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DEFUSION FROM THOUGHTS ABOUT CANCER

Metaphors to help you defuse from
common thoughts about cancer.

Created by Sally Gardner Ward - NHS Psychological Therapist



Defusion from thoughts about cancer

Ok, so you have cancer. There's no arguing with that. However, when you spend all your time thinking about cancer, it gets in the way of living a fulfilling and meaningful life.

Defusion involves taking a step back from your thoughts and seeing them for what they are, just a string of words and pictures floating through your head. When you are defused from your thoughts, it becomes less about whether your thoughts are right or wrong and more about whether they are working for you here and now.

See if the metaphors here help you defuse from common thoughts about cancer.



Pocket oncologist

Imagine you have a tiny Oncologist who sits in your pocket. What is your one called? They constantly talk to you about your prognosis, your health, your treatments, and side effects.

Although they want to help, they haven't had any real Oncology training. Instead of offering reassurance, they tell you the worst possible outcomes. Take what they say with a pinch of salt, as they frequently get it wrong. They appreciate being thanked for their service with a gentle pat on the head.



The refrigerator

Refrigerators are constantly whirring in the background, just like thoughts about mortality.

Sometimes you hear it, sometimes you don't. If you turn the refrigerator off, you'll only spoil your food, so just allow the noise to be there and focus on things that enrich your life instead.

The violin

When you notice you are caught up in self-pitying thoughts, try serenading yourself as you complain.



Cancer bait

Our minds grab our attention using irresistible bait. It's impossible not to get hooked from time to time. If you would like to spend more time living your life and less time thinking about cancer, perhaps try these steps:

How to Unhook from Thoughts

1. Notice when I am thinking about cancer.
2. Unhook myself simply by acknowledging "I've just been hooked again" or "Whoops I took the bait".
3. Ask myself, "What is helpful to focus on right here and now?"
4. Do something fulfilling, useful or fun.





The Blob

The Blob is a 1958 film about an alien who swallows anyone in its path.

Are you ever tricked into thinking you can outrun cancer fatigue in the same way?

If you stop to rest, will you really be swallowed whole?



The time tyrant

The time tyrant cracks a whip and barks orders anytime you waste any of your precious time left. They have an extreme view on what constitutes a waste of time. For example, they perceive rest and savouring the moment as a complete waste of time and they have a ban on anything you cannot tick off a list.

Fortunately, they are all mouth and no trousers, so you have the final say.

Cancer boomerang

Our minds have evolved to survive, so your mind is going to keep bringing up cancer whether you like it or not.

Each time you notice that your thoughts or conversations have drifted back to the topic of cancer, yet again, imagine you have just been hit in the head by the perpetual cancer boomerang. It might help to say 'DOINK!' aloud when it hits.



BORING!

Thoughts about cancer can be very repetitive.

Next time your mind brings up cancer, try say "Boring!" instead of getting in another tedious monologue about it.

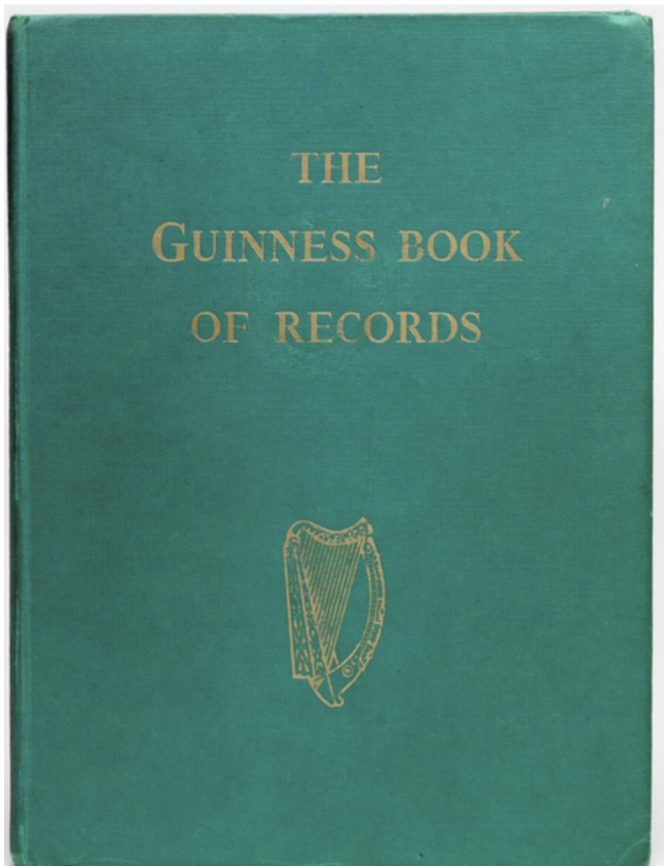




Ticking time bomb

Every living thing is built with a ticking time bomb, because one day we will all die. As cancer can shorten the fuse, it brings the ticking into sharp focus.

When the Ticking Time Bomb catches your attention, you always have a choice. Continue staring at the fuse getting shorter or spend your life truly living.



Guinness Book of World Records

It's only natural to want to break the record for being the longest cancer survivor. Hope can be extremely protective, but when we hold any ideas too tightly, it can become problematic.

When the Guinness Book of World Records pops into your head, try asking yourself the following questions:

1. How is this book serving me now?
2. Am I allowing any wiggle room for setbacks and treatment changes?
3. Am I grieving things in my future that haven't been decided?
4. Do I need to reach an old age before I can feel happy or grateful?

About this guide

This guide is designed for anyone with cancer, but also practitioners of ACT, including psychologists, therapists, and coaches, who are committed to helping clients with cancer build meaningful, values-driven lives. It was created by Sally Gardner Ward, an NHS Psychological Therapist diagnosed with Stage 4 Cancer who kindly shared her ideas with Contextual Consulting for wider distribution.

About Sally Gardner Ward

Sally Gardner Ward is an NHS Psychological Therapist working within an At Risk Mental State Team. She has extensive experience using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), including delivering individual therapy, facilitating workshops, and providing professional training.

In May 2025, Sally was diagnosed with incurable stage IV breast cancer. Since then, ACT has become not just a professional framework but a deeply personal one. She draws on its principles to navigate the emotional realities of living with cancer, using it as a guide for staying present, connected to what matters, and engaged in a meaningful life.

About Contextual Consulting

Contextual Consulting are specialists in ACT, an evidence-based psychotherapy approach. ACT focuses on mindfulness, accepting difficult emotions, and aligning your actions with your values to create a more meaningful life.

We are committed to providing leading edge evidence-based ACT training to therapists and practitioners so that they can deliver the very best outcomes for their clients. We only engage the very best world-renowned ACT experts as trainers and presenters to ensure that practitioners attending our courses receive the most up to date and practical ACT training and techniques. And we endeavour to make our training as affordable and convenient as possible.

We also offer 1:1 and group supervision for practitioners.

Looking for a therapist?

Our therapy team provides online mental health support through psychological therapy for a variety of emotional challenges. Our expert CBT and ACT specialists deliver personalised online sessions to help you address issues such as anxiety, depression, trauma, and more.

Learn more about how ACT can support you on our website: contextualconsulting.co.uk



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