



Insight and Inspiration,
Innovation and Vision
For the Developing and
Evolving Self

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR SELF DEVELOPMENT

Comfort Zone (Part II): Exploring New Aspects of The Lower Level

INTRODUCTION

This Letter for Insight and Inspiration contains an exploration of the lower level of the comfort zone. We will discover new aspects of our emotional/feeling life, and new ways of responding to our painful feelings. The comfort zone itself is relatively straightforward and understandable. However, it is profoundly useful in the theoretical and practical ideas that it suggests.

Point of Empowerment: Powerful ideas are straightforward and understandable and challenge us to reach our potential by putting them to use.

THE COMFORT ZONE

The comfort zone is a way to conceptualize the psychological space that we live and operate in each day. It is an emotional—thought and feeling—space. (Remember we define emotions as the combination of thoughts and feelings.) It is a space of awareness. Comfort itself is desirable because it is a pleasurable feeling. It is part of what has been called homeostasis, a still and stable state of being. The problem with comfort is that it becomes boring. We then seek various kinds of stimulation for entertainment and growth.

In the December 2017 newsletter we explored aspects of the comfort zone, especially the upper boundary, which is the limit we place on ourselves as to how much of the good in life we will allow into our life. We said that to raise that upper limit we had to challenge the beliefs that create that limit.

Let's now explore the lower boundary with some additional ideas that can help us deal with and grow from the pain in our life.

A CHALLENGE FOR YOUR GROWTH

In *The Operating Manual for the Self* we outlined three challenges for your growth. One of the three challenges is: "Seek to feel good all the time." This does not mean that one can or should feel good all the time. Rather, as we seek to feel good we become aware of how we feel, move ourselves out of painful feelings, and enjoy pleasurable feelings. Let's see how working with the comfort zone can help us do this.

WORKING WITH THE COMFORT ZONE AND PAINFUL FEELINGS

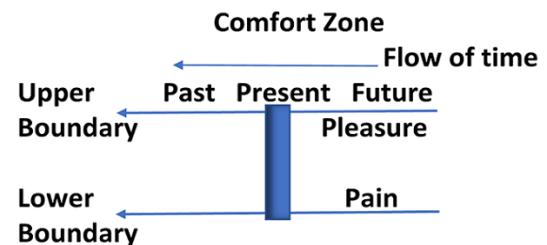
Here is a new conceptualization of the comfort zone (see diagram) that illustrates a new approach to its lower level and lower boundary. The lower level now contains two kinds of painful feelings: painful feelings that we quickly act on, and painful feelings that we need to experience and tolerate, without acting on. This is a very useful distinction that helps us to move from pain to pleasure more quickly.

Letter for Insight and Inspiration

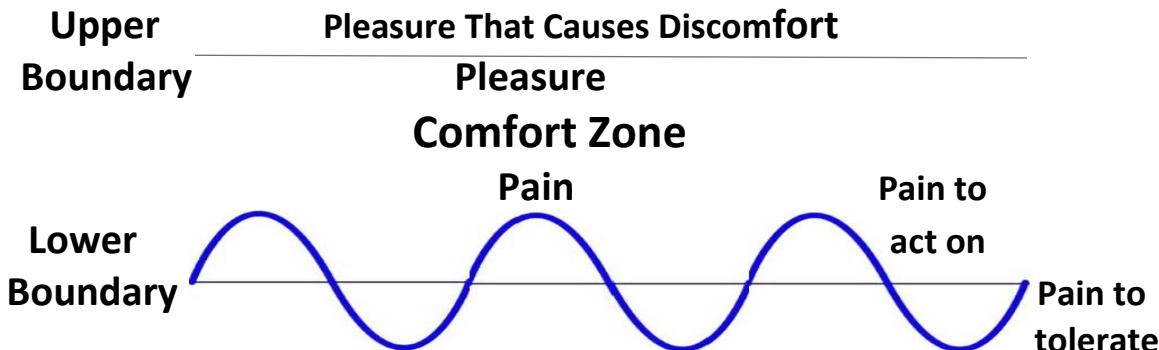
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Comfort Zone



PAIN TO ACT ON

There are times when we experience certain painful feelings, and the best course of action is to delay acting on them. These are feelings that we tolerate. With pain that we act on, first we hear the message of the pain—what it can tell us about the situation we are in. We then take quick action to change the situation rather than waiting passively, enduring the painful feelings. This is especially true with repeating, predictable, cycles of interactions with others, which give us the opportunity to act quickly to change the situation and alleviate the painful feeling. For example:

- Consider a parent with a screaming child. The parent is trying to be patient. The child persists or even escalates with his or her behavior. The parent feels frustrated and angry and inevitably screams at the child. Then both parent and child feel badly. Action: respond to the child quickly without waiting for the frustration and anger to build and reach out of control proportions.
- We feel anger at someone who is mistreating us. We think that we cannot respond effectively so we do not act. Action: do something quickly to stop this person's behavior. The first line of defense may be to walk away. Other responses may follow.
- Chronic dissatisfaction with some aspect of our life that we do not take any action to correct. For example, working at a job that is very stressful and unfulfilling. Action: find another job.

Point of Empowerment: When we take quick action to change a situation, we are respecting our feelings by hearing their message and taking the action that would alleviate the feeling so that we feel better.

PAIN TO TOLERATE

Tolerating painful feelings means that we allow them to exit within our awareness, opening ourselves to experience them. We do block them from our awareness and do not immediately act on them. When we do this, we maintain our aliveness and create the opportunity to receive the message of the feelings. What are the situations that arise where this is a wise strategy for dealing with painful feelings? The most frequent situation that triggers painful feelings that we need to tolerate are situations that we don't have control over. Frustration, anger, and sadness are the most frequent feelings that occur in these situations. Examples of these situations are:

- Being sick
- Having injuries that we will never fully recover from
- When the people that we love and care about are hurt in some way and there is nothing we can do to help them
- Grieving and mourning a loss
- World events that touch us emotionally

However, there are times when we are experiencing painful feelings that seem unbearable, that we think will hurt, and maybe even destroy, us. We then resist (fight) having these feelings, which sets up a battle within us that will exhaust us. Additionally, resisting feelings increases the pressure of their pain. It is like building a dam that blocks a river which then exerts tremendous pressure on the dam. We can remove painful feelings from our immediate awareness, but at a great cost. We numb ourselves, which alienates us from life,

and we miss the information about our life that is conveyed to us by our feelings. To expand our capacity to cope with these feelings effectively, we need to learn the skill of tolerating their presence within us.

Point of Empowerment: Learning to tolerate painful feelings gives us the strength to live life more fully.

TOLERATING PAINFUL FEELINGS

To tolerate painful feelings, we need strategies to cope with them, and the willingness to employ these strategies. The willingness to use these strategies comes from changing the beliefs that cause us to reject and run from our feelings in the first place.

Know that feelings have a natural flow, a beginning, middle, and an end. In the beginning a situation exists; then feelings arise in our awareness; then they dissipate and are gone. If we know this, we can be patient with our feelings just allowing them to run their course. We breathe deeply and relax into them.

It is possible to experience intense feelings that we truly cannot tolerate at the moment. Our approach should be to recognize this and merely distract ourselves, but with the promise of coming back to the feeling in the future when we are in a calmer state. We then recall the feeling, experience it, and work with it. A powerful distraction technique is to focus your attention on your breath saying, “I breathe in. I breathe out,” to yourself or out loud. Focusing on your breathing is a distraction technique that does not involve going numb by dulling our awareness.

IDENTIFY AND CHANGE BELIEFS

To be able to tolerate painful feeling we need to identify and change the beliefs about feelings which motivate us to banish feelings from our awareness—to “defend ourselves” against feelings. The thought that we need to eliminate painful feelings is based on the belief that our feelings are dangerous in some way. We think that they will annihilate us—killing us psychically, that they will hurt other people, or get us into trouble with others. There may be feelings that cause stress, but the stress is mostly due to the fear of the feeling, not the feeling itself.

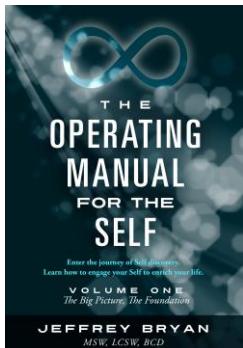
- False belief: my feelings are dangerous. They will kill or hurt me or others.
- Truth: no feeling has ever killed anyone, and feelings won’t get us into trouble with others unless we express them destructively. There may be “hurt feelings,” which are a normal part of living, and can be worked with and resolved.
- New belief: I am in control of my feelings. I recognize the value of experiencing my feelings. They are my experience of life and contain messages for me about my life. If I allow them to be, they will come and go on their own.

Point of Empowerment: Learning to tolerate our most painful feelings helps us develop the ability and willingness to experience a wider range of feelings. These experiences enrich our life.

CONCLUSION

By redesigning the lower level of our comfort zone, we have expanded it. We are now less afraid of painful feelings. We know that allowing painful feelings to run their course, or acting quickly to change a situation that generates painful feelings, will bring us back into the middle of our comfort zone. We are then ready for the next thing that arises.

In future Letters we will explore the comfort zone and its relationship to the past, present, and future.



The Operating Manual for the Self explores in detail, the origins and healing of painful feelings. See chapter called “Disturbances of The Self.”

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