

Reality Acceptance

Good morning! Here we are at the end of summer, and the evenings are getting cooler already. I don't know about you, but I feel a little melancholy as the summertime activities are nearing an end. I'll miss family outdoor celebrations at the lake, picking berries, eating delicious fresh veggies from the farm, swimming in the reservoir, and enjoying longer days of sunlight.

I know that if I were to cling to summer and refuse to acknowledge that cooler seasons are coming, I would soon find myself in a suffering place. I'd be sad or angry or miserable as the season changes and summertime activities come to an end. I could close my eyes and imagine that I'm at the beach with the sunlight on my face, but once I open them, I'd be so disappointed. The reality that I wish for just wouldn't be there at all.

The way out of this suffering place is to accept reality as it is, not what it had been and not what I wish it could be. I can look at my surroundings mindfully, noticing the leaves starting to change, the cool refreshing breeze as I walk my dog, and my young grandchildren jabbering about how excited they are that school is going to begin. By accepting reality, this gives me the freedom to live in the present moment, to enjoy life as it is. It frees me from suffering. It also allows me to move forward, towards change.

Sometimes balancing acceptance and change is fairly easy. In my case, I practice being mindful of the moment when I start feeling sad about summer ending. That way, I enjoy the summer in the moment. It hasn't ended yet, so why ruin a summer day by thinking about it not being here anymore? I also find it fairly easy to move along with the change of seasons. I enjoy summer sun and outdoor activities, but I also enjoy cool autumn days, wearing sweatshirts while going for walks, helping out at the Pumpkin Patch, picking apples, and greeting the new enthusiastic interns that I supervise at the clinic.

Reality acceptance can also be very difficult and challenging. It's hard to accept when a loved one dies, when you or a loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness, when someone you care about becomes addicted to drugs, when you lose a job or housing, or when you or someone you care about is badly hurt emotionally or physically by others. And what about the world we live in? It is so difficult to accept the disasters caused by global warming and to accept racial discrimination, hate crimes, gun violence in schools, and so on.

Early this summer, I found myself going in and out of reality acceptance after finding out that my granddaughter was addicted to hard drugs. She overdosed twice and was hospitalized. A month later,

she came home strung out on drugs and asked to be taken to the hospital. We had a heart to heart talk before she went, and she said she was ready to do the hard work of recovery. I had a very difficult time accepting that after 1 ½ weeks of detox, she turned down a 90-day residential treatment for drug addiction that was offered to her. After practicing acceptance over and over again, I finally accepted that she is not ready for treatment. Once I accepted this, I was able to start moving forward towards change.

In the most challenging life situations, you may need to turn your mind towards accepting reality over and over again...for days, months, or sometimes even a year or two. It takes time, effort, and patience with yourself. Any time your mind moves out of acceptance, just notice this without judging yourself, and then gently turn it back towards acceptance. It may be helpful to remind yourself that acceptance doesn't mean approval or that things will never change. It just is accepting reality as it is. Once reality is wholly accepted, then change may follow.

Change can only happen after you accept reality with your whole self (mind, body and spirit). Marsha Linehan, psychologist and founder of dialectical behavioral therapy, calls this "radical acceptance".

Linehan explains that "The basic idea in radical acceptance is that you've got to accept all the way. To do this you need to practice 'letting go.' If you are not accepting, your body will tighten up and your muscles will tense. Letting go is letting go of the tension in your body."

Add: "If your mind screams 'No! I don't want to!' and you tighten back up, don't worry. That happens. Start over. Just start relaxing again and keep letting go. Practice saying yes to the universe. Practice mindfulness as a way to practice acceptance of the present moment."

One of the ways I practice radical acceptance is by thinking about what it is that I'm not accepting for a while. Then I pray about it, asking God to help me accept what has happened and to place it in His Hands. Lastly, I practice mindful deep breathing for about 5 minutes. For each breath in, I say in my mind "breathing in the breath of God" and breathing out, I say "breathing out sadness, anxiety, tension" or whatever it is that I need to let go of in my body or mind. I usually practice this exercise while I'm walking my dog, but it can be done sitting in a chair. Sometimes I'll replace the deep-breathing with playing music on my violin to release tension and pent-up emotions.

I admit that I still feel sad and worried when I think about my granddaughter and wonder how she is doing. But this sadness and worry doesn't consume my thoughts or keep me from doing my work.

Accepting my granddaughter's addiction with my whole self, body mind and spirit, gives me the freedom to move from a suffering place and enables me to work towards change. Practicing radical acceptance and releasing my sadness and worry to God in prayer allows me to continue supporting others in their journey of recovery through individual therapy or DBT groups. It allows me to enjoy being with my friends and family. It gives me the freedom to enjoy what is left of summer and to welcome in the fall.

There are many different ways to practice radical acceptance. I encouraged you to create your own practice that works best for you.

I would like to end with the full Serenity Prayer written by Reinhold Niebuhr. The short version of this prayer has been repeated by many individuals attending AA and NA meetings who are in recovery from alcohol or drug use.

Serenity Prayer

God, give me grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen