



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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COGNITIVE DEFUSION

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Definition: Reducing distress from thoughts by training people to focus on their process of thinking rather than its content or meaning.

Elements: Cognitive defusion diverts attention away from the *content* or meaning of words and sentences toward the *process* of forming words and stringing them into sentences by concentrating on their sound, pattern, rhythm, frequency, and individual letters or words. Defusion temporarily disrupts the usual meaning of thoughts or spoken/written words even though their form or content may stay the same.

Related procedures: Self as context, mindfulness, meditation, metacognitive awareness, semantic satiation

Application: In individual or group ACT (acceptance and commitment therapy) and other therapies and religious practices.

1st use? As an ACT term, by Hayes & Strosahl (2004) who initially called it 'deliteralization', and in other therapies and religious practices.

References:

1. Blackledge JT (2007) Disrupting verbal processes: Cognitive defusion in acceptance and commitment therapy and other mindfulness-based psychotherapies. *The Psychological Record*, 57, 555-576.
2. Hayes SC, Strosahl KD (2004) *A practical guide to acceptance and commitment therapy*. New York: Springer.
3. Hayes SC, Strosahl KD, Wilson KG (1999) *Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change*. New York: Guilford.
4. Wilson KG & Murrell AR (2004) Values work in acceptance and commitment therapy: Setting a course for behavioral treatment (p120-151). In S Hayes, V Follette, M Linehan (Eds.), *Mindfulness and acceptance: Expanding the cognitive-behavioral tradition*. New York: Guilford.

Case Illustration 1 (Blackledge, unpublished)

Jim struggled with his feeling that he was a "bad father" for often having been unsupportive of his children, especially as he now felt they mattered very much to him. To help Jim experience the thought "I'm a bad father" as 'just a thought rather than a thought defining him, a repetitive defusion exercise was conducted. *Therapist*: "I'd like to try something a little odd just to show you how thoughts like 'bad father' work. Let's start it with words that are less compelling. Say the word 'milk' once, and notice what shows up." [Client says 'milk' and says he imagines a clear glass of white, cold milk.] "Now, let's say the word 'milk' out loud, over and over, fairly quickly, for at least a minute." [therapist and client repeat "milk-milk-milk milk-milk ...] "At the end of that exercise, what did you feel as you kept saying 'milk'?" Jim: "Nothing .. just this weird sound and a weird physical sensation in my throat". *Therapist*: "What if this is all words are? What if they're just arbitrary sounds, just noises you make? And when you look at them in a different way, they're exposed for that?" Jim: "It certainly seems that

way with 'milk'!" Jim then agreed to and completed the same exercise with the words "bad father". At first saying this was extremely distressing, but after he and the therapist had together repeated "bad father" on and on for over a minute, Jim said: "The words just kind of fell apart. They 'lost their power' over me. The thought just pulls me in less now."

Case Illustration 2 (Blackledge, unpublished)

Jill believed she was a "bad person" because of how she'd sometimes treated people. The thought was problematic, in part because it often kept her from engaging with others in a deep and meaningful way. With her consent, the therapist tried a defusion exercise to 'mess up rules of the language game' and help her view this thought differently. Together, Jill and the therapist spoke the words "I am a bad person" out loud very slowly, spending 4-5 seconds on each syllable: "IIIIIIII...ammmmmmmmm..... aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...baaaaaaaadddd..... perrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.....sonnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn." Jill then said the words seemed strange, 'fishy, less substantial, just sounds'. The therapist suggested 'carry those sounds with you' the next time she had an opportunity to get closer to her partner.