

# The Single Most Powerful Technique for Extreme Fusion

*An eBook By Dr. Russ Harris*





## EXTREME FUSION

Extreme fusion can manifest in a wide variety of ways, depending on the thoughts, images, memories, emotions that we fuse with.

Here are some common ways we might see it (in ourselves or in others):

When we are overwhelmed by our emotions: crushed with guilt, drowning in shame, swamped with sadness, paralysed by fear, seething with rage, flooded with grief, gripped by a ‘panic attack’.

When we are jerked around by our emotions like a puppet on a string – e.g. we may start yelling or acting aggressively when fused with angry thoughts and feelings.

When we are so caught up in our thoughts and feelings that we lose touch with all the other important things that are here in the present moment.

Even more extreme fusion can show up when working with trauma.

For example, the term ‘flashback’ refers to such extreme fusion with a traumatic memory that the person experiences it as vividly reliving the experience over again.

Extreme fusion with trauma-related thoughts, feelings, emotions and memories can render a person literally speechless: incapable of talking about their experience. MRI brain scans show that during these experiences, Broca’s area of the brain – which is largely responsible for speech – actually ‘shuts down’ (*i.e. there is less blood flow to the area*).

## “I CAN’T TALK ABOUT IT!”

When extreme fusion happens during a therapy session, clients are often incapable of speaking about it. They may be so overwhelmed by their emotions, they just can’t talk.

If a therapist responds to this by trying to get the client to talk about what she’s feeling, it’s not likely to go well.

And traditional or commonplace defusion techniques are likely to be highly ineffective. If you ask your client to say “I’m having the thought that ...”, or to do a “leaves on the stream” exercise, or to “thank your mind” or to write her thoughts on a card, or do any of the more-than-a-hundred defusion techniques currently published in ACT textbooks ... it’s very unlikely to be helpful.

So what is most likely to help (yourself or your clients), when fusion is extreme?



# FOR THE MOST EXTREME FUSION

... no intervention is more effective than what I like to call 'dropping anchor' exercises. I call them this because we are basically learning to 'drop an anchor' in the midst of an 'emotional storm'. These exercises don't require you to speak, or to self-talk, so they are especially useful when you are overwhelmed.

Now before we go any further, let's just be clear:

*dropping an anchor won't make the storm go away; it will just hold you steady until the storm passes.*

The storm may pass quickly, or it may pass slowly, or it may even get worse

before it gets better. The anchor holds you steady during this time, so the storm doesn't sweep you away.

There are many different versions of these exercises, and I've included 4 MP3 recordings in this newsletter, to give you a sense of the range from ultra-brief 30 second versions to much longer 10 minute versions. The great thing with these exercises is you can practice them any time and anywhere; you don't have to wait until an emotional storm blows up. And by practicing them during those times when you're not so fused, you're more likely to remember to do them when you are extremely fused.



# STORMS AND ANCHORS

Just to be clear – the ‘emotional storm’ refers to all the difficult thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories that you are fused within this moment.

Anchors are anything else that is here in the present moment, that is not a part of the storm. Anchors can include what you see, hear, touch, taste, smell; your breathing; your body posture; what you are doing with your arms and your legs, and so on. Basically anything that can help you to stay present, stay grounded, stay in contact with where you are and what you’re doing, can be an anchor in the midst of your emotional storm.

So ‘dropping anchor’ may involve

focusing on your breath, stretching, breathing, looking around the room, listening to sounds in the room etc.

The most common mistake both therapists and clients make with these kinds of exercises is to use them as a kind of distraction technique. Distraction is the very opposite of mindfulness; distraction is turning away from what is here in the present moment, trying to escape it. Mindfulness involves turning towards what is here in the present moment, with openness and curiosity. So if you start using the methods that follow to try to distract from the painful thoughts and feelings that are present – well, it sure ain’t mindfulness anymore.



## TWO STRANDS TO ‘DROPPING ANCHOR’

Dropping anchor exercises (which I also often refer to as ‘expansive awareness’ exercises) are based on two sets of instructions:

- a. *Expanding your awareness of what is here in the present moment.*
  - b. *Exerting self-control over your physical actions – breathing, physical movement, body posture, etc*
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- a. **Expand awareness:** acknowledge the presence of your difficult thoughts and feelings and at the same time notice what you see, hear, touch, taste, smell.  
(This is Not to distract from pain; but to notice that *in addition to pain* there is a lot happening here in the present moment; there is so much more present than these difficult thoughts and feelings that are currently dominating awareness).
- b. **Exert self-control over physical action:** Move, stretch, change posture, sit upright, stand up, walk, sit down, breathe differently, push feet into the floor, push hands into the chair, push fingertips together, drink water, hug yourself, massage a tense spot, etc.

Although in ACT such exercises are usually thought of as ‘contacting the present moment’, almost always they result in some degree of defusion. So ‘dropping anchor’ will almost always be my first line in targeting the most severe states of fusion.



## NON-VERBAL INTERVENTIONS COME FIRST

Although these ‘dropping anchor’ exercises are usually classed under ‘contacting the present moment’ in ACT, almost always they result in some degree of defusion. (This is not surprising, as all 4 core ACT mindfulness processes are overlapping and interconnected.) When there is extreme fusion, therapists will need to do this kind of non-verbal grounding and centering work before they move on to more conventional defusion exercises.

So ‘dropping anchor’ or ‘expansive awareness’ will almost always be my first line in targeting the most severe states of fusion.

Indeed, these are usually the very first mindfulness techniques I teach to clients who suffer from emotional dysregulation, panic attacks, overwhelming grief, dissociative states, flashbacks, ‘anger management’ issues, and so on.



# DROPPING ANCHOR

I'm going to give you a couple of scripts now, for creating 'dropping anchor' exercises – one for therapists to use with clients, and one for you to use on yourself. But please **don't stick to the script**; instead, modify and adapt it to make the exercise suitable for you.

This is especially important for therapists; don't robotically parrot the same script for every client – improvise around the script; modify and adapt it to suit the unique individual you are working with in this session.

In the script for therapists, I'm going to assume that your client is so overwhelmed they can't speak, so you don't actually know what the pain is they're struggling with.

Obviously, if the client can speak, it's good to ask them what's showing up - get an idea of the thoughts, feelings, memories etc they're fused with.

With clients, I often introduce this exercise with the metaphor of an emotional storm: "I can see there's an emotional storm inside you right now - and I want to help you deal with it. While you're being swept away by that storm, there's nothing effective you can do about the issues you're dealing with. So the first thing you need to do is drop an anchor. The anchor doesn't make the storm go away; the anchor holds you steady, until the storm passes in its own time."

If my sense is that the client is so fused, she won't be able to listen to what I'm saying or take on board this metaphor, then I'll just skip it and launch straight into the exercise.

Keep in mind you don't have to use this metaphor; you can talk about 'pain that you're struggling with' or 'difficult thoughts and feeling showing up for you' instead of an

'emotional storm'. However, the metaphor is very useful because dropping an anchor doesn't make the storm go away - it just holds the boat steady.

If your client says, "It isn't working" as you do the exercise, always ask what they mean. 99% of the time they mean "The storm isn't going away", "The pain isn't going". This shows they have misunderstood the purpose of the exercise. If we're using the metaphor of the storm and anchor, we can then gently and compassionately remind them,

"Dropping an anchor doesn't make the storm go away - it just holds you steady. The storm comes and goes in its own time."

# DROPPING ANCHOR: SCRIPT FOR THERAPISTS

*This is a script for therapists to use with clients. You should allow a good ten seconds between instructions. Give your voice a kind and calming quality.*

- You're obviously experiencing a lot of emotional pain right now and I really want to help you handle it. So please follow my instructions struggling with this - and I want to help you handle it. So please follow my instructions.
- Push your feet hard into the floor.
- Sit forward in your chair, and straighten your back.
- Press your fingertips together, move your elbows, move your shoulders. Feel your arms moving, all the way from your fingers to shoulder blades.
- ***So notice, there's a lot of pain here that you're struggling with and...*** there's also a body around that pain – a body that you can move and control. Just notice your whole body now – hands, feet, back. ... Have a stretch. ... Press your feet down.
- Now also look around the room and notice 5 things you can see.
- And also notice 3 or 4 things you can hear.
- And also notice you and I, working here together, as a team.
- ***So notice, there's something very painful here that you're struggling with and...***
- Also notice your body in the chair ... move it... have a stretch... take control of your arms and legs.
- And also notice the room around you.
- And there's you and I here, working together as a team.

***The therapist ends the exercise by asking questions such as:***

- Do you notice any difference now? Are you less caught up in the emotional storm (or 'these difficult thoughts and feelings' )? Are you less 'swept away' or 'pushed around' by it/them?
- Is it easier for you to engage with me, to be present, to focus?
- Do you have more control over your actions - over your arms and legs and mouth?

***Note: the therapist does NOT ask if the storm/emotional pain has reduced or gone away - because this is not the purpose of the exercise.***



# MINDFULNESS VERSUS DISTRACTION

Notice how the therapist keeps referring to the pain that is present. The formula is:

- Notice your pain/feelings/emotional storm
- And notice A, and B, and C
- Notice your pain/feelings/emotional storm
- And notice D, E, F
- Notice there is something very painful here, **and** A,B,C,D,E, F

If the therapists fail to keep acknowledging the presence of the pain/feelings/emotional storm, this will almost certainly turn into a distraction technique rather than a mindfulness technique



# DROPPING ANCHOR

## NOTES FOR THERAPISTS

- Indication: if and when the client is so fused (overwhelmed) that he is unable to effectively engage/participate in the session.
- If the client is in pain, but she is still able to be present, engage, participate in the session, then it's not necessary (although it can still be very helpful).
- NB: If the therapist uses 'dropping anchor' to try to stop the client crying, to distract her from pain, to reduce his anxiety etc, this is a misuse. The aim of dropping anchor is to help the client be present regain control of her actions, engage in and focus on what he is doing. It is not a method to distract from pain!
- Modify the script – use anything present (other than the 'storm' itself) – e.g. a glass of water, stretching arms out, slowing breathing, the sound of the air conditioner, etc.
- It goes for as long as needed, until the client is grounded, centered, engaged. You can repeat as often as needed.
- If your client is ready and able to talk, identify the elements of the storm first – i.e, ask the client what thoughts, feeling, emotions, memories are present. But if your client is too overwhelmed to speak, just go into the exercise.
- Debrief it afterwards

# DEBRIEFING A 'DROPPING ANCHOR' EXERCISE

*The therapist asks the client:*

- Do you notice any difference now? Are you less caught up in the emotional storm (or 'difficult thoughts and feelings')?
- Are you less swept away or pushed around?
- Is it easier for you to engage with me, to be present, to focus?
- Do you have more control over your actions? Over your arms and legs and mouth?
- How could this little exercise that we've just done be helpful outside the room?
- Would you be willing to practice this?

# DROPPING ANCHOR

## A SCRIPT FOR YOURSELF

- a. Silently and kindly acknowledge to yourself that you're hurting, you're in pain.
- b. Push your feet hard into the floor.
- c. Straighten your back; if sitting, sit forward in your chair.
- d. Press your fingertips together, or stretch your arms, or shrug your shoulders.
- e. Acknowledge the painful thoughts and feelings that are present, **and also notice...** there's a body around that pain – a body that you can move and control. So notice your whole body now – hands, feet, back. ... have a stretch. ... Press your feet down.
- f. Now also look around the room and notice 5 things you can see.
- g. And also notice 3 or 4 things you can hear.
- h. And also notice what you are doing
- i. **So notice there are painful thoughts/feelings/memories here, and ...**
- j. Also notice your body in the chair ... move it, stretch it,
- k. And there's a room around you.
- l. And come back to what you are doing, and engage fully in the task or activity at hand.

*Remember, you can practise these kinds of exercises, any time, any place, any activity. And it's a good idea to practise them often when you're less fused, so you can remember to use them when you are really fused!*

All the best,  
Cheers, Russ Harris