

Comparing the Efficacy of Defusion, Self-as-Context, and Distraction Strategies  
For Getting Rid of Possessions

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### Abstract

Interventions for hoarding disorder need to target difficulty letting go of items to reduce clutter and improve functioning. The present studies were designed to test the efficacy of brief cognitive interventions for letting go of possessions and self-report outcomes. Participants ( $N = 67$  in Study 1;  $N = 110$  in Study 2) received training on defusion or distraction in Study 1 and defusion, self-as-context, or distraction in Study 2 and completed measures at pre- and postintervention. Study 1 found no differences between defusion and distraction on saving, self-rated discomfort with discarding, or perceived importance of the target belonging. In Study 2, participants provided most favorable feedback for self-as-context compared to defusion and distraction, indicating promise of this strategy. Nonetheless, findings from both studies overall provide minimal support for use of present procedures to reduce saving. Limitations include use of non-clinical samples and single-item variables to obtain participant feedback.

*Keywords:* distraction, defusion, self-as-context, hoarding, discarding, saving

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People with hoarding disorder (HD) struggle with parting with possessions—usually accompanied by excessive acquiring (Meyer, Frost, Brown, Steketee, & Tolin, 2013)—leading to accumulation of clutter that precludes use of active living spaces (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Significant hoarding is associated with poor quality of life and functional impairment (Saxena et al., 2011; Tolin, Das, et al., 2019). In particular, clutter tends to be problematic as it can block pathways in the home posing a safety hazard, compromise sanitation, and extend to the workplace (Kim, Steketee, & Frost, 2001; Tolin, Frost, Steketee, Gray, & Fitch, 2008). Given clutter is a consequence of acquisition of and difficulty discarding items, interventions for HD need to target these problem behaviors to stem further accumulation of clutter.

The current empirically supported treatment for HD is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Although CBT for HD has produced moderate to large effect sizes on symptom measures, rates of clinically significant change for CBT are low (25 to 43%; Tolin, Frost, Steketee, & Muroff, 2015), suggesting a need for more effective interventions. One way to develop better treatments is to study specific therapeutic components in controlled settings to determine their efficacy before evaluating them in more ecologically valid environments. Component studies can provide greater precision in testing and give researchers more control over intervention parameters. In addition, investigating specific components could help to streamline treatments by evaluating the utility of individual aspects of intervention packages.

A key process of change in treatment for HD is decreases in maladaptive saving cognitions (Levy et al., 2017; Tolin, Wootton, et al., 2019), and CBT for HD primarily uses

cognitive restructuring to address such cognitions (Wheaton, 2016). The efficacy of cognitive restructuring has been well documented for anxiety and depression (e.g., Cristea et al., 2015; Hofmann, Heering, Sawyer, & Asnaani, 2009), but its unique impact on HD symptoms is less clear. For example, a study comparing the effect of cognitive restructuring to thought listing found cognitive restructuring led to more saving of personal possessions than thought listing (Frost, Ong, Steketee, & Tolin, 2016) and no differences in acquiring decisions (Levy, Frost, Offermann, Steketee, & Tolin, 2019).

Examining other approaches to address maladaptive cognitions may provide alternative options in treatment. From an acceptance-based model, maladaptive cognitions do not need to change if we can change how we respond to them (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). One way of responding differently is to treat thoughts more lightly instead of as reflections of reality that must be adhered to or resolved; this process is called cognitive defusion in acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Practicing defusion weakens the power of thoughts over behaviors and increases sensitivity to other information (e.g., long-term goals) that may have a more helpful influence on actions (Masuda, Feinstein, Wendell, & Sheehan, 2010; Masuda, Twohig, et al., 2010).

Given emotional attachment to possessions is a core element in the presentation of hoarding (Frost & Hartl, 1996; Kellett & Holden, 2014), applying defusion in the context of difficulty discarding could entail noticing sensations associated with the attachment without buying into what the attachment means. For example, a defused stance may allow people to view distress associated with discarding as a combination of accelerated heartrate, knotted feeling in the stomach, and shoulder tension instead of an insurmountable emotion that “must be immediately alleviated.”

Another ACT process related to defusion is self-as-context, which describes creating a distinction between the self or “I” and inner experiences such that the individual perceives the self as the space or context in which inner experiences occur—not as the inner experiences themselves (Hayes et al., 2006). Defusion and self-as-context are complementary processes as both foster distancing from inner experiences without first having to change their form or frequency. Moreover, self-as-context is contingent on defusion from self-stories so there is overlap between the two processes. However, a key difference is self-as-context more explicitly addresses the concept of self and emphasizes perspective taking to a greater extent. Previous studies comparing defusion to self-as-context interventions have found marginal superiority of a self-as-context approach with respect to increasing tolerance of pain and distress (Gil-Luciano, Ruiz, Valdivia-Salas, & Suárez-Falcón, 2017), improving performance on a cognitive task (López-López & Luciano, 2017), decreasing adolescent problematic behavior (Luciano et al., 2011), and reducing self-reported stress (Foody, Barnes-Holmes, Barnes-Holmes, & Luciano, 2013; Foody, Barnes-Holmes, Barnes-Holmes, Rai, & Luciano, 2015).

The current studies aimed to test the effect of defusion and self-as-context on actual saving in a nonclinical sample of college students. Just as defusion has been found to reduce believability of self-critical thoughts (Masuda, Feinstein, et al., 2010; Masuda, Twohig, et al., 2010), and self-as-context has been shown to increase willingness to tolerate discomfort (Gil-Luciano et al., 2017), we examined if similar interventions would reduce attachment to possessions operationalized by self-report and behavioral measures. We used distraction as an active control condition given it has been found to be effective in certain contexts but not others (Wolgast & Lundh, 2017) and has face validity as an intervention, which means it would likely account for placebo effects.

The present report contains findings from two studies. The first study compared the effects of defusion and distraction protocols. We predicted defusion would be more effective than distraction for decreasing emotional discomfort associated with discarding, perceived importance of the possession, and saving as well as for producing more favorable feedback. The second study extended the protocol of the first study by adding a self-as-context intervention. The defusion and distraction interventions in the second study were modified to have a parallel structure with the new self-as-context training. We predicted self-as-context would be most effective for improving outcomes.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through SONA, an online university research recruitment system, and on-campus fliers. Participants received course credit for study participation. Eligibility criteria included age of at least 18 years, English fluency, and physical and cognitive ability to complete study procedures.

### **Procedure**

Prior to the experiment, participants were instructed to bring a possession that met the following criteria: (a) hard to part with, (b) not currently used (within past year), (c) not currently needed (within past year), (d) inexpensive, (e) other people might get rid of the item, based on how often it is used, and (f) easily transportable. These criteria were used to approximate items typically saved by individuals with significant hoarding (Frost et al., 2016) and elicit difficulty discarding reactions from our nonclinical sample. For example, even people who do not generally struggle with letting go of things may have specific items like a concert ticket stub, shirt from a college event, or childhood toy they find harder to relinquish. Experimenters verified

that these criteria were met prior to the informed consent process. If items did not meet these criteria, participants did not proceed with the experiment.

After participants provided informed consent, they completed preintervention measures on a laboratory computer. These measures included a demographic form (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity), the Saving Inventory—Revised (SI-R), Action and Acceptance Questionnaire—II (AAQ-II), and three visual analog scales.

Participants were randomly assigned to an experimental condition. Study 1 included two conditions: Distraction ( $n = 32$ ) and Defusion ( $n = 35$ ). Study 2 included three conditions: Distraction ( $n = 35$ ), Defusion ( $n = 35$ ), and Self-as-Context ( $n = 40$ ). Conditions were approximately five minutes long and structured based on scripts developed by the first and third authors (details are provided in the following section; scripts can be found in Appendices A and B). These scripts were modeled after theoretically consistent therapy exercises (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011) and protocols used in previous studies (e.g., Gil-Luciano et al., 2017; Masuda, Twohig, et al., 2010). Of note, we were unable to use the same intervention as Masuda, Twohig, et al. (2010) in Study 1 because our target stimulus was a physical object not a verbally expressed negative self-referential thought. For example, for a self-critical thought, a participant could repeat the word, “ugly” from the thought, “I’m ugly” in the defusion exercise whereas repeating “shirt” for an old T-shirt would not be as meaningful. However, we attempted to adapt the *function* of the defusion exercise (i.e., attending to the physical properties or literal sound of the thought) to objects. Thus, we had participants focus on describing the physical properties of the objects—this is similar to defusion exercises wherein clients are asked to notice and objectively describe physiological sensations (e.g., heart beating, chest tightening) rather than labeling them as “anxiety” or “unbearable.”

Trained research assistants each ran participants in all conditions to avoid confounding intervention and experimenter effects. Training involved role playing the full experimental protocol from obtaining informed consent to debriefing participants after the intervention. Experimenters were observed twice following training to ascertain intervention adherence.

The interventions were structured to be as similar as possible within each study in terms of components, duration, and order of components. At the start of each condition intervention, participants were instructed to close their eyes. In both studies, participants were prompted to practice the specific technique trained in their assigned condition with a neutral stimulus before being guided to apply the technique to their possession. Participants were instructed to open their eyes at the end of the intervention prior to the behavioral task. For the behavioral task, participants were asked to discard, donate, or keep the item they brought with them. Their decision was coded and used as a behavioral outcome measure.

After the intervention, participants completed postintervention measures (i.e., visual analog scales, manipulation feedback items) on the same laboratory computer.

### **Experimental Intervention**

**Study 1.** Both conditions contained a brief rationale explaining the purpose of the technique to be used, training with a neutral stimulus (pen), and intervention with the target possession. The Distraction training involved refocusing participants' attention away from the pen and toward a different stimulus (e.g., object in the room, weather, pleasant experience) and asked participants to similarly avoid thinking about the meaning of the target item by focusing on the other stimulus. The rationale for Defusion was adapted from Hayes et al. (2011): to notice how arbitrary associations we make influence our behaviors and to instead respond based on objective properties. In the Defusion condition, participants were instructed to focus on the



physical properties (e.g., material, color, texture) of the pen and apply this method to their belonging. Scripts of Study 1 conditions are provided in Appendix A.

**Study 2.** The conditions in Study 2 were experiential in that they instructed participants to focus on present-moment experiences. They were modeled after scripts used by Gil-Luciano et al. (2017). In Distraction, participants were asked to redirect their attention to a different stimulus (e.g., an earlier event, scenery outside). In Defusion, participants were guided to notice the attachment to their belonging as a feeling distinct from the self. In Self-as-Context, participants were asked to notice the self as “bigger than” the attachment. Scripts for these conditions are provided in Appendix B.

## Measures

**Saving Inventory—Revised (SI-R; Frost, Steketee, & Grisham, 2004).** The SI-R is a 23-item measure of hoarding symptoms across three subscales: difficulty discarding, acquisition, and clutter. Items are rated from 0 to 4 with higher scores indicating greater severity. The SI-R has demonstrated good internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant reliability (Frost et al., 2004). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s for the SI-R in the current studies indicated excellent internal reliability for the full scale (.95 in Study 1; .92 in Study 2).

**Action and Acceptance Questionnaire – II (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011).** The AAQ-II is a seven-item measure of psychological inflexibility, which is a pattern of rigid responding to difficult internal experiences in ways that interfere with valued living (Hayes et al., 2006). Fusion and self-as-content (the inverse of self-as-context) are aspects of psychological inflexibility. Items are scored from 1 (*never true*) to 7 (*always true*) with higher scores indicating more psychological inflexibility. The AAQ-II has shown good internal reliability and

convergent, predictive, and incremental validity (Bond et al., 2011). Internal consistency in both study samples was excellent (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s = .92 and .90 in Studies 1 and 2 respectively).

**Visual analog scales.** Three Likert-style visual analog scales were rated for emotional discomfort associated with discarding the target possession (discomfort), perceived importance of the possession (importance), and willingness to discard the possession (willingness; only administered at preintervention). Scale responses ranged from 0 (*not at all uncomfortable, not at all important, not at all willing*) to 100 (*very uncomfortable, very important, very willing*).

**Item decision.** Participants were given the option to discard into a trash can, donate to a local thrift store, or keep the target item. The instructions were as follows: "Now, we will do the behavioral task. The purpose of the task is simply to get a behavioral measure of your attachment to the object following this brief intervention, using the skill we practiced; in that way, it is similar to the questionnaires you have completed, but with actual behavior. You may choose to discard, donate, or keep the object you brought with you. What would you like to do?" The first two options were collapsed to create a binary behavioral outcome variable: discard/donate versus keep. The reason for collapsing the first two choices was we did not perceive any functional difference between donating and discarding; that is, both choices entailed getting rid of the item.

**Manipulation feedback.** Three face-valid items were used to assess responses to strategies taught in the experimental conditions: (1) I was able to use this strategy successfully, (2) I found this strategy effective, and (3) I will use this strategy again when I have trouble letting go of belongings. Each item was rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

### **Statistical Analyses**

Analyses were conducted in RStudio (RStudio Team, 2015) with R (R Core Team, 2018) using the following packages: tidyverse (Wickham, 2017), stats (R Core Team, 2018), ez

(Lawrence, 2016), furniture (Barrett & Brignone, 2017), cowplot (Wilke, 2018), effsize (Torchiano, 2017), and psych (Revelle, 2018).

Means and standard deviations for continuous variables and frequencies for categorical variables were calculated for demographic items. Repeated measures ANOVAs were used to test the effect of time (preintervention, postintervention) and condition (Study 1: Distraction, Defusion; Study 2: Distraction, Defusion, Self-as-Context) on two outcome variables: self-reported discomfort and perceived importance of the item. Between-group comparisons were conducted for manipulation feedback items at posttreatment using *t*-tests (for Study 1) and ANOVAs (for Study 2). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted with *t*-tests for Study 2 data.  $\chi^2$  tests were used to examine the effect of condition on item decision at postintervention.

## Results

### Study 1

**Sample.** Of the 67 participants, 58% identified as female and 88% as European American/White. Other identified ethnicities included Latinx (5%), bi/multiracial (3%), and African American/Black (2%). The mean age of the sample was 21.2 years ( $SD = 6.4$ ). Mean scores for willingness to discard, SI-R total, and AAQ-II were 43.9 ( $SD = 29.7$ ), 25.1 ( $SD = 13.6$ ); consistent with a college student sample; Coles, Frost, Heimberg, & Steketee, 2003), and 20.9 ( $SD = 9.0$ ), respectively. Groups did not significantly differ on demographic variables, willingness to discard, SI-R total score, or AAQ-II total score at baseline ( $ps > .05$ ).

#### **Experimental findings.**

**Discomfort.** There were no significant main or interaction effects of time and condition on self-reported discomfort. Results are reported in Table 1 and condition means are plotted in Figure 1.

**Item importance.** Similar to for self-reported discomfort, no significant main or interaction effects were observed for item importance (see Table 1).

**Item decision.** There was no significant difference between conditions with respect to the decision to discard/donate versus keep the item ( $p = .567$ ; see Table 2).

**Manipulation feedback.** There was no significant difference between the Distraction and Defusion conditions in successful use of the strategy, perceived effectiveness, and willingness to use the strategy to get rid of belongings in the future (see Table 2). There were marginally significant differences between groups for perceived effectiveness ( $p = .058$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.47$ ) and willingness to use the strategy again ( $p = .066$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.45$ ), with participants in the Defusion condition assigning higher ratings to these items.

## Study 2

**Sample.** Of the 110 participants, 65% identified as female and 85% as European American/White. Other identified ethnicities included Latinx (4%), African American/Black (3%), and bi/multiracial (2%). The mean age of the sample was 21.3 years ( $SD = 5.7$ ). Mean scores for willingness to discard, SI-R total, and AAQ-II were 39.0 ( $SD = 26.4$ ), 25.2 ( $SD = 11.8$ ), and 19.1 ( $SD = 7.6$ ), respectively. Groups did not significantly differ on demographic variables, willingness to discard, SI-R total score, or AAQ-II total score at baseline ( $ps > .22$ ).

### Experimental findings.

**Discomfort.** There were no significant main or interaction effects of time and condition on self-reported discomfort. Repeated measure ANOVA results are reported in Table 1 and condition means are plotted in Figure 2.

**Item importance.** There were no significant main or interaction effects of time and condition on item importance. Given the exploratory nature of the study, we note the marginally

significant interaction effect for condition  $\times$  time,  $F(2, 103) = 2.66, p = .075$  (see Figure 2).

Whereas ratings of item importance showed an increasing trend over time in the Distraction and Defusion conditions, they remained more constant in the Self-as-Context condition.

***Item decision.*** There was no significant difference among conditions with respect to the decision to discard/donate versus keep the item ( $p = .709$ ; see Table 2).

***Manipulation feedback.*** There were significant omnibus differences in self-reported successful use of the strategy, perceived effectiveness, and willingness to use the strategy to get rid of belongings in the future (see Table 2). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated participants in the Defusion and Self-as-Context conditions used the prescribed strategy more successfully (Cohen's  $d = 0.78$  for Defusion, Cohen's  $d = 0.68$  for Self-as-Context) and found it to be more effective (Cohen's  $d = 0.69$  for Defusion, Cohen's  $d = 1.00$  for Self-as-Context) than participants in the Distraction condition. However, participants in the Self-as-Context condition reported being more likely to use the strategy in the future when they have trouble letting go of belongings compared to the Defusion (Cohen's  $d = 0.73$ ) and Distraction (Cohen's  $d = 1.05$ ) conditions.

## Discussion

Overall, there were few significant between-group differences in both studies. In Study 1, the Distraction and Defusion conditions were statistically equivalent on all outcomes tested including self-reported discomfort with discarding, perceived importance of the belonging, and the decision to discard/donate versus keep the belonging. At the same time, there were small between-group differences (Cohen's  $d = 0.45-0.47$ ) for perceived effectiveness and willingness to use the strategy again in favor of the Defusion condition.

Study 2 was a replication of Study 1 with two key differences. First, the conditions used a different method to teach the cognitive strategies. Instead of directing participants' focus to the physical properties of the belonging, the Defusion condition in Study 2 trained noticing the self as distinct from feelings of object attachment. Second, Study 2 added a Self-as-Context condition to train perceiving the self as not only distinct from feelings of attachment to the belonging but also "bigger than" those feelings of attachment.

Results from Study 2 were also mostly non-significant in terms of differential performance among conditions. In particular, there was no significant difference in the behavioral measure of discarding/donating versus keeping among conditions. However, feedback on the experimental manipulations tended to favor Self-as-Context in that participants rated themselves as more likely to use this strategy again to get rid of belongings in the future compared to Distraction and Defusion. In addition, both Defusion and Self-as-Context were used more successfully and perceived as more effective than Distraction. Furthermore, the interaction effect of time and condition on item importance was marginally significant, suggesting a possible divergent temporal pattern in Self-as-Context relative to Distraction and Defusion. Specifically, item importance showed an increasing trend in Distraction and Defusion in contrast to a stable trend in Self-as-Context from preintervention to postintervention (see Figure 2).

Nonetheless, there is little evidence from these studies to support the efficacy of brief cognitive training for increasing willingness to get rid of a belonging compared to distraction given there were no statistically significant differences on the behavioral outcome of parting with the belonging. There are several possible reasons for the impotence of the tested interventions. First, the interventions were too brief; protocols used in other studies were longer than those in the current study (~30 minutes vs. ~10 minutes; Gil-Luciano et al., 2017; Luciano et al., 2011).

Behavior change might only be observed with more training and practice of self-as-context as the only significant differences tended to favor Self-as-Context. Thus, it may be worth using more intensive (e.g., longer duration, more in-depth practice) self-as-context interventions with object attachment to see if more elaborate training impacts saving especially because the counterintuitive premise of defusion and self-as-context (i.e., thoughts and feelings do not cause actions, “I” is bigger than thoughts and feelings) may require a shift in worldview in addition to training process of change skills. Second, we did not provide sufficient context in which to learn the skills; asking participants to consider the benefits of applying these strategies in their life (e.g., to make decisions in line with values rather than feelings of attachment) could have enhanced the efficacy of the interventions. Third, participants might not have been highly motivated to let go of their possessions as the possessions were unlikely severely affecting their quality of life. While similar items may cause functional impairment in HD, they may not have the same impact in nonclinical samples. Fourth, given the multifaceted cognitive and emotional elements implicated in the maintenance of hoarding (Mackin et al., 2016; Timpano, Buckner, Richey, Murphy, & Schmidt, 2009; Tolin, Levy, Wootton, Hallion, & Stevens, 2018), the exclusive focus of our study interventions on object attachment might not have provided an adequate dose to effect behavior change.

In relation to the extant literature, positive effects of brief defusion interventions on negative self-focused thoughts (Masuda, Hayes, Sackett, & Twohig, 2004; Masuda, Twohig, et al., 2010) and pain/discomfort (Gil-Luciano et al., 2017) were not replicated in the current study on object attachment. Our discrepant findings may be due to differences in how individuals respond to possessions, which are tangible (unlike thoughts) and immediately personally relevant (unlike pain that is verbally linked to values in a cold pressor task). That is, defusing from

attachment to belongings may be more difficult than defusing from a self-focused thought or pain/discomfort. Alternatively, the presence of the target possession in our study setup and use of a behavioral measure might have increased the difficulty of the experimental task. It is also possible adaption of intervention protocols was needed to increase relevance and applicability to getting rid of belongings. For example, the rationale could have been more explicitly linked to the purpose underlying using defusion and self-as-context skills with feelings of attachment to possessions. Replicating our study methodology with more controlled intervention parameters and more specific manipulation check items would clarify the validity of these explanations.

Another reason for our divergent results could be the use of a different defusion strategy from that used in studies with negative self-focused thoughts (Masuda et al., 2004; Masuda, Twohig, et al., 2010) as vocal repetition is less applicable to object attachment. We did use similar mindfulness-based interventions in Study 2 to those tested by Gil-Luciano et al. (2017). However, their control condition was irrelevant to the experimental task whereas our comparison condition was active (i.e., Distraction), precluding a direct comparison of present results with theirs. Still, the variability in findings may also indicate *how* cognitive strategies are trained matters, with certain intervention structures having a stronger effect on the target behavior than others (Masuda et al., 2009). As such, it is hard to ascertain if defusion as a process of change or the method of intervention in our study was unhelpful for increasing willingness to part with possessions. However, given that defusion has been consistently found to be a meaningful process of change in laboratory component studies (Levin, Hildebrandt, Lillis, & Hayes, 2012) and clinical trials (Arch, Wolitzky-Taylor, Eifert, & Craske, 2012; Forman et al., 2012) and that acceptance-based training appears to be relevant to clinically significant hoarding (Ong, Krafft,



Levin, & Twohig, 2020), it is more plausible that our specific iteration of defusion training was not potent or precise enough to effect behavioral change.

With respect to clinical implications, it would be prudent to strengthen similar interventions by simultaneously targeting other inner experiences that influence saving. For example, individuals can be taught to apply self-as-context to beliefs about the implications of discarding for self-conceptualization (e.g., “I am wasteful,” “I am not grateful for this gift”). Practicing self-as-context, individuals may observe the self as “bigger than” or “containing” a plethora of inner experiences, which do not inherently have the power to cause behavior. Expanding the targeted scope of the intervention in this way could weaken the effect of a wider range of inner experiences on behavior, resulting in more discarding. Still, further tests of therapeutic procedures to improve cognitive skills and correlating these skill changes with meaningful outcomes would clarify (a) how to most effectively address maladaptive cognitions and (b) whether such cognitive strategies are useful in the treatment of HD.

### **Limitations**

First, the manipulation feedback items for which there were significant group differences were single-item variables, which may compromise their reliability and validity. Thus, these findings should be replicated with psychometrically validated measures before we draw robust conclusions about the acceptability of similar cognitive interventions. Second, the manipulation feedback items were not specific enough to each intervention. Hence, it is unclear if participants understood the rationale and skills entailed in the intervention they received. For example, participants could have “successfully” used a technique that did not match the training in their condition. Researchers doing similar work should assess the specific impact of interventions on processes of change to elucidate the causal relationship from intervention to process to outcome

(Hofmann & Hayes, 2018). Third, we used a nonclinical sample of college students, limiting generalizability of our findings. Although some evidence suggests processes underlying hoarding are similar between nonclinical and clinical samples (Preston, Muroff, & Wengrovitz, 2009; Timpano et al., 2013), object attachment may be more entrenched among individuals with HD and their behaviors may be more resistant to intervention, rendering cognitive strategies less effective in clinical samples. Furthermore, whereas letting go of items would be adaptive in HD, the same behavior might not have served the same function in our nonclinical sample.

Replication of our null findings in more robust analogue paradigms is warranted. Fourth, we did not specifically assess changes in use of cognitive strategies, which makes it difficult to determine if the experimental manipulation resulted in changes in cognitive responding but not behaviors or if the intervention did not adequately shift cognitive responding. Future component studies should measure the target process of change in order to elucidate the links among procedure, process, and outcome (Hofmann & Hayes, 2018).

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Table 1  
*Repeated Measures ANOVA Results for Self-Rated Discomfort and Item Importance*

	$df_{\text{effect}}$	$df_{\text{error}}$	$SS_{\text{effect}}$	$SS_{\text{error}}$	$F$	$p$
<b>Study 1</b>						
<i>Discomfort</i>						
Condition	1	64	311	73467	0.271	.605
Time	1	64	297	27042	0.703	.405
Condition × Time	1	64	447	27042	1.059	.307
<i>Item importance</i>						
Condition	1	63	453	111679	0.255	.615
Time	1	63	35	12080	0.180	.673
Condition x Time	1	63	16	12080	0.085	.772
<b>Study 2</b>						
<i>Discomfort</i>						
Condition	2	101	508	124616	0.206	.814
Time	1	101	3	32999	0.008	.927
Condition x Time	2	101	768	32999	1.176	.313
<i>Item importance</i>						
Condition	2	103	409	139454	0.151	.860
Time	1	103	646	19127	3.477	.065
Condition x Time	2	103	989	19127	2.663	.075

*Note.* ANOVA = analysis of variance.

Table 2  
*Group Comparisons for Item Decision and Manipulation Feedback Items*

<b>Study 1</b>						
	Distraction (n = 32)	Defusion (n = 37)		$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	
<i>Item decision</i>						
Discard/Donate	10 (31.2%)	14 (37.8%)		0.328	.567	
Keep	22 (68.8%)	23 (62.2%)				
<i>Manipulation feedback</i>						
			<i>t</i>		<i>p</i>	
Successful use	4.38 (1.41)	4.49 (1.46)	0.322		.749	
Was effective	4.28 (1.55)	4.95 (1.27)	1.931		.058	
Would use again	4.59 (1.68)	5.32 (1.55)	1.867		.066	
<b>Study 2</b>						
	Distraction (n = 37)	Defusion (n = 35)	Self-as-Context (n = 41)		$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
<i>Item decision</i>						
Discard/Donate	14 (37.8%)	16 (45.7%)	19 (46.3%)		0.687	.709
Keep	23 (62.2%)	19 (54.3%)	22 (53.7%)			
<i>Manipulation feedback</i>						
				<i>F</i>		<i>p</i>
Successful use	3.35 (1.14) <sup>a</sup>	4.43 (1.60) <sup>b</sup>	4.32 (1.66) <sup>b</sup>	5.858		.004
Was effective	3.68 (1.06) <sup>a</sup>	4.49 (1.27) <sup>b</sup>	4.80 (1.17) <sup>b</sup>	9.553		<.001
Would use again	3.62 (1.69) <sup>a</sup>	4.11 (1.75) <sup>a</sup>	5.29 (1.47) <sup>b</sup>	10.880		<.001

*Note.* Superscripts denote significant pairwise differences based on *t*-tests.



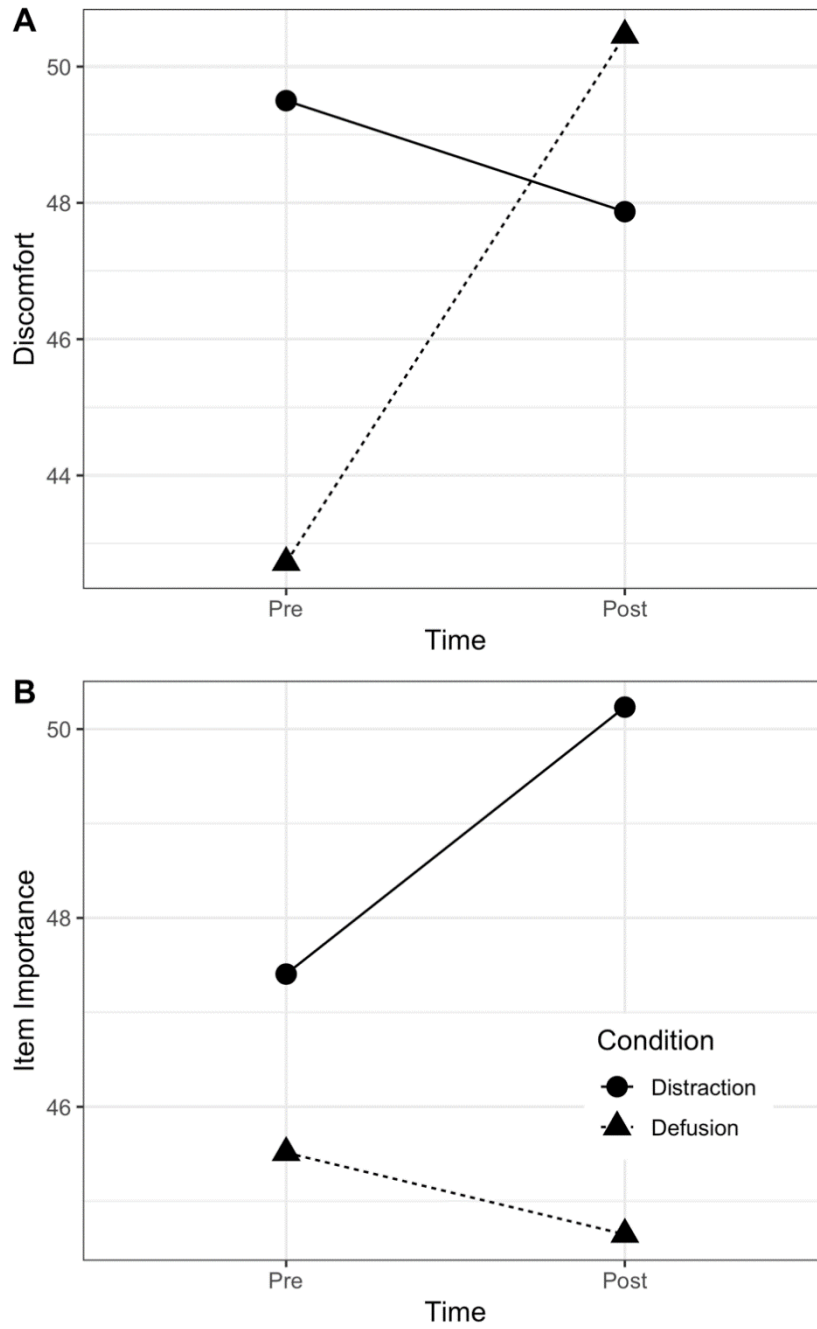


Figure 1. Plot of means by condition for self-rated discomfort (Panel A) and item importance (Panel B) from preintervention to postintervention in Study 1.

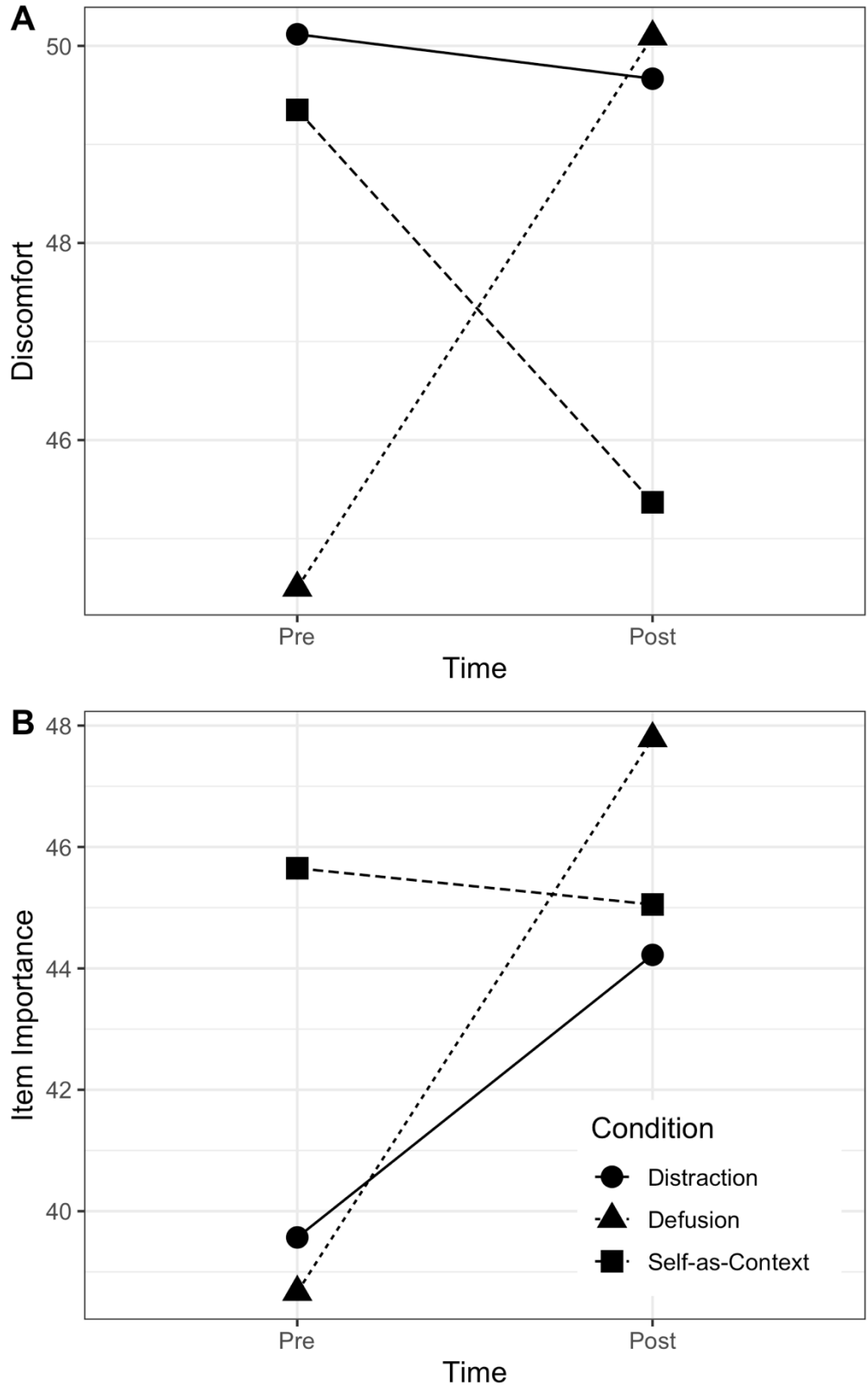


Figure 2. Plot of means by condition for self-rated discomfort (Panel A) and item importance (Panel B) from preintervention to postintervention in Study 2.

## Appendix A

## Experimental Manipulation Scripts for Study 1

**Distraction Condition**

**Rationale.** Our thoughts can have a powerful effect on our feelings and actions. Even when we are presented with similar situations, how we interpret or think about those situations affects how we react to them. In that way, unhelpful thoughts can create suffering in our lives. One way to deal with unhelpful thoughts is simply to distract ourselves from them by thinking about something other than those thoughts.

In the case of our belongings, it is normal—even adaptive—for people to think about memories, past experiences, or other people who are important to us when we look at our belongings. Thinking about objects in those ways can create a social connection even after someone has left us. However, sometimes, those thoughts can lead to difficulties, such as being unable to let go of our belongings even when we want to. In those situations, it may be more helpful if we can distract ourselves from those thoughts by thinking about something different.

**Training.** Look at this pen. Let's say it was given to you as a prize for something that is important to you such as getting good grades, winning a snowboarding competition, or giving a great musical performance. Based on what I told you, what meaning does this pen have? Now I'm going to teach you a few ways to not think about that meaning. You can focus on something else around the room, think about a pleasant experience that you recently had, or think about something neutral, like the weather. Which one would you like to try out?

Now, try not think about the meaning this pen has. Focus on an object in the room, a pleasant experience, or something neutral [modify this based on participant's answer to previous question]. Do not think about the meaning of the pen.

What did the distraction strategy do for you? Were you able to stop thinking about the significance of the pen?

**Intervention.** Now, let's apply this distraction strategy to the item you brought with you today to see if it can help with letting go of the item. It probably has some meaning to you, so let's see what happens when you try not to think about that.

Focus on an object in the room, a pleasant experience, or something neutral [modify this based on participant's response in previous segment]. Do not think about what [name of belonging] means to you. Keep going until I say "stop." *Note: The experimenter provides verbal prompts at 10 s, 20 s, and 30 s, "Don't think about the meaning."*

### **Defusion Condition**

**Rationale.** Human language and our use of symbols, such as the alphabet, contribute to both human achievement and human suffering. Without language, we would not have organized civilizations, scientific advancement, and all the things you see around you in this room. However, the other side of human language and symbol use is misery. Language allows us to carry unpleasant experiences around with us—even when they aren't happening. We can become consumed by our memories, thoughts, and feelings, even when doing so causes us suffering and gets in the way of living a meaningful life. Can you give me an example of how this might show up your life?

In the case of our belongings, it is normal—even adaptive—for people to make associations between our belongings and memories, intense feelings, or other people who are important to us. Having that association can create a social connection even after someone has left us. Yet, sometimes, those associations can lead to difficulties, such as being unable to let go of our belongings even when they get in the way of living fulfilling lives. Can you think of a

time when this happened to you? In those situations, it may be more helpful if we can see our belongings simply as objects.

**Training.** Look at this pen. Is it good or bad? Now notice how your reaction to the pen changes as I tell you different things about it. What if I said this pen was given to me by my grandparents who have both passed away? What meaning does this pen have now? What if I said I dropped this pen in the toilet just before you got here? What if I said this pen was a limited-edition pen that sold for \$100? What if I said this pen was used by a famous celebrity? Notice how the meaning of the pen or your reaction to it changes as I say different things about it.

Now I'd like you to describe the physical properties of this pen: What parts does it have? What are its different parts made of? What shape do its different parts have? What colors do its different parts have?

Notice the effect of the describing exercise on the significance of the pen. What meaning does this pen have now?

**Intervention.** Now, let's apply this describing exercise to the item you brought with you today to see if it can help with letting go of the item. It probably has some meaning to you so let's notice what happens to the meaning of the object when we describe its physical properties. Describe the physical properties of the [name of belonging]. Keep going until I say "stop." What meaning does this [name of belonging] have to you now? How might you apply this strategy to other things in your life? What would your life look like then? *Note: If the participant is having a difficult time, the experimenter may provide verbal prompts at 10 s, 20 s, and 30 s, "What else can you say about the [name of belonging]?"*

## Appendix B

## Experimental Manipulation Scripts for Study 2

**Distraction Condition**

**Neutral.** I would like you to close your eyes and listen to what I say. If you suddenly find yourself distracted from the exercise, just say so and we will go back to where you were before the distraction. For now, just focus on something you did yesterday or earlier today. See if you can remember what you were doing...and how you were feeling.

Now, see if you can picture yourself in that time as you were going about your day...and what was going on for you then.

Now, try to focus on the scenery outside. Go over the trees...the mountains...tell me, which part of the scenery is the most pleasing? (...) Picture that part of the scenery... See if you can bring yourself closer to it...see if you can add details to the scenery you're imagining...don't do anything with it, just watch it.

Now, go over the scenery outside again and tell me which part of the scenery is a bit unpleasant. (...) Ok, picture that part of the scenery... See if you can bring yourself closer to it... see if you can add details to the scenery you're imagining...don't do anything with it, just watch it.

**Attachment.** Now, I would like you to focus on the item you brought with you today. Take a moment to notice your attachment to the item. What do you feel at this moment? What thoughts are showing up for you? (...) Imagine you can distract yourself from this attachment...go to where you were yesterday, where you were earlier today, or the scenery outside. Don't focus on your attachment to the object. [Give participant time to practice distraction. E.g., use prompt, "try to distract yourself from the attachment."]

**Defusion Condition**

**Neutral.** I would like you to close your eyes and listen to what I say. If you suddenly find yourself distracted from the exercise, just say so and we will go back to where you were before the distraction. For now, just focus on your breath. See if you can notice your belly rising every time you inhale...and how it falls every time you exhale.

Now, see if you can picture your belly as if you had a bag that inflates every time you inhale...and that deflates when you exhale.

Now, try to focus on the posture you are maintaining. Go over your arms...your legs...tell me, which part of your body has the most comfortable posture? (...) Notice that comfort... See if you can give it a shape...a color...don't do anything with it, just contemplate it.

Now, go over your general posture again and tell me which part of your body feels a bit uncomfortable. (...) Ok, just notice the discomfort... See if you can give it a shape...a color...don't do anything with it, just contemplate it.

**Attachment.** Now, I would like you to focus on the item you brought with you today. Take a moment to notice your attachment to the item. What do you feel at this moment? What thoughts are showing up for you? (...) Feel whatever it is you are experiencing right now. Can you? Imagine you can take a picture of this attachment...take it and put it in front of you. Just contemplate it.

**Self-as-Context Condition**

**Neutral.** I would like you to close your eyes and listen to what I say. If you suddenly find yourself distracted from the exercise, just say so and we will go back to where you were before the distraction. For now, just focus on your breath. See if you can notice your belly rising every

time you inhale...and how it falls every time you exhale. Ask yourself, who is breathing? Who is noticing his/her belly rising...and then falling?

Now, see if you can picture your belly as if you had a bag that inflates every time you inhale...and that deflates when you exhale. Ask yourself, who is picturing his/her belly like a bag that inflates...and deflates? Can you realize you are the one watching it like that?

Now, try to focus on the posture you are maintaining. Go over your arms...your legs...tell me, which part of your body has the most comfortable posture? (...) Notice that comfort... See if you can give it a shape...a color...don't do anything with it, just contemplate it. Ask yourself, who is noticing that comfort there? Can you realize you are the one contemplating it?

Now, go over your general posture again and tell me which part of your body feels a bit uncomfortable. (...) Ok, just notice the discomfort... See if you can give it a shape...a color...don't do anything with it, just contemplate it. Ask yourself, who is noticing that discomfort there? Can you realize you are the one contemplating it? Imagine yourself doing whatever you would do if you let that discomfort be in charge of what you do: imagine yourself changing your posture so that the discomfort is gone. Now, imagine that you are the one in charge of what you do and not that discomfort: imagine yourself remaining in the posture, making room for the discomfort.

**Attachment.** Now, I would like you to focus on the item you brought with you today. Take a moment to notice your attachment to the item. What do you feel at this moment? What thoughts are showing up for you? (...) Feel whatever it is you are experiencing right now. Can you?



Now, ask yourself who is experiencing this attachment? Imagine you can take a picture of this attachment...take it and put it in front of you. Just contemplate it. Who is contemplating that picture of attachment? Now, imagine yourself letting that attachment be in charge of what you do. See yourself doing whatever you would do if the attachment were in charge. What would you do, then?

Now, imagine that you allow yourself to be in charge of the situation. Ask yourself, what would you do if you were in charge? Would you be bigger than your attachment in that case? Imagine that you give yourself the chance to place yourself over your attachment. Imagine you apply this to any sort of situation in your daily life, when you feel something you don't want to feel.