

An extract from ACT Made Simple (2nd edition) by Russ Harris

Introduce a Metaphor for Defusion

Before we start to actively practice defusion skills, it's useful to introduce a metaphor that conveys the costs of fusion and the benefits of defusion. This helps the client to understand the purpose of defusion and how learning defusion skills can help him. My favorite metaphor for this purpose is the Hands as Thoughts and Feelings exercise. I took you through an ultrabrief version of this in chapter 2; what follows is a longer, more detailed version. Typically, this would take around four minutes to do with a client. I encourage you to read it aloud and act it out as if doing it with a client.

THE HANDS AS THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS METAPHOR— EXTENDED VERSION

This exercise is predominantly a metaphor for fusion and defusion. It's evolved from my earlier Hands as Thoughts exercise (Harris, 2009a), and the instructions overlap a lot with the Pushing Away Paper exercise detailed in chapter 9. The script that follows is a generic version, suitable for just about anyone. It's much more powerful if we make it specific to each unique client, so instead of saying things like "all the people you care about," we'd say, for example, "your husband, Michael, and your teenage daughter, Sarah."

When I do this, I usually carry my chair over to the client, and we sit side by side, with our backs to the wall, facing the room, and we both do all the actions simultaneously. You don't have to do it this way, of course; like any exercise in ACT, you can modify and adapt it freely to suit yourself; I've just found it more powerful to do so.

I also like to do two lovely variants on this exercise. One option is to write down some relevant thoughts and feelings on a sheet of paper, and use this instead of one's hands. Another option is to write them down with an indelible all-surface marker on something thin, flexible, and transparent such as bubble wrap, acetate, cellophane, or a clear plastic page protector.

Therapist: (sitting side by side with the client, both facing the room) Imagine that out there in front of you (gesturing to the contents of the room and the far wall) is everything that really matters to you, deep in your heart; everything that makes your life meaningful (or used to, in the past); all the people, places, and activities you love; all your favorite foods and drinks and music and books and movies; all the things you like to do; and all the people you care about and want to spend time with.

But that's not all. Also over there are all the problems and challenges you need to deal with in your life today, such as... (therapist gives some examples based on the client's history, such as "your conflict with your son," "your financial issues," "your health problems," "your court case," "your search for a job," "your chemotherapy for your cancer").

And also over there are all the tasks you need to do on a regular basis to make your life work: shopping, cooking, cleaning, driving, doing your tax return, and so on.

Now, please copy me as we do this exercise. Let's imagine that our hands are our thoughts and feelings, and let's put them together like this. (*Therapist places his hands together, side by side, palms upward, as if they are the pages of a book. The client copies him.*) Now, let's see what happens when we get hooked by our thoughts. (*Therapist slowly raises his hands toward his face, until they are covering his eyes. The client copies him. Both keep their hands over their eyes as the next section of the exercise unfolds.*)

Now, notice three things. First, how much are you missing out on right now? How disconnected and disengaged are you from the people and things that matter? If the person you love were right there in front of you, how disconnected would you be? If your favorite movie were playing on a screen over there, how much would you miss out on?

Second, notice how difficult it is to focus your attention on what you need to do. If there's an important task in front of you right now, how hard is it to focus on it? If there's a problem you need to address or a challenge you need to tackle, how hard is it to give it your full attention?

Third, notice how difficult it is, like this, to take action, to do the things that make your life work, such as... (*therapist gives some examples based on the client's history, such as "to cook dinner," "to drive your car," "to cuddle your baby," "to type on your computer," "to hug the person you love"*). So notice how difficult life is when we're hooked. We're missing out, we're cut off and disconnected, it's hard to focus, and it's hard to do the things that make life work.

Now, let's see what happens as we unhook from our thoughts and feelings. (*Therapist now slowly removes his hands from his face and lowers them until they drop into his lap. The client copies him.*) So notice what happens as we unhook. What's your view of the room like now? How much easier is it to engage and connect? If your favorite person were in front of you right now, how much more connected would you be? If there were a task you needed to do or a problem you needed to address, how much easier would it be to focus on it, like this? Now move your arms and hands about (*therapist gently shakes his arms and hands around; client copies*). How much easier is it now to take action: to drive a car, cuddle a baby, cook dinner, type on a computer, hug the person you love? (*Therapist mimes these activities as he says them; the client usually will not copy this part, but that doesn't matter.*)

Now notice these things (*therapist indicates his hands, now once more resting in his lap*) haven't disappeared. We haven't chopped them off and gotten rid of them. They're still here. So if there's something useful we can do with them, we can use them. You see, even really painful thoughts and feelings often have useful information that can help us, even if it's just pointing us toward problems we need to address or things we need to do differently, or simply reminding us to be kinder to ourselves. And if there's nothing useful we can do with them, we just let them sit there.