

How to Practice Willingness

By:

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Many psychological approaches based in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and other mindfulness-based therapies propose *willingness* as an effective technique for coping with a variety of symptoms. I agree that this paradoxical approach is the best way to address our suffering, and you may too, once you realize that *resistance* has never really provided the relief you were hoping for.

Before we continue, I want to emphasize that the strategies I am proposing should only be used in regards to inescapable suffering – anything that you feel subjectively, such as a feeling, thought, or physical sensation. We are not talking about a *situation* you might be in, like being abused by a boss or a romantic partner. This approach is not intended to be a tool for remaining in unhealthy situations, since there are truly dysfunctional environments we sometimes need to remove ourselves from. What we're talking about here is the relationship you have to your migraine, nausea, tinnitus, depression, or panic – anything that arrived unannounced and that you experience internally.

Intuitive = No / Counter-Intuitive = Yes

Despite how frequently we resort to *distraction*, *avoidance*, and *escape* as our usual “go-to” responses, these intuitive strategies most certainly fail when it comes to reducing our suffering. Even though we are able to see this at times, we still end up utilizing these self-defeating strategies. After the symptom has passed, it's easy to have insight about how futile these attempts were, since we can clearly see what did or didn't help. But when we are deeply struggling – when we are at our lowest ebb – we tend to forget what to do. Thus our insight waxes and wanes: at best, it is intermittent; at worst, it goes straight out the window.

Even when we begin to remember that we can't escape our pain, it can still be very hard to practice *willingness* as an alternative to resistance. As it turns out, *willingness* is not especially hard to sell as an idea, but it is very difficult to sell as a practice. And it gets even harder when I encourage my clients to go further and actually *want* their symptoms, which is something I often suggest that they do. You may be feeling horrified after reading the last sentence, and believe me, I get it. Everything about this approach feels wrong. But so are our intuitive strategies, and since these don't work very well, it might be time to try something new.

FAQ

Before we go on, let me first respond to some frequently asked questions, such as “What about self-care?” and “Shouldn't I fight an illness or search for a cure?” Yes, of course, but here is something you need to consider. If the mind is working on something tangible, like scheduling a doctor’s appointment or researching treatment, that’s absolutely fine, because you are engaged in a task that’s measurable – you’re doing something concrete. But if your mind is *refusing to feel* something in the present moment that actually exists, resistance isn’t going to work, and that’s when such control strategies fail. If your mind is working on an escape route such as, “How long am I going to feel this way?” and “How can I make this pain go away?” – it isn’t doing anything productive, and it isn't the best use of your mind. Rather than trying to escape the inescapable, see if you can just show up for the present moment you are in, and if that moment happens to include some discomfort, try moving towards your pain rather than pushing it away. Don’t worry; there’s more to this process, and I’ll help you learn how to do this.

Feel the “No!”

It’s easiest to begin by first noticing the resistance or implied “refusal” you have in response to your distress. This is a perspective of, “This can’t be happening. . . This is unacceptable. . . I can’t let this go on.” And yet, deep down, we know we ultimately lose those types of ultimatums with our bodies or our minds, since most often our symptoms just steamroll right over us.

Rather than engage in this losing battle, see if you can begin to appreciate how the *refusal* goes hand in hand with continued suffering. Vow to hold onto this insight, understanding that it is your sense of refusal which actually sets up you to fail, because “what we resist persists.” Once you feel more aligned with this awareness, locate the feeling inside your body that feels like a protest. Feel the “NO!” response, and see if you can soften the rigid stance you are taking. Then, draw in your next breath, taking the position of being “all in” or “fine; here goes”

It's Not Forever

You may be glad to know this isn’t something that you need to do all day long. Practicing *willingness* can and should be done in small bursts – whatever you feel you can manage. If it feels too daunting, set the timer. You even can start with just thirty seconds, but I think for it to work effectively you should do it for at least five to twenty minutes. You also need to practice in a quiet space with no interruptions, because it’s too hard to achieve the right results when there are other distractions that are competing for your attention. Because of your symptoms and everything else you are dealing with, you need to put yourself in a quiet space in order to focus.

Admitting the Truth

Once you are in a place where you cannot be interrupted, begin by just *admitting* that the discomfort is there. You don't have to like it, and you don't have to agree with it, but see if you can simply admit the truth, that the experience is present. Ok so far? From there, move closer and closer toward it. And once you get really close to it, try going even farther than you intended. As with any skill or technique, the best way to nail it is to "over-shoot." You actually have to go beyond the admission, go beyond the acceptance, and move straight into *willingness*. And then go past it.

"Oh, my God!" you might intuitively groan. "What is beyond *willingness*?" What is beyond *willingness* . . . is . . . (bear with me) . . . wanting the symptom. It is actually going after the feeling, seeking it out, wanting it, and then . . . wanting more. I know it sounds hard, but I promise, what you've been doing has been harder.

The Problem of Resisting

Let's talk more about resisting, and why it tends to increase our suffering. Resisting is sort of an attempt to flee, but if you think about it, it's impossible to flee from an internal experience. The "fight-or-flight" response that's built into our hardwiring was designed to protect us from danger, but it only applies to danger that is *external*. This survival mechanism was only supposed to help us run from an avalanche or flinch from a snake. It was never meant to help us avoid something subjective—something that's inside the skin.

When we practice resistance as a coping strategy, *we are trying to flee, at least mentally*, and when we attempt this, all we are aware of is the pain. Feeling "trapped" is a common experience that goes with symptoms like anxiety or pain, but this notion only exists because "fleeing" is somehow considered to be an option. But how can it be? We're residing inside of ourselves, and there *is* no place to go. Likewise, avoiding or fleeing from a triggering *situation* isn't a viable strategy either, because Reality doesn't like to replace what already exists with our own preferred circumstances.

But *willingness* gets along with Reality, because *willingness* agrees with what already exists. This gives us more energy, because agreeing takes a lot less work. While resistance produces the unintended consequence of increasing our discomfort by imploring us to struggle, wanting our suffering makes it less so. The reason? It's because wanting something provides the awareness that we are separate.

To Relate is to Separate

Let me provide a little bit more explanation. When suffering predominates, the “Observer” part – the part that usually helps us to feel more distance – doesn’t like what it sees, and tries to vacate the scene. But without such presence, the suffering takes center stage. The result is to feel “fused” with the suffering, unable to achieve any distance. When we “refuse to feel,” there is no longer a sense of truly relating to our suffering – only a sense of hiding or turning away. In the end, “refusing” leads us straight into jeopardy – causing us, paradoxically, to be “re-fused” with our pain. And if it’s distance we want, it can only happen where there is a dynamic – a dynamic of relatedness. The most powerful tool you have when it comes to easing your suffering is to discover the real “You” that has the ability to notice things, and to want what’s real.

As you regard your discomfort from a curious place, you will begin to notice that **You** and the **symptom** are in relationship to each other. Moving towards it, even wanting your suffering, establishes a relationship dynamic that didn’t exist before, and therein lies your freedom. Suddenly you will discover that You and the experience are not the same. This safe presence can also give you something reassuring to focus on. One of the nicest things about practicing *willingness* is that it helps you find a great comfort in your ability to feel your own presence.

“You” Are Not Your Symptom

In the beginning, don’t be surprised if you feel your own presence to be very small. Up until now, you may have only experienced the temptation to disappear, and the attention on your suffering has made it the most important thing. But even if you can sense only 1% Observer and 99% discomfort, this is a significant foundation that you can build upon. The good news is that you have already proved that the discomfort does not consume all of you – you just noticed that it isn’t 100%. Better still, paying more attention to the Observer will help it to become larger, and pretty soon your suffering will feel smaller by comparison.

Contrary to what you might think, showing up willingly in the presence of pain or discomfort can be a deeply moving experience, especially if you have never fully witnessed the truth about your own bravery. Knowing yourself in this new context affords you another gift as well. You will begin to see the best, most sincere part of you, the part that is willing to attend to something difficult – the part that can show up in a genuine, heartfelt way. This can change your internal experience. You might not learn anything new about how difficult your symptom is, but you will learn something about your own character and your courage that you never saw before. Aside from the eventual reduction in your symptoms, this is a very connected feeling that will affect your self-worth and the quality of your life.

Moving Forward, Inch by Inch

You are already getting a glimpse of why this might be a good idea, so let's approach *willingness* together in a more structured way. From a compassionate standpoint, start inching your way forward. Take time with each step, and consider each one deeply:

Find the refusal

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Soften the "No!"

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Admit that the feeling is here

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Agree that the feeling is here

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Agree with the feeling

↓

Want the feeling

↓

Want more of the feeling

Discover all the nuances as you progress through this exercise, and notice how we're not taking any action here. You're still here, and the experience is still here. Nothing has really changed . . . or has it? Notice whether this exercise made you feel worse, better, or the same. If you're still feeling bad, you might be evaluating too soon. Ask yourself sincerely: Did you try to use this exercise as a control strategy to make the discomfort go away? Because if you did, it wouldn't work.

Take a big breath right now. The only way it's going to work is if you go into *willingness* for its own sake, pure and simple. Change your objective. The purpose is not to reject the feeling, but to explore *willingness* in an open-minded, completely genuine way. Once your intention has changed and you are completely satisfied with your integrity, go through the steps again, this time making *willingness* your only goal. You can evaluate your suffering perhaps later on today, as a footnote. But don't hold it so fiercely in front of you at this point.

I'm Still Resisting ~ It's Hard to Change

We recently learned how just doing this practice for the sole purpose of reducing your symptoms will eventually backfire, so it will become necessary to find deeper incentives for agreeing to have this experience. In order for you to want your suffering – really want it – you are going to need to find a higher purpose, or it might be too difficult to approach. This is going to be a very personal thing, and you must answer to yourself,

from a heartfelt place, why on earth this would be a good idea. This is hard to do, so you will need to dig deep. If you have difficulty coming up with your own higher justifications, you may borrow from some of these below:

Why Do I Want to Feel This? (Finding Incentives Through Your Values)

1. If you value self-improvement and personal growth, you might appreciate that: *"Moving towards my pain gives me practice to be with uncomfortable experiences. There will be many times in life where I need to demonstrate strength and flexibility in the face of adversity. This is an opportunity to develop myself. It's like working a muscle, or training for something difficult, the inner equivalent of weight training or running a marathon."*
2. If you value self-care and a holistic path to wellness, you may similarly appreciate that: *"Experiencing the pain helps me to not dissociate or use resistance, which can produce an unnecessary layer of suffering or discomfort. This is a natural, organic and straightforward way to ease my suffering."*
3. If you value scientific thinking and the process of evidence-based discovery, consider that: *"Feeling all of my suffering gives me the chance to truly test my beliefs, such as the prediction that moving towards my symptom will only cause it to cascade out of control. Exposing this as a myth would be worth taking the risk. It's a relief to have direct experience and a way to navigate through this. In this way, I can prove what works and what doesn't."*
4. If you value balance and having energy for other areas of your life, consider that: *"Agreeing with my suffering helps me to let go of the struggle, which was taking too much energy, removing me from what's important in my life, and leaving me depleted and exhausted."*
5. If you value the grace and serendipity that can emerge from random moments, this perspective can feel meaningful: *"Becoming intimate with my suffering tells me I am likely to learn something new that I may never have known otherwise. Because agreeing with my discomfort is so unfamiliar and difficult, everything that follows is sure to be a new understanding. Because this is a rare occurrence, it can be considered to be a gift. I'm not sure what the gift is yet, but I'm open to receiving it."*
6. If you value being in the Now and practicing Mindfulness, this may feel important: *"Meeting my suffering forces me to be in the present moment. There is still a "connected" feeling about being in the Now, even if the Now is difficult."*

7. If you value having a wider range of feelings and a fuller range of experience, this perspective affords that opportunity: *"Feeling more of the discomfort helps me to feel more expansive, rather than feeling trapped and limited inside my pain. I'm tired of making ultimatums with my symptoms that I eventually lose, of shrinking and hiding from discomfort. It hurts a whole lot, but when I agree to feel more, I notice more space inside of me, more room to breathe. It's easier now to live inside my own skin."*
8. If you value Truth, this higher justification may have unique significance: *"If I fully admit that I am in pain, I am closer to truth. Because I value truth, this experience feels meaningful. To me, there is no such thing as desirable or undesirable truth. Truth is always sublime."*
9. If you value being closer to Reality, this perspective may also be inherently meaningful: *"Admitting the presence of my suffering helps me to come closer to what's real, to meet Reality on its terms. When I insist that Reality conform to my wishes, it never happens, and I frequently get discouraged. Avoidance, distraction or escape are just "control tactics" – indirect and ineffectual means of trying to change my internal experience. I have better insight about this now. The willingness to be with what's real is a privilege that feels simple, moving and meaningful. I choose Reality."*
10. If you value developing self-worth and self-discovery, this incentive may feel important: *"To see this kind of bravery as I practice willingness, I have a window into my true nature, my character, my triumphant spirit. Moving closer to my suffering allows me to see who or what I am when I truly show up with presence."*
11. If you care deeply about others, this higher justification may have importance: *Moving toward my suffering allows me to know more directly what others are experiencing. Finding the courage to face my suffering may allow me be of service to others, and to have more compassion."*

A personal note to my reader: *Thank you for reaching for something so difficult. What more could a therapist ask for? Your willingness made me respect the hell out of you. I am deeply impressed by your bravery. You are so much more than your suffering. Be well.*