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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