

## RMP BLOG: The Remarkable Power of Willingness

In an [earlier post](#), I mentioned three qualities health scientist Kelly McGonigal believes are essential for the process of change, one of which is *willingness*. The power of willingness to resolve distress cannot be overstated. It provides the perfect orientation to address the struggle with *what is*. Let's look more closely at this.



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Our unwillingness to experience inner discomfort arises from our lack of experience with it. Our inexperience leads to fear that being present with painful sensations (anger, fear, frustration, irritability, annoyance, anxiety and so on) will be intolerable and harmful. This perception of harm arises from our mind constructing a narrative of something dangerous, however as we buy into the story fear seems very real and justified. Our unwillingness to experience discomfort is evident in the effort we invoke to resist experiencing it. Resistance takes many forms (avoidance, control, venting, suppression, numbing, etc.) and we learned in a [previous post](#) resistance is almost always a pathway leading towards greater distress and suffering. But just as surely as avoidance amplifies distress, suffering can be reduced over time by ensuring we don't avoid it.

You can end your struggle with *what is* by increasing your willingness to experience what your thinking mind is so desperate to protect you from experiencing. It is not until we face our inner landscape that we realise, through experience, the sensations we try hard to avoid are actually tolerable and even manageable.

There is a metaphor that comes from the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy field to illustrate the important place willingness plays in resolving distress. This metaphor applies to both physical and psychological (mental) pain and it fits well with Shinzen Young's conceptualisation of resistance, discussed in a [previously](#). Take a look at this image:



This image shows two dials. One measures the intensity of pain—in this case is psychological pain—such as anger, worry, frustration or guilt. The other measures the degree of willingness we have to experience the pain. The truth about pain is it's largely immovable, and this is represented by the pain dial being firmly jammed on 6.5. As much as you might try to turn it down (through venting, avoidance, control or some other equally futile

form of resistance) it won't budge. But in the struggle to turn the pain down—in our unwillingness to accept *what is*—pain is amplified and distress is generated, which is exactly what [Young's formula](#) predicts. The struggle is kept alive by searching for solutions where none can be found. It occurs in the dark and generally outside our awareness percolating up from the lower limbic areas of the brain as we struggle against *what is*.

Because there is little we can do practically to turn down pain, the most sensible<sup>1</sup> thing would be to accept the wisdom of our experience and stop trying. If we are open to it, this is where willingness can take centre stage.

Willingness is a top-down process mediated by the [prefrontal cortex](#). We can decide to be willing or decide not to be. If willingness becomes an option for us, we can also decide how willing we are prepared to be. Therefore, it is important to understand although the pain dial is firmly wedged, the willingness dial can move about more freely in line with any decision we make about our readiness to experience *what is*.

You can set your willingness dial high, low or somewhere in the middle. This dial reflects your willingness to experience the pain you are unavoidably feeling. In essence, this is a measure of your acceptance of *what is*. Now here's the clincher: when you experience high levels of pain and your willingness to have it is zero, as in the image above, this creates the perfect recipe for suffering. This is readily apparent in people who unfortunately experience chronic physical pain, like back pain, or acute pain following an injury. Even when the benefits of modern medicine have been exhausted, sometimes physical pain remains. Understandably, people with chronic physical pain are often on a quest to rid themselves of pain by finding the right doctor, the right medicine or the right surgery. In effect, their willingness dial is fixed on zero.

Willingness equally applies to anyone who struggles with mental pain who similarly wishes to rid themselves of it. People experiencing a variety of mental health-related problems, including depression, anxiety, rages, and even substance abuse almost always have their willingness dial set too low and often hovering around zero. Their unwillingness to experience distress—their resistance to *what is*—simply magnifies suffering.

With reference to the image above, what would happen if we take hold of the willingness dial and move it from zero to the first notch (0.25)? What difference would this make to the experience of pain? A lot! When patients with physical pain increase their willingness even a little, their distress proportionately reduces. This rapidly frees them to live more of their life even in pain. It also tends to reduce their perception of pain intensity. Likewise, when you experience distress and increase your willingness to experience it, even a little, you can begin to live your life without struggling against *what is*, and your experience of suffering will also reduce.

Take a work colleague, partner or friend who fails to undertake their fair share of the workload. With the stirring of thoughts and emotions inside you, you begin to feel frustration, which your experience reveals could easily trigger venting. Understanding the importance of willingness as you now do, you are faced with two options. Either your willingness to experience your frustration is zero or it isn't. If willingness is locked on zero, you are in for a difficult and distressing ride. One that may culminate in further distress and even damage the relationship you and your associate share. On the other hand, if your willingness to experience your frustration is not zero, your distress will be less. You will find available mental space where you and your colleague, partner or friend may consider a compromise or an incentive for completed work you can mutually agree on. Distress adds nothing and can result in collateral damage; but calmness brought about by a willingness to experience *what is* allows space for solutions and can strengthen relationships and wellbeing.

When you become more willing to experience what you have to experience anyway, you lessen the struggle against *what is*. As a client, your decrease in distress will be directly proportional to your degree of willingness you allow when difficult thoughts and feelings arise. Increasing your willingness and creating space for *what is* promotes wisdom and enhances wellbeing.

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<sup>1</sup> I say *sensible* because mental pain can be dulled by a range of prescribed and illicit drugs, which do not offer a sensible long-term solution. Used for the purpose of dulling mental pain, consuming drugs, alcohol and other addictive substances are another means to avoidance of *what is*.