



Session 3: The Trouble with Thinking

How the mind works

It can get things wrong:

There are a number of 'truths' in any given situation. ACT is therefore less about identifying the 'truth' of something, and more about identifying how helpful/unhelpful that something is. This message was demonstrated through the use of optical illusions in session, which not only showed how experiences can change our perceptions, but also just as we don't always believe what we hear, we should not always believe what our minds say.



Automatic:

Verbal labelling, such as the image of the banana in session, is often automatic. In other words, we don't deliberately make it happen, which can make it difficult to switch off. Therefore, imagine applying this to everyday situations such as 'someone yawns', you automatically think 'bored'.

For human beings who have learned language, making links between words and images, so it makes it difficult for us to have one in mind without the other being there. Additionally, we can make links between words and words (or associations), again which make it difficult to have one part in mind without the other. Try the following:



Jack and Jill went up the _____

There's no place like _____

It seems natural to finish these sentences with 'Hill' and 'Home'. Any other way would feel odd or unnatural due to the familiarity with the words. Imagine 'Jack and Jill went up the PUB' or 'There's no place like LAS VEGAS'. This tells us that it can feel strange when we try and change the way we think, which in turn can make it harder for us to actually make changes.

Additionally, when connecting words and images, we can impact our body. In session you were asked to imagine a lemon and for some people, this can produce a physiological response of salivation. Additionally, you were given an example of the horror movie, which although there is no threat in the cinema, you may still experience fear in your body.



Language:

Our minds automatically make connections in terms of image or words, and we do this because our minds love to categorise the world. We automatically break the world down into bits and then build relationships between these e.g.

One thing comes before or after another	One object is bigger or smaller
Something is hotter or colder	This is the same as that
The object is below that object and the other above	The thing is over here, that thing is over there

For example, rather than weighing more than someone else, we think “I am fat”; rather than you being less educated than someone else, we think “I am not educated”.

We’ve fused with these automatic processes, and become rigid in our thinking by losing the context; something we can only do through language.



Changing ‘But’ to ‘And’:

Language leads us to think in terms of dichotomies: good vs. bad, hot vs. cold, tall vs. short, fat vs. thin. This can lead us to lose sight of the full picture. Look at the following sentences and notice the impact of the word ‘but’:

*‘He’s a good kid **but** he’s always coming home in a police car’*

*‘I try to be a good mother **but** my children are always causing trouble’*

The word ‘but’ completely cancels out everything that comes before it so the kid is no longer a good kid (he’s a bad one for coming home in the police car); the mother is no longer a good mother (she’s a bad one for having children who cause trouble). Simply by changing this word, we can change how we understand the whole sentence...

*‘He’s a good kid **and** he’s always coming home in a police car’*

*‘I try to be a good mother **and** my children are always causing trouble’*

Is it now easier to see him as a good kid?, and to see her as a good mother? Try this for yourself, replacing ‘but’ with ‘and’ whenever possible, and notice the difference this makes.

Changing 'shoulds', 'oughts', and 'musts'

Just like 'but', words such as 'should' 'ought' and 'must' can have a huge impact on us, and how we interpret things. Look at the following sentences and notice the impact of the words:

*'I **should** be more confident when socialising'*

*'I **must** eat more healthily'*

*'I **ought** to exercise more'*

The commanding sound of these words can make you feel pressurised to do something, and if we don't fulfil this, we can feel inadequate, or like we are failing. Simply by changing this word, we can change how we understand the whole sentence...

*'I **want** to be more confident when socialising'*

*'I **want** to eat more healthily'*

*'I **want** to exercise more'*

Just changing those words can feel like commanding, less pressurising, and in turn, it is less likely you will feel like your failing. Altering these words can also be a really good way of helping us explore our values too, to feel more connected with the decisions we make, *for example, saying "I should be a better mother" feels very different to "I want to be a better mother"*.

Language: Where does the problem lie?

So far we have learnt that our minds are fairly automatic, and language can have a subtle, but powerful, impact on how we experience the world around us. However, it is important to emphasise that none of these things are in themselves a problem as they are just our mind doing what our mind does best.



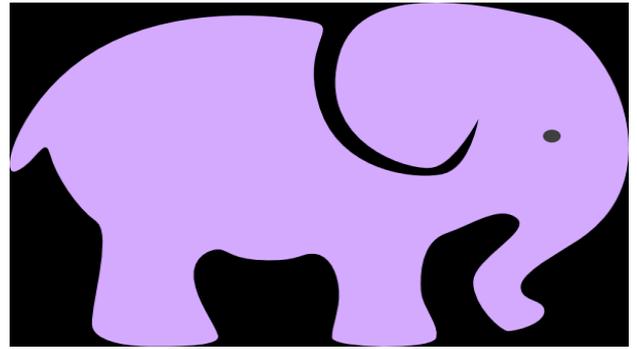
Language allows us to do many things such as communicate with others; it allows us to predict, plan and problem solve; it allows us to manage our behaviour through social norms; it enables us to learn from people and cultures.



However, language and our minds become problematic when we start to see them less for what they are (a helpful tool to keep us alive) and more for what they're not (an accurate reporter of the truth).

Thought Suppression:

When an unwanted and distressing thought, image or memory pops into our mind, our natural tendency is to try to get rid of it, or **SUPPRESS** it. In session, you were asked to NOT think of a purple elephant, and your attempts to do this were unlikely to be successful.



Almost always, trying not to think of something makes it stronger. This has two important points:

1. In order to not think about something, we have to be aware of what we are trying not to think about, which of course means we're aware of it.
2. By actively trying to get rid of a thought that you find distressing, you will inadvertently make it stronger by adding a new layer of distress to it. You will then become distressed by the thought itself and your inability to suppress it. This will most likely make you even more aware of the thought when it pops up in the future.

This is the same with Emotions!

The Beach Ball:



You can think of this suppression of thoughts, images, memories and feelings like a **beach ball** being pushed under water.

You engage in a constant struggle to keep it under water (to get rid of them), leading you to become completely focused and captivated by avoiding our pain (the beach ball). This leaves us with no, or only limited ability to focus on life.

...and in the end, the beach ball always bounces back no matter how much we have struggled to 'suppress' it.

Cognitive Fusion

In ACT, this attempt to control our thoughts stems from our belief in them, or how much we buy into them. In other words, we TRUST our minds, which ACT calls '**Cognitive Fusion**'. In session, we played the music from two soundtracks associated with sharks: the Jaws film soundtrack, and the 'Baby Shark' song.

Our reaction to hearing this music indicates the associations we have made, and personal meaning that the tune holds for us. For example, you might have had thoughts of 'danger' or noticed feelings of apprehension, or even fear when the Jaws music played. This is an example of fusion. For someone who has never heard of Jaws, they likely had a different reaction, as they would not have attached the same meaning to that music.

The following thought traps are good indicators that you might be experiencing fusion and would benefit from taking a step back:

Thought Traps:

- Thoughts are **TRUE**
- Thoughts are **ORDERS**
- Thoughts are **THREATS**

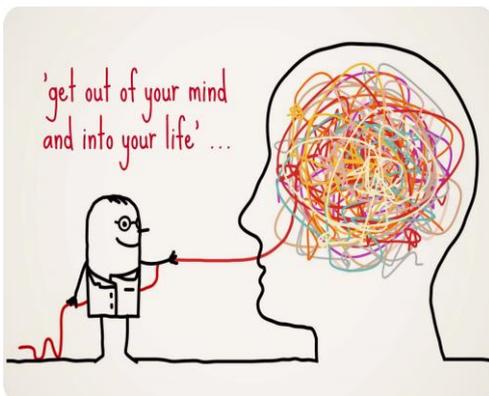


Getting caught in a thought trap means you believe what your mind tells you (*fusion*) and you end up...

'Getting Hooked'



When you get 'hooked' into these thought traps, you increase your suffering as you no longer identify thoughts as thoughts.



You should be sceptical about what your mind is telling you, as we sometimes believe our mind even when it presents us with ideas which are exaggerated, ridiculous, over-critical or just plain fantasy.

Develop that healthy disrespect for your mind, allowing you to de-fuse from things which can make you feel frightened, disappointed, angry, miserable, ashamed, disgusted etc.

How does Language impact our Self-image?

If you asked yourself “Who am I, really?”, your problem-solving mind would come up with all kinds of suggestions. Although these suggestions would be snippets of your ‘story’, you would be tempted to accept them as truth.

Any answer to questions about who you are or what you are like might be an:

OVER-GENERALIZATION

and/or an

OVER-SIMPLIFICATION

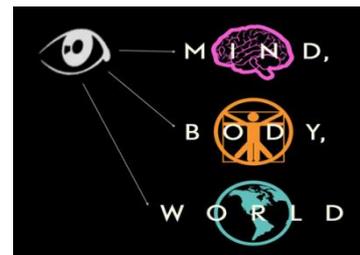
Imagine someone asked you, “Do you have a good sense of humour?” You may find it difficult to answer this question with a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. This will be because a ‘Yes’ or a ‘No’ will be over-generalised or over-simplified answers. You may remember a time when you had a great sense of humour, however you also may remember a time when you maybe lacked a sense of humour. Therefore ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ don’t sum these up.

‘Who we are’ is very complex, and ever –changing. No simple answer could ever capture these complexities; we are not fixed and solid ‘objects’.

Think about this...

There are things externally that we are aware of through sense, such as the light coming through the windows or the seats beneath us. We are also aware of our bodies, such as our heart beat, or stomach rumbling when we are hungry.

We are AWARE of both of these things, but we know they are not us, *for example, when our stomach rumbles, we can choose whether to eat or not to eat.* So why don’t we do this with the things our mind presents to us? We are not any of these things: we are experiencing them, however there is a difference between:



‘Me’ and ‘What goes through my Mind’.

Cognitive Defusion

Defusion means recognising that:

Words are only words

Thoughts are only thoughts

Images are only images

This can prevent us from 'Getting Hooked'. In session, you were given a short exercise to demonstrate this point:



← What is this? It's an IMAGE of a pineapple.

This demonstrated the simple point that your mind would have labelled this a 'pineapple', removing the 'image' part. It is important to recognise that all the images in your mind, and all the thoughts or beliefs you have may reflect reality (and may be fair/accurate reflections), but they are not reality and should not be mistaken for reality.

Examples:

The **THOUGHT** that I am stupid

Is **NOT the REALITY** of me being stupid.

The **IDEA** that I MIGHT get cancer

Is **NOT the REALITY** that I WILL get cancer.

The **BELIEF** that I am unlovable

Is **NOT the REALITY** of me being unlovable.

Home Practice: Cognitive Defusion

Awareness of Unhelpful Labelling

To be able to look at our minds in a more detached, therefore de-fused way, it is important to be able to develop an awareness of when we are labelling habits.

Labels are personal judgements about objects, or events, or people.

For Example:

Good	Bad
Attractive	Ugly
Old	Young
Funny	Not Funny

Labels alone can make it harder for us to manage. Look at the examples below:

*"I am **incredibly** anxious"* vs. *"I am anxious"*

*"I am **unbearably** depressed"* vs. *"I am depressed"*

All we have changed is the language we use, but that seemingly small change can have a big impact on our state of mind, and on our experiences of life. Those sentences without labels may even seem more manageable to you.

When it comes to labelling, this is our mind doing what minds do. However, we don't have to 'buy into' this.

Instead, we can simply **thank our minds** for doing this and providing us with the information, recognising what it has done but not 'buying into it'. We are therefore distancing ourselves from our minds, allowing us time and space to make more informed decisions.

Home Practice: Cognitive Defusion

I am having the thought...

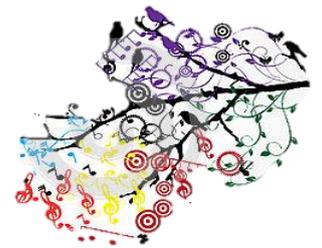
To begin this exercise, first bring to mind an upsetting thought that takes the form “I am XYZ”. For example, “I’m not good enough” or “I’m stupid”. Preferably pick a thought that recurs and that usually bothers or upsets you. Now focus on that thought for about ten seconds. Next, take that thought and, in front of it, insert this phrase: “I’m having the thought”. Now play your original thought again, this time with the new phrase in front of it. Think to yourself, for about ten seconds, “I’m having the thought that I am XYZ”. Notice what happens. Now, do this again, but this time try “I notice I’m having the thought that I’m XYZ”. What was this like?

Poisonous Word Defusion

In session, milk and billion were not distressing words; however the same defusion strategy of constant repetition can be applied to words that really do bother us. Identify a word that particularly distresses you - for example, ‘stupid’, ‘fatso’, ‘fruitcake’ and then subject this word to constant repetition in order to reduce the ‘sting’ that this word has for you (if your thought is longer than a single word see if you can reduce it down to the most powerful, e.g. I’m the ugliest person in my class might focus in on the word ugliest, or ugly). The time it takes for this to have an impact can vary, so play around with different lengths of time.

Sentence Distortion

Bring to mind a negative self-judgement that commonly bothers you. For example, “I’m an idiot”. Hold that thought in your mind for ten seconds, and then start to sing it to yourself to the tune of ‘happy birthday’ (or any other tune you’re familiar with). Notice what happens. Now go back to the original (not sung) thought and hold it in mind for another ten seconds before this time, in your head, singing it to yourself to the tune of ‘Jingle Bells’ (or, again, any other tune you’re familiar with). Notice how this affects the thought. Try this also by slowing the word down, or using a different voice (e.g. an accent).



Home Practice: Cognitive Defusion

Image Distortion

The defusion techniques for images are similar to those for thoughts. Initially we need to focus on these images in order to be able to practice defusing them. The ultimate aim, however, is to let these images come and go...much like having a television on in the background, but not really watching it.

Your own personal cinema

Bring an unpleasant image to mind (e.g. you blushing in front of others, you fainting at the supermarket). Now imagine a cinema screen in your mind (or you could, if you're feeling adventurous, imagine a film set with your image being played out on it (with you as the director, of course)), and project the image onto the screen.

Once it's up there, play around with it – stretch the scene out or squish it down, slow it down or speed it up, turn it into a black and white film or go in the opposite direction and make the colours ultra-bright (or alter the colours (make the sky orange and the grass purple)).

Perhaps add some subtitles, or narration screens in the style of an old silent movie. You could even add a soundtrack, if you have one in mind, or change the scene (maybe an old western setting, or a sci-fi theme).

As you're doing all this notice how it impacts on the mental image, and once you have a 'new image' in mind have a go and play it through a few times, compare it to the original and see if there's any difference in how it impacts on you.



Home Practice: Linking values to goals

Last week, you were asked to complete a Values bulls-eye, exploring areas where you may not be living up to your values. This week, we ask you to try and link these areas to goals which may help you live in line with your values.

Remember! Values are a direction you continue to travel down. Goals are steps along that direction. Together, knowing our direction and having steps in this direction, allows us to live a life that is more meaningful and fulfilling.

Firstly, please identify 3 values which you feel are currently lacking (possibly you identified these in your values bulls-eye). Then, identify goals in the boxes below that fit in the direction of that value.



Goals in the direction of my
value identified above:

Goals in the direction of my
value identified above:

Goals in the direction of my
value identified above:

Remember, you may have a valued direction of West (from Cardiff), and your goal points may be Bridgend, Neath, Swansea... Goals are steps along the valued direction.

Home Practice: Increasing Flexibility

The previous two weeks have been more 'behavioural' flexibility exercises. This week, we ask you to increase your 'mental' flexibility.

Firstly, we ask you to come up with as many uses of an item as possible:

Example: A brick could be...

Step, doorstop, paperweight, weapon, diving aid, cheap dumbbell, way to break a window..

Try this for the following:

A paper clip

A piece of paper

A shoe

A cardboard box

Simply, this exercise is demonstrating that you may have had strong associations with these items and certain uses e.g. a brick → builds houses. However, there are many options and choices you could have chosen, and are available. We often run with the strongest associated items, but remember, there are other options and choices.

Home Practice: Mindfulness Tasks

Leaves on a Stream



You can also listen to this exercise as a recording here:
<https://jasonluoma.com/media/Leaves%20on%20the%20stream.mp3>

Firstly, close your eyes or look down towards the floor, and sit in a position which is comfortable for you.

Imagine you are sitting on a riverbank, beside a small, s-l-o-w flowing stream.

Imagine it's a sunny day, and there is no-one else around. You are feeling very peaceful and very relaxed as you watch the water flowing over rocks, gently running downstream.

As you watch this slow, peaceful scene, you notice that once in a while a large leaf drops from a tree that is slightly upstream.

The leaf slowly glides down onto the surface of the water and is gently carried downstream.

As you watch this happening, become conscious of your thoughts. Each time a thought pops into your head, just imagine that it is transferred on to one of those leaves.

If the thought comes to you in the form of words, think of those words written on the leaf.

If the thought comes to you as an image, imagine it as a picture drawn or printed on to the leaf.

Just stay there, beside the stream and allow the leaves to keep flowing by. Don't try to change anything or control anything, just let things happen.

If you are distracted by a noise or movement, or some feeling in your body, again just let it be. Return to your position on the riverbank, gently watching the stream flow.

*How did you find that? Was it easy? What happened? Did the stream keep flowing? Maybe you found some of your thoughts were about the exercise itself such as "I don't think I'm doing this right" or "I just can't keep focussed". That is okay – just let yourself come back to the stream, gently and slowly each time. The skill that you have just been practising – perhaps for the first time for many of you – is a great skill to have. It de-fuses your thinking and makes it very clear that there is a difference between YOU (*on the riverbank*) and YOUR THOUGHTS (*on the stream*).*

Next Week:

The fourth and final session of this ACT course will focus on values in depth, and the ACT way of goal setting.



All of the defusion techniques discussed in today's session, and more, can be found in 'The Happiness Trap' by Russ Harris.