

# Disputation Vs Defusion

Many therapists & coaches come to ACT having first trained in models that emphasise the need to dispute or challenge the content of thoughts. If this is your background, it's quite common to be wary about defusion. You may have concerns that defusion is hard or complicated or perhaps not as effective as disputation. Hopefully, this document will address those concerns.

# Fusion Versus Believability

First let's be clear that fusion with a thought isn't the same as believing a thought. (Fusion refers to the problematic dominance of cognitions over behaviour, not to their believability.)

Likewise, defusing from thoughts is not the same as disbelieving them. We can defuse from thoughts even when we still believe them 100%. We can defuse from thoughts that are indisputably true, such as "The plane *might* crash" or "One day I will die."

The interesting thing is, in numerous published studies, defusion created significant reductions in believability of distressing thoughts - even though we are not actively trying to achieve this in ACT. (Remember: we are not aiming to reduce the believability of thoughts, but rather to reduce their problematic dominance over behaviour.) Indeed, in two RCTs, defusion created faster reductions in believability of depressogenic thoughts than CBT.

# Defusion Is Simple: Step 1

Some therapists worry that defusion is too complicated for some of their clients. Well, it doesn't have to be. Here are some simple steps to follow.

Step 1: We acknowledge the presence of the thought – whether it be a belief, idea, attitude, assumption, schema, metacognition – and we restate it plainly:

E.g. 'So you have the thought that/ you have the belief that/ you have the cognition that/ your mind tells you that/ you believe that/ this thought shows up that ..... X, Y, Z

## Defusion Is Simple: Step 2

Step 2: Instead of looking at the content of the thought – is it true or false, positive or negative – look at what happens if you fuse with it.

E.g.: If you hold on tightly to *(or get hooked by)* that thought *(or belief/idea/attitude/assumption etc.)* – and let it control you *(or let it control what you do with your arms and your legs and your mouth, or let it guide your actions, or let it jerk you around, or let it grab all your attention)* ...

What happens?

How does that work for you?

Where does that take you?

## Step 2 Variants

There are many variants on step 2, eg:

Does holding it tightly/getting hooked by it help you to be the person you want to be?

In the long term does holding it tightly/getting hooked by it take you towards or away from the life you want (or towards/away from your values)?

If you let this thought dictate your actions, how does that work in terms of creating the life you want?

## Not Bad, Huh?

In those two steps, the client is already defusing from the thought/belief/idea. We do not have to spend time and energy debating whether it is true or false, assessing if it is right or wrong, or judging it as positive or negative.



## Step 3

If the client says holding on tightly to the thought is helpful/workable/facilitates towards moves etc, then we could say something like, 'In that case, there is no problem. Let's move on to something that's an issue.'

If the client acknowledges that hooked/holding on is a problem we can then invite them to go further with defusion: 'So if we could do some work here to help you unhook from these types of thoughts, *(or loosen your grip on them, or stop them from jerking you around, or take their power away, or reduce their influence over you)* would that be useful?"

## Step 4

So usually you've already created some defusion with those first three steps – and now you can go on to more formal defusion exercises.

The great thing is a client can still defuse from a thought that he 100% believes, and that disputation can never disprove or refute – e.g. 'The plane *might* crash', 'I *might* get rejected', 'I *could* have a heart attack'



# Paradigm Shift!!

It's not the thought content that is the problem, in ACT. The problem is *fusion* with the thought.

So we always normalise & validate thoughts – positive or negative, true or false.

And we emphasise that we don't get to choose the vast majority of our thoughts – they just 'show up'. We are also clear that no one has ever found a way to stop unhelpful thoughts from appearing - but we can learn to respond differently to them when they 'show up'.

And remember: it doesn't matter how positive or negative the thought is. Positive thoughts can be really unhelpful, and negative thoughts can be really valuable, depending on the context.

# What's Your Experience?

Try it for yourself. Stop debating with the thoughts; stop trying to disprove them or judge them. Instead ask the 'workability question': If I hold on tightly to this thought, let it dictate my actions, how does that work for me? Does it lead to towards moves or away moves?



## Q& A

*Q: I often have clients who use techniques such as changing thoughts through disputation. I struggle to explain how defusion from thoughts could be an added coping skill to their already existing strategies. My question is: how would you go about introducing defusion to someone who has worked hard to practice changing their thinking through disputation?*

A: Always come back to workability. I'd ask how well disputation is working for them. Is it giving them the results they want? If yes, no problem; keep doing it. If not, are they open to something different?