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Embracing Mental Health: The Power of Acceptance and Letting Go

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Abstract

This essay challenges the notion of avoiding uncomfortable thoughts and emotions in mental health. It argues that accepting these experiences, as supported by therapies like Exposure and Response Prevention for Pure OCD, promotes greater well-being. By cultivating a compassionate relationship with inner experiences, individuals can foster resilience amidst challenges.

Keywords: Mental Health; Acceptance; Discomfort; Emotions; Thoughts; Resilience

Introduction: Avoidance to Inner Peace

Just as physical health plays a major role in the well-being of a person, in the same way mental health is also important if we want to be holistically healthy instead of being just healthy one-dimensionally. Physical Health is only one aspect of our health card diary. When talking about mental health I would like to emphasize the current culture within the therapy circle whereby it's prescribed to not think particular thoughts and avoid certain sensations, emotions and feelings. Though this strategy of avoidance may work in the short-term for our mental health, but it's just a short-term relief.

The strategy of avoiding uncomfortable situations in life gives a signal to the brain that the situation is dangerous which further gives rise to the sympathetic nervous system response of flight-fight or freeze. But, if we instead of fighting the uncomfortable sensations and thoughts, we let them be there without resistance or fighting against them, then it gives rise to the parasympathetic response of rest and digest which makes the mind to calm down and relax. When we stop judging the uncomfortable sensation as either good or bad, then the fuel of the uncomfortable sensation on which it relies for its perpetuation and survival gets dislodged and it passes away sooner than expected. In mental health circles, there is a strong emphasis on the prescription of "not thinking", but I have a strong intuitive sense that this presumption or prescription of not thinking about a particular thing – like an uncomfortable experience that we may have had years ago makes the imprints of the memories of that experience even stronger. The moment we try to control or manipulate the natural flow of thoughts in our mind, the more out of control the mind gets. The more we try to not think about something, the more we start to ruminate on it or think about it.

Challenging Mental Health Preconceptions

There is also a misconception in the field of mental health that the arising of negative thoughts, emotions, feelings and sensations is bad in some way. So, in today's culture we try hard to suppress bad thoughts, emotions and feelings. Moreover, we can say that the labeling mechanism whereby we label thoughts as being either good or bad gives rise to the increased psychological problems. A person suffering from Pure OCD might start to judge the thoughts

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(intrusive thoughts) of harm, violence and sex that come in his or her mind. It's not the thoughts themselves that make them intrusive, uncomfortable and disturbing, but it is the judgments, conceptualizations and false beliefs we make around the initial movement of thought that makes a thought intrusive. Therefore, Exposure and Response Prevention is a good therapy for the patients of Pure OCD where the patient gradually lets the thoughts which he or she considers as uncomfortable and distressing to arise in his or her mind realm and doesn't react or responds to those thoughts by compulsively trying to judge them or resist them. Good mental health is not based on removing uncomfortable thoughts, emotions and sensations from our field of experience, but rather it is a leap of acceptance whereby a person or an individual let's go of the idea that he or she should only experience one spectrum of the field of experience (like desiring only a specific type of thoughts to arise in the mind). It's our attitude of engagement and interest in controlling the thoughts in the mind which ends up making our mental health even worse by amplifying the worry, anxiety and the sadness about a particular situation.

Mental Clarity and Letting Go

Most of the people fail to differentiate between the arising of thoughts, emotions and sensations and the active effort of "thinking about" those thoughts, emotions and sensations. The thoughts, emotions and sensations will continue to arise in the mind till the time the physical body continues to exist, but we as an individual have a choice to think a particular thought or not. I believe most of the mental health problems arise when our thinking is based on thoughts of belief about the past or the future, rather than thinking those thoughts which are related to the situation in the present moment. Good mental health and developing it in a good way is about having the ability to let go of thinking about thoughts which are no longer relevant to the situation at hand, being comfortable in the midst of uncomfortableness, the ability to regulate our emotions with regard to the situation and the ability to tolerate distressing situations and still being able to carry on with our daily activities efficiently. Good mental health is not that we will have no thoughts, or memories, or emotions arising in our mind.

That will be like a robotic and bland state of existence without any vitality. On the contrary, having a nice, relaxed and composed mental space is all about the way in which we deal or the relationship that we have with these thoughts, emotions and sensations. I want to say further that mental health is all about the type of choice we exercise over the contents of experience (thoughts, emotions, sensations). One choice is of resisting the content of experience and another one is accepting and embracing the content or the field and the realm of experience for what- it-is rather than expecting it to be different from the one it already is. The first choice gives rise to psychological suffering and the second choice leads to inner calm and ease leading to mental well-being. Acceptance and the art of letting go are the two most important facets when it comes to maintaining and operating from the space of good mental health.

Conclusion

While modern mental health practices often advocate for the suppression of negative thoughts and emotions, this paper advocates for a paradigm shift towards acceptance and non-resistance. The experience of mental health is not defined by the absence of uncomfortable thoughts but rather by our relationship with them. By choosing acceptance over avoidance, individuals can navigate distressing experiences with greater ease and resilience. This nuanced approach, rooted in therapeutic principles like Exposure and Response Prevention, offers a path towards holistic well-being that embraces the complexities of human consciousness and emotional life.

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