

TITLE: A Cognitive Defusion Technique Decreases the Discomfort, Believability, and Decentering of Self-Referential Negative Body Image Thoughts

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Background and Objectives: Body dissatisfaction is rigid and pervasive, and it is associated with a range of negative psychological outcomes. Using two modes of intervention delivery, the present study investigated the effects of a cognitive defusion strategy on the various stimulus domains (i.e., emotional discomfort, believability, and decentering) of self-referential negative body image thoughts provided by participants and the additive effect of experiential exercise with the target thoughts.

Methods: One mode of intervention consisted of a clinical rationale and training, which was labeled as a partial condition. The other mode, labeled as a full condition, contained a condition-specific experiential exercise with the target negative body image thought, in addition to the clinical rationale and training. Undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of five treatment conditions: Partial-Defusion, Full-Defusion, Partial-Distraction, Full-Distraction, and an experimental control task.

Results: Changes in discomfort, believability, and decentering with desired directions were found across all conditions at post-intervention, except decentering in the Partial-Distraction condition. At post-intervention, the Full-Defusion group showed significantly lower emotional discomfort and greater decentering than the Partial-Distraction and control groups. The Full-Defusion condition also showed significantly lower believability than the four other comparison conditions.

Limitations: The use of a face-to-face intervention format reduces methodological rigor by possibly introducing experimenter bias or variation in protocol execution between experimenters.

Conclusions and Clinical Implications: A cognitive defusion exercise utilizing the target negative body image thought combined with clinical rationale and training is effective in temporarily altering stimulus functions of that thought. The present study's results suggest that cognitive defusion may be superior to thought distraction in the short-term management of college students' negative body image thoughts. Future research should investigate clinical samples and the long-term effects of these two strategies.

Keywords: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy; cognitive defusion; decentering; body dissatisfaction; body image