

Willingness in Difficult Times (by Jenna LeJeune, Ph.D)

I may be singlehandedly responsible for more cactus sales in Portland than any other person. Yes, I'm into low maintenance gardening, but that's not why I encourage my therapy clients to buy cacti.

In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) we often focus on helping people develop a sense of acceptance or willingness in their lives. So, as an ACT therapist, as you might expect, I often need to practice being willing to have my experiences... I think I'm particularly good at it as long as those experiences are pleasant for me. I have no trouble at all being willing to have the experience of joy or happiness or confidence. However, when it comes to painful experiences in my life — like sadness, self doubt, or anxiety, let's just say my willingness can look a little different — like nonexistent. Sometimes it looks like the person who is afraid of flying who is “willing” to fly by white knuckling through the whole flight, with maybe a few drinks in route to help with “willingness.” I too sometimes try to white knuckle my way through emotional pain. But I don't really think that's what we mean by “willingness”.

Willingness is an action

Willingness isn't the same as wanting. Instead, acceptance or willingness is being willing to experience, without struggle, difficult thoughts and feelings in the service of our values. It's that whole “without struggle” part that can be the trickiest because as soon as we're struggling to try to change, decrease, alter our thoughts/feelings/sensations, we aren't really willing to have them. That puts us in a power struggle with our own insides. And it can even be hard to know when we're really being willing versus white-knuckling. This is where the cactus come in....

One of my favorite metaphors for willingness comes from a friend and colleague, Dr. Hank Robb, who first related this metaphor to me:

Imagine extending your hand and having a feather placed in your open palm. The feather is soft and pleasant and you can hold it gently. Now imagine extending your hand and having a small cactus placed in your open palm. The cactus is prickly and unpleasant, AND you can hold it gently. That's willingness. Being willing to let the cactus be there, without struggle (you can imagine what happens when you struggle with a cactus!).

Just like you can hold a cactus gently, even though its prickly and uncomfortable, we can learn how to hold difficult thoughts and feelings gently.

Hold difficult feelings gently

So if you notice yourself going through a particularly challenging time, you might imagine holding your difficult thoughts and feelings gently, like a prickly cactus. As I often suggest to my clients, you might even buy a small cactus and practice holding it as a reminder of what willingness means. We may *want* to have those nice pleasant thoughts and feelings, but we can also be willing to hold gently those prickly thoughts and feelings when that's what is present.