

Hello, Darkness

Discovering our values by confronting our fears

by Steven Hayes

I keep a supply of Chinese finger traps in my office to show to clients. When you push your fingers into each end of these straw tubes and then try to remove them, the tube diameter shrinks and grabs the digits firmly. The more you struggle, the more your fingers are trapped. The only way to create enough room to get your fingers back out is to do something counterintuitive: push them deeper *into* the tube, which only then relaxes its grip.

These toys demonstrate a basic principle about why so many of the issues people have seem insoluble, despite determined and well-intentioned efforts to deal with them: fighting a problem can itself create a problem. I remember giving one of these finger traps to an especially anxious client and watching as he practically pulled his fingers out of their sockets in his frantic attempt to get them free. Suddenly, abandoning his struggle with the toy, he let his hands relax. Okay, he said knowingly, I get it. He pushed the ends of the tubes inward and then removed his fingers easily. I knew he meant more than understanding how the toy worked, though. He saw in that moment a model of how his battle with anxiety had constricted his life, and that the strange alternative I was putting on the table might not be so strange after all: only by moving *into* his pain could he ever find the room to live fully.

During the past 10 years, a number of therapy approaches have come into the mainstream of clinical practice based on the core idea that the more we struggle with the Chinese finger traps of the human mind, the more confused and stuck we become. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, and the approach my colleagues and I have developed, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), all agree that a first step toward fundamental change is to come into the present moment--even if that moment is painful--and let go of the impulse to leapfrog into a desired future from which inner troubles have evaporated. These methods are based on the view that taking the obvious step of trying to escape from difficult thoughts and feelings usually makes them worse--just as with finger traps, in which doing the presumably sensible thing is counterproductive--and, in the process, takes us further and further away from a liberated life.

Rather than being preoccupied with changing the painful content of the mind, these methods change our *relationship* with what troubles us. For example, instead of disputing negative thoughts, clients learn to watch them mindfully and at enough distance to realize, in a visceral and not just analytical way, that they're just thoughts. Instead of getting rid of sadness, clients learn to detect how sadness feels in their body, how it tugs at their behaviour, how it ebbs and flows, and begin to feel at a deep level that they can carry sorrow with them while still living the life they want.

ACT and other mindfulness-based methods invite clients to step into the now and fundamentally change their relationship with their own experience. Instead of trying to manipulate and change their inner world into a more desirable form, these methods encourage clients to deepen and enrich their contact with a continuously unfolding present.

The Trap of the Problem

A basic principle of ACT, buttressed by 20 years of research into the nature of human cognition, is that common-sense problem-solving strategies, when applied to subjective experience, too often become traps. In fact, our research suggests that human problem solving itself contributes to the intractability of human suffering.

A person trying to solve the problem of panic by getting rid of it, regularly evaluates the level of anxiety being experienced, and fearfully checks to see whether its going up or down. This process actually tends to elicit anxiety, and risks conditioning the person to experience anxiety in more and more circumstances. Anxiety gradually becomes a constant focus of life, and clients believe they can only live happily by constantly imagining themselves at some point in the future when they're cured and anxiety has left the scene. Typically, life itself has to be put on hold while they continually and repeatedly attempt the impossible task of thinking themselves out of their anxiety.

In contrast, ACT takes the position that experiential avoidance--trying to steer away from psychological pain--limits our ability to be present in our own lives. Research has shown avoidance of pain is one of the most consistently troublesome processes in all of psychology, accounting for about 20 to 25 percent of the variance in successful outcome across a broad range of common psychological complaints--everything from depression, to difficulty in learning, to whether a traumatic event will lead to a post-traumatic stress disorder. The research evidence confirms the paradoxical proposition that trying to change your unpleasant thoughts and feelings typically just makes them more entrenched.

Coming into the Present

In contrast with traditional cognitive-behavioural methods, ACT doesn't try to change clients thoughts or feelings. It concentrates instead on helping them recognize that thoughts are just mental events to be noticed, not true or false pronouncements on the fundamental nature of reality itself. Similarly, feelings are something to be felt, not powerful and dangerous bullies to be avoided at all cost. According to ACT, the therapeutic task isnt helping clients successfully dispute their thoughts or feelings; rather, its enabling people to say yes to their own experience, whatever it happens to be.

How does ACT work? To help clients attain a present focus, ACT identifies three fundamental skills. The first is **Cognitive defusion**: separating the *process* of thinking. A thought like I'm bad invites us to argue about whether its true by providing evidence (usually from the past) on one side or the other. But whether its true or false is irrelevant to the fact that the thought is here, now. Simply noticing thoughts as processes, rather than as events that must be true or false, liberates clients from having to put their life on hold while cognitions are evaluated, accepted, rejected, argued with, or put in some sort of order. Also, The process of defusion dampens down the impact of thoughts and allows more flexibility in responding to them. The ACT defusion techniques all carry the same message: thoughts are just thoughts. Notice them and then do what works, not necessarily what they say.

The second fundamental ACT skill is **Acceptance**. When clients try to avoid, escape, or control painful feelings, the present becomes the enemy. *Now* is where and when feeling occurs, but they're concentrating on the imagined future in which the now will be different. Coming into the present requires psychological acceptance--a voluntary and undefended leap into the multifaceted, multisensory moment. As with any leap, this means abandoning some degree of control. In a physical leap, we leave it to gravity to carry us safely back to earth. In a leap of acceptance, we give over control to the now, allowing our experiences to present themselves in their full breadth and depth.

ACT uses a variety of metaphors and experiential exercises to help clients get past the judgments and analytical mind-sets that keep them entangled in unproductive problem solving. The task for clients is to drop their struggle with unwanted reactions and amplify contact with what *is*. Rather than trying to win a tug-of-war with difficult private experiences, clients learn to 'drop the rope' and allow themselves to feel the experiences as they happen. That shift of perspective profoundly alters the function of feelings, changing them from something bad that must be evaluated and manipulated to something to be fully felt without fear or desperation.

The third basic ACT skill is the acquisition of a **transcendent sense of self**. Clients commonly confuse their passing thoughts, feelings, and judgments about themselves with themselves. The goal here is to directly experience the distinction between what's seen and the conscious person seeing it

And Then What?

But as mindfulness and acceptance methods help clients more fully inhabit the present moment in their lives, they face an unavoidable question: what will they do with the now-ness of their lives? Once they've quit fighting their own experience, what should they do with it? It isn't enough simply to help clients live in the present moment. The real issue, once they've made friends, so to speak, with their problems and learned to avoid avoidance, is how they should live. What should they live *for*?

We take clients into pain because it'll inevitably come up when they move toward what they really want. Defusion and acceptance help clients realize that plain hurt isn't devastating. By contrast, the kind of denied, convoluted hurt that comes from avoidance is deeply harmful because it blocks us from achieving full consciousness and full humanity.

By reducing the need to avoid painful feelings, acceptance and mindfulness can actually help people become braver and live with the anxiety, pain, and discomfort required to attain something they deeply value. From an ACT perspective, values are consciously undertaken actions aimed at achieving purposes that are deeply important to one's sense of selfhood. Research suggests that the only values that can transform lives are those that are purposely chosen, reflect what you really want, and are fully expressed in your actions. Only doing what you truly value for its own sake, because it's what *you* want, will ultimately contribute to your development, even your happiness, as a human being.

It's also important to remember that *valuing* something isn't the same as achieving life goals. Values are like directions on a compass. They're never achieved, but in

each and every step they influence the quality of the journey. Values dignify and clarify our life course by putting pain in a proper context: its now about something that matters to us, which we want with our entire selves. In the realization that values cant ever be achieved, only lived moment to moment, comes joy, because from the first moment clients acknowledge what their values are, they're living them. Values aren't something you can both have and be finished with, like objects you can put in a box and store away--they're ongoing, active, and perpetually generative.

Said another way, the value directs the journey, but it's the journey that ultimately matters.

There are no shortcuts to living joyfully--we can't just take refuge in the moment and avoid the messy process of life itself. When we learn to carry our fears, we still have to face all life's day-to-day decisions and difficulties. But once were aware of our values and develop a deeper commitment to our own purposes, life becomes much more vital than it is when were merely trying to keep our demons at bay.

If we stay connected with what we most care about, life itself will present us with exactly what needs to be accepted. We can begin to do that by staying right here, right now, in this present moment. But acceptance is then about something. It provides an answer to my clients question: And then what? Acceptance and mindfulness aren't ends in themselves. Rather, they empower us to live a value-filled, meaningful, committed life by helping us to open up to the full range of thoughts and feelings we experience from moment by moment.

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