

Responding to Internal Experiences with Acceptance

Give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

~Reinhold Niebuhr

An Alternative Approach

Instead of trying to use more clever ways to fight and win the war with your IEs, you can step out of this war altogether. We are able to alter the impact of these experiences by stopping the struggle with them rather than by attempting to fight them. In other words, the way in which we *respond* to IEs is modifiable and can be changed. As an alternative to our automatic tendency to attempt to avoid or control IEs, we can respond with acceptance or willingness toward these experiences.

What is Acceptance?

Acceptance in this context means actively contacting psychological experiences - directly, fully, and without needless defense - while behaving effectively. This approach does not abandon direct change efforts: it simply targets them toward more readily changeable domains, such as overt behavior or life situations, rather than personal history or automatic thoughts and feelings.

Accepting or being willing is about noticing the feeling and letting it be there, rather than engaging in various control or avoidance strategies. This doesn't mean that you want the feeling - that would not be very natural. But acceptance in this case means allowing yourself to have the feeling at that moment without trying to change or escape it in some way, if directly changing or avoiding has not worked for you. This approach encourages you to give up the struggle to change what cannot be changed for the sake of promoting change in domains of your life where change is possible. This may seem counterintuitive, but the basic idea is to let go of ineffective and unworkable change strategies to open the door for genuine, fundamental change to occur.

Acceptance also involves taking a non-evaluative posture toward living with oneself and the world, characterized by compassion, kindness, openness, and acceptance. It is not a feeling - it is a stance toward life and is very much about behavior and action. At its core, acceptance or willingness is about approaching and making contact with thoughts, emotions, and life experiences fully and without defense, in order to live the life that you want to live.

Acceptance is not:

- ...liking
- ...wanting
- ...giving up
- ...resigning
- ...tolerating
- ...approving
- ...agreeing
- ...believing

Acceptance is simply:

- ... letting it be
- ... breathing into it
- ... holding it lightly
- ... making room for it
- ... making peace with it
- ... softening up around it
- ... allowing it to be there
- ... letting go of the struggle
- ... not fighting with it or pushing it away
- ... giving it permission to be where it already is

Practicing Acceptance

- When you're feeling an unpleasant emotion, the first step is to take a few slow, deep breaths, and quickly scan your body from head to toe.
 - You will probably notice several uncomfortable sensations. Look for the strongest sensation – the one that bothers you the most. For example, it may be a lump in your throat, or a knot in your stomach, or an ache in your chest.
 - Focus your attention on that sensation. Observe it curiously, as if you are a friendly scientist, discovering some interesting new phenomenon.
 - Observe the sensation carefully. Notice where it starts and where it ends. Learn as much about it as you can. If you had to draw a line around the sensation, what would the outline look like? Is it on the surface of the body, or inside you, or both? How far inside you does it go? Where is the sensation most intense? Where is it weakest? How is it different in the centre than around the edges? Is there any pulsation, or vibration within it? Is it light or heavy? Moving or still? What is its temperature?
 - Take a few more deep breaths, and let go of the struggle with that sensation. Breathe into it. Imagine your breath flowing in and around it. Make room for it. Loosen up around it. Allow it to be there. You don't have to like it or want it. Simply let it be.
 - The idea is to observe the sensation – not to think about it. So when your mind starts commenting on what's happening, just say 'Thanks, mind!' and come back to observing.
 - You may find this difficult. You may feel a strong urge to fight with it or push it away. If so, just acknowledge this urge, without giving in to it. (Acknowledging is rather like nodding your head in recognition, as if to say 'There you are. I see you.') Once you've acknowledged that urge, bring your attention back to the sensation itself.
 - Don't try to get rid of the sensation or alter it. If it changes by itself, that's okay. If it doesn't change, that's okay too. Changing or getting rid of it is not the goal.
 - You may need to focus on this sensation for anything from a few seconds to a few minutes, until you completely give up the struggle with it. Be patient. Take as long as you need. You're learning a valuable skill.
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- Once you've done this, scan your body again, and see if there's another strong sensation that's bothering you. If so, repeat the procedure with that one. You can do this with as many different sensations as you want to. Keep going until you have a sense of no longer struggling with your feelings.

As you do this exercise one of two things will happen: either your feelings will change - or they won't. It doesn't matter either way. This exercise is not about changing your feelings. It's about accepting them.