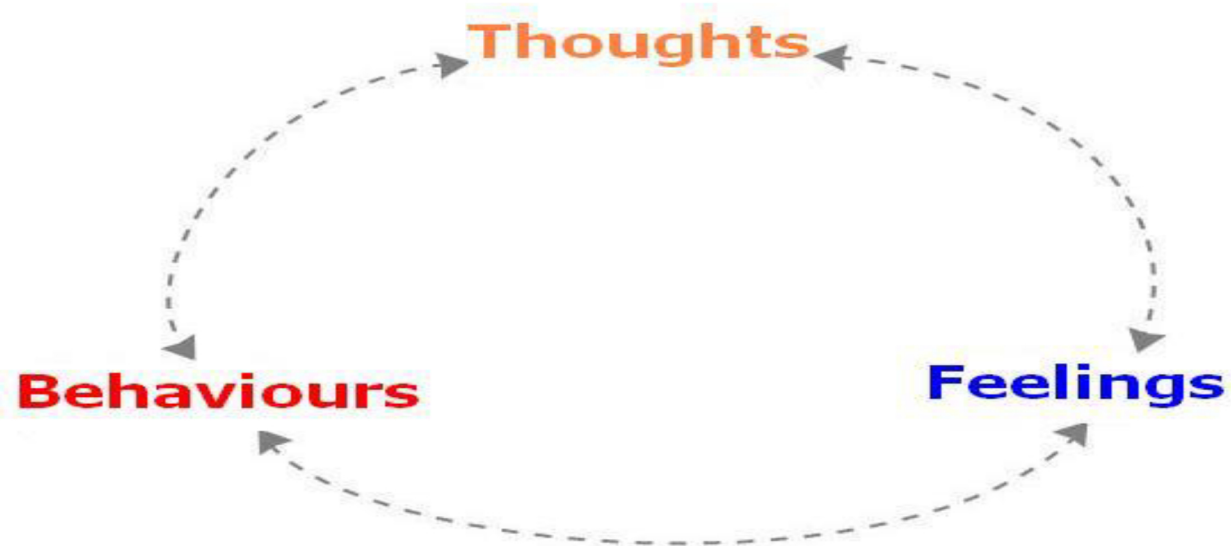


**An Introductory
Self-Help Course
in
Cognitive Behaviour Therapy**

Step Six



Carol Vivyan

2009-2013

Step 6

Distancing or Defusing from Thoughts

Remember that Playground Bully? Victim 1 believed the bully and became upset. Victim 2 challenged back and the bully eventually loses his power and gives up. Victim 3 was quite different. He didn't react at all. He merely acknowledged the bully, then turned away and went off to play with his friends.



Defusing from our thoughts involves acknowledging the thought as a thought, not reacting automatically, then choosing to put our focus of attention elsewhere.

Thoughts can be described as 'passing streams of words', or passing images or sensations, rather than the statements of fact that we usually accept them to be. We can practise mindfulness techniques so that we can learn to observe those words, images or sensations, rather than engage with them, or buy into them.

Start with learning Mindful Breathing, and practise often, several times a day, just for 3-5 minutes at a time. The more you practise, the more effective it will be. You will be constantly distracted by intrusive thoughts, sounds, images, sensations - but that's ok. The only aim of mindfulness is to notice when your mind wanders, and repeatedly to bring your attention back to your breathing, or perhaps to an activity you are engaged in. [Practise the techniques on page 45-49.](#)



Earlier, we learned about noticing thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and asking ourselves questions in order to help challenge our thoughts.



STOP, take a breath, and ask yourself these questions which will help you defuse or distance yourself from your thoughts:

- What's happening right now? What thoughts, feelings and sensations do I notice?
- What am I reacting to? What meaning am I giving this event? How is this affecting me?
- Is this fact or opinion?
- What is the result of my believing this thought?
- What would be the effect of not believing this thought?
- Is this a thought, a feeling, or a sensation?
- Am I predicting what might happen in the future?
- Am I evaluating a situation? How might I describe it instead?
- Is this a memory from the past?
- Is this one of those [Unhelpful Thinking Habits](#)?
- Perhaps write the thought down, get it out of your head and onto paper
- Maybe repeat the thought in a strange or comical voice, or say it very quickly or very slowly - words can lose or change their meanings
- Can I use a metaphor for this situation? (examples on page 52)



Learn about

❖ **Mindfulness**

This worksheet is an alternative to the earlier Thought Record Sheet. Photocopy it (or print more from the website), try it out and see which one you prefer.

❖ **ACT Worksheet**

Photocopy these sheets (or print more from the website) and practise the techniques as much and as often as you can

❖ **STOPP**

❖ **Defusion Techniques**

Mindfulness



Jon Kabat-Zinn

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice which is very relevant for our lives today. Mindfulness is a very simple concept. Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally.



Mindfulness does not conflict with any beliefs or traditions, whether religious, cultural or scientific. It is simply a practical way to notice thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds, smells - anything we might not normally notice. The actual skills might be simple, but because it is so different to how our minds normally behave, it takes a lot of practice.

We might go out into the garden and as we look around, we might think "That grass really needs cutting, and that vegetable patch looks very untidy". A young child on the other hand, will call over excitedly, "Hey - come and look at this ant!"

Mindfulness can simply be noticing what we don't normally notice, because our heads are too busy in the future or in the past - thinking about what we need to do, or going over what we have done.

Mindfulness might simply be described as choosing and learning to control our focus of attention.

Automatic Pilot

In a car, we can sometimes drive for miles on “automatic pilot”, without really being aware of what we are doing. In the same way, we may not be really “present”, moment-by-moment, for much of our lives: We can often be “miles away” without knowing it.



On automatic pilot, we are more likely to have our “buttons pressed”: Events around us and thoughts, feelings and sensations (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of thinking that are often unhelpful and may lead to worsening mood.

By becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice; we do not have to go into the same old “mental ruts” that may have caused problems in the past.

Mindful Activity



If we wash the dishes each evening, we might tend to be ‘in our heads’ as we’re washing up, thinking about what we have to do, what we’ve done earlier in the day, worrying about future events, or regretful thoughts about the past. Again, a young child might see things differently, “Listen to those bubbles! They’re fun!”

Washing up or another routine activity can become a routine (practice of) mindful activity for us. We might notice the temperature of the water and how it feels on the skin, the texture of the bubbles on the skin, and yes, we might hear the bubbles as they softly pop. The sounds of the water as we take out and put dishes into the water. The smoothness of the plates, and the texture of the sponge. Just noticing what we might not normally notice.

A mindful walk brings new pleasures. Walking is something most of us do at some time during the day. Even if only for a couple of minutes at a time, we can practise mindful walking. Rather than be ‘in our heads’, we can look around and notice what we see, hear and/or sense. We might notice the sensations in our own body just through the act of walking, noticing the sensations and movement of our feet, legs, arms, head and body as we take each step. Noticing our breathing. Thoughts will continuously intrude, but we can just notice them, and then bring our attention back to our walking.

The more we practise, perhaps the more (initially at least) we will notice those thoughts intruding, and that’s ok. The only aim of mindful activity is to bring our attention back to the activity continually, noticing those sensations, from outside and within us.

Mindful Breathing

The primary focus in Mindfulness Meditation is the breathing. However, the primary goal is a calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. This creates calmness and acceptance.



- ❖ Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed and your spine reasonably straight.
- ❖ Direct your attention to your breathing.
- ❖ When thoughts, emotions, physical feelings or external sounds occur, simply accept them, giving them the space to come and go without judging or getting involved with them.
- ❖ When you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that the attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.

It's ok and natural for thoughts to arise, and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing.

Breathing Meditation 1 (Kabat-Zinn 1996)

Assume a comfortable posture lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting, keep the spine straight and let your shoulders drop.

Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.



Bring your attention to your belly, feeling it rise or expand gently on the in-breath and fall or recede on the out-breath.

Keep your focus on the breathing, 'being with' each in-breath for its full duration and with each out-breath for its full duration, as if you were riding the waves of your own breathing.

Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that took you away and then gently bring your attention back to your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out.

If your mind wanders away from the breath a thousand times, then your job is simply to bring it back to the breath every time, no matter what it becomes preoccupied with.

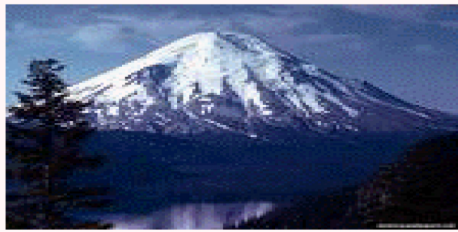
Practise this exercise for fifteen minutes at a convenient time every day, whether you feel like it or not, for one week and see how it feels to incorporate a disciplined meditation practice into your life. Be aware of how it feels to spend some time each day just being with your breath without having to *do* anything.

Breathing Meditation 2 (Kabat-Zinn 1996)

- ❖ Tune into your breathing at different times during the day, feeling the belly go through one or two risings and fallings.
- ❖ Become aware of your thoughts and feelings at these moments, just observing them without judging them or yourself.
- ❖ At the same time, be aware of any changes in the way you are seeing things and feeling about yourself.



Using mindfulness to cope with negative experiences (thoughts, feelings, events)



As we become more practised at using mindfulness for breathing, body sensations and routine daily activities, so we can then learn to be mindful of our thoughts and feelings, to become observers, and then more accepting of them. This results in less distressing feelings, and increases our ability to enjoy our lives.

With mindfulness, even the most disturbing sensations, feelings, thoughts, and experiences, can be viewed from a wider perspective as passing events in the mind, rather than as "us", or as being necessarily true. (Brantley 2003)

When we are more practised in using mindfulness, we can use it even in times of intense distress, by becoming mindful of the actual experience as an observer, using mindful breathing and focussing our attention on the breathing, listening to the distressing thoughts mindfully, recognising them as merely thoughts, breathing with them, allowing them to happen without believing them or arguing with them. If thoughts are too strong or loud, then we can move our attention to our breath, the body, or to sounds around us.

Jon Kabat-Zinn uses the example of waves to help explain mindfulness.

Think of your mind as the surface of a lake or an ocean. There are always waves on the water, sometimes big, sometimes small, sometimes almost imperceptible. The water's waves are churned up by winds, which come and go and vary in direction and intensity, just as do the winds of stress and change in our lives, which stir up waves in our mind. It's possible to find shelter from much of the wind that agitates the mind. Whatever we might do to prevent them, the winds of life and of the mind will blow.



"You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf" (Kabat-Zinn 2004).

The Visitor

This exercise helps to develop a mindful awareness of the environment, of the body, of the breath, and of thoughts and emotions. You can practice the exercise as a whole, or in parts – using any part of the exercise.



The Environment



As you're walking, or just sitting quietly somewhere, start to notice things as though you were a visitor to this place. As you look around you, notice sights, sounds and smells as though you had never seen, heard or smelled them before. You can imagine you are a visitor from another area or culture, or from a different species or even planet. Seeing or hearing things for the first time, from a completely different perspective. Spend a little time just looking and

listening and noticing.

The Body

When 'Dr Who' regenerates, he immediately checks out his new body. As a newcomer or visitor, start to imagine being in your body for the first time. Notice what that feels like – what bodily sensations do you notice? How does it feel to move around, stretching those muscles, standing up or sitting down. What do those hands feel like as you move them about, stretching and wiggling those fingers, clenching those fists? As you start to walk, how is that? What do you notice about your legs – upper legs, feet and toes? Move your head around and notice what your neck and shoulders feel like. Bend, stretch and move about. What are those physical sensations? Spend a little time just noticing those bodily sensations, and imagine taking your body for its first ever walk, or any everyday activity.



The Breath



What would you, as a new awareness or visitor to this new body, notice about the sensations of breathing, as you breathe in, then out? Notice the sensations in the abdomen, the chest, the throat, the mouth and nose. You can notice how your attention wanders, as thoughts come in, sometimes crowding in, and your attention can follow those thoughts. Just notice as your attention wanders, then gently bring your focus back to your breath. Minds do wander, thoughts will come and thoughts will go, that is the nature of the human mind. As a visitor, you can stand back, notice those thoughts, feelings, sounds and sensations, and keep bringing your attention back to your breath.

Thoughts and Emotions

Then you can start to notice, as a visitor, the thoughts and images, feelings and emotions that come and go, in this your new body and mind. You're brand new to this body and mind, and there are no expectations for you to react to any thought, image or emotion – you can just notice them, and not respond. As a visitor, you can notice that they are just words and images, sensations, and feelings. Merely notice them as you would as a new visitor to this body and mind. Words and images, sensations and feelings: they come, and they go, and that's okay, because just what the human mind does.



NOW



Notice: Where my attention is.

Observe: What I'm doing. Say to myself: "I am walking", "I am sitting",
"I am breathing", then notice those sensations in your body.

Wise Mind: What now? How shall I continue? Doing or Being?



If you want an explanation for your present, look at your past.

If you want to know your future, look at your present.

Buddha.

Mindfulness for Busy People

- Choose an activity to do mindfully throughout the day, for one, two or five minutes. For example: Drink a cup of tea. Walk. Wash the dishes.
- Whatever you are doing, be in that moment, right now. See, hear, smell, touch, feel, breathe.
- Simply notice whenever other thoughts and sensations come to mind, then re-focus on your chosen mindful activity.
- Be patient and compassionate with yourself.
- Describe... rather than judge good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant.
- It is as it is.
- It will pass.

Everything Flows. Nothing is fixed. Heraclitus

ACT – ABCD Worksheet

A Activating Event	B Believable Thoughts	C Consequences	
<p>Notice a situation in your life that is difficult. This can be an event in the past, present, or future. It can be internal or external, real or imagined. Now briefly summarise the situation you are struggling with in the space provided. Be specific.</p>	<p>Please describe the difficult thoughts that show up for you in this situation.</p>	<p>Consequences of Believing the Thought Pick a thought from B that you are likely to believe. Now write how you will behave and feel if you believe the thought.</p> <p>Balanced alternative thought- optional</p>	<p>Consequences of Not Believing the Thought How are you likely to behave and feel if you do not believe the thought?</p>

D Defusion	Examples of Defusion Exercises
<p>Defusion involves seeing thoughts and feelings for what they are (streams of words, passing sensations), not what they say they are (dangers or facts). Write down some defusion exercises you would like to practise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notice unhelpful thoughts. Say them slowly. Write them down. Say them in funny voices. • Label unhelpful thoughts and emotions, e.g. an evaluation, a prediction, a feeling, a sensation, a justification, a memory etc. FACT OR OPINION? • Practise mindfulness so that you can better notice when you are in the present moment versus when you are stuck in your head in the past or future. • Use metaphors to help get a different view of your thoughts, feelings, and self evaluations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Passengers on the Bus, Playground Bully, The Beach Ball, The Shop Window, The River, The Thought Train • STOP, STEP BACK. OBSERVE (what you are feeling and thinking; how the other person is acting). <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Adapted from Ciarrochi & Bailey 2008</i></p>

STOPP



➤ Stop and Step Back

- Don't act immediately. Pause.



➤ Take a Breath

- Notice your breath as you breathe in and out.

➤ Observe

- What am I thinking and feeling? What are the words that my mind is saying? Is this fact or opinion? Are the thoughts descriptions or evaluations? Accurate or inaccurate? Helpful or unhelpful? What unhelpful thinking habit am I using (e.g. mind-reading, negative filter, thinking the worst)? Where is my focus of attention? What metaphor could I use (mountain, tunnel, playground bully, thought train, beach ball, passengers on the bus)?



➤ Pull back - Put in some Perspective



- Pull Back. See the situation as an outside observer. What would a fly on the wall see? Is there another way of looking at it? What would someone else see and make of it? What advice would I give to someone else? What meaning am I giving this event for me to react in this way? How important is it right now, and will it be in 6 months? Is my reaction in proportion to the actual event? What's the 'helicopter view'?

➤ Practise what works

- Do what works and what helps! Play to your Principles and Values. Will it be effective and appropriate? Is it in proportion to the event? Is it in keeping with my values and principles? What will be the consequences of my action? What is best for me and most helpful for this situation?



Adapted from Ciarrochi & Bailey 2008

Defusion Techniques

Defusion involves seeing thoughts and feelings for what they are (streams of words, passing sensations), not what they say they are (dangers or facts).

- **STOP, STEP BACK, OBSERVE** (the thoughts and feelings, what's happening to/for the other person).
- Notice what's happening – your thoughts, physical sensations, emotions, images, memories. Notice the way you're interpreting what they mean, and how that's affecting you.
- Notice the unhelpful thoughts. What am I reacting to? Perhaps say the thoughts very slowly, or very quickly, in a squeaky or comic voice, or write them down.

- **Identify the emotion you're feeling, and label the unhelpful thoughts**

- an evaluation
- a prediction
- a feeling or sensation
- a memory
- an unhelpful thinking habit: mind-reading (believing we know or what others are thinking), negative filter (only noticing the bad stuff), emotional reasoning (I feel bad so it must be bad), catastrophising (imagining the worst), the internal critic etc.

- Learn more and practise **mindfulness** so that you can be aware of when you are in the present moment rather than being 'in your head' - perhaps the past or future. Notice what you don't normally notice – sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts, textures etc.

- **Use metaphors** try to see things differently. For example:

Passengers on the Bus

You can be in the driving seat, whilst all the passengers (thoughts) are being critical or shouting directions. You can allow the shouting, whilst focusing on the road ahead.

Playground Bully (our thoughts can be our own internal bully)

Victim 1 – believes the bully, gets upset & reacts automatically (bully carries on)

Victim 2 – challenges the bully (bully eventually gives up)

Victim 3 – acknowledges then ignores the bully, changing focus of attention.

The River

Items floating down the river – perhaps leaves or bits of mucky debris (thoughts, feelings, images) – instead of struggling to float, we can stand on the bank watching it all go by

The Beach Ball

We try to stop thoughts – we hold the ball under water, but it keeps popping up (thoughts). We can allow the ball to float around us, just letting it be.

Thought train

We can sit on the train, watching the scenery (thoughts, images, sensations) go by, or stand on the platform watching the thought train pass by – we don't have to jump on it.

The Tunnel

When we get anxious driving through a tunnel, the best option is to keep going rather than try to escape. This feeling will pass – there is an end to this tunnel.

The Mountain

Whatever the weather, or whatever happens on the surface of the mountain – the mountain stands firm, strong, grounded, permanent. We can be like that mountain, observing thoughts, feelings, sensations, knowing inner stillness.



In Step 7 we will learn other helpful techniques including imagery and visualisation, how to improve our sleep, and also how to maintain the positive progress.

If you need help with Step Six, please see this page for individual and personal support from the author, an accredited CBT Therapist:

If printing out the whole self-help course, you can dispose of the Step Six cover page (page 43), and replace this page (54) with the first page (54) of Step Seven