

Practicing Radical Acceptance

Objective

To use radical acceptance to tolerate overwhelming emotions in a difficult situation.

You Should Know

No matter how you live your life, there will always be situations and events that cause great sadness, anger, or frustration. You may wish to avoid these painful and sometimes overwhelming emotions, but avoiding them is not helpful.

What would happen if you accept things as they are - without trying to change, escape from, or eliminate them? What would happen if you refocus your attention on what you can do *NOW*? This is called radical acceptance - accepting even the most difficult situations the way they are rather than trying to avoid them.

When you practice radical acceptance, you acknowledge the current or past situation without judgment, and without criticizing yourself or others.

Why should you practice radical acceptance?

You may have heard the saying “The only way out, is through.” This means you must go through the pain in order to get to the other side of it.

Remember:

- Rejecting things that make you uncomfortable does not make them go away.
- Pain is a signal that something is wrong.
- A refusal to accept reality can keep you trapped in sadness, shame, anger, or other painful emotions.
- In order to successfully change something in your life, you need to accept it first.

Here is the example of Kendra, who struggled with the infidelity of her husband for years before she practiced radical acceptance:

Kendra and Jon were married for 16 years when she noticed that he seemed to be losing interest in her. Jon was always going away for weekends and even when he was home, his mind seemed to be in another place. He was constantly on the computer and texting people, but Kendra was afraid to ask him what was going on.

Kendra told her sister and her best friend that she thought Jon was having an affair. She wondered if she should try and spy on him or even hire a private detective. She started thinking about Jon and what had happened to their marriage all of the time. She felt guilty, angry, and worried about what would happen to her children if they divorce. The

only thing that would quiet the voices in her head was taking a few drinks and she did this every night.

Using radical acceptance, Kendra learned to acknowledge her feelings rather than giving them power over her or trying to avoid them. She stopped blaming herself and even stopped blaming Jon. Once she could accept that this was a difficult situation (but a common one), she contacted a marriage counselor and asked Jon to go with her to a session.

What You Should Do

There are several steps to practice radical acceptance:

- Stay in the present moment and pay attention to the emotions you are experiencing.
- Remind yourself that the unpleasant reality cannot be changed.
- Remind yourself that the past or present reality is shaped by numerous factors, decisions, and events that took place over time.
- Practice accepting with your mind, heart, and body. This can include relaxation techniques, mindful breathing, prayer, or visualization.
- Listen to your body's sensations (tension, tightness, etc.) as you think about what you need to accept.
- Allow disappointment, sadness, or grief to surface.
- Recognize that life, even when it is painful, can be worth living.

There are also statements you can say to yourself that may be helpful during this practice:

- "I can't change what's already happened."
- "It's impossible to change the past."
- "The present is the only moment I can control."
- "This situation is the result of countless other decisions and actions."

Now, consider radical acceptance as it relates to your own experiences. Think of a recent situation that you found distressing, and answer the following questions.

Describe the situation.

What were the past events that led to this situation?

What role did you play in causing this situation?

What role did others play?

What did you have control of in this situation?

Where did you lack control in this situation?

How did you respond to this situation?

How did this response affect your thoughts and feelings?

Did you avoid dealing with upsetting thoughts and feelings?

How could the events have played out differently if you had practiced radical acceptance?

Now, practice radical acceptance on a current situation that is causing you distress. Describe the situation.

What are your thoughts and feelings about this situation?

What can you do to help you accept this situation?

Did you notice any shift in your thoughts and feelings about the situation after practicing radical acceptance? Describe those changes.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
