

## Transforming Pain – Part 1 - by Russ Harris

Life involves pain. It visits us in a multitude of different forms every day: the emotional pain of disappointment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, regret, resentment, sadness, guilt, etc.; and the physical pain of injury, illness, and aching body parts. There is no way for any of us to have a pain-free life (unless you happen to be in a coma). We all know this intellectually, of course. But we all find it hard to truly accept pain in reality.

Where ACT differs from most other approaches to pain, is that we don't try to avoid or get rid of the pain; instead, we aim to fundamentally change our relationship with it. And as we do that, the pain itself transforms; it no longer holds us back, or brings us down; it is no longer toxic or life-distorting; it loses its impact and influence over our lives.

When we look at our pain mindfully – *i.e.* with a genuine attitude of openness and curiosity, in much the same way that a young child might look curiously at a ladybird or a butterfly - we discover it is different to the way we initially perceived it. It's no longer the horrible, terrible thing we thought it was. It may still be painful, and unpleasant – but it's no longer something we need to fight with, run from, or get overwhelmed by. When we look mindfully at a painful thought, image or memory, we call that 'defusion'. And when we look mindfully at a painful feeling or sensation, we call it 'expansion' or 'acceptance'.

It requires an act of faith to look at our pain in this way. Our society has trained us to regard pain with suspicion; to treat it as the enemy; to judge it as bad, toxic, a sign of abnormality, a barrier to living well; to either do battle with it, or flee from it.

But if we can put these ideas aside, and look any painful thought or feeling with genuine openness, and genuine curiosity - in other words, if we respond to it with mindfulness - we will find there is no need to struggle with it or hide from it. Instead, we can drop the struggle, and make peace with it.

Many people think that ACT does not try to change your painful thoughts and feelings, but this is not the case. You see, acceptance is a profound form of change. When we accept pain, we transform it. When we make peace with pain, the pain changes. It might go by the same name – for example, it might still be called anger, sadness, or fear – but when we make peace with these painful emotions, we transform them; they exert much less influence over us; they create much less disruption and stress in our lives. Fear accepted is not the same as fear struggled with; anger allowed is not the same as anger suppressed; sadness given room is not the same as sadness pushed away.

The more we learn to make peace with our painful thoughts and feelings – the more we allow them to freely flow through us, neither fighting against them, nor getting swept away by them – the more our lives change for the better. Instead of wasting our energy and effort in futile battles with parts of ourselves, we can invest it in living by our values, taking action to do the things that matter in life.

Of course, that's easy to say, but not so easy to do. So what's the best way to learn any difficult skill? Break it down into small steps. A trainee firefighter doesn't go out to a huge out-of-control bushfire on his first day of training. He starts by learning on small fires, carefully lit, under controlled circumstances. And gradually, over time, he develops his skills, until eventually he can handle those huge bushfires.

It is the same with our pain. If we haven't had much practice at responding to our pain mindfully, it'd be somewhat futile to leap in and attempt it with raging anger or overwhelming grief or sheer terror. Instead, we need to start small, and develop our skills over time.

We could pick just one painful thought, memory, image, feeling or sensation, and observe it with curiosity and openness, and see if we can drop the struggle with it for just ten seconds. Then we could pick another one, and do the same thing. And then another.

And then we might try for fifteen seconds, or twenty seconds, or thirty seconds, and so on.

We can look for opportunities in everyday life to practice this: when stuck in traffic or a supermarket queue, we could practice on our frustration and impatience. When running late for an appointment we could practice on our anxiety. When our kids are not listening to us, we could practice on our irritation. And as we do this, we transform the pain even further. Because those painful thoughts and feelings are no longer merely pain; they are now also opportunities for us to develop a powerful, life-enhancing skill. And remember too: that when it comes to learning a skill, every little bit of practice makes a difference, no matter how brief it may be.

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