

6 ACT* Conversations

*Acceptance & Commitment Training

Session 2: Action and Experience Versus Thought and Emotion

Handout: Further Defusion Exercises

In addition to the defusion exercises you can practise by listening through the audio segments of 6 ACT Conversations, here are four more defusion exercises to practise. The first two are designed to be used for thoughts that occur to you in the form of a word, statement or phrase, e.g. “loser”, “I’m frightened” or “had enough”. The third exercise is designed for stories you or others tell you about yourself. These can be brief statements such as “I’m just not good at maths” to extended narratives, or chains of memories you are familiar with where you remember or remind yourself of all the mistakes you’ve made or of all your character flaws.

Remember as stated in the audio section, defusion exercises are not meant to stop the thoughts happening, but rather to allow you to see the thoughts as just thoughts.

Exercise 1: Sing the Thought

For this exercise you simply sing the thought aloud. Ideally the tune you choose should be one that is incompatible with the mood you normally experience when you have this thought. So for example, if the thought is one that you normally experience a feeling of sadness or depression with, try singing that same thought to a tune that is bouncy and bright. See what happens to the ‘meaning’ of the words as you sing them to this tune.

Exercise 2: Dancing Letters / Words

Close your eyes. Imagine you are looking at a blank cinema or television screen. At first the words (or letters if it’s a single word thought) of the thought appear in a fairly neutral form, say as white letters on a black background. Notice how it feels to see the thought that way.

- Now, change the colours of the words gradually. Go through yellow to pastel green to bright fluorescent lime green to orange to fire truck red to lavender and pale blue and back to white. Notice how your feeling about them changes according to the colour.
- Now make the white so bright that the edges of the letters start to blur. Notice how it feels to look at the word(s) in that way.
- Now see the letters start to jiggle on the spot slightly. If it helps to make them move more vigorously, imagine some music playing in the background or even have some music on as you do this exercise.
- Now have the words (or letters) dance around into a completely different order so that they no longer make the same sentence (or word). Notice how you are feeling as you watch these letters dance across the screen in your mind.
- Finally, have the words (letters) rearrange themselves in their original order and in their original colour. See how you feel about them now.

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Exercise 3: Go to the Movies

To do this exercise, you need to recall a 'story' you know about yourself that is tied to specific events. For example, I have a story about myself that I cannot draw. I also have a lot of evidence for it from experiences in primary school right through recent attempts at drawing especially when I play Pictionary (a drawing game) with my family. "I can't draw" is a story about myself that my mind is very good at finding new evidence for the 'truth' of. Consequently I feel 'put on the spot', incompetent and unconfident when someone asks me to draw something. So find a story you have about yourself that has become in some way an obstacle for you – that stops you doing things you might like to do or at least attempt.

Now close your eyes and imagine as in exercise 2 that you are in a darkened cinema, but this time it is packed with people excited to see this new movie. As you watch the screen, the 'story' you have chosen unfolds in its usual form. All the events familiar to you that helped your mind to know that this 'story' is how it really is for you, are happening. When the feeling or mood that you normally feel when reliving this story is at its most intense, pause the film. Now rewind the film and watch it again, but this time we will change the genre of film you are watching.

- First imagine that your story is a big Hollywood or Bollywood musical. It ends with a big all-singing all-dancing, brightly costumed extravaganza.
- Now imagine that the story has been filmed as an action or adventure movie. Lots of shooting, chases and racing against time.
- Imagine it as a slapstick comedy. The crowd around you is laughing uproariously.
- Imagine it as a pilot for a new TV soap opera.
- Imagine it as a commercial for a car, an exclusive fragrance or a soft drink.
- Now run through the story in its original format. Notice the audience's reaction

Notice how you feel about the story now and what thoughts you are having about it.

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Exercise 4: Physicalise the Emotion

This exercise is often used by Acceptance and Commitment Therapists for dealing with difficult emotions – the kind that people struggle with. As we've emphasised throughout this session of 6 ACT Conversations, the purpose of this exercise is not to get rid of the emotion you struggle with. Rather it is to give you a different way of relating to it, so that even while the emotion remains unpleasant, you can still choose to do something more productive than struggle with it.

So think of an emotion that seems to get in the way of you behaving or thinking effectively. Spend some time letting yourself experience this emotion in the way that it generally becomes upsetting or a struggle for you. When you feel the emotion at that intensity, try to imagine that you can see it and hold it just like a physical object. And try to imagine that you are a scientist or an alien who has never seen a specimen like this before. Then answer these questions about it:

- When you look at it, what colour is it?
- What size is it? The size of a pea, a golf ball, a softball, a football?
- What shape is it?
- Where inside you is it located exactly? How far in and how high, wide and deep is it?
- Look at its surface. Is it smooth or rough? Shiny, dull, glossy, matte?
- Now if you were to touch it, how would that feel under your fingertips? Smooth or rough?
- And if you pressed in on it, would it be spongy, soft, or hard? Would it have any give or would it retain its shape?
- What temperature would it be? Hot, warm, room temperature, cool, or cold?
- And would there be any movement from it when you touched it? Would it be vibrating or pulsing or still? If it's moving, how fast? And what kind of rhythm?
- What sound is it making? What pitch and rhythm does that sound have?

Now take a moment to let yourself experience the emotion again. See what has changed about it. Notice if the emotion seems the same, but you feel different about it. See if you are able to maintain an attitude of open curiosity about it – what it is and what it may become.