Unhooking from thoughts

Ways to step back from a thought so it has less control over what you do.

Minds produce thoughts all day long: judgements, predictions, memories, rules. When we are hooked by a thought, we treat it as the truth and it dictates what we do. Unhooking means stepping back and seeing a thought for what it is: words and pictures passing through.

Hooked

- The thought feels like a fact
- It demands all my attention
- I do what it says
- It feels like a threat or a command

Unhooked

- I see it as a thought
- I can notice it and still pay attention to my life
- I choose what to do
- It is just my mind talking

In ACT the useful question is "If I let this thought decide what I do, where does it take me?" Whether the thought is true matters less.

Ways to unhook

"I am having the thought that..."
Put this phrase in front of the thought. Then: "I notice I am having the thought that..."

Thank your mind
"Thanks, mind. Good story." Said lightly, not sarcastically.

Name the story
"Ah, the 'I am not good enough' story. I know this one."

Say it slowly, or in a silly voice
The words stay the same, but they affect you less.

Sing it
To the tune of "Happy Birthday".

Put it on a screen
Imagine the thought as text on a phone. Change the font and colour.

Leaves on a stream
Place each thought on a leaf and watch it float past.

Carry it with you
Write it on a card and put it in your pocket. It can come along, and you can still get on with your day.

Tips

- You are not trying to get rid of the thought or to feel better. You are practising seeing it as a thought.
- Try several. Different ones suit different people and different thoughts.
- If a technique feels like mocking yourself, choose a gentler one.

The thought that hooks me most often, and the technique I will try

From Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Several of these techniques were popularised by Russ Harris.

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"I am having the thought that..."

A two-minute exercise in getting distance from a painful thought.

1. Bring to mind a self-critical or upsetting thought that often hooks you. Write it as a short sentence. For example: "I am a failure."

The thought

2. Silently repeat it to yourself, believing it as much as you can, for ten seconds. Notice how it feels.

How much does it hook me?

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

Not at all — Completely

3. Now put this in front of it: **"I am having the thought that..."** Repeat the whole sentence for ten seconds. Notice what happens.

4. Now make it: **"I notice I am having the thought that..."** Repeat for ten seconds.

How much does it hook me now?

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

Not at all — Completely

What changed? Did the thought go away? Did I get some distance from it?

What this shows

The thought is the same. What has changed is where you are standing. You have moved from looking at the world through the thought to looking at the thought.

Using it in daily life

When	The thought	With "I am having the thought that..."	What I noticed

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