Radical Acceptance Exercise

Improving your ability to tolerate intense negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety or sadness, begins with altering your attitude. This exercise is built on the extensive work done by Marsha Linehan, Matthew McKay, Jeffrey Wood and Jeffrey Brantley. This exercise involves learning a different way to view the world – a way which helps to turn down the volume on intense anger.

Often when people are distressed, the first emotion experienced is anger or rage. The other possibility is to place blame on others for creating the pain.

The problem with that approach is that, regardless of who is blamed, your pain lives on. Your suffering continues. In many instances, the more upset you become, the more severe your suffering gets.

What’s more, getting enraged prevents you from seeing what’s really going on. It’s true, to a large extent, that rage blinds us. This happens frequently in those who are overcome with intense negative emotions. Then, the negative thoughts follow - internal criticisms and self-judgments. And these negative thoughts and feelings blind you to the details in your life. When you get overwhelmed with anger, your view of reality gets distorted.

By giving in to your anger and thinking about how a particular incident shouldn’t have happened, you miss the fact that it did happen. And now you have to find ways to get past it.

Criticisms, blame and judgments keep you from making positive strides towards accepting the situation, coming to terms with it and improving things. Changing the past is impossible. The more you struggle against the past, the more you get stuck, frozen in your own rage over the injustice done you.

So what are your options? If getting angry, enraged or judgmental doesn’t change the past or improve things, what else is there?

The alternative involves radical acceptance which means allowing the present moment to be just as it is, without judgment or criticism of the event or your own actions (or inactions). Rather, the goal is to accept that the current situation exists because of a long trail of decisions and events that reach far back into the past.

For example, a friend of mine was angry over getting laid off. He was having an understandably difficult time with this situation. It affected his self-esteem, his self-worth, his perception of himself as a provider, spouse and father. His anger was palpable and came through on every interview for new jobs. His irritation was evident at home with his wife and children. So his anger was hurting his chances at success in finding a new job and damaging his relationships at home. This exercise helped him to realize that his current job status was a result of countless
events that began years ago when he first accepted the job at a community bank. He rose up the corporate ladder within the community bank over the course of several years. At various times in that span, he had opportunities to move to bigger banks but chose to stay in the community bank because he loved his coworkers and the level of service provided to the community. Two years ago, the banking crisis began due to the economic crisis in the United States. Individuals began defaulting on their mortgages at record rates. A few months ago, out of the blue, the federal government came in and seized control of the bank. A few weeks later he was let go. To deal with his anger and improve his job prospects, he took this online course and participated in this exercise.

This chain of events happened regardless of how he feels about these events. Denying the chain of events does nothing to change them. Being stuck in anger doesn’t change the past. The more one fights this moment, the more paralyzed one becomes. Radical acceptance suggests looking at yourself and the events around you as things truly are.

Radical acceptance does NOT mean that you approve of what happened to you in the past. It does NOT mean you approve of the negative behaviors of other people or even your own destructive behaviors.

Radical acceptance DOES MEAN that you stop trying to change the past by staying stuck in anger and blaming others for where you are now.

The goal is to focus your energies on what you can do now, in the present moment, to improve your lot in life. By turning down the volume on your anger, you can more effectively focus on more constructive ways to improve your life.

**Helpful Radical Acceptance Statements**

Below are several useful radical acceptance statements to get you going as a reminder. Put a check mark next to the statements that make the most sense to you.

What’s worked best for my clients is to choose three to four of the statements below, write them on a 3 x 5 index card and carry it in your wallet. You can even tape a copy up on your bathroom mirror. Put one wherever you need it so that the next time you get upset about the chain of events that got you here, you can pull out the index card and remind yourself to use radical acceptance to return your mind to the present moment (instead of dwelling on the past).
Helpful Radical Acceptance Statements

___ “This is how it has to be right now.”
___ “All my decisions have led up to right now.”
___ “There is no use fighting the past.”
___ “Fighting the past only blinds me in the present.”
___ “The present moment is perfect just as it is.”
___ “The present is the only moment over which I have control.”
___ “It’s a waste of time and energy to fight what’s already happened.”
___ “The present moment is fine, even if I don’t enjoy what is happening.”
___ “This moment is exactly the way it should be, given what’s taken place before it.”
___ “The present moment is a result of millions of other tiny decisions.”
___ Your ideas:
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________