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Cognitive Defusion versus Cognitive Restructuring: An Analogue Examination of Potential Moderating Variables

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The impact of negative self-referential thoughts on psychological problems has long been targeted in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) through cognitive restructuring. Recently, acceptance and mindfulness-based approaches within CBT have suggested cognitive defusion as an alternative strategy. The primary purpose of this analogue study was to compare the effects of brief cognitive restructuring and cognitive defusion protocols in reducing the believability and discomfort of targeted negative self-referential thoughts among college students. Its secondary purpose was to investigate whether levels of dysfunctional attitude endorsement and cognitive fusion differentially moderate the impact of the two interventions. While both protocols significantly reduced believability and discomfort to an equivalent degree, moderating effects were noted only for reducing emotional discomfort via cognitive defusion. The impact of this intervention was greatest for participants who endorsed less dysfunctional attitudes. The limitations and clinical implications of this study are discussed.