



## Leaves on a Stream

### Mindfulness

 Meditation

 10 min

 Client

 Yes

Cognitive defusion, or simply defusion, is “the ability to separate from your thoughts and to let them come and go, instead of getting caught up in them or allowing them to dictate what you do” (Harris, 2009, p. 6). Defusion is a core component of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), third-wave mindfulness-based psychotherapy developed by US psychologist Steven Hayes (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). It involves creating distance between an individual and his or her thoughts. People learn to step back from their thoughts and view them as mental events passing through the mind rather than absolute truths; that is, they learn to look at rather than from their thoughts. In this way, defusion provides a powerful way to deal effectively with painful, unhelpful, or self-defeating thoughts and beliefs. Research has validated the benefits of cognitive defusion techniques on psychological wellbeing. For instance, Masuda, Hayes, Sackett, and Twohig (2004) found that cognitive defusion reduced both discomfort and believability in self-relevant negative thoughts more so than attempting to distract oneself from or control such thoughts.

This tool provides practitioners with a mindfulness script for Leaves on a Stream, a well-known cognitive defusion practice. This exercise can be carried out in session as well as assigned for homework to help clients develop the skill of cognitive defusion.



### Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD).



### Goal

The goal of the exercise is to develop the ability to let go of problematic thoughts through practicing cognitive defusion.



## Advice

- If clients report difficulty visualizing the stream, offer them alternatives (and adapt your verbal instructions accordingly), such as pieces of luggage on a moving conveyor belt, or cars driving past outside the client's house, or clouds or birds in the sky.
- Since the goal is for clients to improve their ability to unhook themselves from their thoughts, it is necessary to practice this technique with every thought that arises, both pleasant and unpleasant, helpful and unhelpful.
- This exercise can be used during moments of distress (i.e., in session when clients are experiencing rumination or particular problematic thinking) or as a skill-building exercise (i.e., to build the skill of cognitive defusion so that clients may apply the technique in daily life). If used in a skill-building capacity, practitioners may choose to begin sessions with a Leaves on a Stream practice and/or assign it as homework. Practitioners can shorten the length of the practice to 2-3 minutes if needed/preferred.



## References

- Harris, R. (2009). *ACT made simple*. New Harbinger.
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). *Acceptance and commitment therapy* (p. 6). Guilford Press.
- Masuda, A., Hayes, S. C., Sackett, C. F., & Twohig, M. P. (2004). Cognitive defusion and self-relevant negative thoughts: Examining the impact of a ninety year old technique. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 42(4), 477-485.

# Leaves on a Stream

## Instructions

### Part 1: Leaves on a Stream script

Sitting in a comfortable position, allow your shoulders to drop and relax and plant your feet firmly on the ground... Or, if you are sitting cross-legged, feel the sense of contact between your feet and the seat and the floor beneath you.

Now gently close your eyes, and for the next few breaths, focus fully on your breathing. Notice the feeling of the air flowing in through the nostrils, down into the lungs, and down into the belly as you inhale... and on the exhale, feel the release of any tension as you let the air out slowly.

Now, imagine that you are sitting by the side of a gently flowing stream... This might be a stream that you know, or it might be something you create in your mind using your imagination. There might be a light breeze blowing as you sit here, dappled light glistening on the water, and soft green grass beneath you... imagine the stream however you like - it is your imagination (10 secs).

Now imagine that leaves are floating on the surface of the stream, and these leaves are gently flowing past you, down the stream.

For the next few minutes, see if you can take every thought that pops into your head and place it on a leaf...

Now your thoughts may show up in your mind in the form of words, pictures, or something else. However, as a thought arises, simply place it on a leaf and let it float by.

Do this regardless of whether the thoughts are positive and enjoyable or negative and challenging. Simply place each on a leaf, and let it float down the stream... (10 secs).

If you notice that your thoughts stop momentarily, just continue to watch the stream. Sooner or later, your thoughts will start up again... (20 secs).

Allow the stream to flow at its own rate. There is no need to try and speed it up. The aim here is not to wash the leaves away - the aim is to allow them to come and go in their own time... To just sit and watch (20 secs).

If your mind says something along the lines, "I can't do it" or "This is stupid," place those thoughts on leaves and let them float by... (20 secs).

If a leaf gets stuck, let it hang around. There is no need to force it to float away... simply sit and watch, as sooner or later another leaf will come along and give it the nudge it needs (20 secs).

If a difficult feeling arises, such as boredom, impatience, or anxiety, simply acknowledge it. Say to yourself, "Here is a feeling of boredom," "Here is a feeling of impatience," "Here is a feeling of anxiety," and place those words on a leaf... (20 secs).



Now, from time to time, your thoughts will hook you, and you will lose track of the exercise. This is normal, as our attention naturally wanders, and it will happen time and time again... As soon as you realize this has happened, simply come back to your stream... (20 secs).

Continue to place each thought that pops into your mind on a leaf, watching it slip by... (30 secs).

Again and again, your thoughts will hook you. Remember, this is normal. As soon as you notice this has happened, simply come back to your stream... (30 secs).

As the exercise comes to an end, begin to let go of your imagined stream and bring your attention back to where you are... notice what you can hear... what you can feel... and when you are ready, open your eyes and notice what you can see...

You might like to take another minute to sit quietly before carrying on with your day... holding on to this sense of presence and spaciousness from thinking.

## Part 2: Debrief

Discuss the following questions:

- What did you notice?
- How did you visualize your thoughts (i.e., words, images, or something else)?
- Did your mind get hooked by thoughts? If so, were you able to unhook yourself and come back to the stream?
- Did any negative or painful thoughts show up? Were you able to place these thoughts on leaves and allow them to float by at their own pace?
- How do you feel now?