

Thought Stopping

This is a technique for thought stopping that uses many of the mindfulness principles. It is distinct from most cognitive therapy approaches in that it does NOT focus on the content of the thoughts, but rather treats undesirable thoughts as just a mental object that does not need attending.

It is essentially an attentional training technique. As such, it will take some time to master it. You need to be practicing this for some time before it is effective. In other words, it won't work at first so don't give up on it.

The sequence to practice is described below. It is important to follow it as described. Each step is in red. The reasons for the step are in black.

1. Note the undesirable or distressing thought. Accept that your mind/brain produced this thought at this moment. Don't try to fight it or suppress it – accept that it's there. Label it as a thought and do not engage with the thought's content.
2. You can say to yourself: "My mind (my brain) produced this thought (this worry)". Do not engage with the content: in other words, do NOT say something like: "My mind produced the worry that I will fail this test". Stay with abstract labels only.
3. After accepting that the thought exists in your mind, gently but firmly direct your attention to your breath. Find a place where you can feel the physical sensation of your breath – it can be your nostrils, your chest, your abdomen – doesn't matter. Direct your attention to these physical sensations and shift your attention from the thought to these physical sensations.

(Note: there is nothing magical about the breath – it is simply a convenient 'anchor' where you can direct your attention to re-direct it away from the undesirable thought. If you prefer to use some other anchor, that's fine, but it should be the same place every time. Whatever anchor you choose, it should also have a strong sensory component (a physical sensation, ideally) so that you are forced to shift to a different modality of information processing (cognitive → somatic).

4. As soon as you do step #3, the worry or ruminative thought will likely return, or some other thought. This is normal. Just repeat the process. As you get better at this attentional training, the space between the thoughts will get longer. Eventually, you will just be able to stop thinking undesirable thoughts.