



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

Volume 5,2 (02/2011)

Mindfulness Practices for Depression

© Amita Schmidt, LCSW, 2011

Healing from depression is a journey that involves using physical, psychological, and spiritual methods. In healing my own depression, and in helping others heal from depression as a therapist and spiritual teacher, I have found three particular areas that can help you address the psychological and spiritual components of depression. These three areas include Awareness, Choices, and True Nature (ACT). Awareness of your triggers sets the groundwork for disengaging from depression, making new choices furthers this process, and reorienting to true nature begins a new way of life.

Awareness

Awareness is the first step to unhooking from depression. Focused awareness is also mindfulness or knowing/paying attention in a non-judgmental way. Mindfulness can be applied to several aspects of depression.

Awareness of the depressed mind itself

The first, and most essential practice, is to be aware of the depressed mind itself. Depression is like wearing dark glasses. During these times, mental noting of the depressed view is invaluable. Without mindfulness, you will get sucked into the depressed viewpoint, and begin to think it's

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are posted at www.wisebrain.org/bulletin.html

Rick Hanson, PhD, edits the Bulletin. Michelle Keane (<http://michellekeane.com>) is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by Laurel Hanson (lhanson@berkeley.edu).

To subscribe, please contact Rick at drh@comcast.net.

who you are or the way the world is. Remind yourself frequently, “this is the depressed mind” or “this is the lens of depression,” and put a moratorium on believing or acting upon any negative thoughts. Research shows that labeling thoughts can activate the brain’s hippocampus and

allow you to be more resilient under stress. Also, for the moments that you are labeling the depression you are not caught in it. The awareness that witnesses the depression is not part of it, and this reprieve can be the first foothold in disengaging from depression.

Awareness of thoughts that fuel depression

It’s also useful to bring mindfulness to specific thought patterns that fuel the depressed mind. A period of depression can begin with a thought as simple as “I made a mistake,” which then turns into “I always make mistakes,” which then turns into “I’m a failure,” which then turns into “I might as

well not be alive.” People without depression can stop with the “I made a mistake” thought and say, “Okay no big deal, start over again, you’re human.” But for someone with depression, a simple thought like “I made a mistake,” can lead down a rabbit hole of despair. One error is just one error. It is not a reason to question your whole existence. This is generalizing and universalizing.

For this reason, it’s important to notice some patterns of thought which fuel depression such as, all-or-nothing thinking, generalizing, universalizing, black and white thinking, doom and gloom scenarios, creating a catastrophe, and obsessive doubt. When you are caught in depressed thoughts, ask yourself; “Am I taking one instance and generalizing it into a pattern for the future? Am I thinking in black-and-white or all-or-nothing terms? Am I using the words “all” or “never?” Am I catastrophizing? Am I creating a doom-and-gloom picture?” If the answer is “Yes,” then use mindfulness and gently say, “Oh, this is creating a catastrophe,” or “This is generalizing.” For instance, when one young woman was applying for graduate schools she found herself thinking, “If I can’t get into Harvard or a top notch school, then no one will ever grant me the credibility I deserve, and my life will be ruined.” When she labeled this as “all or nothing thinking,” it kept her from being seduced into a depressed mindstate.

Self-hatred is the main fuel for depression, so it's important to label "self hatred thoughts" when they arise. Even if you have a running commentary of self-hatred thoughts throughout the day, they don't have to be believed, and can be left alone. Try bringing a neutral, curious, or even bemused mindfulness to this endless commentary. In reality there is nothing true about self-hatred. The mind that criticizes you is the same mind as the one it is criticizing.

Perfectionism is also a fuel for depression. When you inevitably can't do things perfectly, then the opposite extreme takes over of hopelessness, shame, and not good enough. Try labeling the habit of "perfectionism" throughout the day. See if you can let go of this desire to be perfect (or it's opposite of being a hopeless failure), and just be a garden-variety human being with both mistakes and successes.

Leaving thoughts alone

Mindfulness practice is not about trying to stop negative thinking. True mindfulness is about learning to leave your thoughts alone. Depression will decrease on its own if you don't cling to your thoughts. What if you couldn't believe any of your depressed



thoughts? Healing happens when you stop either pushing away or indulging in your thoughts and you simply let them be. Sometimes when I am barraged by negative thoughts, especially ones that pick on me, I try and counter them with, “So what? So what if I didn’t do things perfectly. It’s not 9-1-1.” Notice when you are velcroed to a thought, such as self-hatred or doom and gloom, and practice leaving it alone.

Knowing your depression triggers

Another area where awareness is important is with your triggers for depression. Are there certain life situations where depression often occurs, such as when you feel tired, overwhelmed, or lonely? Knowing your depression triggers can help you work with them. For example, if you realize that evenings or being alone aggravates your depression, you can proactively schedule phone calls to friends at that time. In this regard, it’s good to put a moratorium on any beliefs that occur in the middle of the night (especially those fears that wake you at 3am). My strategy is “hands off” of all depressed

or fearful thoughts from midnight until 6am. If those same thoughts are still around in the middle of the next day, then I take a look at them then.

What need is the depression serving?

The final aspect of awareness of depression is to see what need your depression is meeting. We all have basic needs for safety, security, autonomy, connection, love, belonging, and self esteem. Is your depression meeting one of these needs? Or you might ask, “What is the benefit of my depression?” If you look below the depression, to what’s deeper, you might find the original reason the depression began. For instance, my depression started as a way to stay safe. It was my foxhole to retreat to away from my father’s violence and my mother’s illness. And paradoxically, below my self-hatred, was a voice of love and concern (fostered by the misguided belief that being hard on myself would help me). If you trace the origin of your depression back, you might find some kindness or protection at its core. Can you offer appreciation to this protection, and then be willing to meet this need with some other choices besides depression?

Choices

Making new choices is the second part of disengaging from depression. New choices are not positive affirmations. They

The Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to www.wisebrain.org/wellspring.html.

are the willingness to move the focus off of depression and onto what else is true.

Choose what is really true

One of the best choices to make for healing depression is to question negative thoughts. Depression is a form of civil war where the mind turns against itself. The mind unabashedly lies, deceives and exaggerates in this civil war; therefore, it's important to have a tool to uncover its deception. When you have a negative thought, ask yourself, "Is this really true? Is it true 100% of the time?" If it isn't really true, then why believe it? For example, is the thought "I'm a failure," really true? Has it been true, every moment of your life? Were you a failure when you were sleeping? Were you a failure when you were drinking a glass of water? And, if "I'm a failure" is not really true, then why bother with this thought? Inquiry keeps your thinking honest. Remember negative thoughts have a black and white, all or never quality, and if you question them with loving awareness, they will fall apart.

Choose the present moment

Negativity, worry, fear, and anxiety can be significantly reduced if you steadfastly focus on the present moment. Depression gets a lot of mileage from the past or the future. When you feel depressed, notice if you are dwelling in the past, or worried about the future. One wise friend said to me, "fear needs a future."

If you are lost in the future (or past) ask yourself, "Am I okay now?" I've never yet found a moment where the answer wasn't "Yes." If I have to, I ask myself this question, "Am I okay now?" repeatedly. Do this one moment at a time, or even one-half moment at a time, as needed.

Five-minute increments

On a similar note, when it's hard to do something, break the task down into smaller increments. One man describes this as "living in five-minute increments." He asks himself "can I do this for just five minutes?" Then after five minutes he checks to see if he is able to do five more minutes. Without pushing, he can end up doing something for hours that he thought he couldn't do at all. Another person who found it difficult to get out of bed in the morning would ask himself "can I move one leg?" Then he would see if he could move an arm, and both legs, and put his feet on the ground, and then move to a standing position. From one increment at a time he was able to begin accomplishing things in his day.

Choose kindness

Loving-kindness is a form of mindfulness where you chose to talk to yourself like a good friend would talk to you. Even though your first response in a situation might be your old standby of, "I'm such an idiot," or "Why did I do that, again!" you can notice this, and make your second response, "Well,

that wasn't perfect, but it's okay," or "I'm doing the best I can." It's strengthening a friendly way of speaking to yourself with compassion. Even if you can only offset your drill sergeant voice with compassion once in a while, this will begin to condition a habit of kindness to yourself.

Loving-kindness can also be done as a formal practice. I do it daily on my commute to work. I turn off the radio and cell phone and do loving-kindness prayers for others and myself the whole trip. Some examples of the loving-kindness prayer for yourself: 1) "May I be happy, May I be peaceful, May I be safe, May I be free of suffering." and/or 2) "May I

love myself completely, just as I am." A brain research scientist also told me that putting loving-kindness phrases to a melody makes them more effective, so I do this too.

Choose neutral and pleasant moments

Because depression is often a fairly chronic condition, it can seem like there is nothing else but depression. The Buddha taught that in each moment there are three feeling states possible; pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. With depression, there is a tendency to be hyper-focused on the unpleasant. Making new choices is noticing that in a day there are also many moments which are neutral or pleasant. Neutral moments might be when



you put on your shoes, or when you turn the key in your car. Pleasant moments might be when you feel the warmth of your shower, when you eat something tasty, or when you lie down at night. The depressed mind misses these times. See if you can notice a neutral or pleasant moment today.

If you have a meditation practice, it is important that you learn how not to get engulfed in depressed thoughts during your meditation. For this reason, it's important to find a neutral or safe place in your body, and focus on this periodically, or exclusively. During your meditation session, scan your body. Is there a place that feels neutral or safe? Use this as your neutral anchor. This might be your breath, or the bottoms of your feet, the palms of your hands, the hair on your head, or the center of your body. Pick one place, and during your sitting, if the feelings of depression begin to increase, switch to this neutral anchor as the object of your awareness. Stay with the anchor as long as you need to. If this doesn't work, it's okay to stop meditating. You don't want to continue meditating if you are conditioning your mind to be more depressed. This wouldn't be skillful means.

Choose gratitude and service

Daily gratitudes are also a way to work with the depressed mind because you can't feel both gratitude and depression in the same

mind moment. Try writing down three gratitudes a day. For instance, just for today I noticed gratitude for: the mailman, dental floss, clean air to breathe, and a phone call from a friend. Your gratitude list can be as endless as there are things happening in a day. I even formed an email gratitude group with a couple of friends and every few days we write our gratitudes to each other. It's very connecting to see what my friends come up with and reminds me of new things to be grateful for every day.

A small act of daily service is also a good antidote for depression. This service can be as simple as telling a friend what you appreciate about them, letting someone get in front of you in line, picking up a piece of trash, or watering a dying plant. Then, when depression arises in the day, you can reflect on this small act of service and it will bring some buoyancy to your mind.

True Nature

The last part of disengaging from depression is orienting to your true nature. True nature is also sometimes referred to as original nature, the unborn, the unconditioned, presence, awakeness, higher self, or God-consciousness. Orienting to true nature can happen through meditation, prayer, silence and other spiritual practices. Being aware

of true nature, on a daily basis through a spiritual practice, is a way to stay spiritually fit. When you are spiritually fit it becomes harder for depression to take hold.

Although practices that engage true nature aren't a substitute for the actual experience itself, a practice can help you to recognize, remember, and reorient to who you truly are. True nature is something that is already here and is uncovered. The idea is not to try to create a particular experience, but instead to remember what has always been here in you, all along.

Willingness to turn back towards

You might remember that there was a time

in your life when you consciously decided to turn away from away from life. Something happened, a trauma, a hurt (perhaps one thing or a series of things) and you stopped trusting in life. Reorienting to true nature is a willingness to turn back towards who you were, and what you have always been, before you disconnected from life.

As someone with depression, unknowingly you may have developed a habit of orienting to and believing in the depression above everything else. Are you willing to have faith in something else? Are you willing to imagine that true nature can help you? Be willing to ask for help from your true nature or the dharma every day. This could



be in the form of a mantra or a prayer for a few minutes at the beginning of the day or throughout the day. If you are open to discovering whether there is something greater than the depression, this willingness can show you what is true.

Meditations

Any basic meditation practice that allows you to sit quietly and listen can lead you to your true nature. Additionally, I have found the following practices can help access true nature:

Center of the wheel

The center of the wheel is an image that can be useful when there are a lot of thoughts or busyness. Picture a wheel that is turning quickly. The outside of the wheel (your thoughts and actions) might be spinning very fast, but what is happening at the very center of the wheel? The axis on which a wheel turns is completely still and stopped. This stillness is always here. Where is your “center of the wheel” in your body right now? Can you feel it? Oftentimes people notice it in their belly or solar plexus area. It’s a quiet feeling, at the center of your body. It is a stopped feeling. There is something in you that is stopped and still no matter what you are doing. Can you have a sense of this?

Inquiry into true nature

Inquiry is also a useful practice for uncovering true nature. With the questions below, you are not trying to find a specific answer with your mind. Instead, the questions are meant to create a sort of free fall into “I don’t know.” From there you can then listen and feel the answer from your body, neck-down. You can pick a question and use it on a daily or weekly basis, reflecting and feeling what is true at deeper levels.

- 1) “What can I trust?” What can you trust no matter what? If everything were to fall apart in the world and your life, what could you ultimately trust? Feel this answer in your body.
- 2) What is it that doesn’t come and go? Thoughts, feelings, experiences all come and go, arise and pass away. What is it that doesn’t come and go? From what do all feelings and thoughts arise out of and pass away into? Can you sense what this is?
- 3) What is looking out of my eyes right now? What is the looking itself, that is independent of your personal story? Everyone has this same thing looking out of his or her eyes right now. Feel what this is.
- 4) Who am I, really? What is deeper than who you think you are? Who are you that isn’t about your gender, your roles in life,

your age, your emotions, or your views and opinions? Who are you without any of this? What is beyond all the stories of “you?”

Where is it now?

Once you have a sense of how true nature can feel and where to find it in your body, it can be helpful to check in with it everyday to strengthen your experience of it. Even if your experience is indistinct, it can still be helpful to practice noticing true nature. Sometimes I say to myself throughout the day “Where is it now?” Zen master Bankei said, “Unborn Buddha nature is always happening.” Look and see for yourself. True nature is always here, while you are driving, standing, talking, or moving about. Yes, depressed thoughts and bodily sensations might be here, but what else is happening? It doesn’t take 45 minutes of sitting daily to contact your true nature. You can feel it right here, right now.

As another way of strengthening a connection to true nature, I try to bookend my day (the very first thing in the morning and the last thing at night) by meditating with the feeling of the center of the wheel or “what doesn’t come or go.” I rest in this stillness for a few minutes in the morning and the evening. I find having this daily bookend

is better than starting or ending the day with depression thoughts. Eventually this focus on true nature leaves less and less room for depression to arise.

If you don’t understand true nature yet, don’t worry. Try to use the practices of awareness, mindfulness and new choices. Pay attention to your physical, psychological and spiritual well-being. Eventually your sincere efforts will lead to a new relationship with depression, and a new way of life.

• • • • •



Amita Schmidt, LCSW is a psychotherapist and Vipassana meditation teacher. She is also the author of *Dipa Ma: The Life and Teachings of a Buddhist Master*.

Amita can be contacted at <http://www.amitaschmidt.com>.

Transitions

© Robert Jackson-Paton, 2011

*Paying attention
To the journey
And the destination
Process and product
Noticing every moment
That is the goal*

*I always
Considered myself
Observant
But now
After a brain injury
Everything
Is more noticeable*

*Certainly this takes
Some getting used to
Noises are
Too loud
Light is
Too bright
People are
Too invasive or
Too oblivious*

*Yet sometimes
My breath
Feels rich and powerful
Occasionally
My words
Seem perfect
A touch
Exquisite*

*That reminds me of
Hiking in Yosemite
When I wrote about
Being wild
I must revisit that
Place in my writing
Where everything
Inside and outside of
Myself
Seemed at peace*

*Yesterday
My yoga teacher, Carrie
Mentioned the
Sanskrit word for
Groove
Referring to the
Patterns
In our lives*

*The ruts in which
We often live
Mindlessly
Without thinking
Without feeling*

*Carrie said
Filling a groove
Takes as much
Work
As carving it out*

*I smiled to myself
It sounds
Like rewiring
The brain*

*But in beginning to
Notice the
Spaces
Between actions
Poses and
Breaths
I find more meaning
Than ever before*

*If I am noticing
Space between
My breath
For perhaps the
First time*

*What have I
Been doing
All of these years
Have I been breathing
At all*

*I saw something about
Speechlessness by
Alice Walker
Similarly
I remembered
“Silent All These Years” by
Tori Amos*

continued next page

*It occurred to me
If I have not been
Breathing
I certainly have not been
Speaking
If I have not
Spoken
Then I have had no
Voice*

*Obviously
No voice means
No power
And if I gave up
My power
Perhaps it is even
More difficult
To get it back
Like those grooves*

*But now
I am no longer
Willing to
Give up power
I must be true*

*I am reclaiming
Breath, voice, power
But with heart
Compassion
Even tenderness*

*My heart built walls
To protect
Myself
At any cost
I had fled my body*

*So of course
I was not
Breathing*

*The shells cracked
With my children
Holding them for the
First time*

*Introduced me
To what love
Might feel like*

*And yet I still didn't
Know myself
I didn't recognize
Who I was
How I'd been
Living
If I was, at all*

*Now everything
Has changed
Now I am
Paying attention
To the pauses*

*There is no way out
This time
Except forward
Through the fear
The unknown
The transitions*

*Now I have the
Chance to
Relearn
Remember
Rewire*

Robert Jackson-Paton lives in the Dallas area—Comancheria—with his beloved spouse, and elderly in-laws. He has actively pursued Indigenous studies, ecopsychology, and cultural identity issues for



more than two decades. Since a brain injury in 2009, he has sought to narrate the transitional spaces of his experience. As a doctoral candidate, his dissertation research centers on the healing transformation of White identity as gateway for Indigenous rights, cross-cultural reconciliation and environmental restoration. He loves to be a father for his two teenage children (and three step-daughters!), be with animals, listen to music, cook, and be outside, especially swimming in rivers like a salmon! He has worked in elementary education, as editor for the journal ReVision, and was production manager for several years with California Revels.

Authentic Willingness

© Alane Daugherty PhD

Are You Willing?

Our recent discoveries in psychophysiology and neuroscience are giving us hope, and evidence, that a different way of being in this world is possible. However, it is my belief that although most people profess to want change, healing, transformation, or even higher states of consciousness in their life, they are not authentically willing to embrace that change. I believe that what prevents most people from substantial change is the absence of true internal willingness, or the captivation of paralyzing fear, and those dynamics deny the invitation of growth. What is at the root of this unwillingness or fear? I assert that there are subconscious blocks in our ability to move forward, and until we entertain those blocks and take an in-depth look at authentic willingness, from an internal sense, our efforts will be muted.

We can see, through an in depth exploration of the psycho-physiologic literature, the absolute damage we are doing to ourselves by ruminating on, or functioning from states of hatred, fear, shame, jealousy or judgment. We can also see the

tremendous possibilities for our bodies, brains, behaviors and relationships by intentionally cultivating emotional states based on love, compassion, connection and kindness. That same body of literature has shown us, again and again, that the state of our emotional attention, whether constructive or maladaptive, becomes our internal experience. Our repeated internal experience determines our reactive patterns, creates and strengthens our neural networks, and influences our biochemical and electro-physiological states of being. In short, our repeated internal experience becomes who we are. And yet most of us remain in status quo.

For most of us, stress, chaos and anxiety have become such familiar places to be that we are really not willing to replace them with higher functioning states, healed states, or states with a higher baseline of happiness. Transformative information and resources abound and yet, I believe that at a fundamental level, people are not ready or willing, or they lack the courage or resources to truly embrace vibrant internal growth. Fundamental change must come from

within. It is the internal experience that gives meaning to and creates the external experience.

Are we really ready to allow ourselves to drop our habitual ways of reacting to maladaptive emotional patterns, and thus create a different internal ideal? Are we willing to take the internal and external steps necessary to create that change? Are we willing, through attention and intention, to embrace constructive adaptive emotions, and welcome the invitation of growth and healing? Any program aimed at positive transformation must address the question of true willingness. As difficult as this question is, it must be spoken to. Unfortunately, many people wait for internal or external tragedy or crisis to strike before they are willing to change – and even at this point many are unwilling. But what about the deep yearning for something more – before the crisis point? What about the choice for life as life emerges? The question of willingness applies at many different levels. It applies for major change, in the midst of tragedy or not; it applies for change to remove ourselves from status quo and grow out of the stress and anxieties that consume us, a desire to reach a higher potential; it applies when beneath our maladaptive emotions and woundedness lies an invitation, a yearning for healing.

Internal versus external experience

An overwhelming percentage of our culture seems to have it backwards. The world is full of those who have created external experience or success that our culture deems noteworthy, and are

still not allowing themselves to be happy. Over and over again we have seen what we deem as culturally thriving successes, in the form of movie stars, successful musicians' etc., only to see them self-destruct internally. Although these cultural icons are the most prominent in our minds, this scenario plays itself out over and over again to a lesser extent throughout our society. We seem to be echoing, "If society says I'm OK, then I must be OK", and we expect to be fulfilled. Of course this is a never-ending push because the internal acceptance that is expected to follow doesn't appear, and even great external success is left feeling empty and meaningless.

This does not imply that external success and acceptance is unimportant. However, remember that it is our limbic system, activated by our internal experience, that gives meaning to circumstance. If our internal experience isn't integrated with our external success, that success is void of meaning. Maybe that's what acting out of integrity means. My friend John at the coffee shop, an extremely wise man who I greatly admire, says integrity comes from internal integration. Acting out of integrity then, comes from acting and behaving from an internally coherent state. Again, we return to the fundamental importance of internal experience.

The internal must come first. It is the internal that gives meaning to and creates the external. If your goal is to be externally successful, for that success to be meaningful or lasting, it must first

come from within. Higher internal experience creates higher potential, empowerment and intention, and if external success is your goal, it will naturally flow from an internally integrated state.

It is internal willingness that is the true question. We have the knowledge and know how; many wonderful books give us that knowledge. We have the practical steps of creating higher internal experience, many practices abound that lead us through the process of elevating our internal experience, complete with the very real and very measurable changes in our physiology. So, why don't we? What's the payoff in staying stuck? Are you truly willing to live differently? When I look up the word "willing" in various dictionaries the main description or definition that keeps

appearing is the word "ready". When I look up the word "allow" I get the definition "give permission for something to happen."

What do those terms mean when we apply them to cultivating a healthier and more constructive or pro-adaptive internal experience? If we are talking about internal experience, then we need to examine the concept of being willing or ready, from a deeply authentic or innermost place of awareness. In other words, we need to examine, from the deepest parts of who we are, if we are ready to be or behave differently. Are we really ready to allow, or give permission, for the concepts that are being proven through all the wonderful findings in neuroscience and psychophysiology to play a part in our lives? Are we ready to let go of the definitions of ourselves that hold us back,



and work through the physiological discomfort of change? Are we ready to engage the invitation of maladaptive and difficult emotions to find the yearning of healing that lies beneath? These, I believe, are some of the blocks of growth, and, I believe the keys to cultivating authentic willingness.

At this point I think most, although not all, the readers of this article would say, “Yes, I am willing.” However, when we dig deeper and get more specific those answers may change. For instance, the next time you have a negative reactive pattern and you want to lash out from fear, jealousy, hatred etc. are you really willing to react differently? Will you give yourself permission to truly let go of your negatively ingrained reactive patterns, appreciate their message, and replace them with cultivated states of higher consciousness? Are you really ready and willing to do the sustained practice that it takes to transform your reactive or maladaptive emotional states to those based on higher awareness and higher potential?

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

What’s keeping you stuck?

Examining the payoff

An authentic look at willingness requires us to examine the dynamics of what keeps us stuck. Four main concepts stand out for me when I examine the question of what keeps us stuck. First, we need to look at the advantages, in any specific situation, of staying stuck. In all situations there are positives and negatives, and honestly looking at the advantages of remaining status quo may be the key to understanding, and curing, our inertia. Second, we must entertain the concept that there is a very real physiological and psychological discomfort of change. Maladaptive emotional patterns, in many cases deeply ingrained, may not be healthy or conducive to a thriving existence, but usually are familiar states of being. This familiarity, in some ironic way, carries it’s own sense of comfort. Additionally, being able to “see”, and authentically accept ourselves in the transformed state already begins the process of that change. Third, an honest look at the underlying fear associated with change can help dissipate that fear and help us move forward. Lastly, because maladaptive emotional patterns are most often judged as “bad”, “dark” or “afflictive”, they are frequently suppressed or denied, and the underlying invitation, the yearning for healing or growth, is unrealized. I honestly believe that underneath every maladaptive emotion is a pro-adaptive emotion yearning to be healed.

Weighing the advantages and disadvantages

An authentic look at willingness, meaning true internal readiness, requires us to look at the advantages of staying stuck. You may examine a specific situation in your life, with an honest look at all the advantages and disadvantages of change, and determine that change for you, right now, is not advantageous. Or, you may decide that you prefer change, however an honest examination of the pay offs of staying stuck is what you needed to do to be able to move on.

There are certain circumstances in my own life where I had thought I wanted change in a specific area but after examining the situation in its totality, including the pay offs in staying stuck, I decided that I needed to wait until I was truly willing and ready for that change to occur. Professing to want change, without a true examination of willingness, only increases our stress and blocks us off from our internal selves. We beat ourselves up for not taking action, when in reality we just aren't ready. We need to be nice to ourselves in the process, and know that when the time is ready we will take appropriate action. Only when an examination of willingness leads us to an affirmative and receptive yes are we ready to authentically allow the change to happen. Conversely, examining the payoffs of staying stuck and genuinely deciding they are worth giving up, only serves as motivation for change.

The pay offs of staying stuck can be tangible or

psychological. Many times the psychological pay off, unfortunately, is that it feeds into our perceptions of being a victim, and that is a familiar definition of our self. In other words, you're not willing to let go of a specific thought or feeling because it is a feeling you feel entitled to; someone else has wronged you. Tangible or intangible, if you are not aware of the pay offs, you may not be able to move beyond them. Also, again, maybe after examining the pay offs you may decide it is not time for change. Either way you need to honor yourself in the process.

Some examples may make these points more clear. I have a student that professes to want major change in his life. He is a much older student than typical college age, lives with a parent, doesn't have a job and doesn't like himself because he feels he doesn't have the internal resources to move on. The pay off for him is that it is a comfortable existence, he doesn't have to work through the discomfort of growth, and it plays into his perception of himself of being worthless – a perception he is comfortable and identifies with.

Another example is one a participant in one of my seminars. She honestly has had some tough issues in her life to deal with, and these have left her some psychological reactive points. She will make statements like "that's just what my husband used to do," rationalizing or insinuating that, "therefore I am entitled to this reaction." The pay off for her is she stays stuck in her perception of the circumstances that have influenced her. In other

words, her perceptions just reinforce the negative image of how bad things always happen to her, or people always wrong her. Recognizing that this is in some way a pay off, although a negative one, is the first step in being able to move on from those perceptions, to create a new story.

These are just a few very brief examples. Every person in many, many, different situations in their lives has multiple areas to question authentic willingness. If you find yourself rationalizing: “this is the way I’ve always been,” “this is because of my childhood,” “this is what my former partner (or parent or sibling or child) used to do,” but using it as a reason to stay stuck, you might question your willingness for change. Obviously some people have very deep psychological wounds, and this is no way is meant to demean those

wounds, but if you truly desire to move beyond those wounds you need to be willing to let them go. The concept of embracing the invitation of the difficult emotion or wound from a grounded and loving state, and welcoming the depth of healing offered by that practice, is a different concept and is entertained later in this article.

The physiological discomfort of change

The second reason we choose to remain stuck is physiological discomfort of change. We have very specific biochemical reactions to maladaptive emotions. These biochemicals flood our bodies and brains, and it is as if our cells actually become addicted to that biochemical state. If fear and anger keep me in a specific biochemical state, and my cells crave that biochemical state because it is familiar, I will want to keep experiencing fear and



anger because it feels comfortable. Conversely, it actually feels physiologically uncomfortable to be willing to let those states go and replace them with positive states, even though they are much more coherent and healthy states. The key here again is routine experience. If we routinely experience negative reactive states, then those states are what we become addicted to, and we crave to stay in those states. However, if we routinely experience constructive or pro-adaptive emotional states, which we can intentionally cultivate, than those states are what we become addicted to, and we crave to stay in those states.

Willingness in this sense may be the understanding and awareness that there is a new biochemical reactive pattern to establish, and it takes willingness to adopt constructive reactive patterns that establish those states. This concept is of fundamental importance in creating internal higher experience. Are you really willing, in the middle of a negative reactive pattern, to replace the reactive emotional states with a constructive one? Are you willing to let go of the perception that you have the right to react in a specific manner because that's "just the way you feel" and look at the underlying invitation of growth? Are you really willing to let go of reactive patterns that are built on past negative experience and not assign that reactive pattern to the current circumstance? Are you willing to let go of your justified righteousness and replace that reaction with a calm, coherent, clear and empowering response?

Reactive patterns create biochemical responses, and biochemical responses create reactive patterns. Are you willing, from a fundamental level, to notice and disengage from your reactive patterns as they happen, refocus your attention, and choose a reaction based on a pro-adaptive or constructive emotional state? Unless you are truly willing to allow yourself to respond differently, the negative reactive patterns encoded in your brain will never transform. Unless you are genuinely willing to allow yourself a different reaction, your internal experience will remain the same. Are you willing to give your brain and body an alternative constructive experience from which to grow?

One of the most transformative and important experiences I have had dealing with these concepts is in my relationship with my children. We were going through an especially rough period, as with two teenage boys can be typical, and I found myself much more frustrated and angry than usual. Of course this frustration and anger only made the situation a whole lot worse, but I felt completely justified by those responses as my boys were making some very poor choices. Just at the point I felt completely overwhelmed, I decided to try an experiment.

Every day for the first 10 minutes when I woke up, and most often during my daily, sustained practice, I would completely focus on, and literally bathe myself in the gratitude I feel for my children. Admittedly, at first this was hard to do because of

their current behavior, but I was persistent in my practice. Even though that practice was seemingly unrelated because it was at a different time of the day than when we were having difficulties, our relationship at that point began to transform. I found myself reacting, more often than not, from a caring stance, and my positive reactive behavior began to stimulate a change in their behavior.

They could feel the love, gratitude and care I felt for them, and responded positively. Because a good deal of my attention was on care, I could set down caring and safe guidelines, instead of angry reactive ones, and we all transformed in our relationship. The power in that change was obvious and truly the only initial behavior change

was in my sustained focus of gratitude, but I could feel the difference. My reactive patterns were profoundly changed and we more often began to operate from love and care as the foundation of the relationship than from the opposite. By intentionally cultivating physiological shifts in our brains and bodies, we can not only develop higher states of consciousness, doing so changes the circumstances by which we live by.

Another area this concept is of great significance is in dealing with challenging and specific issues or situations. In other words, imagine a specific issue or situation that is especially challenging for you, and examine your willingness to truly work through the situation from a higher state of consciousness. If you are truly willing, and you



can feel what it would feel like to be done with, or at a more positive point in the situation, you have already begun to make the physiological shifts conducive to solving that issue; your neurons and biochemicals are responding as if the process has already begun.

One of my sons had major growth points in his life that demonstrates this concept. Learning to ride a bicycle and learning to snowboard were quite traumatic events initially, complete with tantrums and emotional upheavals. In both of these circumstances I knew he was capable of the activity, he was just not ready to perceive himself as someone who could do those things. But, in both of those cases, the moment he was willing to perceive himself differently (one was prompted by a magic 'push' from my father) was the moment he succeeded. In both of those activities he performed like he had been doing the activity for years. The moment he could see himself differently was the moment he began to create the physiological changes necessary for success.

Ask yourself what it would really "feel" like to already be in the condition or conditions you want to create, or free of the unease you want to be free of. Just being willing to feel those states begins to create the physiological conditions necessary for change. It's as if your brain believes you have already created those external conditions, and begins to act accordingly.

The significance of this point cannot be

understated when examining willingness. Are you willing to really see yourself in a position of already achieving the change you desire?

This concept is vastly different from 'wanting' something. When we want something, but can't allow ourselves to make the physiological shift to feeling what it would genuinely feel like to receive it or achieve it, we perpetuate the physiological condition of lack.

Fear and reluctance

Part of willingness involves staying grounded through the discomfort of growth. Even if it is positive growth there may be some aspect of fear of the unknown or fear of growing out of the familiar. Understand that this is part of the process. What is it about change that scares us? Is it the fear of the unknown? Is it that, although we may not like the current circumstance that we are trying to grow out of, we are accustomed to it; it feels familiar and that is what we know?

I love the metaphor of a car driving through the dark. When a car travels in the dark, its headlights light the road. Those headlights shine only about 200 feet in front of where the car is traveling, but those 200 feet are always enough, as long as the car is traveling in safe manor. When I feel the fear of growth, if I can ground myself in that metaphor I am a little more at ease. I know that I will see what I need to see as it is appropriate, and if I can stay centered, in my own grounded internal experience, that transformation will come.

The invitation of difficult emotion

What about when, no matter how hard we try, we are consumed with difficult emotion? The research clearly shows there are constructive, or pro-adaptive emotions and maladaptive emotions; are we 'bad' or 'weak' because those emotions we define as maladaptive keep re-appearing? Unfortunately much of our current literature on the topic may lead us to believe so. Typically what we do as they appear is suppress them, become totally hijacked by them, or judge ourselves as being less 'enlightened' because they exist at all.

A brief look at how our reactive patterns are created may help. Reactive patterns are most

often stored for our protection. Something has threatened our psychological or physical well-being, and that trauma is stored in our neural networks as associative memory; the reactivity's purpose is to somehow prevent the trauma from happening again. The next time an event looks remotely similar (this is mostly done at a subconscious level) our brain reacts in a way that initially served to protect us. For example the fear, anger, hatred, disassociation or resignation we feel may have initially served to buffer the trauma, but typically this pattern of associative memory has long outlived its purpose, and now has become maladaptive. In short, these reactive patterns have become our internal existence.



Because the trauma no longer lives in the initial event, but now lives in our neural networks, we need to break that law of associative memory. Somewhere beneath that maladaptive and reactive emotion is an invitation. What was the constructive or adaptive emotion being violated during that initial event? Was it security? Love? Safety? Nurturing? Instead of shaming or judging ourselves for the reactivity, we need to acknowledge that it was initially formed as a protection, maybe even appreciate its existence, and then begin to ground ourselves in the healing emotion wanting to emerge. From a psycho-physiological standpoint we are reprogramming our implicit memories, or reactivities, to a grounded, pro-adaptive or constructive state. 'Holding' the trauma from a place of acceptance and love enables healing and fundamentally changes our internal realities.

What does this have to do with willingness? Many times our own blame, shame or judgment of that which wants to be healed, ironically, prevents the healing. The willingness lies in the ability to recognize the invitation, and hold it all from a grounded and loving place of acceptance.

Making the choice

Authentic willingness requires fundamental internal shift. What blocks us from this shift? Sometimes it is an intuitive knowledge that we are not really ready, or it is more advantageous for us, right now, to stay where we are. Sometimes it's

being stuck in old definitions of ourselves, in our fears or reactivities. Sometimes it's the discomfort of growth or fear of the unknown; sometimes it's an inability to recognize the yearning of healing.

In all these instances, however, we need to look at the stories we tell ourselves and examine if we are willing to create new ones. We need to examine if we are truly willing to allow different perceptions of ourselves; to routinely replace maladaptive reactive patterns with pro-adaptive and life giving emotional states; to choose to react with love instead of fear, and compassion instead of hate; to embrace our own healing, and to choose to honor the sacred in all we encounter.

General questions of willingness

Read each question and pause. Tune into that part of your chest that seems to hold the answers for you. Remember that not all these questions are meant to be answered yes. Change must come in a way, and at a rate that feels comfortable for you. Again, some people seem to change slowly over long periods of time, and other change rapidly in bursts of growth. Honor what feels right for you and honor when an answer is no. Most of all keep in mind the scientific and physiological principles behind authentic willingness, and know that when you are truly willing, change will take place.

1. Are you really willing and ready for internal change or transformation in small or large ways? (No is OK)
2. Are you, in truth, willing to examine your

perceptions of events and allow yourself a different subjective interpretation?

3. Are you willing, when you are faced with a challenge, to see yourself beyond that challenge, visualize it and actually “feel” the physiological state of being beyond that challenge?
4. We all have emotional baggage. My friend likes to say “if we don’t unpack our emotional baggage here, well just have to carry it awhile longer.” Are you willing to admit to your emotional baggage? Are you willing to “unpack” it and let it go?
5. Are you willing to let go of thoughts like “that’s just the way I feel” or “that’s just my perception,” when in truth you are using those statements to validate or wallow in a maladaptive reactive pattern?
6. Are you truly willing to examine your own trigger points, “own them”, accept their invitation of growth (recognize the underlying yearn for the healing), and let them transform?
7. Are you willing to recognize and work through the discomfort of change, and allow yourself a new paradigm as a way of being?

I hope so.

• • • • •

Dr. Alane Daugherty is the author of *The Power Within: From Neuroscience to Transformation*. Her work centers on the psychophysiology of Mind / Body / Spirit dynamics, and practical

considerations, techniques and activities aimed at intentionally cultivating healing, healthy emotional states, and higher states of consciousness. She has been a lecturer at Cal Poly Pomona in the department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion for over twenty years, has taught courses at Claremont Graduate University, The Claremont School of Theology and Colorado College, and routinely does workshops and presentations on these topics. She has just finished recording a meditation CD, highlighting some of the techniques in her book, due out this spring. Dr. Daugherty is also the co-founder / co-director of the Institute for Individual and Social Wellbeing, an institute located within the Claremont School of Theology’s Center for Engaged Compassion. She lives with her husband and three kids in Claremont California. To contact her directly: visit her website at www.dralane.com or email her at adaugherty@csupomona.edu or adaugherty@cst.edu.



Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.