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THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

When you see sand for the first time as a child, you want to touch it, feel it, and even taste it. After you put the sand in your mouth, you discover that sand is not exactly a delicacy. And so you learn about life through play.

We eventually forget how to play. This is because as we grow older we develop an increasingly complex mind that starts making decisions based on assumptions instead of direct experiences.

A classic example is that you have learned not to stick your finger in a socket. Most people consciously do not do this, without ever actually trying it out. This is probably because as a child you heard from your parents several times that you should not do this. So this is an example of such an assumption.

You see the power of language here. Words can tell us what we should and should not do, but also what we may and may not think, feel, and be. Let's investigate how this works for you.

HOW DO WORDS AFFECT YOU?

As a behavioral expert, it is always super interesting for me to look at the difference in behavior between humans and animals. Genetically we are very similar to the ape species, but also behaviorally, and (especially when alcohol is involved) you can see the resemblance.

So then, how is it possible that we are the boss on earth, and all those other animal species are not?

Scientists working from different angles unanimously agree on this: This is because, compared to all other animal species, we can use very complex forms of language. Language allows us to learn, communicate, and transfer knowledge to each other super fast. Words are interwoven in everything, so deeply that we often do not even notice them.

This does not apply only to the words we read or speak. Language is also constantly going on in our heads, in the form of thoughts. These can be about what you feel, about the things you still have to do that day, or about a memory of that nice party from last week. For example, as soon as you think of feeling “good” or “bad,” language is already active. After all, *good* and *bad* are words that cannot be used by any other animal species. The whole fact that good and bad exist at all was invented by us humans.

What do you think of that last remark about good and bad? Isn't it weird that other animals can't even use that basic distinction?

I found it quite shocking myself that language apparently plays such a big role. If we could no longer judge our experiences, it would probably save us a lot of hassle.

From that context, think for a moment about what it must be like to be an animal. Choose your favorite species and try to put yourself in the shoes of (for example) a horse. Now consider that this animal cannot use words, neither inside nor outside. It cannot read, write, or talk, but it also cannot use words to think that it is cold or that it is suffering from depression. Take a moment to imagine what this must be like. Must be nice and quiet, right?

Because with us humans, language quickly takes on a life of its own. This means that we can also become very unhappy just because of the words we use.

Language has ensured that we are the most powerful, but also the most unhappy species on earth.

Just look inside your own head at all the crap that's floating around there. My head is full of negative thoughts about myself, about the fear of dying earlier than average, about the idea that I am weak and not good enough, and even about the fact that you probably think I am just a wimp with all those stupid stories about myself, and so on. I can really suffer from those thoughts. Even words alone can do something to you. Here is a selection from the fear drawer in my head. Read the following words and see if they do something to you:

Spider	Bullying	Past
Cancer	Fat	Weak
Depression	Nausea	Blood
Ugly	Fear	Failure
Death	Stupid	Corona

There are probably a few words here that will affect you. The point is that *the words alone* can do this to you, without (for example) actual blood being present.

Another great example is to imagine what it feels like to eat a yellow round sour candy. Imagine for a moment that you put that sour candy in your mouth and immediately taste a very strong lemon flavor. Pretend for a moment and think about how such a sour candy would taste if you were to actually eat it. Feel in your mind how the sour candy rolls backwards in your mouth, to the back of your right jaw, and then let it roll in your mind to your left jaw. Now chew the sour candy in your mind and feel how lemon juice splashes out of the candy, right onto your tongue. Are your jaws starting to contract yet? Almost like the real thing, right? This just goes to show you what language can do to your feelings!

In addition to what we experience directly (pain), a whole verbal world has developed within our heads (suffering). I hope that this piece has made it a little clearer what words can do to you, in addition to what you experience directly. If you know how big a role language plays in our lives, you will also see what the possible dangers of that language are.

THE DANGER OF LANGUAGE

The problems arise when (1) we are no longer prepared to experience things openly and (2) we start taking language far too seriously, which can make words feel very real.

You can see how willingness fits in beautifully with this theme. We often don't want to do or feel things, because our head then shouts that we can't, or because something is just really stupid. As a result, we miss the direct experience, and we are not open to what life has to offer us.

For example, my head always shouted very loudly that I wasn't the type for concerts and festivals. That was convenient, because I had a lot of social anxiety, so I didn't have to go. I had never been to a concert, but my head had already decided that it wasn't for me. Do you recognize this? Can you think of an example of how your head shouts in advance that you can't or don't want to do something, while you've never actually done it?

Willingness can ensure that you listen more to your "real" experiences instead of just blindly following your protesting mind. This is so important, because we have really started to take language far, far too seriously. For example, if my mind shouts that I'm not good enough, or that I've failed when I did something wrong, then such a thought can still affect me quite a bit (even now). There's no one around me saying nasty things; it's purely and solely in my head.

The fact that we let ourselves be affected by all those thoughts is an important topic in this book. Once again, I hope that you will recognize yourself in my story. So if your negative thoughts can sometimes get in the way of your direct experiences too, I think it is good to rebel against them together.

This means that I want to teach you to look at thoughts differently. Don't confuse this with learning to think differently. Some therapies in traditional psychology have taught us that we should combat negative thoughts with positive ones. However, we now know that this does not work, or can even be counterproductive. The explanation for this is that

you cannot control your thoughts and that thoughts do not disappear once they are in your head (as I explained earlier in this book).

DEFUSION TO THE RESCUE

Suppose you have the thought that you are afraid of having a panic attack. In traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy, you learn to push that thought over with the help of alternative, rational thoughts. These are in fact a kind of “good” thoughts, which serve to combat the bad ones. The therapist then asks questions such as these:

- How likely is it that you will have a panic attack?
- And if that happens, how bad is it?
- Does a panic attack eventually go away?
- Do the people around you really think that you are a wimp, or are you mainly imagining that?

Based on these questions, you could formulate the following alternative rational thoughts:

- The chance that I will have an attack is actually very small.
- If it does happen, the damage is still quite manageable.
- A panic attack usually goes away after 10 minutes.
- No, people don’t say that I am a wimp, so that’s mainly what I think.

The thought of a panic attack is now accompanied by four alternative rational thoughts. This sometimes seems to work in the short term: If you have enough good arguments to defeat your negative thoughts, you can temporarily shout them down.

But in the long term, it turns out that negative thoughts always gain strength again. This is because our brain has always been a bit of a doom-monger. New negative thoughts often spontaneously arise, which win out over the old positive thoughts. For example, the following thoughts may emerge and take over:

- I recently had two panic attacks in one day, so the argument that there are few of them is no longer valid.
- And that one panic attack was in the elevator. I thought I was done for! I didn't know it could be that bad.
- What if I had stayed in the elevator? I was alone. Who could have helped me? I didn't even have a phone signal!
- And those people might not be saying anything, but I can see them looking! I bet a few of them really thought I was a wimp!
- And so forth.

People often recognize this from their own experience, that thinking differently in the long run mainly leads to even more brooding. You then have to try really hard every time to get your head in order. In the long term, you will unfortunately not win the battle with your negative thoughts. Sorry, bad news again. But don't worry: There is an alternative!

What you can do is look at your thoughts differently. Instead of trying to add new thoughts, you try to pull the existing thought out of its serious context.

That is defusion, which comes from the English word *defuse* (to dismantle). You remove the fuse from a thought or a word, as it were, by pulling it completely into the ridiculous.

The best example that you will recognize is something that your brother, sister, or classmate will undoubtedly have done to you once. You would say something very angry and serious like "I don't want to play with you," after which the brat next to you would repeat that sentence whiningly ("Boo, I don't want to play with you"). Because your serious

remark was made so ridiculous, you could no longer say it seriously. Try to remember such a moment.

Defusion teaches you, with the help of humor and weird exercises, to stop taking serious thoughts so seriously. The important thing is that you don't have to win the discussion with the difficult thought. You just have to be prepared to make fun of your thoughts. This will feel strange at first, but if you actually do this, I guarantee that it can be the key that gets you out of your head.

Are you still awake? I hope this piece wasn't too boring for you, and at the same time I really wanted to tell you this. Because if you understand this idea, you will understand why we do what we do. You can then stop thinking differently or positively, because that's of no use to you anyway. Instead, I have a particularly cheerful and effective alternative for you, so let's practice that.

THE CLASSIC

This is really a matter of just doing it. The exercise is simple, but strange, which is why people often don't do it, or only do it halfway. Not you of course; you just go for it hard. So especially for you, here is the simple explanation.

Choose a word that moves you. This can be a word from the list on page 42 or another word. Think about which word you want to defuse and write it down:

If you don't want to do this now because you want to keep the book tidy, take a pen and paper and write the word down in large print (or type it on a digital device in a big font).

This is very important and of course applies to all exercises.

Personally, I hope that you treat this book as your own activity book, and that you draw, scribble, and take notes wherever you want like a big child. Even if it is just to break the rule that you have to keep your books neat.

Next, look at the word and feel what it might do to you. In this case, realize that you are now suffering from language and not from what is really happening.

Now take your watch or a clock and set it for 90 seconds. Repeat your word out loud for one and a half minutes, saying it in a clear, loud voice—for example, “fear, fear, fear, fear, fear.”

Do not stop; be sure to finish the exercise. The feeling might become a bit more intense in the first 45 seconds. Break through this barrier and continue repeating the word out loud. Also make sure that your voice remains loud and clear, so that it does not become silent halfway through.

Look at the word that you have written down while you do the exercise. Look and notice what you feel while you repeat the word out loud.

Do the exercise before you continue reading.

Is it true that the word has lost its serious charge and that it now feels more like a word than something real? In that case the exercise was successful!

THE EFFECT OF DEFUSION

You can see that we have given a difficult word a different, strange association here. We have not tried to think differently; we have only taken the existing thought out of its context.

You then get this image, as it were.

Without having come up with other (rational/positive) thoughts, we have nevertheless tackled the power of language. You can do this with all words, sentences, thoughts, and images. In this way you do not

remove the thought, but you change the impact of the thought (from serious to pleasantly unimportant).

YES, BUT A LOT OF MY THOUGHTS ARE ACTUALLY BASED ON REALITY, AREN'T THEY?

You may be thinking this now. Defusion can feel uncomfortable at first, because you notice that certain truths are then being called into question. Things that you previously experienced as very real can partly evaporate when you apply defusion. This happens because we remove the verbal reinforcement of the real problem through language .

Let's say you suffer from chronic pain. Every day you notice that it is difficult to get out of bed and to do everyday things without hindrance. That is very real. Why would you then start defusing with the word *pain*?

The answer is that words can unnecessarily amplify the pain. On top of the direct pain, you also have that suffering! Defusion tackles that part of our experience. In this way, the sharp edge is taken off a bit.

Besides that, language is often the only, or the biggest, culprit. Suppose you are in perfect health and young as a puppy with pink paws, but you are still afraid of getting cancer tomorrow. Apart from all that is possible, you can say here that you are mainly bothered by the *thought* of cancer, right? And so the intention is that we also defuse this word.

WEIRD AND DIFFERENT ARE YOUR TWO BEST FRIENDS FROM NOW ON

Defusion ensures that problems caused by language will feel less heavy. You are then left with the real pain, to which you can apply willingness (covered in the next chapter). Now of course you want to become an absolute master of defusion. I understand that too. I am going to help you with that.

The most important thing in this case is that you be willing to behave like a complete idiot. The crazier an exercise feels to you, the better it is. The repetition exercise offered above is very good, but it can be even better. Because what if you said your word out loud with the voice of Bert or Ernie? What if you sung it like an opera singer with dust in her lungs? What if you really took that serious word to the extreme of ridiculousness?

I have only been experimenting with this idea for six months, and the first results are overwhelming, with all sorts of clients making huge steps forward in their life using this learning principle. That is why I did not want to withhold this extra information from you.

The idea is that you do something with difficult words or thoughts that feels as strange and different to you as possible.

If you really want to become an ACT ninja master, we can take this exercise one step further. Of course I give you lots of other fun exercises in the rest of this book. The only question is whether you want to put your own spin on them, so that you can increase their effect even more.

For example, maybe Bert or Ernie's voice does not sound strange to you at all, or you're too young to remember them (or maybe I'm too old; that's probably the right answer). Maybe your father and mother always speak like that, and you do not know any better. In that case, I would like to meet your parents, and it is better for you to choose something else, which does feel strange to you.

Here's another example: For me, the Dutch southern accent is a source of joy. When I hear someone say something serious in that tone of voice, I always burst out laughing. For me, this is a good accent to do defusion with. But for people from the south, this probably sounds very normal (don't ask me how that is possible).

Do you understand what I mean? Can you think of an accent that, if you're honest, sounds really weird to you? If you dare to experiment with this, you can then really learn how to put serious thoughts in their place. If it feels strange and different to you, then you are well on your way to your black belt in defusion.

Here are some existing exercises that you can try as written and then make into your own version.

THE WORRY FACTORY

What has helped me a lot is the realization that I have a very large, strange worry factory in my head. And I work there every day. I try to produce “good” thoughts. But within the factory there is always disagreement about which thoughts are good and which are bad. There is a department within the factory that says that I should be careful and thoughtful, but in another department they say that I should take risks.

In short, within the worry factory it is almost always a mess.

GIVE YOUR MIND A NICKNAME

This is the most important exercise in the entire book. So if you don’t do this, you might as well go bowling. If you really want to distance yourself from your thoughts, it is super important that you actually start to feel that you are separate from your mind. The way to achieve that is to give your mind (or your worry factory) a nickname.

Mine is called Harry. Through ACT I noticed how much trouble I actually had with my thoughts. My past kept following me like a thundercloud, and no matter what I did, according to my mind it was never good enough.

I rebelled when I discovered what I really wanted to achieve with my life. I really wanted to feel unconditional love with someone, but my mind said that I was not good enough for that. I wanted a career and to write books, but my mind shouted in advance that I would never succeed.

One evening I was sitting alone on the couch, restless, nothing on TV, bad weather—you know how it is. I realized then that I had a choice: Was I going to be guided by my past and my mind, or was I going to find

my own way? I got very angry at my past and at that dark head of mine that kept telling me I was worthless. I realized then and there that I no longer wanted to listen to my mind. I wanted to follow my heart.

Coming up with the name Harry helped me tremendously with that. From the moment I started talking out loud with Harry, a healthy distance arose between me and my mind. For example, I had a lecture for a couple of hundred people scheduled, and Harry would shout that I was not well enough prepared, or that I would be exposed. In response, I noticed those thoughts and said: "Well, Harry, you are doing well again today, aren't you?"

You see that I did not try to win the argument with Harry. All I had to do was notice that Harry was whining again. By saying this out loud, I took the sting out of those thoughts.

In this way you create a kind of marriage of convenience with your mind, by noticing it but consciously not getting caught up in that maelstrom of thoughts.

Does a name for your head come up spontaneously? My most important tip for thinking of a name is not to make it too personal. So your father's or mother's name is not very suitable. I wouldn't use a corruption of your own name either. You are not your mind, so it really can be a completely different name. It can be a playful, cheerful name, like Kermit, but it can also be a name that reflects the character of your mind, like Boss or Whiner. Here are some names that have passed review in my therapy room over the past few years, for inspiration:

- Harry
- Hank
- Amy
- Bozo
- The Director
- Bert
- Donald
- Misty
- Sheldon (from *The Big Bang Theory*)

Sometimes people ask me if they can come up with two names, because the mind often has two sides (like an angel and a devil on your

shoulders). I also advise against this, because then you often end up in your head again. You have to keep thinking about who is talking. If your mind is very positive one time and very negative the next, then you apparently have a pretty fickle mind that jumps in all directions. It is precisely then that it is good to have one name, so that you can consciously step out of that ping-pong match of your head.

Okay, the floor is yours. Think of a name for your mind.

My mind is now called _____

You don't have to be too serious about this. Our mind often tells us that we should come up with a good name that fully covers the load. Maybe you just literally thought this; that would be funny.

You can always change your name later, so don't wait too long to choose. Once you have thought of a name, you can playfully discover how liberating it can be to take your thoughts a little less seriously.

TYPE YOUR MIND

To get to know your mind better, the question is how would you describe your mind. Do you have a friendly mind, or is it unfriendly? Is it a perfectionist or a hyped-up hippie? Check off the characteristics that you recognize in your mind (multiple answers possible, also contradictory answers, such as if your mind is nice and sometimes also unkind):

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| ☐ Perfectionist | ☐ Gentle |
| ☐ Nice | ☐ Judgmental |
| ☐ Strict | ☐ Helpful |
| ☐ Sweet | ☐ Negative |
| ☐ Belittling | ☐ Unkind |
| ☐ Hard | ☐ Bossy |

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| ☐ Uninhibited | ☐ Doom-monger |
| ☐ Malicious | ☐ Affectionate |
| ☐ Positive | ☐ Happy |
| ☐ Inhibitory | ☐ Free thinker |
| ☐ Angry | ☐ Dominating |
| ☐ Worrier | |
- ☐ Whatever I do, it is never good enough
 - ☐ Regularly brings up old issues
 - ☐ Regularly gives me compliments
 - ☐ Regularly judges me negatively
 - ☐ Usually thinks everything is fine
 - ☐ Thinks everything should go according to the rules
 - ☐ Compares me to others
 - ☐ My mind is my best friend
 - ☐ Other—namely:

When you look at the checked characteristics, what do you notice? What does it do to you to map out your mind so clearly?

What do you think now about the relationship with your mind?

If you know how your mind behaves toward you, it becomes easier and easier to tackle your mind when it gets in your way again. For example, I know that, according to Harry, I'm never good enough, no matter what I do. So I can expect that he will always have something to complain about. When I am driving home after a really nice, successful lecture, Harry usually starts complaining about something I didn't do well. But because I now know that characteristic of Harry, I get caught up in these kinds of thoughts much less quickly.

THE PUB METAPHOR

If you have a very annoying, strict, or irritating mind, it is of course nice to be able to distance yourself from it. Sometimes we do not fully realize how disruptive our minds can be. We then slavishly and blindly accept all the bullshit that our minds come up with, without realizing that we are being tricked into a pattern of negative and rigid thoughts. To sharpen your ability to notice this happening, try this:

If you notice that you regularly blindly follow your mind, you can ask yourself who is actually in charge of your life, you or your mind.

Look at the previous exercise and at how your head behaves. What do you think of your head? Do you find it sweet, or not? Is your mind very relaxed or very strict?

Most people will agree that the mind/head/brain is indeed not exactly a sweetheart.

Okay. Now imagine that you go to the pub to have a drink with a friend. You walk in, and lo and behold, there is your mind at the bar. How would you describe your mind? Is it a cheerful person who chats with everyone, or is it that sour old grouch who complains about everything?

Take a moment to think about who would be behind the bar in your case.

Take your time.

You now have a clear picture of your mind. The most important question now is this: Do you want to sit next to your mind at the bar? Does that seem like it would be nice? Or would you rather go to your friends and let your head sit there, moaning and whining?

Think about this for a moment.

People often say that they would let their mind sulk at a suitable distance, while they would then go have a drink with their partner, friends, and colleagues. What is that like for you?

What do you think of the idea that in everyday life you often blindly follow your mind, but that in the pub you would probably not sit beside it? Isn't it time to become a little more detached from your mind in everyday life?

TILL DEATH DO US PART

When you discover how your mind works, you may become quite angry or sad about what your mind has done to you all of these years. You may then discover that your mind never lets you cancel an appointment because you are too tired or that your mind keeps telling you that you are not good enough.

If you feel angry or sad, this is most likely justified. In general, the mind is just not that kind, and it does not grant us much. We often see this reflected in our parents, who in turn learned from their parents that

they should not whine and that they should not be a burden to others. In that sense, it is sometimes tragic to see what we do to ourselves.

In response to this, you may be inclined to push your mind away. I myself detested Harry for quite a while and regularly shouted at him to get lost. I have cried because of how mean Harry is, and I have cursed at him when he told me I was weak or a bad person for the millionth time. I am not happy with Harry. But I also realize we have to grow old together.

The term *marriage of convenience* is appropriate here. You will need your mind for the rest of your life, when making shopping lists, doing your job well, and paying bills. Without your mind you cannot go anywhere and cannot function. But that mind can also make you feel bad unnecessarily for a long time.

Through defusion you learn to use your mind when you need it and to be able to leave it when it gets in your way. The trick is to observe your mind and decide yourself whether you want to listen to it. Harry can truly support me during a lecture, by giving me all the information I need to tell my story well. Just as with a computer, I use Harry as a resource of information at that moment. Then, on the way back in the car, I get an evaluation from Harry that makes my teeth hurt. At times like these I can switch gears and see that this is really something typical of Harry that I don't have to care about. This way I pick up the functional things he says and consciously leave the awkward things behind.

And yes, you can learn this too, and no, it really doesn't take years. It's a matter of practicing, discovering, and learning through play.

LEARN TO PLAY WITH LANGUAGE

In this book I have deliberately chosen not to give you all the exercises I have developed but rather to pick only the best of the best. You can find a lot more material in my other books, but in this book I mainly want to teach you the principles behind the exercises so that you can even come up with your own exercises. The hope is that in the coming period you will start playing around with words and sentences that can affect you.

If possible, involve your partner or a friend in what you are doing and see if you can ridicule your mind together. This can also be done very well with children, such as by introducing “the thought puppet” instead of “the mind.”

A question that may now be ringing in your head is this: Who am I if I am not my thoughts? With your permission, I will leave that one for now. But I come back to that in more detail in Chapter 6. We then extend the concept of defusion all the way to your identity, in the hope that we can create some more light and air there too.

So let this above all be the beginning of a cheerful rebellion against your mind. Allow your thoughts, don’t push them away, and twist their meaning with weird accents and sounds. Acknowledge your mind as a separate entity by giving it a name and calling it out regularly. Dare to repeat even the most intense words or beliefs out loud for at least a minute and a half, in the strangest voice you can think of, and notice what happens. Before you know it, you will be freed from the prison of your own head.

Here’s a last tip: Find a symbol for your mind. This can be a keychain with (for example) Harry on it, or a picture as the background on your phone. In my case, Harry reminds me of Scrat, that frantic squirrel from *Ice Age*, and that’s why I have a ringtone where you can hear him running and sniffing so neurotically.

Make sure that something in your environment reminds you of your mind and you will notice that it will speed up your learning process considerably.