

Radical Acceptance:

At some point in our lives we all have to cope with distress and emotional upset. The distress is often unavoidable and unpredictable. Often the best you can do is use the coping skills that you have always used and hope they work. For some people emotional distress feels more intense and occurs more frequently than it does for other people. Their distress comes on more quickly and can feel like a tsunami of emotion. Often, these situations feel like they will never end and the people experiencing them don't know how to cope.

People struggling with overwhelming emotions often deal with their pain in very unhealthy ways. This is understandable. When a person is in emotional pain, it is hard to be rational and to think of good solutions. Nevertheless, many of the coping strategies used by people with intense emotion only serve to make their problems worse. Look at the following list of *self-destructive* coping strategies and see which ones you tend to use:

- You spend a lot of time thinking about past mistakes and problems.
- You get anxious worrying about possible future problems.
- You isolate yourself to avoid getting upset.
- You take your painful feelings out on others.
- You avoid dealing with the causes of your problems.
- You engage in compulsive activities.
- You become depressed.
- You avoid pleasant activities and surrender to your distress.

All of these common coping strategies have serious costs. What I want to introduce to you today is a simple distress tolerance skill that might help you endure and cope with your distress in a healthier way that does not lead to more problems. The skill is called Radical Acceptance.

Often when you begin to get emotionally overwhelmed your first reaction is to blame yourself, someone else, or something for causing your distress. You may get angry, worried, anxious, or sad. However, getting upset often stops you from seeing what is really happening to you when you get overwhelmed by emotions. Being overly judgemental of yourself or a situation often leads to more upset.

Radical Acceptance, as an approach, is a way of challenging yourself to acknowledge your present situation without judging either yourself or others. It means learning to tolerate something without judging it or trying to change it. In fact, you should try to recognise that your situation exists because of a long chain of events that began far in the past. Trying to fight the bad feelings as if to say 'this should not be' only leads to more suffering for you. To radically accept the current feelings and situations does not mean that you condone or agree with bad behaviour in others but it does mean that you stop trying to change what has happened by becoming very reactive and blaming the situation for your bad feelings. It means making simple decisions to improve your well-being rather than staying stuck in a pattern of emotional upset or confusion.

To help you begin using Radical Acceptance, it is often helpful to use coping statements to remind yourself that you can have another attitude. For example:

- This is the way it has to be.
- I cannot change what has already happened.
- There is no use in trying to undo the past.
- The present is the only moment I have control over.
- This moment is exactly what it should be, given what has happened before it.
- I am in this situation because of a million other decisions.
- Instead of blaming and doubting myself, I just need to act.

Now, using these kinds of coping statements see if you can radically accept different situations in your life without judging them. Naturally, it is difficult to accept very painful situations, so start with smaller ones. For example see if you can read articles in this newspaper without being judgemental about what has occurred.

This simple approach is actually rooted in both psychological and spiritual wisdom. Buddhism, as a way of life, encourages people to find a disposition of Grateful Acceptance of what life presents to us – be it good or bad. The destructive coping strategies of trying to undo the past, control the future, or escape the present are all paths toward increased emotional tension and spiritual distress. Acceptance is a path toward far less inner turmoil. There is a self-reassurance that can come with believing that “what ever is happening, I am coping gracefully with it”.

Similarly, psychology emphasises the destructive effects of having either an over-active mind or over-reactive emotions. Obsessive over-thinking and emotional reactivity interfere with clear thinking and problem solving. Putting it simply, over-thinking is useless. Over-reacting is pointless.

So try Radical Acceptance - accept what is, and then make simple wise decisions.

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