought has appeared on a computer screen. Change the format, color, or font, a  color, and format. Animate the  words. Add in a bouncing ball. |  |
| Label recurring but unhelpful thoughts. | * Every time you think “I am not clever enough to complete this task”, repeat to yourself something like “That is my *not clever enough* thought again” * Or describe the problem with this thought, such as “I notice my mind is catastrophizing again” |
| Repeat a thought very slowly, to the tune of a song like Happy Birthday, in a silly voice like Donald Duck, or many times | While alone, you might repeat to yourself “I am going to make a fool of myself” aloud and very slowly. |
| Decide whether your thought is a fact or something else—like an opinion, idea, judgment, desire, aversion, assumption, or prediction | For instance, the thought “I will never finish” is more a pessimistic prediction than a fact. |
| Decide whether your thought is a description or an evaluation. Evaluation thoughts include references to whether something is good, right or fair. | Thoughts that are evaluations, such as “I am not good at speaking” or “They treated me unfairly”, often seem like facts but are actually merely opinions |
| Accept your thoughts are natural and normal. Then clarify the effect of this thought—but do not necessarily label thoughts as helpful or unhelpful. | Ask yourself   * What could happen if I let this thought dictate my choices or actions? * If I let this thought shape my decisions or behaviours, would I become closer or farther from my values. * What happens when the thought hooks me in? |
| Replace *but* with *and* | For example, the thought “I would like to attend the party but I am shy” could be replaced with “I would like to attend the party and I am shy”. This updated thought highlights how thoughts about ourselves, such as the notion that we are shy, do not have to constrain our behaviour. |
| Appreciate but challenge your mind | You might repeat to yourself “Thank you mind. But, at this moment, this thought is not very helpful”. |
| Recognize that some unpleasant thoughts might be partly true but still do not need to dominate your feelings and actions. | You might repeat to yourself   * I might be experiencing a range of thoughts, some of which are partly true * But, what happens when I become immersed in these thoughts? * Does this rumination help me act effectively or cope? * If so, the question is not how to stop these thoughts—a very hard task—but how to disentangle yourself from these thoughts so you can continue to live the life you cherish |

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| **Metaphors to clarify and to promote cognitive defusion** |

The following table presents a series of metaphors that may help you appreciate cognitive defusion. Although you might understand the notion of cognitive defusion, these metaphors help you appreciate this concept at a more unconscious level.

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| Activity | Details |
| Appreciate that striving to prevent unpleasant thoughts is like holding a beach ball under water—the beach ball continues to surface. But, the beach ball, if permitted to float around us, does not disrupt us | Similarly, we should not prevent unpleasant thoughts from surfacing. They do not have to affect our emotions or behaviours. |
| Recognize our thoughts are like the weather because   * we cannot control our thoughts or the weather * but we can respond appropriately to thoughts and weather, such as change our clothes | As we consider this analogy, we are not as intent on shunning unpleasant thoughts. Therefore, these thoughts are not as likely to escalate. |
| Sometimes, if we feel anxious while driving through a tunnel, we should merely continue rather than attempt to escape. The anxiety will pass; the tunnel will end | Likewise, we can often continue despite our anxieties and uncertainties; these feelings will end |
| Imagine sitting alongside a tranquil stream. Leaves are floating down the stream. Now observe your thoughts. When a thought—such as some words or images—appear, place this thought on a leaf. Watch this leave float down the stream. Then continue with other thoughts for about five minutes | This metaphor instils the notion that we can watch even unpleasant thoughts peacefully |