

RMP BLOG: Distress, Suffering and Resistance

In 1994, American-born meditation teacher Shinzen Young drew a clear relationship between pain, our natural aversion away from it, and our level of suffering. He framed the relationship in mathematical terms, given by this deceptively simple formula:¹

$$P \times R = S$$

Where:

P = Pain

R = Resistance

S = Suffering



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Young's view is that our experience of distress and suffering depends on how resistant we are to experiencing natural inevitable pain. Clinical psychologist and author Christopher Germer made the subsequent and audacious claim that pain is inevitable but suffering is optional.²

Pain is a normal part of life and has a protective function to keep us well and healthy. An example might include the pain experienced when you injure your knee while playing sport or hurt your back when lifting something too heavy. The injury forces you to stop and allow time for your body to heal itself naturally. This is the common way in which we understand the meaning of the word pain. However, pain does not always present in a clear physical way like a headache does. We also experience painful emotions that no amount of pain killers, surgery, or bedrest will diminish. Emotional pain is sometimes categorised as mental or psychological pain to distinguish it from physical pain. It acts in the same way as physical pain by forcing us to stop, become aware and take soothing action.

In the way this pain is defined in the literature, there is a confused blending of terminology. Sometimes, for example, psychological or mental pain is held synonymous with suffering. Without getting too embroiled in semantics, there is a very simple way to understand the pain Young refers to in his equation. Think of pain as a uniformly unpleasant feeling³—one that you would prefer to avoid. There are many unpleasant feelings including anger, frustration, fear, jealousy, guilt, shame and revenge. These read like the seven deadly sins, however they are everyday feelings and we all experience them. They feel decidedly unpleasant and we would usually label them 'negative.' Given a choice we would rather not experience them, although we may each have differing levels of tolerance. Young's equation is simply stating that the more we resist experiencing unpleasant feelings, the more these unpleasant feelings grow into real and often enduring suffering.

Resistance is any struggle we engage in as an attempt to get rid of the pain we experience. Examples include trying to: avoid it, control it, bottle it, hide from it, talk yourself out of it, complain about it, punch it out, distract yourself from it, yell and scream about it or find some other way to vent it. It

seems quite reasonable to want to resist feeling pain and this is all very well when it *is* avoidable. But when it comes to mental pain, it almost always *isn't*. And here's the thing; you really don't have a choice. Whenever you resist mental pain, suffering follows. And the impact of resistance on your experience of distress is not merely additive—it is multiplicative.

Resistance is rarely helpful but on occasion it may be. For instance, some people can become so overwhelmed by the intensity of unpleasant feelings they can be a danger to themselves or to others. In such a case, resistance can provide temporary relief from overpowering feelings. A good example of this includes various distraction techniques, which are sometimes used for people who have suicidal thoughts. Ideally, distraction would only be used for temporary relief rather than in any ongoing way to deal with distress. But I am not saying “Don't use it” because you need to do what keeps you safe.

It is evident from Young's equation that to reduce suffering and distress in the long-term, we must reduce our resistance to the pain we experience. For mental pain this is about lessening your struggle against whatever is being experienced as unpleasant.

What we try to do when we experience mental pain is exactly the opposite of what we try to do when we experience pleasure. We try to get rid of pain by pushing it away but want to cling to pleasure. Either way—attempting to push away the bad or refuse to let go of the good—is resistance to *what is*.

The seat of psychological struggle in humans lies in the frontal lobes, as we attempt to bring control through rationality and reasoning to the completely irrational experience of pain. Our frontal lobes err on the side of caution and exaggerate harm, which flies in the face of frontal lobe control of suffering. So, in the words of neurologist and author Gayatri Devi “unless we renounce some frontal lobe control it is impossible to achieve any level of calm.”⁴ In other words, you are not going to find a solution to the problem of distress from thinking your way out of it. This is just another form of resistance, which Young would agree will crank up your distress.

Young's idea is simple and intuitive. It offers us a neat way of understanding distress and it offers us a way forward in our quest to understand and resolve distress and suffering. But resistance is a very sneaky thing created by a brain that, in its unconscious desire to protect you, is even sneakier. So we need to proceed cautiously when it comes to resolving mental pain, to save us falling into the traps that keep us stuck.

¹ Young, S. (1994). Purpose and method of Vipassana meditation. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 22(1), 53–61. <http://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.1994.9976936>

² Germer, C. K. (2009). *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself From Destructive Thoughts and Emotions*. New York, New York: The Guilford Press.

³ Meerwijk, E. L., & Weiss, S. J. (2011). Toward a Unifying Definition of Psychological Pain. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 16(March 2013), 402–412. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2011.572044>

⁴ p. 112, Devi, G. (2012). *A Calm Brain: Unlocking Your Natural Relaxation System*. New York, NY: Dutton.