

Week Six Topic: Cognitions (Thoughts) and Defusion

We all have thoughts - many thousands of them per day. Thoughts usually arise spontaneously or automatically. They can range from positive to neutral to negative.

As helping professionals, we are especially prone to the negativity bias. Negative events or experiences imprint on us more deeply and in a more lasting way than the positive ones. We often find ourselves in situations with a lot of suffering.

Thoughts are not ‘good’ or ‘bad’. They just ‘are’.

Thoughts influence our emotions and our behavior. When we try to label or push away our thoughts, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to work with our thoughts in a more helpful way.

Automatic negative thoughts are very common but also very hard to catch or notice. They are often related to an unhelpful core belief that we hold.

Among helping professionals, it is common to have negative or unhelpful core beliefs. These are thoughts that come so automatically that we hardly notice them - the biggest clue that they even occurred is often a distressing emotion or an unhelpful behavior.

Common core beliefs can be things like:

- “I’m not good enough”
- “The world is an unsafe place”
- “No one listens to me”
- “This will never change”

When we catch and then welcome (or at least allow) all of our thoughts, we can defuse from them. We can observe our thoughts without getting hooked by them. We give ourselves more space to choose our actions.

Take some time to sit and notice your thoughts. Try to just be a witness or observer of each thought as it arises and then passes. As one passes, another will arise. Notice how your attention wanders or moves into or between thoughts, often identifying or attaching to a storyline about the thought or a strong emotion. You might also notice memories, images, or sensations in your body alongside the thought.

Defusion Techniques:

- “I’m having the thought that...”
- Leaves on a stream
- Thoughts as a movie
- Use a silly voice
- Label/Name the story

Russ Harris: “Negative thoughts are normal. Don’t fight them; defuse them.”

Week Six Homework:

Use the enclosed worksheet to explore one of your thoughts.

Identify a situation in which you are having an automatic negative thought. What core belief do you hold that might connect to this thought? Often these statements might start with “I am...”, or “People are...”, or “The world is...”.

How does this belief make you feel? Where do you sense it in your body? How does it affect your actions?

Now, identify the opposite of that core belief. How does this opposite feel?

Choose one (or more) of the defusion techniques and practice this for a few minutes each day, ‘little and often’.

Try to practice defusion at regular intervals instead of waiting until you’re already hooked by a thought.

Remember, defusion is not meant to make the thoughts go away, but just to help you disidentify with them.

