

Clients often find that when they defuse from a painful thought, it disappears, or they feel better, or both. When this happens, the therapist needs to clarify that (1) this is merely a bonus, not the primary purpose, and (2) it won't always happen, so don't expect it. If the therapist doesn't do this, clients will start using defusion to try to control their thoughts and feelings. And then, of course, it no longer functions as a mindfulness technique but as a control technique. And then it's only a matter of time before the client becomes frustrated or disappointed. Here are two examples of how the therapist may handle this:

Client: That was great. The thought just went away.

Therapist: Well, sometimes that happens, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes a thought just keeps on hanging around. Our aim is not to try and make it go away; our aim is to stop getting caught up in it, make some room for it, allow it to be there without struggling—so that if and when it does hang around for a while, it doesn't stop you from doing what matters and engaging fully in your life.

Client: That's good. I feel less anxious now.

Therapist: Yes, well that quite often happens with defusion, but certainly not all the time. Defusion is not some magical way to control your feelings. The aim of is to disentangle yourself from your thoughts so that you can be in the present moment and do the things you consider important. So if you feel better, by all means enjoy it. But please, consider it a bonus, not the main intention. If you start using these techniques to control how you feel, I guarantee you'll soon be disappointed.

If your client seems disappointed or surprised when you say this, it means she has misunderstood the purpose of defusion, in which case you'll need to recap it—and you may need to visit (or revisit) creative hopelessness. One way to do a quick recap is to “replay” the ACT in a Nutshell Metaphor from chapter 1 or the Hands As Thoughts Metaphor from chapter 2.