



FOSTER & ADOPTIVE  
CARE COALITION

FOR EVERY CHILD... A PLACE TO CALL HOME

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# RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

"Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional"

Caring for children and youth who have survived severe and complicated trauma can be exhausting and finding peace among the chaos can be daunting. When we enter survival mode, we can lose perspective and situations can quickly spiral out of emotional control.



## WHAT IS RADICAL ACCEPTANCE AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

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*Everyone experiences pain.* Pain is not an optional part of being alive. Pain, however, is most often temporary. It often creates feelings of sadness, disappointment, loss and frustration. Suffering, on the other hand, is caused by a refusal to accept the reality as it is, resulting in a deep and prolonged state of distress, helplessness, rage, disgust, revenge, hopelessness, hatred or anger.

## THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL.

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*Radical acceptance is about acknowledging reality,* not liking it or fighting against it. Radical acceptance has nothing to do with being passive or giving up. To the contrary, it is about channeling your energy into moving forward instead of being stuck in suffering.

When you radically accept a painful

reality, your thoughts, emotions and attitudes must shift to make room for the truth of what is happening (or has happened in the past).

## PAIN + ACCEPTANCE = PAIN PAIN + NON ACCEPTANCE = SUFFERING

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When an event is painful, it is natural to try to push it away, fight against it, try to control it or numb it out by using unhealthy coping behaviors such as the use of alcohol, drugs, self-harming, blaming, raging, avoiding, shopping ... These coping strategies are deceiving because, while they all provide very intense, immediate and predictable (temporary) relief, rejecting reality only ends up intensifying our emotional reactions, resulting in time spent engaged in unproductive emotions and behaviors. Sadly, these immediate relief strategies do not change the reality you are trying to escape/deny and will most likely make the situation much more painful and difficult



(without providing any lasting relief or resolution.) A waste of time and energy for little to no return!

## COMPONENTS OF RADICAL ACCEPTANCE (WHAT IT IS)

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- Accepting things exactly and honestly the way they are, accepting what we can't control
- Being factual about the situation (avoiding added false or exaggerated meanings)
- Acknowledging the FACTS exactly as they are, including our own actions
- Tolerating the feelings/thoughts coming from the pain and learning how to live with them in a way that does not distract from the present

## COMPONENTS OF RADICAL ACCEPTANCE (WHAT IT IS NOT)

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- Radical Acceptance does not mean agreeing with everything that has happened
- Radical acceptance is not approval
- It is not condoning the behavior or actions of others
- It is not giving up your needs, **acceptance doesn't equal agreement**
- It is not ignoring or denying a situation, it is not surrendering

## FOUR OPTIONS TO EVERY SITUATION

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1. Solve the problem (if you can). If you cannot change it, you can either:
2. Change how you feel about the problem (make lemonade), or

3. Accept it as it is, or
4. Stay miserable

*It really is a choice and it is your choice alone to make: either solve it, redefine it, accept it, or stay miserable.*

## WHY SHOULD I ACCEPT REALITY?

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- Rejecting reality does not change reality
- Pain is unavoidable, it is a part of life
- Refusing to accept reality creates suffering: prolonged and pervasive unhappiness, bitterness, anger, shame, thoughts of revenge and anger
- Acceptance, while often coupled with sadness, creates a space for deep calmness to enter
- Because life is worth living even when it involves painful events

## FACTORS THAT INTERFERE WITH RADICAL ACCEPTANCE (BLOCKS TO ACCEPTANCE)

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### • Not having the skills:

- › **Mindfulness skills** to observe and describe what has happened honestly and non-judgmentally, pausing to allow time for the emotions to subside
- › **Distress Tolerance** skills to handle the uncomfortable and painful feelings that arise without making the situation worse
- › **Emotion Regulation** skills to deal with difficult and erratic emotions and avoid reacting solely out of emotion mind

- › **Interpersonal Effectiveness** skills to interact with others in productive, honest and respectful ways, to initiate healing
- **Not wanting to let the other person “off the hook.”** Holding anger can seem like you are punishing the offending person. As long as you stay angry, then they are not getting away with whatever they did to harm/upset you. Your anger serves as a memorial of what happened.
- **Believing that accepting means I agree with what happened.** Radical acceptance is simply acknowledging the event happened, is real, and has meaning for you.
- **Needing to remain angry to protect yourself.** Radical acceptance can seem very risky, giving up your armor of anger, withdrawal and resentment that have served to protect you from pain. **Non-acceptance** uses up a great deal of energy and focus on a situation that has already occurred and can't be changed.

## RADICAL ACCEPTANCE AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO FORGIVENESS

- Radical acceptance has nothing to do with the other person, it is completely about reducing your own pain and avoiding prolonged suffering

- Radical acceptance allows you to move forward and still hold the other person(s) accountable and completely responsible for their behavior

## PRACTICING RADICAL ACCEPTANCE, STEP-BY-STEP

- Observe if you are fighting or questioning reality (“It shouldn’t be this way” “This is not happening” “This needs to stop”)
- Remind yourself that the situation is as it is and cannot be changed (“this is what happened” describe the situation using facts, honestly and accurately)
- Remind yourself that there are causes for what happened. Some sort of history concluded in this event or situation. Notice how, given the history and causal factors, this reality had to happen exactly as it did. “I might have predicted this would occur” given what I know
- Practice accepting with self-talk, relaxation, emotion regulation skills, prayer, or mindfulness to soften the pain
- Allow any disappointment, sadness or grief to arise and simply exist, without fighting it or making it worse
- Acknowledge that life can still be good even when there is pain

*The information in this resource guide is based on the teachings of Marsha M. Linehan and compiled by Anne Zink, Director of Family Support for Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition. For more support in reducing conflict and increasing happiness in your foster or adoptive family, call the Coalition at 314-367-8373 and ask for more information about Family Works.*