

Chapter 15: Cultivating Acceptance

We get tied to how things should happen, in what way, and when. Anything presented to us outside of that realm will usually trigger denial. We push and pull away in an attempt to make the undesirable or unexpected go away. We resist moving toward acceptance of the situation as it really is because it takes us on a path of uncomfortable emotions. We feel uncomfortable with the idea that something will be or has been taken away from us. More specifically, that our needs will not be met.

We cannot comprehend a situation if we are busy pushing or pulling away from it. We have to accept reality in order to create the mental space to understand and navigate it successfully. If we do not fully understand a situation, we will put our energies into efforts that do not actually help us make any progress. We will beat our heads against brick walls pursuing the wrong thing, generate conflict in our relationships due

to misunderstandings, make rash decisions with insufficient information, become paralyzed with fear, lash out at others in anger, etc.

Frequently we employ denial toward our own selves, which severely clouds our judgment and decision-making. We deny our own feelings, thoughts, and needs if they are not in alignment with our expectations of what our feelings, thoughts, and needs should be. Our expectations of how we should behave are based on our mental model or belief system. If we do not conform to those expectations, we are prone to shame, blame, judge, and berate ourselves. As a result, we suppress our thoughts and feelings and/or actively resist them.

Our resistance to our own thoughts, feelings, and needs hugely undermines our ability to navigate the world. Recall the group of severely depressed patients from Chapter 9 who suppressed their emotions on a regular basis. These patients described their depression as an

obstacle to making meaningful changes in their lives. During and after treatment, these patients reported being able to accept their negative emotions, where before they insisted upon repressing or running away from them. Once they entered a state of acceptance, their feelings would transform into useful cognitive insights. Negative feelings would also diminish or dissipate. As did their depression and their self-reported inability to navigate their world.

Acceptance must come before any attempts to change anything because usually we are trying to change the wrong thing, anyway. We need to let go of what we have been doing or clinging on to that does not hold true and/or does not work so that we can focus our energies into a potentially more effective direction. We stop pursuing the job that does not suit us, stop trying to change our spouse, and stop trying to change dysfunctional institutions that do not want to change. We instead sit still long enough to see that our energies can be better served invested into something else.

Acceptance means to embrace something as it is, without trying to deny its existence, run away from it, or change it. It is synonymous with bringing love, patience, attention, and appreciation for our surroundings, ourselves, and the people in it. It also means getting comfortable with where we are now, even if our worst fears have come true. It is only in becoming comfortable with our reality—regardless of how much it terrifies us—that we can be open to better options going forward, including possibilities we never conceived are even possible.

To take a step even further, acceptance means having fun with where you are now. The challenges in front of you are an adventure, where you appreciate the experiences long the way. You stop focusing on the threats that changing events can create with respect to the fulfillment of your needs. Rather, your focus is on pursuing your needs through curiosity and playful discovery. The curiosity and exploration born from acceptance creates room for us to take in new

information for the purpose of figuring out how to best meet our needs and accomplish our goals. Our capacity for problem-solving and creativity increases exponentially. We are no longer in denial of the reality around us, no longer in resistance to what is happening, and no longer trying to change and manipulate the people around us to fit our mental model. Instead, we take the world as given and get to the business of exploring that reality.

We also realize over time that we can still experience happiness without one or more of the things we expected. Once that realization comes and we are able to embrace it, we suddenly develop the capacity to regain what we have lost, although in potentially much different and more meaningful ways than ever before. We create new and even better circumstances with respect to our careers, relationships, health, community, etc. In short, we grow and develop as human beings through the process of change and emotional acceptance.

You may have taken a yoga class before. When you stretch your body into the downward dog position, your yoga instructor will frequently tell you to get comfortable. Initially you are huffing and puffing and feeling out of sorts. Over time, you learn to relax and sink into the pose. It's really not that bad, you realize, and it becomes possible for you to stay in that position much longer. That is what you are doing when you get comfortable in a potentially adverse situation. You are getting comfortable; and as you do, you learn to accept where you are now, thereby broadening your intellectual capacity to navigate challenging and emerging conditions.

Many people are unwilling to accept a situation because they believe acceptance means approval. To approve of something means to believe that it is good or desirable. To accept something, on the other hand, means to embrace its existence in our lives as it is—including all of its benefits and disadvantages, constraints and opportunities, ugliness and beauty. Acceptance gives

us the capacity to see clearly what is going on around us so that we can adapt to a situation. This does not mean becoming resigned to a situation or conforming to it. It means updating our belief system to reflect current reality so that we can successfully navigate that reality.

Acceptance has been studied in the context of wilderness survivors and people grieving a significant loss in their lives; the experience of these individuals is instructive for the rest of us. People who survived getting trapped in an avalanche or who broke a leg hiking alone in the middle of nowhere have especially proven the value of acceptance. These survivors cultivated an exceptional acceptance of the world around them before they could effectively deal with their crisis.

After initial rounds of denial, anger, fear, and panic, they reported calming down and accepting their situation. They describe entering almost a spiritual state of love and attention for their immediate surroundings,

appreciating the beauty around them fully with their senses. This state of mindfulness made it possible for them to become clear-headed and problem-solve. Those who panicked or refused to accept their surroundings perished—even if they had several days' worth of supplies and were just a few miles from civilization.

A similar state of acceptance has also been reported in terminally ill cancer patients administered psilocybin for grief management. They found not only that they were able to accept their situation, but they were also able to accept other situations in life, including the “flaws” they saw in other people. Their relationships improved, their levels of happiness improved, and they were no longer terrified of dying. Nothing had changed in their reality—they were still terminally ill with cancer. The only thing that changed was that they were no longer resistant to and in a panic about their situation. Their state of acceptance endowed them with the physical,

mental, and emotional bandwidth to enjoy their lives—
even more so than they had ever done before.

Journaling / Meditation Questions

1. What is most uncomfortable about the situation you are in now and why? Can you spend time feeling that discomfort on a visceral level?
2. What would it mean to accept the current reality and let go of your expectations? What would be the consequences of that and how could you live with them?
3. If you could not change the current situation at all, how would you think, feel, speak, and act differently? What different choices would you make?