Becoming Okay
(When You're Not Okay)

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO DECREASE SUFFERING AND DEVELOP ACCEPTANCE

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For Boyd B. Bushman (1936–2014), who generated a spirit of curiosity, playfulness and acceptance in all who knew him

Introduction

Acceptance is difficult. By acceptance, I'm not talking about *resignation*, which is an "I-give-up" attitude that causes us to avoid difficulty. I'm also not talking about *self-blame*, which is an "I-deserve-this" attitude that reinforces helplessness. Finally, I'm not talking about *passivity*, which is a "why-bother?" attitude that generates inaction. All of these attitudes are not true acceptance. Instead, true acceptance is a willingness to accept life for what it is and knowingly let go of what it isn't. True acceptance means approaching the pain of living in a way that gives it less control over you. It means you become willing to accept pain rather than spend your life (and a lot of time, energy, and money) avoiding or fighting it.

True acceptance is strong. True acceptance is active. True acceptance is revitalizing. True acceptance lessens our struggle with pain and increases our ability to live fully because in a way we couldn't understand before, we become okay… even when we really, really aren't okay.

This may sound nice in a confusing, "what-are-you-talking-about" kind of way, but acceptance is a hard sell. We want to fight it. When I discuss acceptance with my patients, for instance, they sometimes resist by crossing their arms, gritting their teeth, and muttering something like:

- *"Would you 'be okay' if you got divorced!? Would you just be able to accept it?"*
- *"Would you 'be okay' if you had cancer!? Would you just be able to just accept it?"*
- *"Would you 'be okay' if your kids died in a car accident!? Would you just be able to accept it?"*
- *"Would you 'be okay' if you had crippling anxiety (or crippling depression, or crippling anger, or crippling addiction issues, or crippling pain, etc...)!? Would you just be able to accept it?"*

First, let me answer these objections directly. I would find all these situations very painful and would want to resist or fight them… just like anyone else. But my natural reaction doesn't change anything. I have, I do, and I will struggle with pain, but acceptance is still our priority even if – in the very act of writing this – I feel like a hypocrite.

I might be a hypocrite because, like most people, I am obsessed with avoiding pain. Part of my obsession is due to our culture's fixation on happiness. Most of us implicitly believe, "*I should be happy right now or something is dreadfully wrong*." But this is a marketing delusion we've been conditioned to believe so we'll stay good little consumers in a world designed to keep us consuming. The idea we should accept at least some pain seems obvious. (How many times did our mothers remind us that life 'wasn't fair'?) But Americans, in particular, don't accept pain well. In fact, accepting pain seems strangely un-American, especially when you consider…

- Depression rates are on the rise. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, for instance, found that rates of major depression in the US have increased from 3.33% to 7.06% in recent decades (Compton et al., 2006). This increase has been demonstrated even though antidepressant use doubled among Americans between 1999 and 2012 (Kantor et al., 2015). We take more antidepressants, but we're still depressed.

- The rates of chronic pain disability claims have been rising in the US. Yet, about 80% of the world's opioid supply is consumed by Americans (Gusovsky, 2016). We take more pain medications, but we're still in pain.

- American consumer debt continues to climb. For instance, the average child born between 1980 and 1984 is likely to have an average of $5,689 more debt than her parents at a similar age (numbers adjusted for inflation). And the same children are likely to have $8,156 more debt than her grandparents (Jiang & Dunn, 2015). Also, despite making up only 5% of the world's population, the United

States produces about 50% of the world's waste [1]. We consume, but we're still not satisfied.

Based on these statistics, Americans have more drugs, more treatments, and more "stuff" than citizens of any other country. Yet, we are not in less pain, we are not less depressed or anxious, and we are not generally happier. I am not trying to imply we are a nation of wussies or attempting to argue against all aspects of capitalism, medications, or materialism. But I am suggesting something in our culture is amiss. Namely, Americans have a big problem with having problems.

Over 100 years ago, American philosopher and psychologist William James stated:

> *A strange moral transformation has within the past century swept over our Western world. We no longer think that we are called on to face physical pain with equanimity [or acceptance]. It is not expected of a man that he should endure it… The way in which our ancestors looked upon pain as an eternal ingredient of the world's order, and both caused and suffered it fills us with amazement… to seek the easy and pleasant seems instinctive… any deliberate tendency to pursue the hard and painful as such and for [its] own sake might well strike one as purely abnormal [2] (James, p. 262–263, italics added).*

If this observation was true then, it's certainly true today. Our obsession with avoiding pain is partly explained by a culturally-conditioned delusion: pain should not exist. Therefore, we resist pain—no matter the cost. However, should we expect all pain to be eliminated? Isn't this expectation impossible? Isn't it – at least partly – responsible for our resistance to acceptance?

There is another reason we resist acceptance. Some people believe if a person accepts a problem then she either *deserves* the problem or should *like* the problem. This simply isn't true; accepting pain doesn't mean you deserve it or like it. Of course, you don't want to be in pain, and you may not deserve it. But pain is still a part of living, and true acceptance softens our struggle with it. Developing true acceptance allows us to transcend pain by changing how we respond. Specifically, true acceptance makes us less likely to respond impulsively every time the proverbial crap hits the fan. I'll explain the difference between pain and suffering more in Chapter 1, but, for right

now, acceptance helps make life easier (not easy) because it helps us avoid impulses that create suffering.

You may still be unconvinced: why read about pain and suffering? Most people assume they are experts on both subjects and reading about them sounds depressing. After all, you probably have better things to do (like getting your teeth cleaned). To an extent, this makes sense: reading about suffering isn't as much fun as watching football, going to a spa, or hanging out with friends. But the only way to prevent suffering is to understand how it's created. A person willing to understand how she creates problems is better prepared to end them, and putting an end to patterns of behavior that create suffering is the focus of this book.

The Three Paths of Suffering

Most mental health problems develop when a person consciously or unconsciously devotes her life to avoiding or fighting mental pain. So, while other self-help books focus on a particular problem, like anxiety, depression or interpersonal conflict, this book applies to a lot of different problems. This became clear to me when my nephew asked me a simple, straightforward question: "*Uncle Bryan, I hear you're writing a book. What is it about?*" As best as I can remember, I stammered and said something lame and unhelpful, like, "*It's a book about how people drive themselves crazy*." He didn't seem pleased with my answer and neither was I. So, let me try again: I wrote this book because I've seen patterns in my life and in the lives of my patients that could be prevented. But instead of preventing problems, my patients and I have repeated them. In fact, we've repeated these patterns multiple times, despite our better resolve, intelligence and intentions. Even so, these patterns (or paths) of suffering are predictable and preventable. They are a sequence of mental and behavioral events that end badly, but we feel compelled to keep doing them anyways.

Eventually, all of us get stuck on one (or more) of these paths; not because we're crazy or dumb, but because we're human. It's my opinion that three main paths of suffering are the driving force behind most forms of human-created unhappiness. I'll describe these three paths in Chapter 1, but this means that whether you have anxiety, depression, addictive behaviors, or relationship problems, this book is for you because it emphasizes how

most psychological problems are maintained and magnified by how we cope with pain or loss. Our pain doesn't define us; we're defined by how we deal with it.

A Preliminary Admission

Before going on, I need to admit something: this book is not revolutionary. Some readers may be turned off by this admission; they need the latest and greatest. But most of this book is based on theories and theorists who came before me and are a lot wiser than I am. Rather than try to market this book as something "new", I've attempted to integrate old ideas. Specifically, I've attempted to integrate relatively new psychological science with relatively old religious wisdom. When it comes to psychological science, I will cite a lot of sources from *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* or ACT. ACT has good research support, and many readers will quickly see how I've integrated ACT with other schools of therapy [3]. (If you are new to ACT, don't worry; I'll go through several of the main ACT concepts.) I've also included a lot of brain-based research, including citing references from the field of *Interpersonal Neurobiology* (Siegel, 2012). When it comes to religious wisdom, I will cite teachings from Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and other eastern religions that illustrate how people have traditionally transformed pain into suffering.

The secular and the sacred have more in common than either side seems willing to believe. Admittedly, integrating psychology and religion seems risky: they haven't always made good bedfellows. Plus, the secular or non-religious person may suspect I'm trying to convert her. Let me be clear that, while I personally believe in God, this is not my purpose. A person without faith or religion can use the principles outlined in this book. Regardless of your philosophical orientation about religion, secular and religious voices have a lot to teach each other. (Just because there is a separation between church and state, does there have to be a "no-contact" order?) Religion has persisted for a reason. If we can combine the best from our religious past with our scientific present, I believe we'll be on more-sure footing than we would be otherwise [4].

How This Book is Organized

Like I mentioned before, most self-help books are focused on a particular problem: how to overcome anxiety; how to beat depression; how to stand up to difficult people; how to deal with addiction, etc. There is a combative tone to all of this; problems are the enemy—an enemy that must be conquered (or overcome, or beaten, or stood up to, or dealt with) at all costs. This makes sense; few people *like* to feel anxious or depressed. But this book is different because it discusses (1) how avoiding pain creates more pain; and (2) how to develop acceptance.

This book will present two frameworks for understanding both negative and positive human behavior. The TRIALS acronym (described in Part I) will provide a framework for understanding human-generated suffering; it describes how people create more difficulty for themselves. In contrast, the ACCEPT acronym (described in Part II) will offer a framework for understanding human potential and growth. Part II describes acceptance, which I believe is a willingness to accept life for what it is and intentionally let go of what it isn't. (This may sound like surrendering or "giving up", but most people find true acceptance liberating.) While the principles behind the TRIALS and ACCEPT acronyms have strong empirical support, neither framework has been scientifically validated as whole entities or constructs. Yet, I believe they are worth knowing because both frameworks present a great deal of useful information in two easy-to-remember acronyms.

As a general rule, each chapter will cover one letter of each acronym; however, the first two chapters ("How to Make Life Worse" and "How to Make Life Better") are exceptions. Chapter one explains the three paths of suffering, while chapter two defines acceptance. (Consequently, chapters one and two give the reader an overview for the entire book.) A few chapters also contain "Practical Application" sections, which are workbook-like exercises for the reader to complete. Optional notes and appendices are also included at the end of most chapters. Putting these sections at the end of the chapter allowed the main text to "flow", while providing brain- and research-based information for readers who wish to know more.

This book is based on the hopeful idea that, while we may not choose all of our problems, we can choose how we respond to them. We can respond to our problems reactively or proactively. If we react to our problems, we'll

repeat them indefinitely, and they'll become our constant, soul-crushing companions. Our names for these problems may change, but reacting impulsively usually makes problems multiply. In contrast, acting proactively may not make our problems "go away", but our relationship to our problems can shift—sometimes subtly, sometimes powerfully. We'll own our problems; they won't own us. And, along the way, maybe a sense of something higher than ourselves will grow.

Acceptance can help us become okay even when things aren't okay. Despite our pain and disappointment, we can rediscover a power we forgot we had: the power of our response. Our response to pain can help us create something beautiful—even something holy. It can be done. The journey and your life are worth the effort.

A Few Last Comments

- I will alternate between using masculine and feminine pronouns in each chapter (odd numbered chapters will be masculine, even numbered chapters will be feminine). Speaking of grammar, readers will notice an informal tone: I start sentences with buts and ands; I end sentences with prepositions. I'm trying to keep a conversational tone, but I apologize to folks like my English-teaching, paternal grandmother. I hope she'll forgive such grammatical transgressions.

- To flesh out my ideas, I give a lot of case examples. To protect patient confidentiality, these examples are composites rather than exact descriptions of events. Names have also been changed.

- When psychological symptoms are severe and impairing, the suggestions made in this book should not replace help from a qualified mental health therapist. Also, I admit that I am not an authority on religion (including my own) and religious or philosophical interpretations made here are my responsibility alone.

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Notes

[1] https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/american-consumption-habits/ (accessed December 30th, 2016).

[2] Yet, James concludes by assuming some pain results in happiness. He continues, "Passive happiness is slack and insipid, and soon grows mawkish and intolerable… some roughness, danger, stringency, and effort, some 'no! no!' must be mixed in, to produce the sense of an existence with character and texture and power…. here I find the challenge, passion, fight and hardship without which my soul's energy expires" (2004, p. 263).

[3] A good summary of the empirical support for ACT can be found in *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, 2nd Edition* (2011) by Steven C. Hayes, Kirk D. Stosahl, and Kelly G. Wilson. Additional theoretical orientations cited in this book include *Dialectical-Behavioral Therapy* (DBT; Marsha Linehan), Schema Therapy (Jeffrey Young), *Interpersonal Neurobiology* (Daniel J. Siegel) and behavioral therapy. I have tried to cite sources and give credit where credit is due, but I confess that I've been using some of the theories for so long that some of the original sources have dimmed in my recollection. Readers familiar with the psychotherapy literature will notice that ACT and DBT are used most frequently— ACT is used to conceptualize mental processes, while DBT is used when behavior change is required. Nevertheless, I have attempted to integrate both schools of psychotherapy in a way that is useable and easy for most people to remember. The interested reader can read appendix E of chapter 14 for more information on how the frameworks I propose here compare to DBT and ACT.

[4] Readers who identify themselves as religious may also be suspicious of my intentions. I've written this book relative to the common principles found in almost all faith traditions. While this may reach a broader audience, your faith in particular may not be emphasized or represented in the way you think it should. If so, I hope you'll forgive me. After all, my Ph.D. is in Clinical Psychology, not Divinity, and trying to include equal weight to all religious voices would sink the metaphorical ship (this book would become *way* too big).

Part I:
How to Decrease Suffering

"Although we want happiness, out of ignorance we do not know how to achieve it; although we do not want pain, because we misunderstand what causes pain, we work at achieving the very causes of pain."

The Dalai Lama, *How to See Yourself as You Really Are*

CHAPTER 1

How to Make Your Life Worse

All mental health professionals share a common goal: to reduce human suffering. This is an intimidating goal, but it's why people come to therapy. People come to therapy because something in their life feels amiss. Perhaps it is a rocky relationship, perhaps it is too much anxiety or depression, perhaps it is a bad habit they can't stop. Regardless of the problem, life has become painful, and people – quite reasonably – want to experience less pain and more pleasure. Although people may define pain and pleasure in different ways, reducing pain and increasing pleasure are the common purposes behind every self-help book, every self-improvement seminar, and every well-meaning piece of advice.

Yet, the quality of our lives is less about the pain we endure and more about how we *react* to the pain we endure. The same is true of pleasure. Said differently, how we react to our pain or pleasure *now* affects how much pain or pleasure we'll experience *later.* Some therapists will say to their patients, "*Before you can make your life better, you have to stop making it worse.*" This is a nice way of saying that how you act on your impulses in the present will change the quality of your life in the future. Many people understand and agree with this, but most of us still feel compelled to act impulsively when we experience the threat of pain or the allure of pleasure. It's as if we are temporarily drunk, and we experience a sudden urge or compulsion to do or say something we usually wouldn't do or say.

This chapter discusses three impulses that seem to give us the most trouble because they block acceptance. The first impulse is to resist pain by

trying to *avoid it*. We push away pain, regardless of what avoidance may cost us in the long run. The second impulse is to become so overwhelmed by our pain we become *lost or stuck in it*. Our pain consumes us and, unfortunately, we make unwise decisions based on the emotional chaos or turmoil we experience inside. The third and final impulse is to become so captivated by pleasure we *hold on to it*. We cannot let it go, even if deep down, we know we should. We may regret holding on to this pleasure, but we elevate our temporary enjoyment over our long-term happiness.

All three impulses—avoiding pain, getting stuck or lost in pain, and holding on to pleasure—make life worse or more difficult than it needs to be. Each impulse is associated with a different pathway or pattern of suffering, and this chapter will describe all three pathways. We do not choose these impulses or pathways consciously, of course. In fact, we may feel ourselves slaves to them (hence, the word "impulse"). Yet, most of the human-created problems of this world are not caused by pain or pleasure, per se, but by the impulsive way humans react to pain or pleasure.

Let's begin with a few examples of how the avoidance impulse, in particular, creates trouble. These examples will also clarify the difference between *pain* and *suffering*; two words that seem similar but, according to centuries of religious and philosophical teachings, can actually be quite different [1]**.**

- Pain is not feeling loved in your marriage. Suffering is not feeling loved in your marriage and habitually avoiding your spouse so you can also avoid reminders of how you feel lonely. Now you feel unloved in your marriage and the emotional distance between you and your partner has grown.

- Pain is being laid off from your job. Suffering is being laid off from your job and repetitively going to a bar to drink away feelings of shame. Now you have both a sense of shame from losing your job and from developing a problem with alcohol.

- Pain is being sexually assaulted. Suffering is being sexually assaulted and locking yourself away from any healing relationship so you "don't

get hurt again." Now you have the pain of the original assault, and you feel isolated.

- Pain is experiencing racial discrimination. Suffering is experiencing racial discrimination and then avoiding anyone in the majority because you assume they are racist. Now you have the pain of the original discrimination, and you've isolated yourself from potential sources of support.

These examples emphasize two different problems in life: the pain of living (i.e., pain), and the additional pain that comes when you try to avoid all pain (i.e., suffering). In each example, the person did not start out doing anything wrong. Life was just unjust. However, each person reacted to pain by attempting to avoid it and, in the process of avoiding, created suffering. We often cannot and should not avoid all pain; yet, if we are willing to accept some pain, we can prevent suffering. While pain is something everyone experiences, how much we suffer depends on what comes next. In other words, we experience pain because we are alive; we experience suffering because of how we respond.

As I suggested before, avoidance is not the only impulse that creates suffering. As the following examples demonstrate, acting while being lost or stuck in pain or blindly clinging to pleasure also create suffering.

- Pain is being told "I hate you" by your teenage daughter. Suffering is being told "I hate you" by your teenage daughter and yelling back, "I hate you, too!" Now you feel disconnected from your daughter and ashamed of how you handled the situation.

- Pain is having your boyfriend break up with you. Suffering is having your boyfriend break up with you and, in a fit of rage, texting him a picture of the cut on your arm to "show him" how much he hurt you. Now you have no boyfriend, and you feel foolish about how you responded.

- In comparison, pleasure is enjoying a few drinks with friends. Suffering is enjoying a few drinks with friends and not being able to

stop yourself from drinking more even though you need to work early the next morning.

- Pleasure is having fun on a first date. Suffering is having fun on a first date and coming on so strongly that by the end of the evening your date is turned off.

In each of these examples, avoidance was not the problem. In the first two examples, the person became lost or stuck in his pain and reacted emotionally. He wasn't avoiding pain; he was overwhelmed by pain and became impulsive. In the last two examples, the person held on to pleasure in a way that inspired foolish action or complicated the situation.

These three impulses (avoiding pain, getting stuck in pain, or holding on to pleasure) create suffering; they make life worse – much worse – than it needs to be. Despite the title of this chapter, I don't want you to make your life worse. But understanding how people make life worse is an important first step. Therefore, this chapter, which is based on both millennia-old spiritual teachings and modern scientific data, gives an overview of the three metaphorical pathways people take to transform their pain or pleasure into suffering.

Resisting Our Way Into Suffering

The Unavoidable Pain of Living

Pain is natural and universal. We use different words to describe psychological pain. Words like sadness, guilt, anxiety, worry, or jealousy are all good examples of emotions most people find painful. But psychological pain includes more than just uncomfortable feelings. Psychological pain also includes uncomfortable thoughts (*"I shouldn't be this way!"; "I'm a horrible person"*), images or memories (*vividly recalling a time when you were rejected by someone*) and bodily sensations (*tightness of chest, racing heart beat*). For simplicity's sake, I lump these internal experiences or reactions under the label of mental pain or aversion. Mental pain, as I will be using the

term, is a broad category of automatic internal reactions, which includes difficult or uncomfortable emotions, bodily sensations, visual images, or automatic thoughts. Pain is the deep, gut-level sense that something is wrong, we have been wronged, or we will be wronged.

Notice we don't actually have to *be* wronged to experience mental pain; just the threat of pain, observing someone else in pain, or the memory of pain is… well… painful. This means that pain can be experienced by humans at any time. Other species don't seem to have this problem.

My wife and I have a cat named Pawtucket, who squeaks nervously every time I come around her. This is because she remembers, on some level, how I like to mildly tease her. But Pawtucket doesn't really think about me when I'm not there. While I'm at work, she does not, for instance, think about the future ("*What will I do when Bryan comes home and teases me again?"*). She does not get trapped in thoughts about the past ("*It was so scary yesterday when Bryan said 'No!' after I peed on the carpet. I can't handle something like that happening again!*"). She also does not think about her personal flaws ("*Why can't I stand up to him? Maybe it is because I was the middle kitty in a litter of twelve and my mother didn't lick me enough.*"). Based on what we can observe, animals live in a blissful out-of-sight, out-of-mind existence. When Pawtucket is sunning herself, she is only sunning herself—no more, no less. When Pawtucket is napping or eating or stretching, she is only napping, eating or stretching—no more, no less. Animals, like Pawtucket, are capable of emotional learning and remembering (why else would she squeak nervously?), but such capacities often lie dormant because most of the time animals are only concerned with the present.

Humans are different. Once a person reaches a certain age, her advanced ability to remember, plan, and forecast events makes her both a creative problem-solver and potential basket case. When I remember, for example, being rejected by a former lover, I re-experience the pain of unrequited love as if the whole rejection was happening again. Mental pain can also be experienced in a future, conditional sense. For instance, I could imagine being rejected before I even ask someone out. Even though the rejection hasn't actually happened, I experience emotional pain as if it has. In both scenarios, the pain has only happened in my mind. That isn't to say the pain isn't real. It is. But it's experienced either as a memory or as a possibility.

Unfortunately, our brains don't make a distinction between pain based on what is actually happening and pain based on memory or imagination. Unlike Pawtucket, humans carry their emotional pain with them all the time, and sometimes it takes little to activate it. A person, for instance, can be enjoying a beautiful sunset. But something about the sunset reminds him of a friend who died. The person goes from enjoying something peaceful (the sunset) to feeling lousy (grief) in a matter of seconds—and sometimes without even knowing why.

The sad reality is that we cannot escape pain completely. Mental pain is universal because it is automatic. It comes automatically when (1) we come in contact with, remember coming in contact with, or think we may come in contact with something painful; or (2) when we lose, remember losing, or are threatened with losing something pleasurable. These two conditions are inevitable; no one is immune to them. Consequently, no one is immune to pain. We cannot escape pain because we cannot escape ourselves, or – more specifically – the tendencies of the human mind that create pain.

Yet, as we're about to discuss, our obsession with escaping pain is exactly what creates suffering.

The Decision to Suffer

As I'm going to define it in this book, suffering happens when we do something impulsive in response to pain, typically when we are trying to escape from it. Yet, people who insist on avoiding all pain experience at least two types of hurt. The first hurt is the pain itself (e.g., the shame of being laid off, the trauma of the sexual assault). The second hurt is created by the impulsive way people resist the first hurt (e.g., drinking alcohol to numb shame, cutting off contact with everyone to "protect" the self). Buddhism calls the first and second hurts the first and second "darts" of human pain and suffering[2]**.** The first dart is the pain of living, while the second dart is the pain created by our impulses.

Someone may ask, "*Isn't this all just semantics? Why is knowing this important? Does it matter?*" Yes, it does matter. In fact, it matters quite a bit.

There is a big difference between someone who accepts legitimate pain and someone who rigidly and persistently avoids it. In my clinical practice, I sometimes see the second type of patient. Here is how it sounds:

Patient: *"Doc, please help me feel less anxious."*

Me: *"In order for you to feel less anxious, you have to challenge your anxiety. You have to face some of your fears."*

Patient: *"Won't that make me more anxious?"*

Me: *"At first, yes. But if you face your fears and experience your anxiety without avoiding it, eventually you'll get desensitized, feel less anxious and, more importantly, reclaim your life from anxiety."*

Patient: *"I don't think I can do that."*

Me: *"How come?"*

Patient: *"Because I hate feeling anxious. I just can't handle it…"*

Here is another example of someone who is unwilling to experience pain (first dart) in the service of reducing suffering (second dart).

Patient: *"I want to stop drinking."*

Me: *"Okay. What happens when you've tried to stop drinking before?"*

Patient: *"Oh, I hate it. I get the shakes. I feel horrible. I can't hang out with my drinking buddies. I feel so lonely."*

Me: *"I can understand why it is tough, but is it worth it?"*

Patient: *"Is what 'worth it'?"*

Me: *"Is reclaiming your life from alcohol worth paying the price of feeling horrible and lonely for a little while?"*

Patient: *"hmmm…. I'm not sure…. I just can't stand feeling that way. Isn't there another way?"*

Me: *"We can do things to help, but we can't avoid all the pain entailed in making change. After all, if it wasn't painful, you probably would have changed already."*

Patient: *"I don't know..."*

In this last example, I am meeting again with an obese patient who previously committed to an exercise and diet routine to lose weight.

Me: *"So how did the exercising go?"*

Patient: *"Hmm…. I didn't get around to it. It was just a really busy week."*

Me: *"I can understand that, but we spent our last session clearing your schedule so you could have time to exercise."*

Patient: *"Yeah… but something always came up."*

Me: *"What do you mean?"*

Patient: *"I just wasn't feeling it."*

Me: *"… 'feeling it'?"*

Patient: *"You know—I just wasn't motivated."*

Me: *"You thought you would be more motivated?"*

Patient: *"Yeah, let's talk about how to increase my motivation."*

Me: "*We can do that, if you like, but I have to be honest with you. You're 150 pounds overweight. We can reset your goals for exercise, but I think initially you aren't going to be motivated because exercise is not going to be particularly enjoyable for you. It isn't likely you're going to be 'feeling it' until you are almost done with your workout."*

Patient: *"I know…. I just hate exercise so much…."*

In each example, the patient started with clear and admirable goals, like reclaiming a life from anxiety, stopping drinking, or losing weight. Each patient was tired of the second dart of suffering; yet, each of them became hesitant with the realization that he or she would have to experience the first dart of pain, like an increase in anxiety, symptoms of withdrawal and social loneliness, or the discomfort of exercise. These patients aren't morally inferior or stupid. They are just like all of us from time to time; each patient shifted to discussing how much he or she hated experiencing pain to justify continuing down a path of suffering.

Complaining about a problem and solving a problem are not the same thing; otherwise, the nation, people, or family who were the most outspoken complainers would also be the nation, people, or family who were the most problem-free. The difference between complaining and problem-solving often lies in our willing to acknowledge the connection between pain and suffering:

> *Complaining = being upset about the second dart of suffering while being unwilling to accept the first dart of pain.*
>
> *Problem Solving = being upset about the second dart of suffering while recognizing that the only way out of suffering is through a firm willingness to either (1) do something painful or (2) lose something pleasurable.*

Before someone can make life better that person has to stop making it worse. Impulsively deciding to refuse the pain of living is the quickest way to

make life worse. Before you can make life better, you have to first know when you're participating in the three paths of suffering, which I will describe next.

The Paths of Suffering

Avoidance

When we come in contact with (or think we may come in contact with) something or someone we dislike, an internal reaction or experience called mental pain or aversion is triggered. Remember that I am using the words mental pain rather than words like "feeling bad" because (1) labeling your emotions as "bad" will cause you to label yourself as "bad" (more on this later); and (2) we are talking about more than unpleasant feelings. Mental pain isn't limited to unpleasant emotions, like anger and sadness. It also includes unpleasant body sensations, thoughts, or memories/ mental images. Regardless of how it shows up, experiencing pain is by definition unpleasant, which frequently drives us to automatically *push away* whatever is associated with the experience of pain. This instinctual or automatic response is called the *avoidance impulse*, which is the first path of suffering.

The first path of suffering happens when we rigidly act out the avoidance impulse to escape pain—no matter what the avoidance costs us[3]**.** Take, for instance, the woman who was sexually assaulted. She wanted to avoid further pain. No one can blame her for this. But, at first, the woman had only the first dart of pain—not the second dart of suffering. She began to participate in suffering when she began cutting herself off from everyone else in her life. This is not "blaming the victim." It is only an acknowledgment that suffering arises when we are so uncomfortable in the presence of pain we try to escape it *at all costs*. Escaping pain at all costs is what some psychologists have called being mentally rigid or inflexible[4]**.**

The costs of escape include minimizing or, in some cases, forsaking (1) our personal values or principles, (2) our long-term interests, and/or (3) potential solutions to the problem. Here are some examples:

Compromising our higher principles: The man who was laid off from his job experienced shame (first dart). He began to participate in suffering (second dart) when he started drinking to escape his feelings. Drinking excessively likely conflicts with his higher values (the person he wants to be as a provider, father and husband).

Compromising long-term outcomes: The person who felt lonely in his marriage and then avoided his spouse likely added to the long-term problems. Procrastination is another example of escaping pain (not starting a term paper, putting off balancing the checkbook) at the expense of compromising long-term outcomes (not completing the paper or doing it poorly, personal finances becoming unmanageable).

Compromising what works: The person who was discriminated against worked against what may have helped his situation (choosing isolation over collaborating with others that may be sympathetic and helpful).

Compromising our values, ignoring long-term outcomes, or being "right" at the expense of being effective are symptoms of psychological blindness or mental rigidity. Such blindness generally occurs because we are *in the service of* avoiding. What does "in the service of avoiding" mean? Avoiding becomes our priority: not our values; not our future; not being effective. All three are sacrificed to appease the avoidance impulse. The costs of mental rigidity are summarized by the acronym POW:

- **P**rinciples: Avoiding or escaping pain even though doing so undermines our higher values or principles.

- **O**utcomes: Avoiding or escaping pain even though we know the *long-term* outcome of avoiding will make things worse. The qualifier "long-term" is emphasized because there is a short-term advantage to avoidance; otherwise, we wouldn't avoid. We have to think past the short-term relief offered by escape.

- **W**hat Works: Avoiding or escaping pain even though doing so causes us to miss a potential opportunity to solve the problem.

The acronym of POW is appropriate because we are the "prisoners of war" held hostage by our impulses[5].

The following diagram (Figure 1.1) summarizes the avoidance path of suffering and what we've discussed so far:

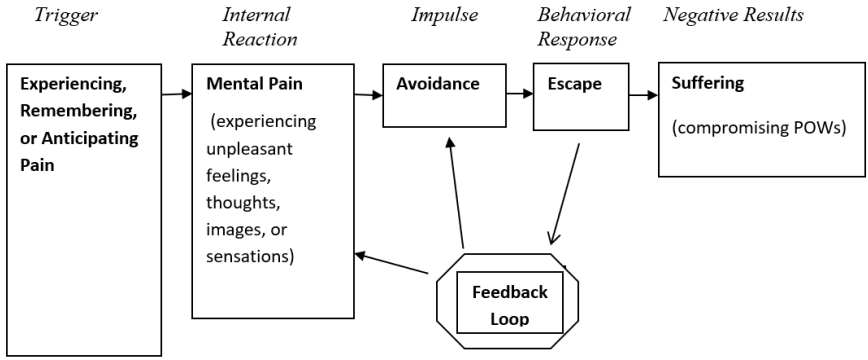


Figure 1.1: The Avoidance Path of Suffering

The first three steps (trigger, internal reaction, and impulse) are automatic; we cannot help but experience them. If we try to deny them, they will have even a greater influence on us. In contrast, it's our behavioral response that sets the thermostat of our suffering. Specifically, our behavioral response (in this case, escape) creates a feedback loop. Every time we escape we reinforce ourselves for escaping[6]. The next time we are in a similar situation, we are likely to escape again because we have unconsciously told ourselves that the pain was intolerable. For example, every time the lonely spouse attempts to avoid feelings of loneliness by avoiding his wife, he sets himself up to avoid again in the future. Even though he may know he needs to talk with his wife, each time he escapes (watches TV instead, for example) he has reinforced the idea that loneliness is intolerable. Suffering is inevitable because the long-term result of avoiding feelings of loneliness is, unfortunately, more loneliness.

Yet, this discussion begs a question: Why doesn't long-term suffering make avoidance *less* likely? In other words, why don't people learn from suffering? Some people, in fact, do learn. The wise among us learn how to

(ironically) avoid avoiding. If our lonely husband experiences enough strain on his marriage due to his self-imposed isolation, it may be enough for him to break the habit of avoiding. However, when many people are upset they do not have enough foresight to see this. They become trapped in the avoidance cycle. They refuse to see or are unable to recognize the costs of perpetual escape. Plus, escape just feels too good in the short-run—especially compared to tolerating something we've unconsciously trained ourselves to believe is intolerable. Such persons learn "the hard way." They change only when the threat of suffering becomes so oppressive, severe, and immediate that it outweighs the short-term relief seductively offered by escape. Otherwise, short-term escape is too enticing and long-term suffering is rationalized away.

Craving

The second way we create suffering is when we rigidly *hold on to* or *crave* pleasure. Fortunately, pleasure, just like pain, is also part of life, and it too can be experienced mentally, physically, emotionally or spiritually. Whether it is a pretty face, a glass of cool water on a hot day, or a child's laughter, we smile and wish to hold on to whatever or whoever seems to be giving us pleasure.

Pleasure is often associated with positive feelings, like joy, pride, or self-confidence. But, like pain, pleasure is more than just an emotion. It is an automatic internal reaction that can also be experienced through bodily sensations (*sexual stimulation, excitement, or relaxation*), images or memories (*imagining telling off our boss, remembering your favorite Christmas song*), or pleasurable thoughts (*"I am in control"; "I showed her!"*). As you can probably tell from some of these examples, I am going to define *pleasure* broadly to include anything associated with craving or desire. This includes states of mind we often think of negatively, like revenge fantasies. After all, it can be very pleasurable to imagine "telling off" someone who has hurt you[7]. It can also be pleasurable to imagine cutting off someone who has just cut you off.

So far, we don't have suffering—only a trigger, an attraction to that trigger, and a craving or desire to hold on to it. Suffering occurs when we metaphorically cling to something or someone so tightly that we ignore

consequences. Clinging does not mean the person is necessarily "needy" or "clingy," as we typically understand those words. Clinging means the person holds on to something even when life has taught him it's time to let go. Rather than simply having an internal reaction to something we find pleasurable (craving), we act in a way that creates suffering (clinging). Craving is an impulse to which we are all vulnerable, but clinging is often a behavior or a mental game that strengthens the grip with which we hold on to our obsessions. Mental games include continuing to entertain fantasies that are pleasurable, yet unhealthy. Despite being married, a man may cling to a forbidden relationship with a coworker—even if the coworker isn't really interested and the relationship never becomes sexual. Entertaining an unhealthy fantasy is often enough to create problems.

Pleasure-seeking or craving is not always a problem. Although people may define it differently, everyone seeks pleasure. Otherwise, "life, liberty, and the *pursuit* of happiness" wouldn't be included in the U.S. Constitution. But "clinging to happiness" is not included in the Constitution, and clinging is the problem. Clinging means a person has gone beyond simple pleasure seeking. Instead, he is so inflexible that personal values are violated or consequences are ignored. We're so caught up in what we're doing that we ignore obvious signals that a problem is developing. Once again, we become psychologically blind or rigid at the expense of POWs.

- ***P****rinciples:* Doing something to violate our higher principles or values. For example, a person has another drink despite promising his partner he wouldn't have any more. This person has compromised his personal values by breaking his word.

- *Long-term* ***O****utcomes:* Doing something that causes problems later. A man impulsively buys something he cannot afford, like an expensive suit, because of how it makes him feel when he tries it on. He is holding on to the pleasure and ignoring the credit card bill he will receive later.

- ***W****hat Works:* Doing something that prevents effectiveness. If a parent spends some fun time with his child, for example, he may be

simply seeking some healthy pleasure. A problem may be developing, however, if the parent is so wrapped up in having "quality time" that he overlooks obvious signals that the child needs space.

People suffer in the service of holding on to something that was only meant to be temporary. As noted by Mary Pipher, "Most of the problems in the world are caused by people being 90% happy and foolishly going for the last 10%." I agree, but I would add that people foolishly go for the last 10% because they are caught up in craving. As a result, they sacrifice their "birthright" (long-term interests, personal principles, actual results) for the "mess of pottage" their obsessions may temporarily provide.

The craving path of suffering is summarized in Figure 1.2 below.

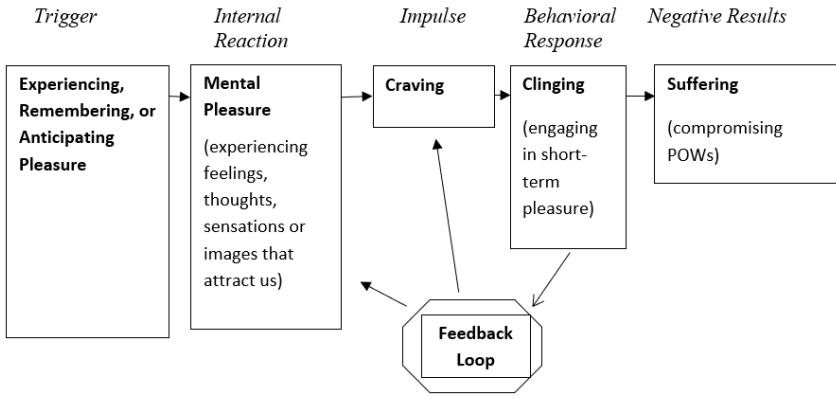


Figure1.2: The Craving Path of Suffering

Once again, we have a feedback loop that, if repeated often enough, can cause people to habitually act out self-destructive behaviors. A person who abuses alcohol, may feel irresistibly attracted to a bar because of the remembered pleasure he associates with drinking (feeling calm and confident). Craving produces a state of mind where we rationalize away long-term consequences (the crushing hangover, feelings of shame, marital problems). In a way, craving makes the person intoxicated before he starts drinking. But every intoxicated state must end, and this includes the psychological state I'm referring to as craving. Only when consequences are intense or catastrophic (person is "sick and tired" of feeling so ashamed, his

spouse threatens divorce) do many people avoid the siren song of craving. As put succinctly by P.M. Forni, "The art of restraint is feeling good later." In fact, a good way to figure out how much a person is craving is to figure out how resistant that person is toward thinking about tomorrow[8].

Fusing

The final path of suffering is fusion. Fusion is an unusual word and requires some explanation. Similar words include "blending" or "melding." The word *fusion*, as I will be using it, suggests a person's reality has temporarily merged with his or her pain. The fused person is "stuck" in the internal reaction he is experiencing. Stephen Hayes explained, "We forget we are interacting with thoughts, rather than the real thing…the future can become present in the here and now, even though it is there and then. The present focus is lost to the mind's focus on the past and future" (2011, p. 16). Pawtucket may avoid me when I am at home, but, when I am not at home, it's very doubtful her mind becomes fused with the past or future. She is too busy sunning or licking herself. A human mind, in contrast, takes literally what they are experiencing. If I am having "bad" thoughts, then I (or something in my world) is "bad." If I am having "bad" emotions, then it must mean things are really bad. If I am having "bad" memories, then my memories define me as bad, often in some unexplained way. We don't just use feelings, thoughts, and memories as pieces of information to be taken with a grain of salt. If so, we wouldn't suffer. Instead, when fused, we act as if our feelings, thoughts, and memories are infallible. They become the most important pieces of information in the world. And that is a big, big problem.

The fusing path of suffering is an interesting hybrid or combination of the first two paths. It starts out like avoidance: something or someone in the environment either threatens us or causes us to feel threatened. This naturally triggers mental pain. Next, we experience pre-programmed, unpleasant sensations, images, feelings, or thoughts. At this point, however, the path changes. During fusion, instead of avoiding what we find aversive, we feel trapped by it. We are so psychologically close to our pain that we cannot see around it. The fused person has little ability to "step back" from what is going on inside his mind. Like some kind of mental tractor beam, he feels overwhelmed and trapped.

People with debilitating conditions, like panic attacks or post-traumatic flashbacks, understand what it means to experience fusion. Yet, these are extreme examples, and fusion can be subtle. If you've ever experienced a time when you felt sorry for yourself, for instance, and couldn't see past thoughts like, "*Why bother*?" or "*It isn't worth it anymore*," you've experienced fusion. If you've ever felt paralyzed by fear, you've experienced fusion. If you've ever experienced guilt to the point that you didn't feel like you could cope anymore, you've experienced fusion.

Before continuing to describe the fusion path of suffering, we have to answer an important question: Why do humans fuse with pain? The impulses to avoid something painful or crave something pleasurable both make sense; in both cases, there is a clear payoff. But what is fusion's payoff or purpose?

Fusion serves at least three purposes in humans. First, much like other animals, humans demonstrate a fight, flight, and freeze response when threatened, and fusion can be similar to the freeze response. Like a small animal cornered by a predator, a person can "play dead" in the (usually misguided) hope that the predator will spare them. This isn't always intentional. When humans experience extreme distress, the stress hormone cortisol floods our brains to prepare a way for our survival. Unfortunately, cortisol also shuts down the more logical parts of the human brain. It's as if our brain decides "I don't have time to think," and we're momentarily incapable of responding rationally.

> *School was hard for Billy. For years, he had suspected the other kids did not like him. Now he was in the lunch courtyard, being bullied once again. As he morosely sat by himself, the other kids would run up behind him and smack him on the back of the head. It never occurred to Billy to fight back or to run away. Instead, he just sat there helplessly; trapped and immobile. Too frightened to move or to do anything but wait for the lunch bell to ring and bring an end to his torment.*

Many people, like Billy, temporarily shut down when they experience something painful, like being rejected by peers.

The second purpose of fusion is a misguided attempt to "figure out" problems. The human brain is a meaning-making machine that is constantly analyzing sources of threat, and fusion may be the brain's way of making

sense out of the world. We try to figure out a problem, even when there is no easy solution available. This can happen with anxious patients, who seem to believe thinking about the problem repetitively will cause a solution to present itself. To an extent, this is understandable because it can often be helpful to brainstorm and consider your options. But there is a big difference between solving a problem and getting lost in it.

> *Joan hadn't slept in many nights. She would lie awake replaying again and again what her grown son, Mike, had told her on the phone a few days ago: he was getting a divorce from his wife of ten years after finding out she had cheated on him. Mike had called to get his mother's support since he was in the process of explaining the impending separation to Joan's young grandchildren, ages 5 and 7. Joan felt both helpless and angry at Mike's soon-to-be ex-wife. Mike had told her not to do anything. "Don't call her," he had pleaded. "You'll just make it worse." Joan knew he was right, but she couldn't help thinking of her grandchildren and the pain they would endure. The more she thought about it, the more agitated she became. "I have to give her a piece of my mind!" she decided. Perhaps knowing she would make a different decision in the morning, she abruptly picked up the phone to call "that slut" at 1:00 in the morning.*

Are we solving problems or regurgitating them? Repetitively thinking about problems often gets our minds stuck in mental quicksand; the more we feel like we are sinking, the more we flail about. Much like Joan, we overreact and make things worse.

The third purpose of fusion is to allow the person to give up fighting, kind of like escape. In some cases, before the person fuses with pain, he has spent a great deal of time and effort trying to avoid it. Now he is tired. The person may be sad or anxious, but he tacitly accepts this bargain because dwelling in misery—at least temporarily—has now become the path of least resistance. If you've ever felt sorry for yourself, you know how difficult it can be to "bounce back." The negative can slowly entwine us as with a flaxen cord that seems impossible to escape. Optimism or hope seems beyond all reach, and it is easier to dwell in misery than find a reason to carry on. Shifting to something more productive seems too exhausting, especially if we have already spent so energy avoiding what we fear:

Jen had spent years trying to convince herself that her marriage wasn't in trouble. Every time she and her husband fought, she had convinced herself that things were "fine" and that "all marriages go through some rough patches." Besides, addressing the problems directly seemed too difficult. Now, after a huge fight, her husband had moved out, leaving Jen alone and confused. She sat on her couch feeling shocked and empty. Her mind was swimming and she seemed incapable of coherent thought. Eventually, she collapsed on her couch, unable to move for days.

Jen was on the avoidance path of suffering until it was no longer an option. Jen fused with everything her avoidance had previously kept at bay, and, because she was blindsided by her thoughts and feelings, she accepted them without question. She relinquished herself to her depression by fusing with the painful thoughts, feelings, images, and sensations she was having. She concluded that since she was experiencing painful thoughts *("My life is over")*, such thoughts must be true. Since she was experiencing painful images (seeing herself dying alone), such images must be true. Since she was experiencing painful feelings (feeling stupid and worthless), such feelings must be true. Since she was experiencing painful bodily sensations (fatigue), such sensations must somehow be her destiny. Jen's case illustrates that if someone avoids something for long enough, he will eventually fuse with that same something once avoidance stops working.

Whether we fuse as a way to play dead, figure things out, or give up, we all fuse with the negative from time to time. *Perseveration* is the word I will use to capture all three purposes. Perseveration is defined as a momentary inability to change one's method of working. If we cannot shift our minds when doing so would be helpful, we are perseverating. Einstein is credited as saying "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Not to quibble with Einstein, but people who do the same thing over and over again – even when it doesn't work – aren't insane; they are fused. Peter Levine described fusion as, "being swallowed up by emotions. This can be quite a dilemma because being *informed by* our emotions, not dominated by them, is crucial in directing our lives" (2010, p. 312). Because they are momentarily swallowed up in strong emotion, people who are fused are temporarily stuck in a stubborn or rigid repetition of what doesn't work.

But what does perseveration look like? Perseveration includes either *acting out* or *acting in* behaviors. This can be confusing because these behaviors look very different. For example, the woman at the beginning of the chapter who impulsively cut herself and then texted her ex-boyfriend was perseverating; she acted out in a frantic way that reinforced the chaos inside. She probably realized later that her response was an overreaction, but at the time her overreaction didn't seem like one, it just seemed "right." Joan also "had to do something"—even though that something was ultimately harmful. People who act out or overreact get so fused that not acting out seems impossible. In contrast, Billy and Jen were also perseverating, but they were both acting in by passively retreating within themselves. Unfortunately, inaction also has consequences. Jen, for example, could have attempted calling her estranged husband and seeing if a solution was available. Instead, she fused with her depression and did nothing, even though the long-term outcome of doing nothing could lead to the dissolution of her marriage. Acting in and acting out seem like polar opposites, but they are two sides of the same coin. They are the behaviors people do when they get lost, dwell on, or fuse with pain.

Similar to avoidance and clinging, perseveration frequently causes people to disregard their higher principles, long-term outcomes, and/or what works (POWs). For instance:

- ***P****rinciples*: Behaving in a way that violates our higher principles or values:

  Acting Out (i.e., Overreaction): The parent who yelled, "I hate you too" to her angry teen likely violated her higher principles.

  Acting In (i.e., Passive Withdrawal): A person is getting unfairly criticized by a coworker in a staff meeting. The person receiving the criticism may be "frozen" by inaction: he may not defend himself. Afterward, the person may feel like he violated personal principles of self-respect.

- *Long-term* ***O****utcomes:* Behaving in a way that causes problems later:

  Acting Out (Overreaction): A woman may "feel fat" and fuse with such feelings to the point that she enters into a frantic binge-purge cycle. She impulsively acts out her feelings of self-disgust. Such binge-purge cycles eventually leave her feeling even more defeated later.

  Acting In (Passive Withdrawal): Billy's passive resignation to being bullied likely interfered with his long-term goals of being respected by his peers.

- ***W****hat Works:* Behaving in a way that prevents us from taking effective action to solve a problem:

  *Acting Out (Overreaction****):*** Such persons would rather be right than do what works. Like Joan, they "cut off their nose to spite their face," mistakenly believing the rightness of their position (or the wrongness of the other person) justifies destructive behavior. They are like the parable of the man who—instead of running—passionately argued he was a vegetarian to a bull that was about to charge[9]**.**

  Acting In (Passive Withdrawal): A man may fuse with feeling overwhelmed whenever he looks at all the housework that needs to be done. Such fusion causes the man to "shut down" rather than do what works (i.e., doing things one step at a time).

The third and final path of suffering, Fusion, is summarized by Figure 1.3.

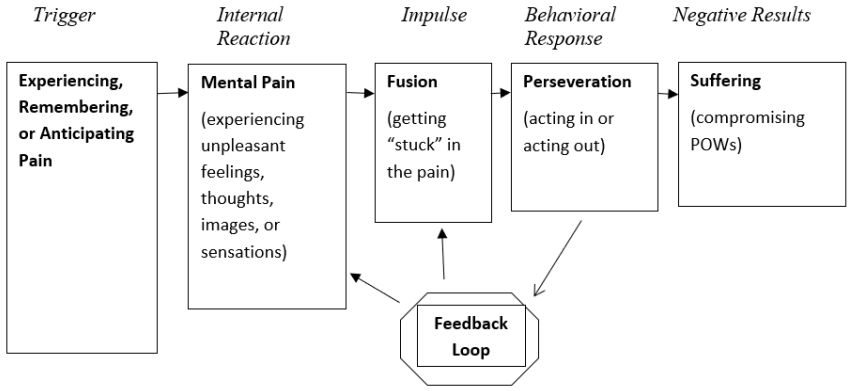


Figure 1.3: The Fusion Path of Suffering

The feedback loop created by perseverative behaviors (acting in or acting out) strengthens our tendency to fuse the next time we are in a similar situation.

A few points need to be made before moving on. It is worth emphasizing that fusion is not acceptance. Many people who wallow in their troubles say they are just "being honest" or "accepting reality", but – in reality – they're fused. They are perseverating by retreating within themselves. We'll define acceptance in the next chapter, but for right now, acceptance is acknowledging what life is, while keeping in mind what life can be (e.g., our power and our options). In other words, *acceptance is acknowledging what is while maintaining our mental flexibility*. In contrast, the people in the examples mentioned earlier fused with pain and neglected personal power, choice, and responsibility. This makes fusion its own kind of escape. After all, if we're fused with the idea that someone else did wrong, then we may not have to do something right. Similarly, if we've passively surrendered to our "fate", we may not have to try again and risk feeling disappointed. Fusion can momentarily free us from acting responsibly, which can make fusion a hard habit to break.

Misery Loves Company: How the Darts of Suffering Interact

The three paths of suffering don't always work alone; they interact with one another in increasingly-complex ways. We've already discussed how people who avoid something can fuse with that same something later. But fusion and avoidance are not the only paths capable of feeding off of one another. A person who spent too much money trying to relive his youth may also be avoiding the pain of getting older. A person who eats the second piece of cheesecake may also be avoiding thinking about something painful. The more a person clings to one thing, the more likely it is he or she is trying to avoid something else. As anyone who has overcome an addiction will tell you, clinging can provide a great distraction from pain.

In Newtonian physics, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. There are some psychological equivalents to this rule: the more psychological energy someone uses to push away from pain, the more that pain will rebound into fusion; the more energy used to fuse with pain, the more one will try to avoid that same pain later; and the energy used to cling now will become the energy used to avoid / fuse later. These are general rules (not as precise as those in physics), but we may rebound into more-complicated forms of suffering.

This means we aren't limited to simply one or two darts of suffering. A man may, for example, be passed over for a promotion at work, which causes him to feel angry, betrayed, and powerless (first dart). Before realizing it, the man fuses and overreacts by spreading unfair rumors about his boss (second dart). But spreading rumors creates additional feelings of shame, which he wants to escape. As a result, the man impulsively quits his job rather than deal with the consequences (third dart). Next, he drinks alcohol to both escape his shame and cling to pleasure (fourth dart).

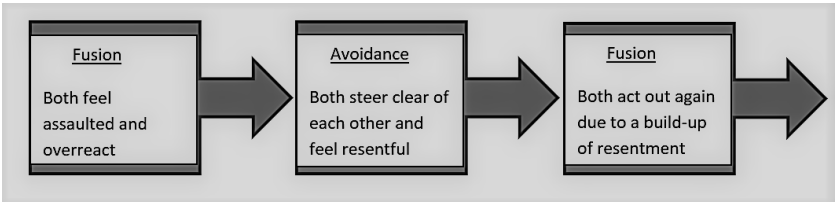
First Dart Pain related to being passed over for promotion
Second Dart Embarrassment about rumors he spread
Third Dart Shame about quitting his job (escape)
Fourth Dart Excessive alcohol use (clinging and escape)

All three paths of suffering are represented in this example, and they interact (or rebound) with each other to make things worse. Dart can be added upon dart, and suffering can be magnified. Unfortunately, many people don't see these patterns until it's too late. There are many different roads to suffering, but avoiding, craving, and fusing are the three common pathways.

Here is another quick example of how these common pathways interact to produce greater suffering.

> *A mother yells "I hate you too!" to a teen who yelled at her first. This causes both mother and daughter to fuse with their painful feelings. After the interaction is over (and several other nasty words are exchanged), the mother feels very guilty. But, rather than admit that she made a mistake, the mother spends the next few weeks working extra hours at her job so she and her daughter do not have to be around each other. Nothing is resolved. They never reconnect or work on what is now a fragile relationship. Eventually, something else sets one of them off and another yelling match ensues.*

This short story demonstrates the following sequence of suffering:



This diagram is incomplete. First, we don't know what caused the initial blow up. Also, we don't know how it will end. (Will one of them seek reconciliation or will the pattern continue?) Yet, for simplicity sake, this diagram is still a good summary.

Psychologists who write books are famous for making claims that turn out to be broad overgeneralizations. With full acknowledgement that I may be making the same mistake, here is my claim: *in isolation or combination, the three paths described in this chapter account for almost all human-created suffering.*

This is a bold statement that demands evidence. If the examples I've provided so far aren't enough, think back on some of your personal regrets. I am not talking about something bad that happened to you or someone you love (pain or first dart). I am talking about a time when you did something in reaction to the pain that you regret (suffering or second dart). I am willing to bet fusion, avoidance, or craving—or some combination thereof—was involved[10].

We all suffer because we're all programmed to resist pain and cling to pleasure. Way back in 1822, the philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously stated, "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as what we shall do." Once again, how we respond to the experience of our pain and the loss of our pleasure matters. Will we respond with greater resistance, or will we respond with something else? Escaping, clinging and/or perseverating are the three major forms of resistance. And resistance – in isolation or combination – creates suffering.

In contrast to greater resistance, the first step to becoming okay when you aren't okay is to develop greater awareness. Specifically, awareness of: (1) the nature of pain and suffering; and (2) the patterns of suffering that imprison you. This chapter summarized both points. The next chapter will define the "something else" response of acceptance and discuss how developing acceptance can sidestep the second, third, or more darts of suffering.

Chapter Summary

Life presents us with a paradox: *if you <u>are</u> okay with not being okay, you'll eventually be okay. In contrast, if you are <u>not</u> okay with not being okay, you won't be okay.* You may need to reread this sentence because it – like many paradoxes – sounds like nonsense, but it's true. If you're okay with not being okay, you'll be able to ride out your pain without doing something impulsive. But, if you're not okay with not being okay, you'll resist pain and – while under the influence of this resistance – shoot yourself in the ass. Our resistance creates additional darts of suffering (self-inflicted, ass-shot wounds). Spoken or unspoken, the words "*I can't stand it*!" are often the precursors to stupidity in otherwise smart people.

Time does not – by itself - heal all wounds. Time is only healing when it's joined with acceptance. Our task is to accept (vs. resist) the first dart of pain sooner rather than later. If not, we'll discover the easy way out of pain is the surest way back in.

"If I am doing the right thing, then why do I feel so bad?" a woman asked. She had recently broken up with a boyfriend, who had neglected and emotionally abused her for several years. "You feel bad because," her friend replied, "doing the 'right thing' often makes you feel bad in the short run; otherwise, everyone would do the 'right thing'."

She scoffed, but her good friend insisted, "Think about it. If 'doing the right thing' immediately made everyone feel good, then everyone would do the right thing. You feel crappy because you have chosen the chance for long-term happiness over the illusion of short-term happiness. You aren't crazy. Deep down you know in the coming days, weeks, and months, you are going to feel lonely and you don't want to experience that pain. I don't blame you. But such feelings are your badge of honor: your way of knowing you are doing the 'right thing'."

The woman who broke up with her boyfriend thought more deeply. "So," she said slowly, "if I'm going to be in pain, I might as well make the pain count."

A brilliant insight! In that moment, she became okay with not being okay. She was able—despite the difficulty of doing so—to accept the first dart of loneliness so she could minimize the second dart of suffering.

Pain counts when we're willing to accept it. But, most of the time, we aren't willing to do this. We don't want pain to count. We don't want it at all. We want to avoid even healthy pain, much to our own detriment. Yet, being able to accept pain (vs. continuing to resist it) is the ultimate path of freedom. We think the experience of pain and the loss of pleasure as being our greatest enemies; yet, as we'll see in the next chapter, they can become our greatest allies in a quest for personal freedom and growth.

Before reading on, you may wish to review the following table, which summarizes many of the concepts discussed in this chapter.

Half Truth	More Helpful Idea
"Only some people experience pain."	Everyone experiences pain. This is the nature of being human. Specifically, we create pain every time we remember (or think we may come in contact with) something unpleasant or lose something pleasurable.
"I shouldn't have to experience pain."	If you are alive, you'll experience pain. In fact, the idea that you "shouldn't have" pain will create suffering. If you truly believe all pain is intolerable, you'll just try harder to avoid it, and this is one of the major ways we create suffering.
"Only people who are dumb or morally weak transform pain into suffering."	To a greater or lesser extent, everyone transforms pain and pleasure into suffering. People only differ by how often they participate in suffering and by what their history/ temperament has taught them to find painful or pleasurable. (This will be explained more in Chapter 3).

"Pleasures should keep going."	All pleasures—even "noble pleasures"—are temporary, which may fill us with a sense of gratitude for them, not a sense of entitlement. Pleasures are nice, but we are not entitled to them. Besides, we've been indoctrinated by a consumer-oriented society to believe life should only be pleasurable. If we buy this idea, we may buy more products.
"To help end suffering, you should never avoid pain or seek pleasure."	Even though we may define the concepts differently, everyone seeks pleasure and avoids pain. In fact, it can be very helpful to avoid certain types of pains and seek certain pleasures. But suffering results when we rigidly avoid pain or cling to pleasure regardless of the cost. We can know if we are being psychologically rigid or inflexible when we ignore (1) our higher personal values or principles; (2) long-term consequences, and/or (3) solutions that may actually help solve the problem (POWs).
"To help end suffering, I should just not think about my problems."	This is just avoidance. If you do this long enough, ironically, you will eventually fuse with what you are trying to avoid when escape is no longer an option. This will be discussed more in the next chapter.
"I cannot 'be okay' if something is wrong with my life!"	Then you won't be okay. If you approach the pain of living from this standpoint, you'll become highly impulsive (avoiding, craving, fusing), and acting on these impulses will eventually lead to the second dart of suffering.

Notes

[1] The difference between pain and suffering cited here is influenced by some of the teachings of Buddhism; yet, similar teachings are found in many of the world's great religions. As mentioned in the introduction, this book does not require someone to be a Buddhist (or even religious); but, according to Buddhism, there are three forms of suffering: suffering that is obviously related to the original pain (*Dukkha-dukkha*); suffering that happens when pleasurable things pass away or change (*Viparinama-dukkha*); and suffering based on illusions (*Samkhara-dukkha*), like the illusion that pain is intolerable (see Robinson and Johnson reference). For simplicity's sake, I am lumping the first kind of suffering under the general category of pain and the last two under the category of suffering. Some subtle and important distinctions are overlooked, however, and I apologize for this admittedly gross oversimplification.

[2] A quote, attributed to the Buddha (Levine, 2010), states, "When touched with a feeling of pain, the ordinary person laments… becomes distraught… contracts… so he feels two pains… just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, right afterward, were to shoot him with another… so that he would feel the pains of two arrows…" In their book, *Buddha's Brain*, Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius expound on the first and second arrows or darts of suffering by saying, "First darts are unpleasant to be sure. But then we add or reactions to them. These reactions are 'second darts'—the ones we throw ourselves. Most of our suffering comes from second darts."

[3] In the behavioral sciences the avoidance path of suffering is referred to as negative reinforcement. It is "negative", not because it is bad, per se, but because something unpleasant is taken away through avoidance. In short, escape reinforces us to escape again. So why not use the term negative reinforcement? Because I have found that few people—including professional psychologists—are able to keep this definition in mind. Instead, when they hear "negative reinforcement" many people automatically think "punishment", even though someone who is negatively reinforced may feel anything but punished for escaping what they find aversive.

[4] The concepts of psychological rigidity and fusion are borrowed from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which was originated by Steven Hayes and his

colleagues. According to ACT, someone is psychologically healthy if he or she is (1) mentally flexible and (2) able to diffuse from internal reactions, like aversion (see Luoma, Hayes, & Walser, 2003). This will be expanded on in the next chapter.

[5] Is avoidance *always* unhealthy? No. When I put my hand on a hot stove, for instance, it's only right that I avoid further pain by pulling back my hand. But pulling back my hand is not suffering because it does not compromise POWs. I am not, for instance, compromising my principles by withdrawing my hand. I am not compromising my long-term interests by withdrawing my hand (in fact, I am serving them). And, because I am not interested in stubbornly proving how "wrong" the stove was to burn me, I am not compromising what works by withdrawing my hand. There is such a thing as healthy escape or avoidance. If you can honestly say that avoidance will not cost you your self-respect, future peace of mind, or a problem-solving opportunity, then you're probably not participating in the avoidance path of suffering.

[6] Most mental health disorders related to anxiety are based on the avoidance path of suffering. For instance, I have yet to meet an anxious patient who did not, on some level, practice avoidance and escape. What they fear seems too menacing to face directly. In contrast, it is more difficult to see avoidance at work when someone is angry. The angry person doesn't look like he is escaping because he is yelling (or worse). He appears to be meeting the pain "head on." But a closer look may tell a different story. A person may use his anger to control or escape underlying negative feelings that are perceived as intolerable. If a parent, for instance, is yelling at a wayward child, the parent may escape having to face underlying feelings of hurt or anxiety. Anger can be a very effective escape from other emotions that are perceived as far more dangerous.

[7] To a certain extent, the clinging path could be referred to as positive reinforcement (see note [3] above). It is "positive", not because it is good, but because something is added. Again, not many people seem to be able to keep this straight. When they hear, for instance, that someone was "positively reinforced" they assume that something good happened. But this is not always the case. It just means that something was *added* that made the behavior more likely to occur again.

[8] What many people call addictions are based on the craving impulse. Compulsive behaviors related to sex, shopping, eating, pornography, online gaming, and substance abuse are all based on the short-term "high" that such behaviors provide at the expense of "feeling good later." Although I mentioned anger as something related to avoidance, anger can also be related to craving. Being angry provides a rush for many people that can be as irresistible as any substance. Regret usually follows action, but, thanks to the feedback loop illustrated in Figure 1.2, change may not happen until the costs of not changing are severe, immediate, and undeniable.

[9] I learned this parable from Marsha Linehan, PhD, the innovator of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Among other things, DBT helps patients look beyond being right and consider what works. Doing so helps patient start to "build a life worth living," which will be covered in Part II.

[10] It is important that you acknowledge this very human tendency and do not shame yourself too much about it. After all, shame is painful and you may cope by avoiding. In other words, you may make up an excuse to stop reading or exploring your problems.

CHAPTER 2

Awareness and Acceptance: How to Start Making Life Better

"Ultimately happiness comes down to choosing between the discomfort of becoming aware of your mental afflictions and the discomfort of being ruled by them."

Yongey Mingyur Ripoche

Becoming okay when you're not okay is about developing awareness. If you're willing to experience the first discomfort ("…becoming aware of your mental afflictions…"), you'll be less governed by the second discomfort ("…being ruled by them"). While becoming aware of the first dart is painful, remaining unaware of it is worse. In Buddhism and other eastern cultures, willfully remaining unaware is sometimes called ignorance. And willful ignorance, as we saw at the end of the last chapter, makes you vulnerable to additional darts of suffering. In fact, a lack of awareness is one of the biggest obstacles to acceptance. If you stay in deliberate ignorance of your pain, how can you adequately cope with it?

Therefore, developing awareness—while, at times, painful—is the first step in the process of making life better. But certain habits of the human mind keep us sheltered in ignorance and "safe" from the discomfort of healthy awareness. The first habit is the habit of avoiding or pushing away mental pain.

Margaret silently sat in her chair for a long time as she looked numbly at the ground. It was the first time I had seen her as a therapy patient. After what seemed like an eternity, she volunteered, "I just don't understand why I did it." When I looked at her with a puzzled expression, she recounted how she had been a teacher at the same school for 20 years. For the last five years, she had worked under an oppressive principal that was critical, harsh, and threatening. Always the model of temperance, Margaret, for several years, had accepted her principal's harsh criticisms with grace and humor, but she had felt herself wearing down over the last few years. In retrospect, she recounted how she no longer looked forward to teaching. She never talked directly with her boss about her concerns because she rationalized, "It wouldn't help anyways."

One Friday morning, after a particularly negative meeting with her boss, Margaret walked passed her classroom, out to her car, and drove north. She had no goal in mind other than to get away. Her husband—floored by the uncharacteristic way Margaret had fled her job and the children she loved—found her near midnight on the side of the highway of an adjoining state. Margaret's gas tank was empty, and she had a dead cell phone battery that had managed one last call for help before being completely out of power...

Although her husband may have been surprised, no one was more shocked than Margaret. She had never done anything so "irresponsible," and she felt intense shame. Piece by piece, we began to reconstruct the source of Margaret's impulsive behavior. She was aware of hating her job, but she had also developed the habit of *mentally* escaping from her job years before she had *physically* escaped from her job.

Suffering in Silence

In the last chapter, I implied that suffering is related to action. Most of the examples, for instance, illustrate people *behaving* in ways that reinforced one of the three paths of suffering. But suffering is not just related to our actions. In fact, suffering can happen totally within the confines of our minds.

This idea first became clear to me through a personal experience. I've always been a nervous flyer. I am capable of flying on an airplane, but,

despite what I rationally know about the relative safety of air travel, I am still anxious. While I was interviewing for a postdoctoral fellowship, I was doing a lot of flying. At one point, I took six different flights in the space of about a week. Nothing bad happened on any of these flights; they weren't particularly turbulent, which is usually my problem with air travel. Despite how uneventful these flights were, I noticed something alarming: with each successive flight, my fear was getting worse, not better. This left me feeling both personally anxious and professionally confused. Why was my anxiety getting worse? I was doing more flying, not less. I wasn't "escaping" what I feared. I was facing it. Shouldn't I be getting *more* comfortable or desensitized to flying? Yet, I was feeling worse. Was my face-your-fears motto flawed?

Before abandoning my professional beliefs, I paid closer attention to what was happening in my mind. There I was at 30,000 feet reading a book. Suddenly, unexplained turbulence would rock the airplane. What did I do? I stopped reading, closed my eyes, and did relaxation techniques: I took deep breaths and imagined myself in a more-comfortable place. Since the up-and-down sensations you experience on a jet ski mirrors the sensations of air turbulence, I would visualize myself on a jet ski. Once I got into this image, my anxiety would go down… at least temporarily.

While doing this seemed to help at first, it actually made my anxiety worse because I was still escaping. I was just escaping mentally instead of escaping physically. The human brain doesn't make much of a distinction between actual avoidance and mental avoidance, and my visualization and relaxation techniques were still serving avoidance.

This process also happens in the fusion path of suffering. People mentally fuse with pain long before they act out the chaos, confusion, or hatred they experience inside.

> *"I didn't have to do this. I could have left. I could have fled. But no, I will no longer run… When the time came, I did it. I had to… You had 100 billion chances and ways to have avoided today but you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off…"*

This quote is taken from the videotaped manifesto of Cho Seug-Hui. On the morning of April 16th, 2007, Seung-Hui, a senior at *Virginia Tech University*, shot and killed 32 people and wounded 17 others before taking his own life. While many of us experience anger, and even rage, we wonder how a person could act out such a violent fantasy and, in the process, blame his victims.

There have always been (and probably always will be) people who are disconnected and angry. They perceive themselves as victims, and, by logical extension, everyone else as perpetrators. "Guns don't shoot people," we are reminded, "People shoot people." Actually, people don't shoot people. People shoot objects. Seung-Hui wasn't, for instance, shooting other people. He was shooting jocks. He was shooting bullies. He was shooting his persecutors. This tragic example emphasizes the cost of mental craving and fusion. Eventually, we find ourselves labeling others in a way that dehumanizes them. And once we are successful at labeling others, a very small minority of us can justify the unthinkable. Most of the time, the positive emotional ties we form with others (ties Seung-Hui did not have) keep us psychologically grounded and intact. Yet, mental rehearsal, in the form of either craving or fusion, can create a lot of suffering.

Why Ignoring Pain Doesn't Work

While mental rehearsal can create problems, let's return to mental avoidance. When I teach the concept of how pain turns into suffering, some of my patients assume I am trying to say they should ignore pain by pretending they are "fine" or that the problem is "no big deal." Let me be clear: this is *not* what I am saying. Being okay with not being okay doesn't mean we ignore what is wrong. Ignoring pain is just another way of avoiding it, and there is usually a price to be paid. Margaret, for instance, tried to ignore her feelings for years, until the price of ignoring caught up with her, and she fused with her pain to the point that she attempted to escape her responsibilities completely.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could selectively repress our feelings? Kind of like eating at a buffet. ("*Oh… let's see…I'll have some joy and contentment, and I'll leave the yucky fear and self-doubt….*") To illustrate why mental avoidance or ignoring doesn't work, engage with me in a mental exercise. Imagine a five-year-old child is sitting beside you as you read. She is happily drawing a picture with crayons and all is well. Suddenly, a glass of water tips over and splashes all over the picture—ruining it immediately. The child begins to cry. But, because the sound of crying is painful, you ignore her. You simply try to pretend she is not there. What would happen? Assuming the child isn't fearful of being abused, wouldn't she cry more? Only when you acknowledged her pain ("*Oh, that is too bad. Let me help you.*") would she begin to calm down.

So, it is with our emotional self. Our emotional selves aren't much different from a hurt five-year-old. Telling the emotional child inside you to "shut up" only makes her cry more. Ignoring her only makes her cry more. Telling her why the spoiled picture isn't "a big deal" only makes her cry more. Worse still, threatening her by saying you'll "give her something to cry about" will make things more complicated. *Emotionally speaking, ignoring, or minimizing a problem and avoiding a problem are identical.* We can tell ourselves again and again how the pain isn't there, but our emotional selves are not fooled. The pain is only intensified and suffering is likely because we will do something impulsive (e.g., shopping, binging on food) to blunt our feelings.

Our emotional selves are like a young child in pain; our mental pain needs to be acknowledged or it will intensify as a way to get our attention. Sadly, emotions cannot be selectively ignored; we are either alive or we are numb. Besides, old hurts may not resolve with time – especially if we are invested in ignoring them or pretending they don't exist. Ignoring pain is <u>not</u> the same thing as accepting pain. An old saying puts it well: "That which we resist, persists."

<u>Acknowledging – Not Ignoring – Pain</u>

On a flight to Philadelphia, I remember making a conscious decision to no longer mentally avoid my fear of flying. The flight was very crowded, I was seated near the back of the plane, and the turbulence was constant. In fact,

the fasten seatbelt light was never extinguished. For two and a half hours, I was rocked back and forth by turbulence, but I was committed to not escaping again. Instead, I allowed myself to experience my fear fully and without resistance. When the airplane would jostle, I would allow myself to experience the movement, and willed the next moment to be even more intense. I remember silently saying to myself, "*Bring it on*."

I felt a little silly saying this and the first 30 to 40 minutes were unpleasant, but then I noticed a change that's difficult to describe. As I refused to mentally flee from my pain, I noticed that my attitude toward the pain subtly – yet powerfully – shifted. I was aware of my anxiety and the turbulence, but I became almost *bored* with it. Both were still there, of course, but now I didn't feel the need to push them away. Both were simply there, and I was okay with not being okay. After about an hour, I became accustomed to the turbulence and was able to read my book. I still experience some anxiety when I fly, but it has never been quite the same. I am able to exist with my pain because I am okay with it. And that shift has made all the difference.

Instead of pushing away mental pain, we need to be willing to acknowledge it—no matter how ugly it may be; no matter how much we may not want or deserve it. In the process of doing this, our emotional selves or internal five-year olds feel heard and understood. Doing this is obviously painful (the first dart of pain), but the alternative is worse (two or more darts of suffering). If we don't have the courage to acknowledge our pain, our emotional selves never grow up. People may tell themselves they are "moving on" or they are "over" something, but what they often mean is that they are pretending it never happened or that it didn't matter. This is a beautiful fantasy, and I don't blame anyone for believing in it. Wouldn't it be great if we could simply tell each other to stop thinking about our pain and then it would magically go away? But if this worked, I wouldn't have a job. In fact, the following magical dialogue would take place between me and pretty much all of my anxious patients:

Patient: *"I have these horrible worries, doc!"*

Me: *"Well, have you tried not thinking about them?"*

Patient: *"Well—now that you mention it—no; I haven't! You're a genius!"*

Me: *"Thank you. And just remember if the worry comes back then there is always alcohol, or excessive exercise, or excessive working, etc…"*

Ironically, ignoring emotional pain is the best way to keep it alive because it ultimately transforms into suffering. What we need is a different *relationship* toward our pain. Instead of ignoring our pain, we can acknowledge our pain. The discomfort of becoming aware of our pain is often the price that needs to be paid; otherwise, our pain will continue to define us.

The Pain of Awareness

Chapter 1 was designed to make you aware, which may have been why it was hard to read. In some ways, it would be easier to stay in ignorance; there is less pain and less guilt that way. But we have to become aware before we can respond to our impulses differently. We cannot stop ourselves from escaping if we're unaware of what we avoid. We cannot stop ourselves from clinging if we remain oblivious of what we crave. We cannot stop ourselves from perseverating if we refuse to see how we fuse. To preempt suffering, we have to slow down the avoidance, clinging, and fusion paths of suffering. And this only happens by experiencing the pain of awareness.

The first step is to identify what you avoid. As described by psychologist Daniel Siegel (2012), mental pain is made up of four different internal reactions, which are summarized by the acronym SIFT[1]:

- **S**ensations: Bodily or physiological reactions we find painful or unpleasant, like a rapid heartbeat, a tightness in our chest, emptiness in our stomach, or sweaty palms.

- **I**mages or Memories: Visual images or pictures—real or imagined—that we find painful, like catastrophic images about being rejected or humiliated. This category also includes memories that we find painful, like memories of our parents fighting or being dumped by a former lover.

- **F**eelings: Emotions we find painful or unpleasant, like shame, guilt, fear, annoyance, or frustration. As will be discussed more in Chapter 3, most of us were raised in families where certain emotions were okay and other emotions were forbidden. For most people, forbidden emotions, like anger or shame, are especially painful.

- **T**houghts: Automatic thoughts that pop into our mind when we are in pain. These automatic thoughts are snap judgments that cause the sense of mental pain to grow, like "*I can't stand it anymore!*"

The next step is to use the SIFT acronym to identify pleasures that produce craving (pleasures that are difficult to let go of). Remember that there may be nothing wrong with the pleasure or how it makes you feel. The problem may lie in how tightly you cling to it. Ask yourself, "*What would I do if I was clinging—not just appreciating—this pleasure?*"

- **S**ensations: Physiological reactions we crave, like relaxation, excitement, or sexual arousal.

- **I**mages or Memories: Visual images we crave, like "telling off" someone we dislike or being admired by others. Images also includes memories, like times when we felt "in charge" or relaxing on a vacation.

- **F**eelings: Emotions that are pleasurable, like calmness, joy, excitement, and satisfaction.

- **T**houghts: We enjoy nurturing some automatic thoughts. These "pet" thoughts may be positive ("*I know what I'm doing*") or judgmental/ pessimistic ("*She deserves exactly what she got!"; "I knew it!")*").

Pleasurable SIFT leads to craving, and craving, if left unchecked, can lead to clinging. Clinging could be a behavior, like "asking for more", "spending more money", or "getting high." However, mental examples of clinging include "obsessively rehearsing revenge fantasies" or "repetitively think about getting high." Even mental clinging brings short-term pleasure; otherwise, we wouldn't do it.

The final step is to identify SIFT that creates fusion. Fusion leads to perseveration, and when you perseverate you either *act in* by shaming yourself or *act out* by reacting in a way that is frantically over-the-top. Both acting in and acting out make the situation worse. (Because the experience of fusion is also aversive, some of your SIFT may be similar to what you identified related to avoidance.)

- **S**ensations: Bodily or physiological reactions we find painful or unpleasant, like restlessness or low energy.

- **I**mages or Memories: Visual images or pictures—real or imagined—that we find painful, like catastrophic images about being rejected or humiliated. This category also includes memories that we find painful, like memories of being treated unjustly.

- **F**eelings: Emotions we find painful or unpleasant, like shame, guilt, fear, annoyance, or frustration. After trying to ignore our forbidden emotions, we fuse with them.

- **T**houghts: Automatic thoughts that pop into our mind. Again, these are judgmental thoughts that pull us into the pain even more, like, "*I can't let her get away with it!*"

Daniel Siegel talks about "sifting the mind" (2003). As I am using this term, sifting the mind means to: (1) know the situations that trigger painful or pleasurable SIFT; and (2) be aware of the SIFT that lead to avoidance, craving, and/or fusion.

When SIFTing the mind, it's important to know that avoidance and fusion are sometimes interchangeable. This means that, when it comes to mental pain, sometimes you fuse with SIFT and sometimes you avoid the same SIFT. It may be helpful to ask yourself:

> *"What comes first? Do I first avoid thinking about something and then fuse with it when ignoring the problem stops working? Or, do I fuse or get stuck first, and then have such a bad taste in my mouth that I avoid thinking about it later?"*

It is quite common to switch between avoidance and fusion. In fact, as mentioned in the last chapter, there is a Newtonian-like, rebound effect between them; yet, being non-judgmentally aware of SIFT sets the stage for acceptance.

The Promise (and Problem) of Acceptance

Once we have awareness of SIFT, we can start developing acceptance. But, other than a few comments in the introduction, I haven't defined what I mean by acceptance. Part of the confusion may stem from the fact that there isn't a good word in English that captures the true essence of healthy acceptance. In fact, the word "acceptance" now has a lot of baggage. Concepts ranging from harsh commands, like "get over it", to cartoon characters naively singing "Let it Go" are now captured by the word acceptance. Therefore, let me use a metaphor[2] to describe how I'll be using the word.

The Metaphor of the Rose

Imagine in your hand is a beautiful rose with only a few thorns on its stem. Now imagine you wrap your hand around this rose, being careful to avoid the thorns. You're taking such pleasure in the rose that you grip it tightly. This stance is symbolic of craving (see Figure 2.1). Yet, if someone or something were to forcibly rip the rose from your hand, the thorns on the stem would cut into you, damaging your hand severely. Unfortunately, all pleasures, either by natural cause or by choice, will end. If we cling to them too tightly or rigidly, suffering will result.

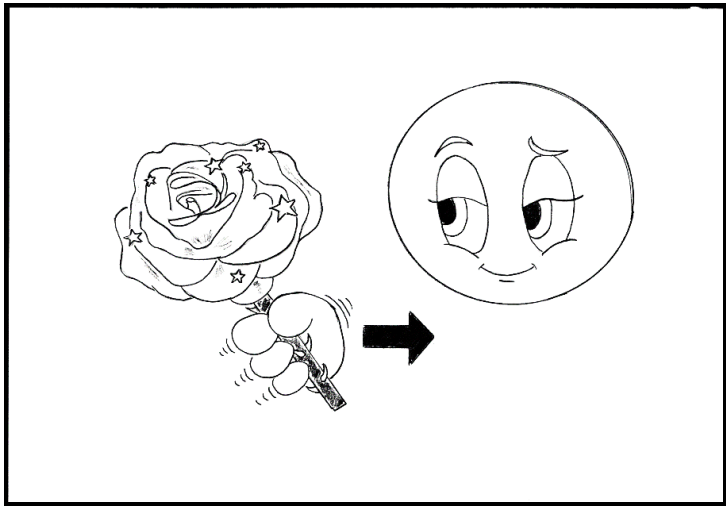


Figure 2.1: Craving

Now imagine another rose, but this one is decaying. It smells unpleasant and is covered in thorns. It reminds us of death, and we want nothing to do with it. What happens? Imagine taking the same hand, but now you are pushing against the rose. Imagine giving the rose the "straight arm" treatment, as if it was a tackler of an opposing football team. With all your mental might you push against the decaying rose to keep it away. This is symbolic of avoidance (see Figure 2.2). Yet, as you desperately push against the rose and turn your head away from it, two problems are created. First, you are expending all of your mental energy to keep it away; you have no

energy left for anything else. Second, you are damaging your hand as, once again, the thorns cut into your flesh. The cruelty of avoidance is that when we ignore or push away from something unpleasant we give it more (not less) psychological power, and we hurt ourselves in the process.

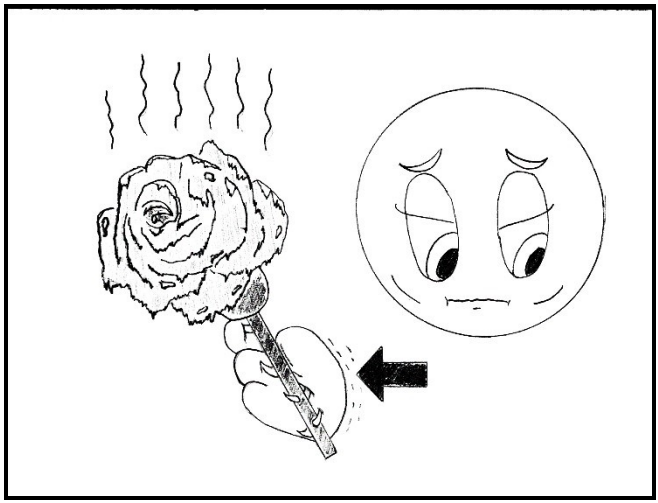


Figure 2.2: Avoidance

Next, let's say we grow tired of pushing against the decaying rose. Instead of trying to push it away, we put it right in front of our face. Now we can see nothing but death and decay. We passively withdraw into a world-view that perceives only the dead rose. As a result, we either give up or overreact because we "just can't stand it anymore." *This is symbolic of fusion* (see Figure 2.3).

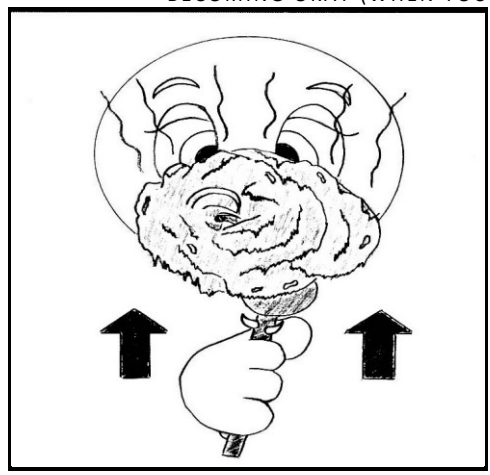


Figure 2.3: Fusion

Finally, consider the last option: acceptance. To illustrate acceptance, imagine you're sitting with your hand out and your palm facing up. Once again, the beautiful rose is placed in your hand. While it's there you notice and appreciate it, but you don't cling to it tightly by wrapping your fist around it, as you did before. When the end comes and the pleasure is over, it is taken out of your hand. You notice the loss—which is still painful—but you aren't nearly as hurt as you would have been if you had grasped it tightly (see Figure 2.4).

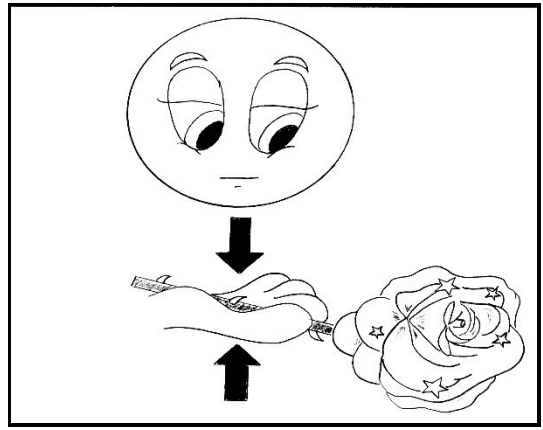


Figure 2.4: Acceptance for Pleasant Rose

Now imagine you are in the same posture as before (hand out, palm up), but this time the decaying rose is placed in your hand. Your first impulse is to turn your head (ignoring) or to push it away (avoidance), but you remind yourself the pain of seeing and smelling the dead flower can be tolerated. You notice the thorns are still biting into your hand a little and you are uncomfortable with the smell, *but you no longer have to spend energy fighting the decaying rose or trying to ignore it*. Furthermore, you aren't experiencing the additional hurt that would come by pushing the flower away. You also aren't putting the rose right up to your face (fusion). Instead, you are stepping away from it enough to see other things. You're in a place where you can acknowledge the painful SIFT; yet, you are also mentally flexible enough that your world is not defined by them. You maintain your perspective (see Figure 2.5). This last stance is what is meant by acceptance: we gently acknowledge pain with compassion and flexibility or appreciate pleasure without clinging.

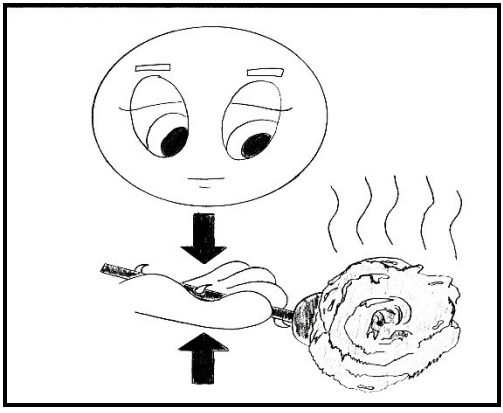


Figure 2.5: Acceptance with Unpleasant Rose

Part of the reason why I like this metaphor is because acceptance can be difficult to describe. Acceptance does *not* mean we like or deserve the experience of pain. It also does *not* mean we like losing something pleasurable. It does, however, mean that experiencing pain or losing pleasure are facts of living, and we do not rigidly resist either of these facts. Some writers have described acceptance as a willingness to accept what is, without adding to or taking away anything. Instead of reacting to our pain,

we acknowledge it. Acceptance has been described this way (Hanson and Mendius, 2009):

> In the pleasant there is just the pleasant with no reaction added
> In the unpleasant there is just the unpleasant with no reaction added
> In the neutral there is just the neutral with no reaction added
> We rest in awareness, free of reactions (p. 111)

To a certain degree, acceptance is acknowledgment without additional reaction. How do we react? We resist. We chase. We judge. We ignore.

We resist when we tell ourselves our pain should not be. We tell ourselves that we are entitled to a pain-free life or a life full of pleasure. We consume ourselves with the idea that life has ripped us off, and we have been wronged. It may be true that we have been treated wrongfully, but being consumed by this idea leads to suffering.

We chase when we grasp at pleasure because of the fantasy that pleasure should always be at our fingertips. We chase when we delude ourselves into thinking life should be a certain way. We chase when we pursue something (or someone) despite all the evidence that such a chase will end badly.

We judge when we use words like "terrible" and "horrible" to describe our feelings. Such words increase our pain by making the perception of pain even more intolerable. There is a difference between acknowledging pain and foolishly trying to judge pain out of existence by emphasizing its significance. When a five-year-old child scrapes his knee for the first time, he cries and seeks comfort from a parent. Yet, most of the child's pain is not based on the blood or wound—as real as both may be. Most of the child's pain is based on fusion; the wound should not be—it is terrible and terrifying. With time and experience, the child will still feel the pain, but he will have perspective or greater distance from the decaying rose of a knee scrape.

We ignore by metaphorically turning our head away from the decaying rose and pretending it isn't there. We ignore by refusing to acknowledge pain and pretending everything is "fine." Maybe if we don't acknowledge the metaphorical sliver in our finger, we won't have to use the tweezers to pluck

it out? We ignore the crying five-year-old, hoping—despite all our experience to the contrary—that he or she will get the hint and just go away.

But our thoughts, feelings, memories, and sensations are only that: temporary internal reactions that will come and go. But this will never happen if we don't acknowledge them. Steven Hayes and his colleagues stated, "Acceptance involves an abandonment of change agendas and an active process of feeling feelings as feelings, thoughts as thoughts, and memories as memories" (Hayes et al, 77). The core of acceptance is being willing to acknowledge feelings, thoughts, memories, and bodily sensations (SIFT), without reacting to them or attempting to change them. Put another way, acceptance is an attitude of willingness; a willingness to acknowledge what is rather than resist what is. It is keeping an "open palm" attitude rather than grasping or pushing away the rose life has placed in our hands. As stated by the Buddha, *"*Through our senses the world appears. Through our reactions we create delusions. Without reactions *[resisting, chasing, judging, ignoring]* the world becomes clear" *(italics added).*

Acceptance is the way we become okay when we're not okay[3].

The quicker you accept and tolerate pain, the less you suffer. The quicker you accept that pleasure is temporary and let go of the fantasy it should last indefinitely, the less you suffer. The quicker you step back from what you are fused with, the less you suffer. We have preempted suffering because we have preempted avoiding, craving, and fusing—the three primary paths of resistance.

<u>Why Acceptance Isn't So Easy</u>

One might ask, "So, why doesn't everyone learn acceptance?" Why doesn't everyone acknowledge pain with a gentle, 'palms-up' approach so it can naturally fade over time? Why doesn't everyone let go of pleasures when it is healthy to do so? In short, if acceptance is so helpful, why don't we use it more often?"

Answer: Because we aren't designed to.

As we discussed in Chapter 1, acceptance is hard because escaping and clinging feel good in the short run and sometimes provide some short-term benefit. But the answer runs deeper. In truth, humans aren't designed to be accepting creatures. It isn't in our DNA. It doesn't come natural to anyone. Acceptance has to be learned because those of our ancestors who were very good at avoiding pain, for instance, tended to survive. In contrast, those of the developing human species who were not very good at avoiding pain were presumably wiped out. Therefore, it is only natural you and I react strongly and impulsively when we experience (or think we may experience) pain or loss. Our impulses are natural and understandable. They do not go quietly into the night with clichés like, "life isn't fair." Life may not be fair, but we still act as if it *should* be. Ultimately, our refusal to accept the unfairness of life is part of the reason why pain is so painful.

Because we react so strongly to pain, we sometimes have a negative bias for it. This means we look for signs of pain and overlook everything else. A man, for instance, who is paranoid that his wife will leave him may look for signs of infidelity (the caller ID states the name of a male caller the husband does not know) and overlook signs of his wife's affection (she tells him how much she appreciates him, she gives him a hug or a smile). This tendency to focus on the negative at the expense of the positive also served our ancestors well. If you were an ancient human, you would have been smart to assume every twig snap was a tiger. It didn't matter if you didn't actually see a tiger because the chance of you being eaten by a tiger diminished if you learned how to overgeneralize by "seeing" tigers everywhere.

The good news is our tendency to overgeneralize has allowed us to survive. The bad news? We still act like tigers are everywhere. The emotional brain of humans, which will be described more in Chapter 6, is like a small, yappy dog that lives in our minds. This dog—like most small, yappy dogs—barks at everything[4]**.** If there is a fly in the house, our inner Chihuahua starts yapping as if an intruder broke in… and the house was on fire…. while there was an earthquake…. during the zombie apocalypse. Some people try to shut the dog up by trying to distract it or trank it with a blow-dart (consume a lot of alcohol, get stoned, play games for hours on the internet, use doctor-prescribed sedatives, etc…), but eventually the dog wakes up—and typically with a vengeance. For both good and ill, we are designed with a memory and

information processing system that serves overgeneralization—not wisdom. In Chapter 4 we'll see how this tendency to selectively remember information creates problems, but the first thing we have to accept is that acceptance is hard.

Chapter Summary

A rigid insistence on feeling good now at the expense of feeling good later is the root of suffering. Pain or pleasure isn't the problem: our unwillingness to accept pain or lose pleasure is the problem. But acceptance is the antidote for suffering. Unlike the three paths of suffering described in Chapter 1, acceptance is the path to freedom; it is the way to become okay when you aren't okay. Yet it is also a path that requires conscious practice and effort. Don't be intimidated. This chapter gave you only a taste of what is to come. All of Part II is dedicated to helping you develop acceptance, which is crucial in redirecting your life away from the paths of suffering.

Acceptance may be a simple concept to understand, but certain tendencies of the human mind make it hard to practice. The first tendency is poor awareness; consequently, the first two chapters of this book were designed to help increase your awareness. Yet, other tendencies of the mind still need to be explored. These tendencies include: (1) what we learned from our past (see Chapter 3); (2) how we remember and process information (see Chapter 4); and (3) how self-destructive habits may have developed (see Chapter 5). In the next chapter, we'll discuss how our personal learning histories may block acceptance and trigger suffering.

The following is a summary of what we have discussed in Chapter 2.

Half Truth	More Helpful Idea
"We avoid, cling, or fuse only with our actions or behaviors."	It is actually possible to do all three mentally. When we are mentally avoiding our **S**ensations, **I**mages/memories, **F**eelings or **T**houghts (SIFT), for example, we're still avoiding or escaping. When we rehearse things in our mind uselessly and ineffectively, we're still clinging or fusing. Mental — not just behavioral — avoidance, clinging, or fusing can also cause suffering.
"If I ignore pain, it will go away."	Like the example of the crying child, ignoring emotional pain is just another way of avoiding it. If you ignore an ongoing emotional pain, it will just intensify until you either acknowledge it or do something impulsive to blunt your feelings (drink alcohol, spend too much time at work, develop an addictive behavior). Ignoring your pain is another way of "not being okay with not being okay."
"Accepting pain means I either want or deserve the pain."	Neither is true. Acceptance means having a gentle, "palms up" attitude towards our pain (see metaphor of the rose). Plus, everyone experiences pain so aren't you in good company?
"But I really do deserve the pain because I really did screw up…"	This is an example of fusion. Maybe you really did make a mistake that you feel terrible about. Yet, it is possible to take responsibility for your actions and still not get stuck in fusion. Taking responsibility and shaming yourself are not the same thing. Furthermore, does judging your pain make it go away? If so, why are you still reading this book? Just try (again) to judge it out of existence. Go ahead… this book will still be here for you when doing so doesn't work.

"I didn't screw up. I'm the victim. Doesn't acceptance mean I'm letting someone else off the hook?"	No. They can still be held accountable, while you get to relinquish a poison that may fester into revenge (craving) or perpetual victimhood (fusion). Injustice needs to be acknowledged and (when possible) remedied, but are you really being served by remaining a victim? Being a victim generally never serves the person; it only serves fusion, avoidance or craving.
"Acceptance is easy."	The need for acceptance may be easy to see in others, but it can be difficult to develop in ourselves. Avoiding, clinging, and fusing are rewarding in the short run. Additionally, humans are designed suffer because, in our distant past, all three paths increased our chances for survival.

Notes

[1] Notice that in the acronym SIFT, Feelings follow Sensations and Images. This is intentional. Levine (2010), for instance, argues that feelings are often *thwarted* sensations. If you see a bear in the woods, you automatically experience the sensations of a rapid hear-beat and constriction of muscles. You can also easily imagine yourself being eaten. As long as you're running away from the bear, you're too busy experiencing sensations and images to *feel* anything. You only experience feelings of terror after you've gotten away or when the bear is catching up. In citing research on negative emotions, Levine states, "All of the negative emotions studied were comprised of two conflicting impulses, one propelling action and the other inhibiting (i.e., thwarting) that action" (pp. 333 – 334). This suggests that feelings and impulses go together. From an evolutionary perspective, feelings developed as a way to orient our species towards sources of pleasure or pain; presumably to prepare us to act in relationship to them. This assumes some kind of valuation process, which usually *precedes* conscious thought. Therefore, feelings are like mini-judgments that prepare you to act. This is probably also why T comes last in the SIFT acronym: many patients report experiencing sensations, images, feelings/impulses far before experiencing anything resembling conscious, identifiable thought.

[2] I cannot take credit for this metaphor, but I have lost the specific reference. I apologize for this; yet, a good summary of "non-grasping" —which is the Buddhist ideal the rose metaphor is based on—is described by Lieu Phap on the following website: http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha017.htm (accessed September 2014).

[3] Allow me to return to an example from Chapter 1 to illustrate how acceptance could have helped. Remember the woman whose boyfriend dumped her, and she cut herself as a way to get even? Let's suppose she was my patient and I was magically by her side at the moment of the dumping. Before she cut herself, I probably would have encouraged her to allow her pain and have a good cry. Other than being generally supportive and encouraging her to call over some of her girlfriends, I probably would have said little to minimize her pain. She got dumped. Of course, she was upset. She was entitled to her pain. Yet, without her reacting to her pain by cutting, the pain would have gradually diminished over time, and she would have been able to avoid further suffering.

[4] I am indebted to Tamar Chansky (2012) for this metaphor, which she uses effectively to describe the neurobiology of many anxiety disorders.

[End of Sample]