



## Managing Stress for Agricultural Producers: Learning to “Unhook”

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All of us experience stress, and with it, unpleasant, uncomfortable, or distressing thoughts. Much of the time, people are able to manage the stress—we refocus on our lives and move on. At other times, however, stressful thoughts really impact people’s moods negatively. These thoughts seem to consume all attention, pulling them away from the people and things they care about in a process called “getting hooked” (Harris, 2019). Unhelpful thoughts may make people act in ways they don’t feel good about. The good news is that people can learn skills to “unhook” from unhelpful thoughts and refocus on the things that matter.

### What Is a Thought?

According to clinicians, thoughts are a combination of words and images (Harris, 2019). Humans experience a vast number of thoughts each day, with estimates suggesting over 6,000 per day for the average person (Tseng & Poppenk, 2020). Fortunately, the majority of thoughts occur without comment or interaction from the thinker; however, particularly when people are stressed, some thoughts seem so important and powerful that it is easy to get totally wrapped up in them. When this

happens, people forget that the thoughts *are* thoughts and begin acting on them in automatic or avoidant ways. Researchers call this cognitive fusion (Gloster et al., 2020); some therapists call it getting hooked (Harris, 2019).

### Cognitive Fusion: Getting Hooked

Cognitive fusion is “the excessive influence of thoughts on experience and action, and an inability to experience a distinction between thoughts and the situations, events, or people to which they refer” (Scott et al., 2016, pg. 142). According to theory, the thoughts most likely to hook you are related to what you care most about (Hayes, 2019). This can include the past, the future, important people in your life, the way you see yourself, or



rules about how you are supposed to behave (Harris, 2019).

For agricultural producers, common and distressing thoughts may come up about family troubles (e.g., trying to find a successor for the family business), economic conditions (e.g., rising costs), environmental conditions (e.g., drought or flood), their own health, or their identity as a producer. All of these are likely candidates for thoughts that get producers hooked.

While everyone experiences some degree of getting hooked, or cognitive fusion, high levels of cognitive fusion are associated with significant negative outcomes, including anxiety, depression, shame, and distress (Cookson et al., 2020; Faustino et al., 2021). Some evidence even suggests that high cognitive fusion levels lay the foundation for various mental health concerns (Cookson et al., 2020; Østergaard et al., 2020). On the other hand, low cognitive fusion levels are associated with significant positive outcomes, like well-being and managing one's emotions despite stressful circumstances (Faustino et al., 2021).

Some people may interpret this to mean that they should not have difficult thoughts at all. They may say, "Stay positive; don't think like that." Or, they may avoid these difficult thoughts and distract themselves by watching hours of TV, spending excessive time away working, or avoiding discussing concerns with their family. This is not the solution! It is very important to remember that the difficult *thoughts* are not the problem. Difficult thoughts are OK; they can even stick around. The problem of cognitive fusion occurs when someone is overly committed to believing that the difficult thoughts are "true" or "real."



## Cognitive Defusion: Learning to Unhook

The opposite of cognitive fusion is cognitive defusion, also referred to as unhooking. Cognitive defusion is "responding flexibly to your cognitions so they can *influence* but do not *dominate* your behavior" (Harris, 2019, pg. 120). When someone has high levels of cognitive defusion, they are able to recognize thoughts as thoughts—words and pictures—and able to act on them only if doing so moves them toward the life they want to live. Rather than dictating behavior or being "true reality," thoughts are seen as information that may be useful or not useful, and people can choose to respond accordingly (Blackledge, 2007).

## A Metaphor: Hands as Thoughts and Feelings

The difference between getting hooked and learning to unhook can be represented by holding your hands in three different positions (Harris, 2019). When you notice a difficult thought, think of that thought as being represented by your hands. For this example, imagine noticing the thought, "I'm overwhelmed; I can't do this anymore."

- **Position 1:** Bring your hands over your face to cover your eyes. What can you see? In this scenario, you are hooked by your thoughts; the thought "I'm overwhelmed; I can't do this anymore" distorts everything

you see and do. Getting hooked by this thought limits your ability to engage effectively with the world around you.

- **Position 2:** Try pushing away this thought—push your hands straight out and away from you as hard as you can (adapt this as needed for physical needs). Notice the effort it takes to try to get rid of thoughts; no matter how hard you push, your hands do not go away (the thoughts either stay or come back quickly).
- **Position 3:** Open your hands and lay them flat in your lap. Let your hands and the thought, “I’m overwhelmed” (or whatever example thought you are using) just be there. Can you feel the difference? This represents life unhooked. The thoughts and feelings are still there, but you are free to act effectively to build the life you want. Living with the thought without trying to control it helps you engage more effectively with things and people you care about, even when the thought is around.



## Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Cognitive defusion or getting unhooked is a skill that everyone can develop (Blackledge, 2007). Psychologists and counselors have used acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) or acceptance and commitment training to help people unhook from thoughts and better manage depression, anxiety, pain, substance use, and many other challenges (Gloster et al., 2020). In studies of people doing ACT with a therapist, cognitive defusion has been

shown to predict increases in pain management, decreases in depressive symptoms (Scott et al., 2016), and improvements in depression and overall mental health (Bramwell & Richardson, 2018; Østergaard et al., 2020).

Fortunately, unhooking skills can be learned through self-help resources or online courses, not just with a therapist (Fauth et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2014). Here are four techniques to help you get started (adapted from Harris, 2019, and Hayes, 2019):

1. **Label your thinking as thinking.** In unhooking from thoughts and feelings, it can be helpful to label thoughts in a way that reminds you that they are thoughts (Hayes, 2019). For example, after noticing the thought, “I am a failure as a farmer,” rephrase it instead as, “I’m having the thought that I am a failure as a farmer.” Or, to create even more distance, try relabeling it as, “I’m noticing that I’m having the thought that I am a failure as a farmer.” This may feel silly and a little awkward, but once you remind yourself that you are noticing something as a thought, you are less likely to believe that the thought is true, making the thought less powerful.
2. **Put your thoughts on the computer screen.** For this exercise, an imaginary or a real computer can be used (Harris, 2019). Begin by identifying a thought that tends to hook you. Picture the thought on the computer screen. Get really close to the screen, then back away. Change the formatting of the thought (without changing the words)—try different colors, fonts, and sizes. Do you feel like you have more distance

from the thought than you used to?  
When you change the font and the size, you are reminding your brain that these are just words. They don't have any more power over you when they are big or small, and they don't have any more power over you than any other words. They are just thoughts—words and pictures.

- 3. Thank your mind.** This exercise pairs well with the first technique. After noticing your thoughts, it can be helpful to remember that your mind is saying what it is saying based on previous experiences and current/future situations (Harris, 2019). It is like an overeager farmhand, trying to explain to you how to do your job, or like a sports broadcaster, always offering commentary on how you are living your life. Rather than arguing with it, instead, try thanking it for the information and refocusing on the task at hand. For

example, you might say, “I'm having the thought that it's getting much harder to make our loan payments. Okay. Thanks for that reminder, mind.”

## Conclusion

While at first, learning how to unhook and refocus can be challenging, it can lead to powerful outcomes over time. Stress will always be there, and with it comes challenging thoughts. You often can't make the stress or stressor disappear, and you can't always focus on the positive. Commit to unhooking from thoughts as a regular practice—even if your mind tells you that doing this is not worth it, won't work, feels weird, or is a waste of time. As you learn to live with stress (and not fight to make it go away or make the situation “be different”), think about the person, partner, and producer you'll be—treating thoughts as thoughts, and taking back control of your stress, your emotions, and your life.

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