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# Defusion from true thoughts

A companion guide for ACT practitioners



## **Introduction**

One of the most common questions that comes up in ACT training is this: "How do I help a client defuse from a thought when that thought is true?"

It is a genuinely important question, and it reflects a widespread misunderstanding about what defusion is for. Many practitioners and clients operate on the assumption that defusion is a technique for dealing with distorted, irrational, or factually inaccurate thoughts. Under this view, if a thought is true, there is nothing to defuse from. The implication is that defusion only applies when we can cast doubt on the content of a thought.

This guide addresses that misunderstanding directly. It focuses specifically on working with thoughts that are factually accurate but still causing significant psychological problems.

## The misconception: Is defusion only for false thoughts?

The confusion tends to rest on a comparison like this:

<b>"I am a failure"</b> Probably not literally true. Feels defusable.	<b>"I have no money"</b> May be literally true. Feels like a fact, not a thought.
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The implication is that defusion is about challenging or modifying the content of a thought, about making it seem less believable or less true. And if the thought is already beyond dispute, then we cannot touch it.

**This is a fundamental misreading of what defusion does. Defusion has nothing to do with the truth value of a thought. It has everything to do with how that thought influences behaviour.**



## What fusion with a true thought actually looks like

Consider some examples of thoughts that are factually accurate:

- *"I have cancer."*
- *"My partner has left me."*
- *"I have no money."*
- *"My country has been destroyed by war."*

None of these are distortions. They may be painful, difficult, or frightening, but they are not inaccurate. And yet a person can still be fused with any of them.

Fusion is a state in which thoughts take over our behaviour, crowding out choice, context, and values. When fused, we respond to thoughts automatically and quickly, without consideration of context, choice, or values. The person who has just received a cancer diagnosis may find the thought "I have cancer" dominating every waking moment, crowding out the things that matter most to them, and driving behaviour that makes their situation worse rather than better.

Fusion with true thoughts can look like:

- Endless rumination on how the situation came about and whose fault it is.
- Catastrophising about how things will develop.
- Comparisons with others who are not in the same situation.
- Evaluations and judgements about the self ("I should have prevented this").
- Passive inaction, not taking steps to address what can be addressed.
- Isolation and withdrawal from sources of support.
- Attempts to avoid or suppress the thought itself, which tends to amplify it.

None of these behaviours are made more useful by the fact that the thought is true. If anything, the truth of the thought makes the pull toward fusion stronger, and makes the need for defusion more urgent.



## What defusion is actually doing

Defusion is not about whether to believe a thought. It is about creating enough distance from the thinking process to allow for a chosen, considered response.

When we defuse from a thought, we are not saying the thought is wrong. We are not trying to feel better about the situation. We are stepping back from the stream of thinking so that we can notice what is happening, and then decide how to respond in a way that is consistent with our values.

A person who receives the thought "I have no money" can use the CARE steps:

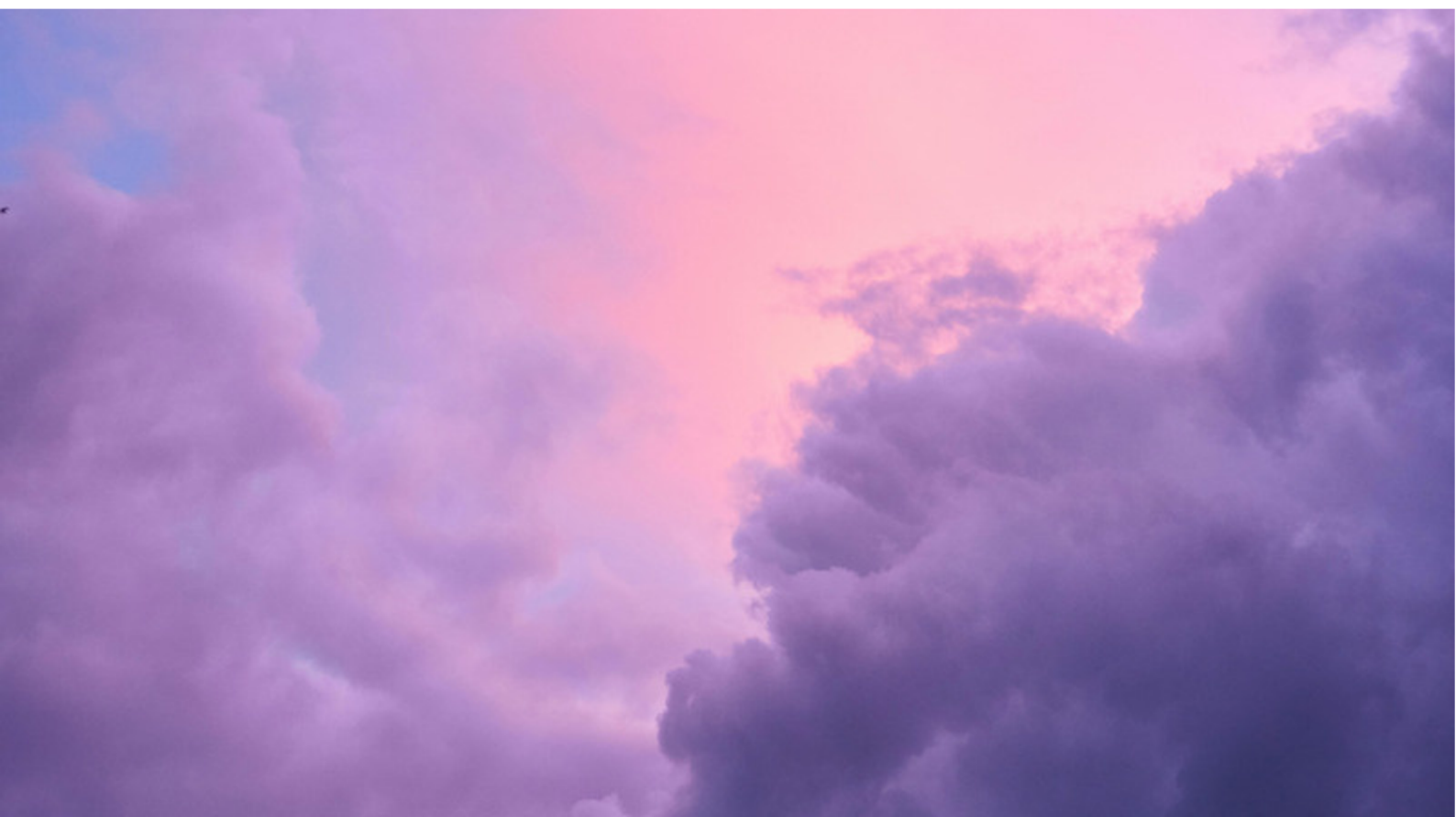
- C - Contact the thought: Notice it as a thought rather than a fact. "I am having the thought that I have no money."
- A - Acknowledge what it brings: Make room for the anxiety, shame, fear, or whatever else arrives with it.
- R - Reflect on values: Ask: "What matters to me here? What would I want to be doing about this situation?"
- E - Engage with action: Take a step guided by values, whether that means seeking advice, talking to someone, making a practical plan, or simply allowing the pain to be present.

This is different from a person who is fused, who may spend hours worrying about how they got into this situation, avoid looking at their bank account, or withdraw from others out of embarrassment. The fused response does not change the truth of the thought. It just makes the situation harder to navigate.

## Effective and ineffective responses to true thoughts

A useful clinical frame is to help clients distinguish between responses that are workable and those that are not, regardless of whether the thought that triggered them is true.

Ineffective (fused) responses	Effective (defused) responses
Ruminating on how or why this happened	Acknowledging: "This is what is true right now"
Catastrophising about future consequences	Asking: "What matters to me in this situation?"
Self-blame and comparison to others	Responding with self-compassion
Avoidance and passivity	Taking values-guided action where possible
Suppressing or fighting the thought	Making room for the thought and the feelings it brings
Seeking reassurance repeatedly	Tolerating uncertainty while staying engaged with life





## Clean pain and dirty pain

A concept that can be enormously useful here is the distinction between clean pain and dirty pain.

Clean pain is the unavoidable suffering that comes with difficult circumstances. If a person's marriage ends, there is grief. If someone receives a serious diagnosis, there is fear and sadness. This pain is a natural, normal, and in many ways meaningful response to a true situation. It does not need to be eliminated or fixed.

Dirty pain is the additional suffering that is generated by our relationship with the clean pain. It arises from rumination, from self-criticism, from efforts to escape or resist the original pain, from the stories we tell about what the pain means. Dirty pain is not inevitable. It is created by fusion.

**Defusion does not remove clean pain. It helps clients hold the dirty pain more lightly, rather than being driven by it.**

When working with a client who has experienced a genuine loss, the aim is not to help them feel differently about it. The aim is to help them respond to it in a way that allows them to move through the grief rather than being locked inside it. Sometimes that means taking action, seeking support, or making practical decisions. Sometimes it means simply making room for the pain, being kind to themselves in the presence of it, and allowing the grief to be what it is.

## Practitioner step-by-step guide

When a client presents a thought that is true and painful, the following steps can help guide the work.

### Step 1: Validate the reality of the thought

Begin by acknowledging that the thought is true. Do not try to reframe or soften it. Attempting to argue with a true thought is both clinically unhelpful and damages the therapeutic relationship.

#### Practitioner prompt:

*"Yes, this is real. And understandably, it carries a lot of weight."*

### Step 2: Separate the thought from the response to the thought

Help the client see that while the thought is fixed (for now), the response is not. There are many ways a person can be in the presence of a difficult truth.

#### Practitioner prompt:

*"We can't change the fact of this right now. But I'm curious: when this thought is here and it's pulling at you, what do you tend to do? And is that working for you?"*

### Step 3: Notice what the thought is generating

Explore the secondary layers of thinking and feeling that the true thought is pulling along with it. Rumination, self-blame, catastrophising, comparison. These are the signs of fusion, and they are where the dirty pain lives.

#### Practitioner prompt:

*"When that thought comes, I notice it brings a lot of other things with it. What does it pull up for you? What else does your mind do with it?"*

### Step 4: Introduce defusion as a tool for stepping back

Introduce defusion explicitly as a way of creating space, not distance from the truth, but from the automatic pull the truth exerts. Techniques from the companion guide are appropriate here, particularly naming the thought and dropping anchor.

#### Example language:

*"I notice I'm having the thought that I have no money."*

*"Here's my mind reminding me again about the diagnosis."*

*"There it is. That familiar, heavy thought."*

## Practitioner step-by-step guide - continued

### Step 5: Connect to values and workable action

Once the client has some distance from the thought, help them identify what they care about and what actions are available to them. Not all true thoughts point to situations that can be changed. But even where circumstances cannot be altered, there is usually a values-guided response available.

**Practitioner prompt:**

*"Given that this is true right now, what matters most to you? And what is one thing you could do, even a very small thing, that would feel like living by that?"*

### Step 6: Make room for the clean pain

Remind the client and yourself that defusion is not about eliminating the pain that belongs with this situation. Some thoughts are true, and the feelings that come with them are real and legitimate. The aim is not to feel better, it is to be free to act in a way that honours what matters.

**Practitioner prompt:**

*"This is real, and it hurts. We're not trying to make that go away. Can we just let it be here for a moment, and see if there's still some room for you to move in the direction you want to go?"*



## Summary

Defusion is not a technique for dealing with thoughts that are untrue. It is a way of helping clients relate differently to their thinking process, regardless of whether the content of that thinking is accurate.

The key points:

- Fusion is defined by its effect on behaviour, not by the truth value of the thought.
- True thoughts can and do cause fusion, particularly when they are serious and frightening.
- Defusion creates space between a thought and a response, making values-guided action possible.
- Clean pain is a normal part of difficult circumstances. Dirty pain is the additional suffering generated by fusion, and it can be reduced.
- The practitioner's job is not to remove the pain of a true situation. It is to help the client carry it without being controlled by it.

**When the thought is true, defusion matters more, not less.**

## **About this guide**

This guide is intended for ACT-trained practitioners working with clients who are struggling with thoughts that are factually true but psychologically overwhelming.

## **About Contextual Consulting**

Contextual Consulting provides specialist training, supervision, and therapy grounded in ACT and contextual behavioural science. We work with individual practitioners and organisations across the NHS and private sector.

Our trainers are world-renowned ACT experts, chosen to ensure practitioners receive the most current and practically applicable training available. We are committed to delivering the best possible outcomes for clients, and to making that training as affordable and accessible as we can.

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