



Beyond Blame

Allowing
Yourself the
Discomfort

Jeffrey A. Kottler

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Allowing Yourself the Discomfort

What place, you may justifiably be wondering, does encouraging pain have in a program to help people who are already struggling with conflict? Am I encouraging self-inflicted suffering as a distraction from wounds inflicted by others? Am I advocating some perverse form of self-torture? Can't you just skip this step and go on to the next chapters, where you get to initiate some fun changes in your life?

Unfortunately, no.

When Discomfort Becomes Your Friend

One of the most difficult concepts for beginning therapists to comprehend is the idea that in order for people to make needed changes in their lives they often must be helped to feel perfectly miserable about themselves the way they presently are. A beginning helper's first instinct when someone cries is to offer him or her a tissue. When a person is obviously struggling with something difficult, the tendency is to pave the way to make it easier. There is no crime in offering comfort, but if the goal is to change a long-standing pattern, discomfort is potentially the greatest of allies rather than an enemy.

Rarely does anyone initiate changes unless what they are already doing is not working very well. People do not walk away from marriages that are perfectly satisfying or even marginally not meeting their needs; they usually feel quite desperate and unhappy by the time they take action, and even then they do so very reluctantly. People do not quit their jobs and make other dramatic life changes unless they are extremely dissatisfied with the way things have been going. A certain amount of tears, anguish, reluctance, depression, anxiety, and misery is par for the course. These come with the territory of altering life patterns that, however self-destructive, are nevertheless familiar.

One of the principal jobs of a therapist, or of any change agent, is not only to help the client feel good about him or herself but also to help him or her feel lousy about some of the ways in which he or she has been managing life. I become concerned and suspicious not when a client complains that she feels terrible about herself when she engages in interactive patterns that have gotten her into trouble, but rather when she reports that she is feeling better about herself even though she is doing the same old things. It takes a certain degree of pain to motivate action.

When Pain Motivates Action

Just a few years ago, I had myself convinced that I was quite satisfied with the way my life had been going. Yes, I was a little bored with the routine of a job

that had become predictable, unchallenging, and stressful. I told myself, however, that at least I was earning a good income and that I did seem to be helping people. Whenever I started to feel some discomfort stemming from the whispers inside my head asking me if perhaps there was not something more to life, I quickly shut that voice down. I bribed it by treating myself with a gift. I ignored it by pretending that it was normal to feel dissatisfied with what one is doing. I buried myself in relationships with my family and friends, hoping that eventually the voice (and discomfort) would give up and go away. I tried to convince myself that the conflicts I was experiencing with some of the people in my life were perfectly acceptable.

What a hypocrite I was! Day after day I was telling my clients to take risks, to go after what they wanted in life, to not settle for mediocrity. I urged them to go after their dreams and I supported them along the way. Even worse, I pretended to be a perfect model of all that they should strive to be. Indeed, several clients told me repeatedly how much they admired the way I conducted my life.

No matter how much I tried to deny it, my discomfort grew. During consultations with colleagues, conversations with friends and family, dialogues with myself inside my head and in my journal, I started to become more aware of the issues that were involved. I was able to identify some of the patterns that I was repeating, as well as come to terms with the origins of certain themes. Yet

rather than feeling better about myself and where I was headed, I started to feel much worse. Mild depression became my constant companion. I appeared distracted and irritable. Within a five-month period I had four automobile accidents, even though I had gone fifteen years without a single previous incident. Clearly, I was feeling more and more discomfort with myself and the life that I was leading. I had to do something, *anything* other than what I was already doing. No matter how frightened I was of initiating some changes, I realized that nothing could be worse than what I was already experiencing.

A friend and fellow therapist remarked to me one day that I finally looked to her the way she had sensed I had been feeling all along. When was I going to realize that until I made some needed changes my pain would be my lifelong companion? Although I had said that very thing to my clients a thousand times, I could not hear my own voice through the fog of my pain. But my friend's words got through to me, enough so that I finally did take some steps to realign my priorities. This was no easy task. As you might imagine, or recall from your own experiences initiating major life changes, I resisted every step of the way. Couldn't I just go on living the way I was, perhaps make a few minor adjustments, and somehow avoid disrupting things in such an annoying and inconvenient manner?

Hating pain as much as the next person, I did everything within my power to avoid further discomfort. It was like having an excruciating backache: I knew

it wouldn't go away without treatment, but I didn't want to do anything radical. Maybe if I just changed my position a bit, the pain would be more tolerable. Perhaps I could simply "medicate" myself with a stronger dose of painkillers, which in my case involved bribing myself with some indulgence (which ultimately only made things worse). Obviously, major "surgery" was needed, even if I was fearful that the cure would be even worse than the problem. Like so many people I have listened to over the years, I preferred a pain that was familiar to one that was unknown—that is, until things became so intolerable that I couldn't go on any longer lying to myself.

This process took several years of hard work. Following the stages set forth within this book, I eventually came to terms with the realization that my pain was not something to be avoided but something to be embraced as my best friend. Without the tremendous anguish that I felt, the pain that I could no longer ignore, there was no way that I would have ever taken the risky but necessary steps to rewrite the plan of my life.

I give you fair warning that what I am attempting to do is increase, not decrease, your discomfort. I want to get in your face, to confront you with the realization that nothing in your life will change, none of your conflicted relationships will ever be any different, none of your core issues will ever be resolved, unless you let yourself feel your pain to the extent that you can't stand it any longer.

When you turn up the heat enough, you will have no choice but to do some things differently. When you face the fact that certain relationships are not good for you, you will no longer be able to put up with them the way they are. Your only choices will be to: (1) change the pattern of your interactions, (2) think differently about them, or (3) act differently so you no longer subject yourself to misery. But to continue the way things are would be absolutely intolerable and unacceptable!

Helping Yourself Feel More Miserable

If you agree with the premise that we are exploring together— that by allowing yourself to experience your discomfort you will feel greater resolve to change—then your principal task should be to make yourself feel worse, not better. I do not mean that you should subject yourself to suffering just for the sake of practice; the object is to make yourself feel even more miserable when you engage in behaviors that are obviously self-defeating.

Joslyn, for example, has become accustomed to a degree of misery in her relationship with her boyfriend, James. They bicker with one another constantly—over how they should spend their time, with whom they should socialize, and where their relationship is going. Joslyn would very much like a permanent relationship, but James is unwilling to commit himself to marriage, now or in the future.

Joslyn and James have been seeing each other long enough for Joslyn to have grown used to the frustrating nature of their relationship. Rarely are her needs met, but then she does not feel entitled to any more than she is getting because of what she observed in her parents' relationship. Joslyn grew up in a home in which her mother and father defined marriage as an endless series of disputes in which Dad always ended up making Mom cry. What Joslyn was living in her own life did not seem unusual to her.

Joslyn relates a story in which James had been watching a football game with his friends. He called her to come over "to keep him company," their code phrase for having sex. Obediently, she drove over to his house and meekly walked past the guys watching the game to follow James into the bedroom. Five minutes after the sex was over, James asked her to go home so he could watch the rest of the game with his friends. Naturally, she acquiesced. The amazing thing about this incident was that Joslyn did not have enough dignity to feel humiliated by this encounter.

If Joslyn was ever to get her needs met in a relationship, if she was ever to move beyond blaming James for their conflicts, if she was ever to feel strong enough to stand up for what she deserved, she had to feel even more miserable about her predicament in order to change it. Rather than offering her only sympathy and support (I had already tried that with little effect), I attempted to increase her level of discomfort in several ways that I would like to suggest to

you.

Apply What You Learned About the Causes and Origins of Your Plight

Based on what you now understand about who gets to you most easily and why, what are some ways you can see that you are living in the past rather than in the present? Just because you have reacted to certain people and certain situations in a particular way before does not mean that you have to do so now or in the future. It is lazy and neglectful of you to automatically follow the pattern that was created long ago.

Joslyn became a bit defensive when I confronted her with this challenge. How dare I tell her that the reason she ends up in similar conflicts is because she stubbornly refuses to break the mold she has become comfortable with! “Comfortable! *Comfortable!* You think I like being in this kind of horrid relationship?”

I didn’t back down. “Yes, I do think that in many ways you have taught yourself to accept and expect a degree of misery as your birthright. If anyone had treated me the way James treated you, I would have been long gone. But, then, your pain threshold is so high that you are still there asking for more.”

This dialogue continued over a period of many hours. The sole object of my confrontation was to help Joslyn feel even more miserable with her

predicament. It worked, too. The next time James called her to “keep him company,” she did go to his house, but she felt utterly terrible about herself during their interaction. The next time she backed down during a conflict rather than standing up for her rights, she could hardly stand herself. Slowly, inexorably, the anger directed toward James for being so insensitive was coming back toward herself. After all, *she* was the one who was volunteering to put up with the relationship the way it was.

Ask yourself the same questions I asked Joslyn: What are you doing that makes you dislike yourself and that you need to feel even worse about? What do you understand about the patterns of conflict that you are repeating out of fear, neglect, laziness, reluctance to venture out of your comfort zone?

Stare at Your Reflection in the Toilet

This is more of a metaphor than an actual suggestion (although I have, on occasion, asked people to do this). You can probably feel yourself resist the necessary task of allowing yourself to feel the discomfort over continued dysfunction in conflict. That is understandable: very few people want to deal with *more* pain and aggravation, even if it might lead to some long-term gain. To prove my point, I would only have to ask you how many times you have made promises, started diets or exercise programs, that you knew would be good for you in the long run, but in the short term you were unwilling to subject yourself

to the deprivation and discomfort involved. Everyone wants to eat healthfully, feel slim and vigorous, follow through on what they commit themselves to, but who has the resolve to put up with the pain?

When I asked Joslyn to “stare into the toilet,” what I was asking her to do was to intensify her own self-loathing over being so deferential. Most people have prior associations with staring at their reflection in the porcelain-housed water during times of great sickness. You have had too much to drink or you have the flu. Your head is swimming. You are not sure if you want to vomit, but you are fairly certain that you want to die. You don’t think you have ever felt so sick in your life. And then you see your own pitiful reflection staring back at you from inside the toilet. These are the times when you are likely to make some promises to yourself. Never again!, you tell that other self in the water, hoping he or she will think you sincere enough to allow you to vomit and get it over with.

“Okay, okay! I get the point,” Joslyn pleaded. “You want me to vomit at the prospect of repeating my same old stupid patterns when James and I start arguing. Well, truthfully, I feel like throwing up every time I think about the fact that I turned out to be just like my mother. I hated her for being so passive, and now look at me!”

Staring at your reflection in the toilet is a reminder of the promises you

have made that you have not kept. If you are going to take responsibility for your situation without blaming others, and then to commit yourself to act differently, you will need to draw on the image of how disgusting you find yourself when you are curled on the floor, draped over the lip of the toilet, staring at the rejected contents of your stomach.

Stay with the Pain Rather Than Hiding from It

It is not enough to access your pain, smile proudly as if to say, “See, I found it,” and then throw it back whence it came. Once you have realized the degree of your own participation in dysfunctional patterns of conflict, you have to let the wound fester a bit, drain the infection and pus, before you put on the antiseptic to let it heal. I am not suggesting that you take on the role of martyr, suffering in silence. I am only recommending that you not run away from your pain just because it is difficult.

Joslyn stopped seeing me for a while when it became apparent that we had no easy solution for her problem. This went far beyond her relationship with James. She had identified similar kinds of conflicted relationships with her parents, prior lovers, and even people at work. The revelations became so distressing for her that she bolted. I respected her need for time to think through whether she was prepared to live with a different, more intense kind of pain in order to someday free herself of the prison she had chosen for herself.

Several months went by before I saw her again. What I saw this time was a renewed resolve in her to stay with her discomfort for as long as it would take to reach her ultimate goal.

It took tremendous courage for Joslyn to stay with her pain as long as necessary to complete the work of self-restoration. We live in a society in which there is little dignity or respect associated with suffering. We are encouraged to “medicate” ourselves whenever possible. You are feeling a little anxious? Have a drink. You are nervous about something? Take a tranquilizer. Feeling depressed? I heard doctors give you pills for that sort of thing. Having problems in your relationship? Get a divorce and start over. Whenever we are confronted with situations that involve tolerating annoyance, inconvenience, discomfort, our very first priority is to find a way to make the pain go away.

As I said earlier in this chapter, there are times when pain can be your most valued ally, signaling to you that everything is not operating as it should. It is a constant reminder that you must take care of your wounds, do some things differently. Assuming that the discomfort is manageable, that it is bringing your attention to something you need to change, stay with it. Don’t run away. Don’t medicate yourself. There is honor in living with pain, temporarily, when it leads you to some greater good.

Find the Meaning in Your Suffering

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, interned in the Nazi concentration camps, once observed that what determined whether people survived their ordeal depended very much on whether they could find some meaning to their suffering. People most often perished when they simply gave up, when they could find no purpose in their torture. Those who were able to create some sense of mission, even if it was just to tell the world about what happened, were much more likely to survive.

Pain can either destroy you or save you, depending on what you do with it. Many people take their own lives when they can find no hope, no way out of their predicament. Similarly, people reconcile themselves to lives of mediocrity, relationships of eternal conflict, and continued dysfunctional patterns when they can see no other choices. Under such circumstances, pain keeps you in line, stops you from trying anything new. It is like having a bad back that sends out excruciating bolts of fire every time you move. Finally, you find a comfortable position that affords some relief. It is unlikely that you will voluntarily move from that position unless you absolutely have to.

Yet when you can find or create some meaning in your suffering, it attains a noble purpose, some underlying reason that makes it worth all the aggravation. I asked this question of Joslyn: "What have you learned from a lifetime of pain?" She spoke more eloquently than I ever could have imagined about her vision of herself as a kind of Joan of Arc. The difference, however, was

that she did not intend to let herself be burned to death. She was getting herself off the stake to which she had tethered herself. Meanwhile, she could put up with things a little longer, knowing that there was a good reason: she had to buy some more time until she felt strong enough to implement the new plan for her life.

It is easier for you, as well, to put up with the annoyances, inconveniences, and discomfort of your temporary predicament if you know that your suffering is worthwhile. This is no different from subjecting yourself to the pain of an exercise regimen, knowing that you are doing something good for your body.

The challenge, then, is for you to create some purpose for the aggravation to which you are subjecting yourself. What can you do to make your suffering easier to live with during this time of transition? One of the most courageous examples of this that I have ever witnessed was evidenced by a group of people who had multiple sclerosis. They had gathered together to help organize support groups for others who also had M.S. I had expected self-pity, resentment, anger, despondency, but I was surprised to discover that this was one of the most upbeat groups of folks I had ever worked with. I even heard one man in a motorized wheelchair say that he felt sorry for one of the able-bodied spouses in attendance because she clearly was not living her life to the fullest. She was dead on her feet, but he was trying to live every moment of his precious life to its fullest. Pain had helped him take nothing for granted.

What gave this group of people the courage and resolve to live with their suffering was their overriding sense of purpose: they wanted to help others. It was because they had lived with pain as a constant companion that they were in a position to understand what others were going through. They were elated with their sense of mission. They were excited that they were starting a movement. Why limit themselves to multiple sclerosis? They would reach out to all those in the area with any chronic illness.

I left that room full of people feeling utterly disabled myself. How dare I complain about how tough my life was, how intolerable my pain was, compared to the suffering that these folks had lived with! Surely if they could find some meaning in their painful existence, I could deal with the annoyances I put up with when somebody gave me a hard time, when I was upset over a conflict in my life.

Take the Hard Way Out

Anything in life that is worth doing is difficult. I believe this credo with all my heart. Given a choice between two possible courses of action, doing what you are already doing or doing something else, you probably are going to select what you are already doing. It is easy. You have had years of practice. Even if you know that you will encounter some aggravation, it is *predictable* pain. You have learned to live with it. You know exactly what to expect. If every day you

walk through a door that you know will hit you on the head when it swings back, eventually you become accustomed to the pain. You are ready for it. No big deal. You get hit. Then it is over. But what if you don't walk through that door? What if you do something else? Initially, that may seem quite logical, but the reality is that most people prefer known pain to something that is unknown.

Joslyn could make this case quite easily: "Look, I know what to expect when I see James. He will treat me like crap, true, but at least there are no surprises. But if I end this relationship, then I will have to be alone. I will have to learn to live with myself. I may not have many conflicts in my life, but I will be very lonely. I like it better this way, where I deal with a pain that I know and can handle rather than one that may be too much for me."

"Take the hard way out" is a reminder that if you really ever want to change the ways you deal with people in your life, the ways you respond to conflict internally and externally, you will have to start taking on some new challenges, trading a familiar kind of pain for another that is far more threatening. But then, you don't have as much choice as you think.

When Discomfort Gets Out of Control

I do not mean to imply that we should worship pain, discomfort, conflict, and stress as wonderful opportunities for learning and growth. Yes, it is possible to gain something from even the most annoying, noxious

circumstances. The problem, however, is that when people are living under such conditions, they tend to be more unreasonable, uncooperative, and irrational than they otherwise would be.

While discomfort may be harnessed for useful purposes, keep in mind that it also can be crippling. Relationships represent the best part of your life, some of the hours of greatest pleasure you will ever experience, and also the worst part, producing the most excruciating pain you have ever known. The wounds will never completely heal from adolescence when you were rejected by someone you really liked, when you were closed out of a group to which you badly wanted to belong, when you were teased or ridiculed by your peers. For those even more unfortunate souls, conflicts in peer relationships were dwarfed by the craziness that took place at home: parents fighting, emotional, even physical or sexual abuse taking place. The home was not so much a sanctuary as it was a battleground.

Years, even decades later, scar tissue still covers these wounds. That is why we are so wary and cautious in our relationships as adults, determined to never be that vulnerable again. Conflicts reminiscent of the distant past continue to plague us. Most of us still fight for approval from our parents, even after they are long dead. We still try to win acceptance among our peers. We still compete with our siblings and continue to harbor resentments toward those we believe were favored. No matter how long and hard we have been

working at it, people still do not understand us or treat us with the respect we believe we deserve.

In conflict situations, discomfort may very well get out of control, to the point where judgment is clouded, decision making is impaired, and behavior is erratic. Both your conduct and that of your adversary become irrational and unpredictable in the midst of the stress that accompanies conflict. Extreme discomfort and stress interfere with people's ability to reason and distort their perceptions of events—exaggerating others' hostility and blaming them for wrongdoings. What makes conflict so dangerous is that opponents, who are each feeling the stresses and strains of hostile engagement, are experiencing the following symptoms:

Perceptual distortions. Stress creates hyper vigilance, or the tendency to attend selectively to those signals that are perceived as threatening. In addition, people shut down their normal information-processing systems, distorting what they see and hear.

Memory deficits. During periods of stress, people are less able to recall accurately what transpired. Details about some aspects of the experience are ignored while others are “creatively” elaborated.

Dysfunctional beliefs. Stress leads to attitudes that are protective yet often counterproductive. People under stress are more negative and pessimistic in the ways they approach situations. They subscribe to beliefs that reinforce feelings of helplessness and vulnerability (“If I don't win this argument I will be forever humiliated.”).

Physical symptoms. A wide assortment of physical consequences result from exposure to stress, including but not limited to hypertension,

addictions such as smoking and alcohol and drug abuse, coronary problems, immunological or respiratory problems, asthma and allergies, digestive ailments, and sleep disturbances and other habit changes.

Emotional instability. People in conflict are prone to feelings of depression, anxiety, panic, and helplessness. As such, they are not in the ideal position from which to make intelligent reflective decisions, nor are they in optimal condition to take constructive action.

During the times of stress that undergird most interpersonal conflicts, you are less inclined than usual to attend to what an adversary is saying. You are more on guard, feeling defensive and provoked. The discomfort associated with conflict also distorts people's ability to see and hear things clearly. People in conflicted circumstances tend to ascribe (erroneously) to forces external to them the cause of the difficulty. They also are less able to deal with complexity in human interactions, tending to oversimplify what is taking place. Finally, in the heat of battle they become less articulate and less able to communicate persuasively.

The picture emerging here is that when we most need to be clearheaded, objective, and influential, conflict renders us less able to perform up to our normal capabilities. In addition, the greater the discomfort level you are experiencing, the more likely you are to attribute causes of conflict to someone or something outside of yourself. Internal pressure must be reduced before self-responsibility for problems will occur. In short, reasoning abilities, cognitive capacities, and information processing will not operate properly without a

certain degree of inner calmness in the face of perceived threats.

Understanding the patterns of conflict in your life will help you recognize the earliest signs of stress, with its corresponding decrease in personal functioning. Once you understand that your typical disagreements with others represent a lifelong struggle for you to maintain your own sense of potency, you may direct your efforts to taking yourself “off probation”—so that your very value as a human being is not contingent on saving face or conquering territory.

Putting Your Discomfort to Use

If only self-knowledge were enough. If only your understanding of past mistakes automatically led you to not repeat them. The reality is that there are many things in life that you are unwilling to change but about which you are very clear—that certain friendships don’t meet your needs (but you stay in them anyway), that certain people should not be trusted (but you continue to do so), that you are much better off if you do not engage in certain behaviors (but you do them anyway).

One legitimate criticism leveled against educational programs, especially those that are therapeutic in their intent, is the difficulty of applying what has been learned outside the confines of the learning situation. How many people have you known who have been in therapy or counseling for years, who can articulate beautifully why they are so dysfunctional, but who do not seem to

ever change? They may have tremendous insight into the causes and origins of their troubles. They have great depth of understanding into their unconscious motives and unresolved issues. But this self-knowledge is not applied or practiced in a meaningful way.

Real insight, if it is truly part of you, cannot really exist as mere intellectual revelations. People who are students of psychology, who have been in therapy for years, who can spout a dozen theories to explain why they are the way they are but who do not apply this knowledge effectively, cannot possibly lay claim to true wisdom. As the next chapter drives home, legitimate learning takes place only when you put your insights to work, when you take responsibility for your predicament without feeling the need to blame others.

About the Author

Jeffrey A. Kottler is professor of counseling and educational psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has worked as a therapist in a variety of settings—including hospitals, mental health centers, schools, clinics, universities, corporations, and private practice. Jeffrey is an internationally recognized authority in the area of human relationships, having authored thirteen books on the subjects of teaching and therapy.

On Being a Therapist (1993, revised ed.)

Teacher as Counselor (1993, with Ellen Kottler)

Advanced Group Leadership (1993)

On Being a Teacher (1993, with Stan Zehm)

[Compassionate Therapy: Working with Difficult Clients](#) (1992)

Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling (1992, 2nd ed., with Robert Brown)

[The Compleat Therapist](#) (1991)

Private Moments, Secret Selves:

Enriching Our Time Alone (1990)

[The Imperfect Therapist: Learning from Failure in Therapeutic Practice](#) (1989, with Diane Blau)

Ethical and Legal Issues in Counseling and Psychotherapy (1985, 2nd ed., with William Van Hoose)

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