

Getting Unhooked From Our Difficult Thoughts

When we have an unwanted thought, we may try to avoid it or push it away. We may also try to get rid of unwanted feelings or bodily sensations. This is sometimes called experiential avoidance by ACT therapists.

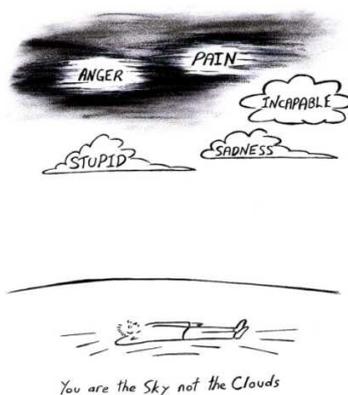
When we get “hooked” by thoughts it is as though they push us around or bully us, like a critical coach who stands on the sidelines giving very negative feedback (e.g. “that was stupid”, “I bet others are doing much better”).

Acceptance refers to experiencing the unwanted thoughts without evaluating them or trying to change them. That is, paying attention to the experience of having the thoughts, rather than focusing on their meaning (i.e. there must be something wrong with me). This doesn’t mean that you have to like or want the thought. It is more to do with acknowledging that you are having the thought and that pushing it away may not have been very helpful. Has it worked yet? Or if it works sometimes does it seem to work in the longer term for you? For example, have you noticed that when you try not to think about something (or someone) that you end up thinking more about it? Distraction may help for a few minutes or hours but does it make the thoughts and feelings go away in the long term?

We can build up our willingness to have unwanted thoughts by practicing a technique called “mindfulness” or mindfulness meditation. This is about “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally” (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness skills are really helpful in developing greater awareness...so just like we can exercise to build (physical) muscle we can practice being aware to develop mental “muscle”.

Key skills that can be learnt are to let go of struggling to control unwanted thoughts and feelings, to focus on the here and now (anxiety thoughts normally focus on the future; depression thoughts on the past), and to act in a way that is consistent with your values. That may sound a bit strange but in a sense rather than trying to get rid of anxious thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, you can shift your focus to what really matters to you in your life, and then in particular areas of your life, and set goals that fit with these. For example, if a young man is very keen to find a girlfriend but feels highly anxious about asking a woman on a date he may still decide he is willing to be anxious as this is something that is really important to him. If he waits for the anxiety to stop of its own accord before he believes he is ready to ask the woman out he may be waiting a very long time.

Learning to be more accepting (i.e. letting it be without having to change or get rid of it) of your internal dialogue, feelings and physical sensations can be challenging and you will need some time to practice so that you can change old habits. There are some great books you can read to help with this and you might also want to look into attending a course to learn mindfulness meditation. If the thoughts are particularly distressing and powerful it might also be really helpful to see a trained professional such as a psychologist who can help teach you these skills.



4 Quick Steps To Emotional Acceptance

(Dr. Russ Harris)

1. OBSERVE. Bring awareness to the feelings in your body.
2. BREATHE. Take a few deep breaths. Breathe into and around them.
3. EXPAND. Make room for these feelings. Create some space for them.
4. ALLOW. Allow them to be there. Make peace with them

Some people find it helpful to silently say to themselves, *‘I don’t like this feeling, but I have room for it,’* or *‘It’s unpleasant, but I can accept it.’*