

Radical AcceptanceNow More than Ever!

The coronavirus pandemic. Layoffs and an uncertain economy. As if these weren't big enough problems, America witnessed a heated presidential election with irregular voting tallies that were seen by some as highly suspicious. Regardless of the final election results (something that was still being determined when this article was being written), *the crux of the matter is this*: There is no doubt that still more anxiety and angst over the election was NOT something anyone needed in a year that *already* saw increasing numbers of psychological problems sparked by public health concerns over COVID, racial and political unrest, and other ongoing issues with still no end or closure in sight.

As 2020 draws to a close and we set to embark on a New Year, is there *anything* we can do going forward? In some ways, no. That's the bad part. And yet, while there is often little we can do *about* something, there is ALWAYS something we can do about our REACTION TO a given issue. This is the heart of "radical acceptance." Whether the issue is big, small, or anything in between, radical acceptance is a concept that, *if practiced and applied*, is likely to enhance our mental health. Recognizing that different issues affect and stress us differently, here is but one workplace example.

The Case of "Vickie"

It's Monday morning and "Vickie" storms into the office of her manager, "Jay", visibly upset over her "do-nothing" co-worker "Danielle." Vickie is a hardworking housekeeper at a busy behavioral health clinic. She has grown increasingly upset about Danielle

taking longer than scheduled breaks, scrolling through her smart phone when she should be working, and in general not doing her job – leaving others to pick up the slack. Vickie didn't want to "snitch" on a colleague, but a conscientious employee like her despises excessive idle time.

Could she have tactfully spoken to Danielle about the matter first? Maybe. The bigger problem is that instead of attempting to nip the matter in the bud, or going to see Jay earlier, she waited until she was hopping mad to talk to him.

Vickie had a right to complain about Danielle, but Vickie's REACTION TO Danielle's poor work habits was clearly adding to her stress. (Conversely, another colleague, "Kim," had mentioned calmly to Jay that she liked "Danni", as she was known, but it wasn't right that she wasn't putting in a full day's work. Jay told her he'd speak to Danni about the issue if her work didn't improve.)

The point is: We usually can't do anything about someone else's *actions*, but we CAN always do something about how we REACT TO a given situation. In other words, did Vickie have to get *that* upset?

Like Kim, she could have more calmly approached Jay and asked him if he was aware of the situation, and if he was, what was he doing about it? Doing so would have put the onus on the problem where it belonged: on Danielle's *work habits*, more than on her personally.

EXERCISE: *Ask participants to share a work situation in which they later regretted their reaction. What would they have done differently?*

What is Radical Acceptance?

This is where radical acceptance comes in. Nearly everyone can relate to a situation in which they overreacted to a given situation. Now, throw in the added element of all the concerns and uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, and it's not hard to see how an already stressed employee could be ready to blow up at any time. Put another way, we all had our own sources of stresses and concerns in the workplace *before* the coronavirus – THEN came the pandemic on top of everything else!

It's no wonder so many of us need all of the stress management tools we can lay our hands on. *So just what is radical acceptance?*

❖ *Radical acceptance means accepting what is going on; completely and totally. "I cannot do anything about what happened." Say it. Repeat it. Believe it.*

❖ *Radical acceptance involves accepting the event that is occurring in both your heart and mind. "Thinking" you're all right with what happened, but then revisiting the issue minutes later is NOT acceptance. Radical acceptance involves moving on. Recognize this might take time.*

❖ *Radical acceptance means you stop fighting reality, you stop blowing your top because reality is not the way YOU want it – and you let go of bitterness. Harmful emotions will only make the matter worse.*

There are many things in our work and personal lives that are simply out of our control. Even though there's something we'd like to do about it, the truth is we usually can't.

Accepting reality is the case for not only interpersonal matters like Danielle, but also much bigger issues like financial difficulties,

and anxiously worrying about not only *when* the COVID crisis will end, but the impact it will have on your job.

EXERCISE: *Ask participants to share a work situation, responsibility or task that's been difficult to accept – something that changed as a result of the pandemic. Why has this been hard to accept? Is there something that could be done differently to cope with this change?*

Just What is it that Has to be Accepted?

1. **Reality.** Reality involves the FACTS – the facts about what happened as well as the current facts – facts are facts, *even if you don't like them.*

2. **Limitations.** There are limitations on the future for everyone – but only *realistic* limitations need to be accepted.

3. **Cause.** Everything has a cause, including events and situations that cause pain and suffering.

4. **Pain.** Things simply don't always go as you had planned. But *life can still be worth living*, even with painful events in it.

Accepting Reality

There are numerous reasons why it is important to accept reality:

❖ Rejecting reality does not *change* it. Reality is reality.

❖ Going forward, it's possible to change today's reality, but even then, changing reality requires first *accepting* reality. Acceptance is always key.

❖ Rejecting reality turns pain into *suffering*.

❖ Refusing to accept reality can keep you stuck in unhappiness, bitterness, anger, sadness, shame, or other painful emotions. In other words, refusing to accept reality will only make your current situation worse than it already is. Acceptance is key to healing.

❖ Acceptance may lead to sadness, but a sense of *calm* usually follows.

❖ The path out of hell is through misery. By refusing to accept the misery that is part of climbing out of hell, you fall back into hell.

EXERCISE: Ask participants to list or state what is most difficult about accepting reality for them personally.

What Radical Acceptance is NOT

It's imperative to point out that radical acceptance does NOT mean approving of the reality (what has happened). We all have to accept drastic changes in our lives: loss of a loved one, a job, divorce, or the dramatic ways in which our lives have been altered due to the pandemic. But this does not mean we APPROVE of it. Radical acceptance is also NOT about being passive or against change.

Factors that Interfere with Acceptance

1. You don't have the necessary skills for acceptance; you do not know how to accept really painful events and facts.
2. You believe that if you accept a painful event, you are making light of it or approving of the facts, and that nothing will be done to change or prevent future painful events.
3. Emotions get in the way. For instance, unbearable sadness; anger at the person or group that caused the painful event; rage at

the injustice in the world; and guilt about your own behavior.

EXERCISE: Ask participants if any of these factors affect their ability to accept reality. If so, what could they do differently?

Turning the Mind

An important part of radical acceptance involves turning the mind. Turning the mind is like facing a fork in a road. You have to turn your mind *toward* the road of acceptance, and *away* from the road of rejecting reality.

- Turning the mind is choosing to accept.
- The CHOICE to accept does not in of itself equal acceptance. It just puts you on this path.

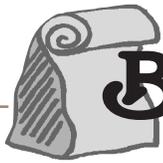
Turning the Mind: Step by Step

1. **Observe** whether you are accepting the given situation. Look for feelings of anger, bitterness, thinking "Why me?" or "Why is this happening?"
2. Take a deep look at yourself and make a **commitment** to accept reality as it is.
3. **Do this again and again.** Keep turning your mind to acceptance each time you come to a fork in the road where you can reject reality – or accept it.

4. **Develop a plan** for catching yourself in the future when you drift out of acceptance. *Your EAP can help!*

Editor's note: For additional steps on practicing radical acceptance, see the Handout section on page 4. ■

Source: "Distress Tolerance Handout", from DBT Skills Training Handouts and Worksheets, Second Edition, Marsha M. Linehan.



Radical Acceptance in Practice: Step by Step



❖ Observe whether you are questioning or fighting reality. (“It shouldn’t be this way.” Perhaps not, but that doesn’t change the fact that it is.)

❖ Remind yourself that the unpleasant reality “is what it is” and cannot be changed. (“This is what happened.” Period.)

❖ Remind yourself that there are causes for the reality. Acknowledge that some sort of history led to this moment. Consider how people’s lives have been shaped by a series of factors. Notice that given these factors and how history led up to this moment, this reality had to occur just this way. (“This is how things happened.”)

❖ Practice accepting with the whole self – mind, body, and spirit. Be creative in finding ways to involve your whole self. Use positive, accepting self-talk – but also consider using relaxation techniques such as mindfulness.

❖ List all the behaviors you would do if you did accept the facts. Then act as if you have already accepted the facts.

❖ Examine events that appear unacceptable. Imagine believing what you don’t want to accept. Rehearse in your mind what you would do if you accepted what seems unacceptable.

❖ Pay attention to your bodily sensations as you consider what it is that you need to accept.

❖ Allow disappointment, sadness, or grief to come to the surface.

❖ Acknowledge that life can be worth living even when there is pain. ■

Source: “Distress Tolerance Handout”, from DBT Skills Training Handouts and Worksheets, Second Edition, Marsha M. Linehan.