



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

Radical Acceptance as a Stress Management Tool

It's Monday morning and "Shelly" storms into the office of her manager, "Tom", visibly upset over her noisy co-worker "Mark." She complains that Mark plays music at a near deafening level, and he also disturbs colleagues by speaking loudly and boisterously to customers over the phone. Shelly and her two nearby cubicle mates did not speak to Mark about the problem – selecting Shelly to talk to Tom instead.

In addition to not trying to resolve this matter among themselves first before speaking to Tom, another key mistake Shelly made was taking the matter personally, going so far as to criticize Mark's character, when nothing could have been further from the truth. Mark WAS loud, yes, but most people liked him and his job performance was considered stellar.

The point is this: Shelly admittedly had a right to complain about the volume, but it was her REACTION TO Mark's music and talking that was proving more stressful than what Mark was doing. ("Kim" for instance, had told Tom she had learned to just tune him out.) We usually can't do anything about someone else's *actions*, but we CAN always do something about our personal REACTIONS to what is going on. In other words, did Shelly have to get that upset? No.

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.
- Radical acceptance involves accepting the event that is occurring in both your heart and mind.
- 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.

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. This holds true for a co-worker who talks more loudly than WE would like – it turns out Mark even does so remotely!

Accepting reality is also the case for much bigger issues like financial difficulties, relationship problems, and anxiously worrying about not only *when* the covid crisis will end, but *how* it will end, and what will be the impact on your job?

EXERCISE: Ask participants to share a work situation, responsibility or task that's been difficult to accept – something that's 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.

“Refusing to accept reality can keep you stuck in: unhappiness, bitterness, anger, sadness, shame, or other painful emotions.”

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?”

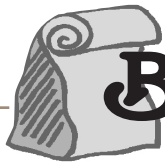
2. Take a deep look at yourself and make a **commitment** to accept reality as it is.

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. ■

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