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ACCELERATED Acceptance

Words by Marie Rowland

We are all familiar with acceptance, but radical acceptance takes acknowledging reality a step further. It entails wholeheartedly embracing life's ups and downs, even amid extreme pain and discomfort – a journey not for the faint-hearted, but one that promises a path to inner peace.

There is acceptance and then there is something called radical acceptance. So, what's the difference? The traditional notion of acceptance, stemming from Buddhist philosophy and adopted by the West, involves consciously acknowledging present circumstances and accepting they cannot be changed. Radical acceptance, however, goes a whole lot further. It is the mindful recognition of reality even when that experience includes pain and discomfort. It is total acceptance using the mind, body and heart, and it's not easy.

Acceptance on steroids

The term "acceptance" has been a feature of our psychological lexicon for a couple of decades now. However, this seemingly modern coping mechanism derives from ancient Eastern wisdom and is one of the footholds of Buddhism. Acceptance is not about agreeing with or being happy about circumstances often beyond our control, but rather acknowledging these events as part of life's reality.

This gentle and compassionate approach to dealing with life's trials and tribulations can be helpful, but it may not suffice in

situations of prolonged pain or anguish, such as experiencing a break-up or loss. In such cases, we might adopt a turbo-charged version of acceptance, or what is better known as radical acceptance.

When we think of the term "radical", it denotes something that exists at an extreme level. In its strictest sense this term was applied to political views or practices that departed greatly from the norm. However, in the 1980s, popular culture hijacked the word and it became synonymous with everything that was amazing, brilliant and mind-blowing – similarly to how the term "uber" is used today. Radical had that sense of being bigger and better, giving birth to the catchphrase "radical man".

In the same vein, radical acceptance is acceptance at an extreme and highly intensive level. It is the super-sized, jumbo version of acceptance.

Radical acceptance involves the integration of heart, mind and body to embrace whatever life may bring. The term "radical" signifies a commitment to complete and total acceptance, without



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resistance, regardless of whether the circumstances are momentary or sustained. The ultimate goal of radical acceptance is to embrace reality unconditionally, leading to the attainment of inner peace and, with continued practice, even contentment may be achieved.

Clinical acceptance

In the 1960s, American psychologist Marsha Linehan developed a therapeutic approach known as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), incorporating principles of acceptance and mindfulness. Linehan's personal experience with mental illness inspired her quest for an alternative, less prescriptive treatment method than those available at the time. A component of Linehan's DBT, radical acceptance offers a valuable tool for anyone navigating intense or prolonged emotional or physical distress.

At a clinical level, radical acceptance serves as a distress tolerance skill designed to prevent emotional pain from evolving into prolonged suffering. Distress tolerance encompasses an individual's capacity to manage genuine or perceived emotional distress through self-regulation and self-soothing techniques. Many of us fall into unhelpful thoughts and behaviours that inevitably perpetuate our suffering – the pain is real, but the suffering can be mitigated if we approach pain through a more mindful lens. Radical acceptance offers a pathway to alleviate unnecessary suffering despite the reality of pain.

Those of us who have low distress tolerance tend to move into overwhelm or even shut down when a situation becomes too stressful or when we are overcome with sadness or hopelessness. This is where we can turn to unhealthy behaviours, which perpetuates the suffering.

Buddhism asserts that pain is part of the human experience. Radical acceptance doesn't work to eliminate pain but informs how we approach and make sense of it through the pragmatic acceptance of life's ups and downs. It is often not just the pain itself that causes suffering, but the attachment to that pain. That attachment can become chronic and self-determining – we can become our pain instead of keeping it at arm's length.

Humanist psychologist Carl Rogers purported that acceptance is the first step towards change. Radical acceptance embraces this thesis, believing that while we might not be able to change our circumstances, we can change our mindset to better serve our mental wellbeing. For example, if you are in chronic pain, you can choose to take the position that even though

the experience is empirically painful, there are good moments and life is worth living. Embracing this mindset in daily life epitomises the essence of radical acceptance.

"Radical acceptance rests on letting go of the illusion of control and a willingness to notice and accept things as they are right now, without judging," says Linehan. This is no small feat. In fact, it can require a lifetime of practice in order to truly get a handle on it.

Most often applied in situations where resolution is unattainable or when events seem unjust, radical acceptance is particularly helpful after the loss of a loved one, heartbreak or unemployment. While grief and disappointment are normal emotions, prolonged suffering ensues when acceptance is lacking. Radical acceptance does not mean you agree with what has happened to you, rather it signals a chance for hope because you are accepting things as they are and not as you would want them to be.

Serene acceptance

At the start of each Alcoholic Anonymous meeting, participants join together in reciting the Serenity Prayer, a revered ritual that fosters self-compassion and self-acceptance:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference."

This creed embodies the notion of radical acceptance, promoting neither resignation nor blind acceptance of the realities and pitfalls of life, but beseeching the individual to discern between what is within their control and what is not, and to choose wisely as to how to countenance what cannot be changed. It is active acceptance as opposed to passive resignation.

Acceptance is not a euphemism for learned helplessness but about acknowledging that some things cannot be changed, and that we must still get on with life. For instance, if you have experienced heartbreak and are in the process of grief, radical acceptance prevents you from going into a space of pity and victimhood where you can fall into self-defeatist language like "why me?" or "this is so unfair". Radical acceptance is the act of embracing, with all parts of your being, the nature of life where you don't succumb to bitterness and suffering or get mired in anger or prolonged pain. You acknowledge the pain, but you refuse to get stuck or dwell in that pain.

However, some of us simply refuse to accept painful situations. We deny and deflect or, worse, hope that

something might miraculously change in our favour. Unfortunately, rejecting or denying reality doesn't change its existence. Many turn to alcohol, comfort eating, shopping or whatever coping mechanism that allows them to stave off the suffering. No doubt pain is hard, but denying or avoiding it makes it so much worse.

10 tips to accept radically

How can we integrate radical acceptance in our daily lives? Psychologist Marsha Linehan created a 10-step plan, which, when practised daily, can help to live better with hurt and pain.

1. Observe if you are questioning or fighting reality ("it shouldn't be this way!"). Remember rejecting reality doesn't make it any less real, nor does it mitigate the pain.
2. Remind yourself that the hard or hurtful reality is just as it is and cannot be changed ("this is what happened"). When we accept reality, we can actually work with it.
3. Remind yourself that there are causes for the reality ("this is how things happened"). And sometimes these causes were out of your control and inevitable.
4. Understand that sometimes pain cannot be avoided and that we just have to endure it. Like the loss of a loved one, it is nature's way and pain is natural. When we finally succumb to accepting the pain, we reduce our suffering which may include anger, bitterness, acute and chronic sadness, even shame or remorse.
5. Practise accepting pain with your whole self (mind, body and spirit) using yoga, self-talk, therapy, relaxation techniques and mindfulness to assist you in your acceptance of the event and the reality of pain.
6. Be conscious of your bodily sensations and attend to your own self-care with compassion and self-regard.
7. Allow disappointment, sadness or grief to arise within you. They are all legitimate emotions and must be experienced and not denied or avoided.
8. Acknowledge that life can be worth living even when there is pain.
9. Make a list of all the benefits of accepting the reality of your situation if you find yourself resisting practising acceptance.
10. Finally, understand that while radical acceptance does bring sadness and pain, there will be a time when things won't feel so bad.

Acceptance versus forgiveness

It is a common misconception that radical acceptance is interchangeable with forgiveness. That is not the case. Whereas forgiveness is an act of kindness extended toward another person, radical acceptance is the act of kindness you give back to yourself.

Radical acceptance is the art of letting go. In fact, if you have been hurt by someone else, you may not forgive them, but instead let the matter go to release the hurt you're feeling. By letting go, you effectively free yourself of the bonds of suffering, while still acknowledging that the pain was real and legitimate.

Radical acceptance reminds us that, yes, we all endure pain and we all go through suffering. But as the beautiful Persian saying goes, "This too shall pass". And so it does, if we choose to accept it. 🌀

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