

Cognitive Fusion

In acceptance & Commitment therapy, "cognitive fusion" refers to the human tendency to become entangled with thoughts as a result of a strong belief in the thought's literal content. In other words, we listen to and believe what our minds tell us. Of course, buying into thoughts is not always problematic. When your mind tells you how to balance your bank account or drive your car safely, listening may be adaptive. What happens when your mind says you are boring or unattractive? Fusion with these kinds of thoughts will probably result in attempts to avoid experiences that you associate with these thoughts. For instance, you might avoid social or romantic interactions even if being close with others is very important to you. In this way, cognitive fusion pulls us away from living in alignment with our values.



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Fusion is most likely to arise across six cognitive domains: rules, reasons, judgments, past, future, and self.

Rules: Rule-governed thinking often consists of “should,” “must,” “ought” and “if-then” language. You might think, *“If I’m in therapy, then it must mean I’m crazy. I should be more normal. If people know how messed up I really am, then they will never accept me.”* Fusion with rule-governed thinking equates to inflexibility, which invariably results in suffering.

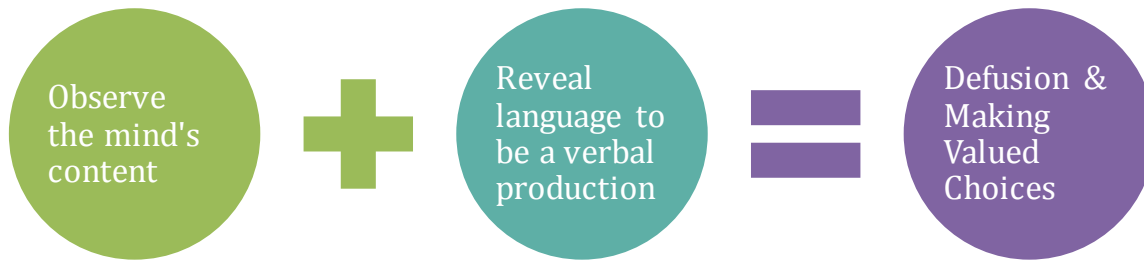
Reasons: Reason-governed thinking typically consists of excuses for why change is impossible. You might have thoughts such as, *“I don’t have the willpower to change,” “I’m not smart enough (strong enough, capable enough, etc.),” “I’m too lazy (ill, unlucky, etc.),”* or *“My craving (anxiety, depression, etc.) is too strong to battle.”* Fusion with reason-governed thinking holds you back from making meaningful changes, even when those changes are in line with important life values.

Judgments: Fusion with judgments can pose a problem whether evaluations are negative (e.g., *“I’m so ugly,”* or *“This anxiety is unbearable!”*) or positive. For example, consider someone who puts friends, colleagues, family members, or helping professionals up on a pedestal and is chronically disappointed when they do not live up to expectations.

Past and future: Fusion with the past or future can involve both unpleasant and pleasant content; fusion with negative memories, wishing to recapture positive experiences from the past, getting hooked by fears about the future, or wishing for brighter days ahead. All of these forms of fusion pull you out of the present moment. Sometimes this process serves as a cognitive form of avoiding experience; although this may produce mild, temporary relief, in the long term it only results in suffering. Ultimately, like all types of fusion, it tends to pull you away from the things that are most important to you. If, for example, you are getting hooked by thoughts like *“The last time I interviewed for a job, it was a total disaster; the next time is bound to be the same,”* you are likely to avoid future job interviews, even if career development is a meaningful life pursuit for you.

Self: Thoughts about the self are stories you tell that make up your sense of identity. They typically begin with “I am,” and in ACT, they are referred to as the *conceptualized self*. This type of fusion leads you to be driven by stories you have about yourself (e.g., *“I am the kind of person who is guarded.”*), rather than by your values (e.g., *“I want to be an open, vulnerable partner.”*).

Cognitive Defusion



Cognitive defusion is the process by which you **change the relationship with your thoughts by stepping back and simply witnessing their presence**. When you defuse, you disentangle from your self-talk and observe cognitions as entities separate from yourself, as just words. This allows you to look *at* your thoughts rather than *from* them.

For instance, if you have the thought, *“Presenting at a professional conference is too scary; my colleagues will think I’m an incompetent fraud,”* then you can probably see that fusion with this thought is likely to result in avoidance of professional presentations. While this avoidance would certainly reduce anxiety in the short-term, it would also mean missing out on an important professional opportunity, and the anxiety would persist in the long-term. What if instead you simply witnessed what the mind says in much the same way you might watch a screen saver scroll across your computer? Imagine how your behavior might be different if you chose to see this thought as simply some words that may or may not be true.

Defusion creates a little wiggle room to make valued choices. For example, if buying into the thought about presenting at a professional conference causes you to avoid professional presentations, then simply observing the thought gives you the space to make a different choice. Importantly, this does not mean the thought disappears. It simply means you are making the choice not to be driven by its content. Thus, you are freed to continue moving in directions that are important to you; perhaps, for example, disseminating your expert knowledge to your colleagues.

Defusion exercises fall into two broad categories, stepping back and observing the content of the mind, and showing language for what it is, a verbal production of sounds and syllables.

Check out the wonderful resource this was adapted from: McCall, Darren. “Cognitive Defusion Education and Exercises for Clients.” Darren McCall LPC, 2019, eightfoldcounseling.com/wordpress/cognitive-defusion/.