



WHAT ACCEPTANCE IS— AND ISN'T!

Acceptance doesn't mean resignation;
it means understanding that something
is what it is and that there's got to be
a way through it.

—*Michael J. Fox, American actor*¹

IF YOU ARE LIKE others I have spoken to about accepting annoying people in their lives, your thoughts on the subject might be similar to theirs:

Why should I accept . . .

My sister's condescending behavior?

My mother's belittling me all the time?

My husband's telling me what's best for me?

My boss's nitpicking ways?

My opponent's unsportsmanlike conduct?

If pressed to at least try accepting such people as they are, they might respond with something like

Why should I have to put up with it?

What good will it do me?

I don't need them in my life.

I refuse to sacrifice my principles and values.

Nothing will really change.

These are all very valid concerns, and truth be told, I've felt them many times myself. However, I have learned that they stem mainly from certain misconceptions about what acceptance means. To give you more comfort about acceptance, let's look at some of its common misperceptions.

Acceptance does *not* mean

- **That you approve or condone another's behavior or the situation.** It is a mistake to equate acceptance with approval. As with Iva's finally accepting her abusive father in the previous chapter, you are not approving or condoning anybody or anything by accepting. Rather, you are simply acknowledging the "reality" of the person or situation and acting upon or deciding what's best for you aligned with that reality. Hence, you can accept someone or something even though you disapprove of what the person has done or the way something is. As such, acceptance is neither a positive or negative mind-set; it is a neutral one.

However, to be very clear, acceptance does not mean that you should accept abuse, violence, or other aberrant or intolerable behavior. Nor does it mean that you cannot or should not remove yourself from, or even sever ties with, someone if

you determine that is in your best interest to do so. As we will see later, what is important is the manner in which you do so.

- **That you must “give in” to others or things.** Acceptance also does not require that you relinquish your needs or subordinate your best interests to those of others or situations. Once again, if you feel unfairly burdened or imposed upon, you can disengage or detach—and when necessary, stand your ground. The only thing that I believe you should give in to is that every person has her own life path and that it is beyond your power (and, I believe, right) to meaningfully alter it. If your respective paths are not in sync, you are free to acknowledge that and move on.
- **That you cannot have reasonable expectations or set boundaries.** Acceptance does not mean that you cannot have reasonable expectations about how you are treated by others, nor does it preclude you from setting boundaries in your interactions or engagements with people. Indeed, you should. It’s more a matter of “live and let live.”
- **That you cannot be angry or resentful.** It’s normal and understandable—only “human” if you will—to be upset or resentful when someone mistreats you or when you have to endure trying circumstances. It is important, however, to address these strong feelings in a timely manner and not allow them to linger too long. When they do, you will dwell in negativity and in the past and not be able to see the meaningful choices and

courses of action available to you. Like Martin in the first chapter, true acceptance is possible only after you stop playing the blame game and rid yourself of deeply rooted anger and resentment. We will look at some ways to do that later.

- **That you must surrender to your “lot” in life.** Acceptance does not mean that you must be so resigned to your situation that you cannot explore ways of improving your stead. We will see that acceptance often involves taking action—just in a realistic, constructive manner.

And very importantly, acceptance does *not* mean

- **That you have no viable choices.** To the contrary, like Chris in dealing with his chronic illness in the previous chapter and Janice in coping with being a grandmother/parent in the first chapter, it is only by accepting situations or circumstances as they are that you are able to recognize the choices and options that will serve you best. Why? Because with acceptance, the focus changes from others and circumstances to *you*—and what you can do to better your life.

With a better understanding of what acceptance is *not*, we can now look at what true acceptance *is*. True acceptance means accepting people and things as they are *without* judgment or harboring negative feelings such as fear, anger, resentment, and the like. As such, it is the detached, even-keeled acknowledgment of the *underlying reality*—the “how is” and “what is”—of the person or situation. Simply put, it is embracing life

as it is. Self-improvement blogger Donna Torbico aptly describes this kind of acceptance as “acknowledging the TRUTH about things, without any make-up.”²

To be clear, though, true acceptance does *not* mean that an undesirable condition or circumstance or unpleasant person will change or go away; it *does* mean, however, that our self-defeating attitudes and negative feelings will lessen or even leave, thereby allowing space for more light and joy to come into our lives.

While the meaning of true acceptance may seem clear and simple enough, practicing it in different areas of our lives often is not. Indeed, in many instances, acceptance will seem unfathomable to you. In fact, you might ask the question below.

WHY SHOULD I ACCEPT THE “UNACCEPTABLE”?

If something is unacceptable to you, you shouldn't accept it. Acceptance is a personal choice each one of us needs to make. However, what is unacceptable for one person might not be for another. Moreover, the passage of time and our own shifting viewpoint can change what was initially unacceptable to us. The determination is usually based on one's beliefs, values, and experiences and also on one's fears, anxieties, resentments, perceptions—and misperceptions.

Whatever your predisposition, however, I would offer that before you determine something or somebody to be totally unacceptable, you should first consider what doing that will accomplish (maybe nothing) and

what adverse consequences could result—for you and others. A personal case in point: When a close friend was ten years old, his father totally severed ties with his brother-in-law because he felt betrayed by this person in a joint business enterprise. As a result, the two families permanently “separated,” and my friend was no longer able to see his closest cousins. He said, “This was a significant loss and has impacted our relationships to this day.”

At times acceptance seems near impossible in dealing with tragic events and circumstances. Tom Smith, whose adult daughter suffered from a personality disorder and took her life, describes the obstacles in reaching some degree of acceptance in extreme cases in his insightful book, *A Balanced Life: Nine Strategies for Coping with the Mental Health Problems of a Loved One*:

“Acceptance can be difficult because it forces us to deal with reality—a slippery concept. What is real and what is illusion? Whose reality are we talking about? What is the concrete, definitive truth of our life, and what is fantasy, naïve expectation, or unrealistic wish? These questions are not just for philosophers, poets, and pundits. In the special circumstances we live in, we all face these questions every day. We seldom ask them directly, but we often think, feel, and act as if we know the answers, when, in fact, we don’t. . . .

“When we do assess our real abilities and limitations honestly and critically, we often see that we have less control than we thought. A sudden illness, an unexpected death, the unwanted end of a relationship, a child growing up and resisting our guidance, a person who makes choices we don’t approve of, a loved one in

trouble who refuses our help, a friend who disappoints us . . . all these real-life experiences expose our own limits and vulnerability. And we don't like it."³

RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

To help people process such horrific adversities, some psychotherapists recommend that their clients practice “radical acceptance” as a means of living a life with meaning and satisfaction even with a painful event. Clients are encouraged to consciously decide to accept reality rather than push against it. Dr. Marsha Linehan, who is at the forefront of practicing radical acceptance, describes it as letting go of the illusion of control and having the willingness to notice and accept things as they are right now, without judgment. She says the process involves accepting the reality for what it is, accepting that the event or circumstance causing you pain has a cause, and finally accepting life can still be worthwhile even with painful events in it.⁴

As such, radical acceptance includes the key elements of practicing acceptance that I write about in this book. In a sense, it can be viewed as “extraordinary” acceptance because it deals with trying to accept extraordinary events.

PRACTICING ACCEPTANCE

Be encouraged by the fact that the challenges of acceptance lessen considerably with practice. That is why I use the term “practicing acceptance.” Pure and simple, embracing life as it is takes lots of practice. It needs our constant awareness and balanced perspective.

Practicing acceptance is akin to changing your muscle memory when you want to get better at your favorite sport. As an avid tennis player, I am always trying to improve my game, and my forehand has been my weakest stroke. In taking lessons from a top tournament player, I learned that my stroke fundamentals were wrong. While I understood what corrections the instructor said I needed to make to improve my forehand, my muscle memory—and my “mental” memory—were deeply ingrained from years of hitting incorrectly. It took hours of continued practice to overcome my old stroke pattern and transition into proper form. However, my forehand gradually improved and I began winning more matches and eventually some tournaments.

The same dynamic applies with acceptance. We need to change our mental muscle memory—those deeply ingrained attitudes and patterns of judging, denying, fearing, resenting, expecting, and controlling. It, too, takes lots of practice. With willingness, commitment—and courage—acceptance will become easier and more natural for you. Don’t worry about lapses or setbacks. Even partial or limited success produces tremendous benefits.

FACING THE CHALLENGE

Whatever discomfort or pain we have to endure, I strongly believe that it is better to face the challenges of acceptance as opposed to giving up hope and dwelling in negativity. Even when acceptance is not smooth or easy, it is most often better than the alternative. As a friend of mine sanguinely puts it, “My accepting

something doesn't mean I like it or enjoy it, but I know that my not accepting it makes matters worse for me." Another friend explains it even more simply: "Life is easier that way."

As we proceed to examine important keys and tools in practicing acceptance in all our affairs, we need first overcome what is likely the most formidable acceptance barrier: denial. The next chapter explains how to do that.

