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ACCEPTANCE AND WILLINGNESS

(From Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life, by Steven C. Hayes)

“Accept” comes from the Latin root “*capere*” meaning “take.” Acceptance is the act of receiving or “taking what is offered.” Sometimes, in English, “accept” means “to tolerate or resign yourself” (as in, “I guess I have to accept that”), and that is precisely *not* what is meant here. By “accept,” we mean something more like “taking completely, in the moment, without defense.”

We use the word “willing” as a synonym for “accepting” to stay true to that meaning of accept. “Willing” is one of the older words in the English language. It comes from an ancient root meaning “to choose.” Thus “acceptance” and “willingness” can be understood as an answer to this question: “Will you take me in as I am?” Acceptance and willingness are the opposite of effortful control.

What follows is a description of what “to take me in as I am” really means.

In our context, the words willingness and acceptance mean to respond actively to your feelings by feeling them, literally, much as you might reach out and literally feel the texture of a cashmere sweater. They mean to respond actively to your thoughts by thinking them, much as you might read poetry just to get the flow of the words, or an actor might rehearse lines to get a feel for the playwright's intent.

To be willing and accepting means to respond actively to memories by remembering them, much as you might take a friend to see a movie you've already seen. They mean to respond actively to bodily sensations by sensing them, much as you might take an all-over stretch in the morning just to feel your body all over. Willingness and acceptance mean adopting a gentle, loving posture toward yourself, your history, and your programming so that it becomes more likely for you simply to be aware of your own experience, much as you would hold a fragile object in your hand and contemplate it closely and dispassionately.

The goal of willingness is not to feel better. The goal is to open up yourself to the vitality of the moment, and to move more effectively toward what you value. Said another way, the goal of willingness is to feel all of the feelings that come up for you more completely, even - or especially - the bad feelings, so that you can live your life more completely. In essence, instead of trying to feel *better*, willingness involves learning how to *feel* better.

To be willing and accepting is to gently push your fingers into the Chinese finger trap in order to make more room for yourself to live in, rather than vainly struggling against your experience by trying to pull your fingers out of the trap. To be willing and accepting means to give yourself enough room to breathe.

By assuming the stance of willingness and acceptance you can open all the blinds and the windows in your house and allow life to flow through; you let fresh air and light enter into what was previously closed and dark. To be willing and accepting means to be

able to walk through the swamps of your difficult history when the swamps are directly on the path that goes in a direction you care about.

To be willing and accepting means noticing that you are the sky, not the clouds; the ocean, not the waves. It means noticing that you are large enough to contain all of your experiences, just as the sky can contain any cloud and the ocean any wave.

Don't expect this foray into poetic metaphors to make any difference yet. But the sense conveyed by them may give you an idea of what you are aiming for in pursuing acceptance in this article.

If you find your mind agreeing or resisting, just thank your mind for the thought. Your mind is welcome to come along for the ride. But willingness and acceptance are states of being that minds can never learn how to achieve. Even if your mind can't learn how to be willing and accepting, *you* can learn.

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Experiencing Anxiety & Depressing: “Hmmm. So, if I'm not willing to experience anxiety or depression, I will be anxious or depressed. I suppose that means if I were more willing to experience feelings of anxiety or depression, I might not feel so anxious or depressed. I hate feeling anxious or depressed, so I guess I could give it a try. I'll try to be more willing to feel my anxiety or depression so I won't feel so anxious or depressed.” With that, the thought trap slams down around you, because if you are willing to experience your anxiety or depression only in order to become less anxious or depressed, then you are not really willing to experience anxiety or depression, and you will become even more anxious or depressed!

This is not psychobabble. Read the sentences again. Yes, they are paradoxical, but the paradox seems to be true. Those sentences demonstrate the merry-go-round ride that can result from trying to force the mind to do something it can't do. If the only reason you're willing to allow yourself to feel anxiety or depression today is the hope that feeling it today will free you from the necessity of feeling it in the future, then it can't work. Because what your “willingness” here really means is you don't want to feel anxiety or depression, and you'll try to jump through all kinds of mental hoops not to feel it. That's not the same as being willing to feel your anxiety or depression.

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The scientific literature is filled with evidence that the person's willingness to experience whatever emotion is present is of central importance to many areas of human psychological functioning.

So, why is willingness so important? Perhaps some first person accounts of the importance of willingness will be more convincing than our capsule review of the literature.

Why willingness...

Because when I am struggling against my painful experiences, the struggle seems to make them all the more painful.

Because when I move away from the pain that I meet when I'm pursuing what I value most, I also move away from the richness of life that those valued actions bring to me.

Because when I try to close myself off from the painful parts of my past, I also close myself off from the helpful things I've learned from my past.

Because I experience a loss of vitality when I am not willing.

Because my experience tells me that being unwilling just doesn't work.

Because it is a normal human process to feel pain, and it is inhumane and unloving to try to hold myself to a different standard.

Because "living in my experience," that is, living in the moment, seems potentially more rewarding than "living in my mind."

Because I absolutely know how my pain works when I am unwilling, and I'm sick and tired of it. It's time to change my whole agenda, not just the moves I make inside a control and avoidance agenda.

Because I have suffered enough.

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The Goal of Willingness

The goal of willingness is *flexibility*. When you are able to be fully present in the here and now without being judgmental or without pushing away experiences (thoughts, feelings, emotions, bodily sensations, and so on) you have much more freedom to take needed steps to action. If you are willing to have an emotion, feeling, thought, or memory instead of attempting to control it, then the agenda of control is undermined, and you are free from the inevitable by-products of this agenda. These by-products are fairly predictable. First, you lose the war with your own internal content. If you refuse to have that internal content, you've got it. If you aren't willing to lose it, you've lost it. Next, you lose the ability to control your own behavior in a flexible and effective way.

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What Willingness Is and Is Not

Willingness is:

Holding your pain as you would hold a delicate flower in your hand;

Embracing your pain as you would embrace a crying child;

Sitting with your pain the way you would sit with a person who has a serious illness;

Looking at your pain the way you would look at an incredible painting;

Walking with your pain the way you would walk while carrying a sobbing infant;

Honoring your pain the way you would honor a friend by listening;

Inhaling your pain the way you would take a deep breath;

Abandoning the war with pain like a soldier who puts down his weapons to walk home;

Getting with your pain like drinking a glass of pure water;

Carrying your pain the way you carry a picture in your wallet.

Willingness is not:

Resisting your pain;
Ignoring your pain;
Forgetting your pain;
Buying your pain;
Doing what pain says;
Not doing what pain says;
Believing your pain;
Not believing your pain.