

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 1 of 12

Changing Your Relationship with Your Thoughts

Cognitive defusion is an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) skill that involves changing the way you relate to thoughts rather than trying to eliminate them. A thought can feel like a fact, especially when it is familiar, emotionally charged, or repeated over time. Cognitive defusion helps create space between the person having the thought and the thought itself.

For example:

“I’m not good enough.”

When fused with this thought, it can sound like a statement of absolute truth:

“I’m not good enough, so I shouldn’t try.”

With cognitive defusion, the thought can become:

“I’m noticing the thought that I’m not good enough.”

The thought is still present, but it has less authority over behavior.

Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy (MBE) provides a natural setting for practicing this shift. MBE integrates mindfulness with connection to the natural world and includes twelve interconnected skills. Cognitive defusion can particularly complement MBE skills such as *Mindful Awareness*, *Living in the Now*, *Letting Go*, *Nature as Metaphor*, *Nature as Teacher*, and *Living in True Self*.

The purpose of cognitive defusion is not to replace a “negative” thought with a positive thought. Instead, the goal is to notice the thought, make room for it, and choose how to respond to it based on what matters to you according to your own personal core values.

This worksheet will help you to enhance your cognitive defusion skills by practicing the idea that thoughts are not commands. They’re just things your brain does. You don’t have to react to them just because you’re experiencing them.

Part 1: Notice the Thought

Think of a difficult thought that has been showing up recently.

The thought is:

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 2 of 12

How often does this thought appear?

When does it usually appear?

What emotions accompany it?

What sensations do you notice in your body when this thought shows up?

What do you usually do when you believe this thought?

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page **3** of **12**

Part 2: Thought or Fact?

Take the thought you identified above and examine your relationship with it.

My thought:

When I am fused with this thought, I tend to treat it as:

- ☐ A fact
- ☐ A warning
- ☐ An instruction
- ☐ A prediction
- ☐ A judgment
- ☐ A description of who I am
- ☐ Something else: _____

What does this thought tell me to do?

What does it tell me to avoid?

What does it cause me to believe about myself?

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 4 of 12

Part 3: Add Some Distance

Now experiment with changing the wording of the thought.

Instead of:

“ _____ ”

Try:

“I am noticing the thought that _____.”

Now try:

“My mind is telling me _____.”

And finally:

“I am having the thought that _____.”

Does the thought feel different when you say it this way? If so, how? If not, why not?

Did the thought disappear or change when you approached it this way?

Did your relationship with the thought change? How?

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 5 of 12

Part 4: The Nature of Thoughts

Find a natural setting if possible. Sit quietly and observe your surroundings.

Notice clouds, leaves, water, wind, birds, insects, or other natural movement.

Imagine that your thoughts are like things moving through nature.

A thought might be like:

- A cloud passing through the sky
- A leaf floating downstream
- A bird flying overhead
- Wind moving through grass
- A wave arriving and receding
- A seed carried by the wind

Choose one metaphor from nature that fits your experience of thoughts (my thoughts are like a...):

Example: *My thoughts are like a cloud. Eventually they will either evaporate or move on.*

Why does this metaphor fit?

As you observe nature, notice that you do not have to stop the clouds, control the wind, or prevent leaves from moving.

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 6 of 12

Can you allow thoughts to come and go in a similar way? If so, how? If not, why not?

Part 5: The “Leaves on a Stream” Practice

Imagine yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream.

A thought appears.

Rather than arguing with it, analyzing it, or trying to make it disappear, imagine placing the thought on a leaf.

- Watch the leaf float downstream.
- Another thought appears.
- Place it on another leaf.
- Continue observing.
- You don’t have to determine whether the thought is true or false.
- You don’t have to follow it.
- You don’t have to push it away.

Simply notice:

“There is a thought.”

Then return your attention to the stream, your breath, your body, and the surrounding natural environment.

After practicing, reflect:

What happened when you stopped trying to argue with your thoughts?

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 7 of 12

Which thoughts were hardest to place on a leaf? Why?

What did you notice about the difference between having a thought and following a thought?

Part 6: From Thought to Choice

Cognitive fusion can create a chain:

Thought → Belief → Emotion → Behavior

Cognitive defusion creates another possibility:

Thought → Notice → Pause → Choose → Action

Take one difficult thought and complete both pathways.

When I am fused with the thought:

Thought:

I believe:

I feel:

I tend to:

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 8 of 12

The result is:

When I practice defusion:

I notice:

“I’m having the thought that _____.”

I allow myself to experience:

I remind myself:

“A thought is something my mind produces. I do not have to obey it.”

I can choose to:

Part 7: Connecting With the Present Moment

Thoughts often pull attention into the past or future.

When you notice yourself becoming caught up in a thought, use your surroundings to return to the present.

Notice:

5 things I can see

4 things I can hear

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 9 of 12

3 things I can physically feel

2 things I can smell

1 thing I appreciate about being here

What happened to the intensity of the thought when you returned your attention to the present moment?

Part 8: Thoughts and the True Self

A thought says:

“I am a failure.”

But if you can notice the thought, then there is something in you that is capable of observing the thought.

The thought is something you are experiencing.

It does not have to define who you are.

Consider:

I am noticing the thought that...

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 10 of 12

The thought is trying to tell me...

What I actually value is...

If I did not have to obey this thought, I could choose to...

This distinction can support the MBE skill of Living in True Self: rather than allowing every thought to determine behavior, you can notice thoughts while choosing actions that are more consistent with your values. MBE describes Living in True Self as integrating mindfulness skills toward authentic living aligned with values, intuition, and inner truth.

Part 9: Defusion in Nature

The next time you are outdoors, deliberately practice cognitive defusion.

When a difficult thought appears:

1. Notice it.

“There’s that thought again.”

2. Name it.

“I’m having the thought that...”

3. Thank your mind.

“Thanks, mind. I know you’re trying to protect me.”

4. Let it be there.

You don’t have to fight the thought.

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 11 of 12

5. Connect with nature.

Look, listen, smell, touch, and notice the living world around you.

6. Choose.

Ask: *“Given that this thought is here, what action would move me toward what matters?”*

My value in this situation is:

The action that reflects that value is:

Part 10: My Defusion Plan

When I notice the thought:

I will remind myself:

“I am having the thought that _____.”

I will use this defusion strategy:

- ☐ “I’m noticing the thought...”
- ☐ “My mind is telling me...”
- ☐ Give the thought a name
- ☐ Thank my mind
- ☐ Imagine the thought on a leaf
- ☐ Imagine the thought as a cloud
- ☐ Use my senses to reconnect with nature
- ☐ Another strategy: _____

Thoughts are not Commands: An ACT Worksheet

Page 12 of 12

Rather than allowing the thought to control my behavior, I want to move toward:

The value I want to express is:

One small action I can take is:

Key Takeaways

- Thoughts are mental events, not commands.
- Cognitive defusion changes the relationship with thoughts rather than requiring thoughts to disappear.
- You can notice a thought without believing it.
- You can make room for difficult thoughts without allowing them to determine your behavior.
- Nature can provide powerful metaphors for observing thoughts without becoming entangled with them.
- Mindfulness brings attention back to what is happening now.
- Defusion creates space for choice.
- Values can guide behavior when thoughts are loud or uncomfortable.
- Living in True Self means choosing actions that reflect what matters rather than automatically following every thought.
- *“I am not required to believe every thought my mind produces.”*

A thought can be present without being in charge. Notice it. Make room for it.

Let it pass through. Then choose the direction you want to go.