

'Struggle Strategies' & Their Costs

Part 1: What have you tried to avoid or get rid of thoughts and feelings you don't want?

Please complete this sentence: The inner experiences (thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, urges, images, sensations) I most want to avoid or get rid of are ...

Next, take a few minutes to write a list of every single thing you've ever tried doing to avoid or get rid of these unwanted inner experiences. Try to remember every single 'struggle strategy' you have ever used (whether deliberately or by default). Come up with as many examples as possible.

*Note: Please do this non-judgmentally — with genuine curiosity! Please **do not start judging these methods** as 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong', 'positive' or 'negative'. We don't want to get caught up in judgments or righteousness about what we should or shouldn't be doing. The aim is simply to find out if these methods are 'workable' — i.e. do they work in the long term to give you the life you want? (And obviously, if any of these methods do improve your life in the long term, they count as towards moves — so keep doing them!)*

Distraction

What do you do to distract yourself from, or 'take your mind off' painful thoughts and feelings? (e.g. movies, TV, internet, books, computer games, exercise, gardening, gambling, food, drugs, alcohol, etc.)

Opting out

What important, meaningful or life-enhancing activities, events, tasks, challenges or people do you avoid, quit, escape, procrastinate on or withdraw from? (Of course, if they're not important, meaningful or life-enhancing, then opting out is no problem!)

Thinking strategies

How do you try (consciously or not) to think your pain away? Tick any of the following that you have ever done, and write in any others that aren't included:

worrying; fantasising about a better future; imagining escape scenarios (e.g. leaving your job or your partner) or revenge scenarios; thinking to yourself 'It's not fair ...' or 'If only ...'; blaming yourself, others or the world; talking logically and rationally to yourself; positive thinking; positive affirmations; judging or criticising yourself; giving yourself a hard time; analysing yourself or others (trying to figure out 'Why am I/others like this?'); analysing the situation, life or the world (trying to figure out why this happened or why life/the world is like this); planning; strategising; constructive problem-solving; making to-do lists; repeating inspirational sayings or proverbs; challenging or disputing negative thoughts; telling yourself 'This too shall pass' or 'It may never happen'.

Other thinking strategies you use:

Substances

What substances do you put into your body primarily to avoid or get rid of pain: foods, drinks, cigarettes, recreational drugs, naturopathic or herbal remedies, tea, coffee, chocolate, aspirin, over-the-counter or prescription medications?

Any other strategies?

What other strategies have you used at times to escape, avoid or distract yourself from unwanted thoughts and feelings? For example, have you tried meditation, having affairs, aggressiveness, Tai Chi, massage, exercise, picking fights, dancing, music, suicide attempts, self-harming, 'tolerating it', 'putting up with it', 'sucking it up and getting on with it', prayer, smashing things, staying in bed, reading self-help books, seeing a therapist or doctor or other health professional, getting angry at life or other people? Tick the ones you've used and write down any others:

Part 2: How have these strategies worked *in the long term*?

Most of these struggle strategies give you short-term relief from painful thoughts and feelings.

But consider: do they permanently get rid of those unwanted thoughts and feelings, so they never come back?

Most of the time, with most of these strategies, how long do your unwanted thoughts and feelings go away for, before they come back?

Over time, is the amount of unwanted thoughts and feelings you have reducing, staying the same, or increasing?

Part 3: What has it cost you, to use these strategies?

Now clearly, some of these methods, if used moderately and wisely, will improve life in the long term — in which case, it makes sense to keep doing them.

However, when we overuse or over-rely on these methods — when we use them excessively, rigidly or inappropriately — they have significant long-term costs.

So consider: when you have excessively or inappropriately used them, what have these strategies cost you in terms of health, money, wasted time, relationships, missed opportunities, work, increased pain, tiredness, wasted energy, frustration, disappointment, etc.?

Really think this through. Identify as many costs as possible, and write them below:

How many of these strategies give you relief from pain in the short term, but keep you stuck, make life worse, or have significant costs in the long term? On the line below, put a cross in the place that best represents your answer:

'none' 'a few' 'about half' 'most' 'all'

Part 3, continued: What has it cost you?

If you did this exercise thoroughly and were truly honest with yourself, you probably discovered three things:

1. You've invested a lot of time, effort, energy in STRUGGLE: trying to avoid or get rid of unwanted thoughts & feelings.
2. Many of these strategies give short-term relief from painful thoughts & feelings — but long term, they return.
3. Many of these strategies, when used *excessively or inappropriately*, have significant costs in terms of wasted money, wasted time, wasted energy and negative effects upon your health, vitality and relationships. In other words, many of these strategies made you feel better in the short term, but in the long term they lowered your quality of life.

Part 4: What is your reaction to this exercise?

Pause for a moment and notice how you are feeling. Are you curious or intrigued? Or are you perhaps a bit dazed, confused or disturbed? Maybe even anxious, guilty or angry?

If uncomfortable feelings are showing up for you ... rest assured, that's normal! This is a whole new perspective, which challenges many deeply entrenched beliefs. Strong reactions are common.

Also notice what your mind is saying right now. Is it saying something helpful or encouraging? Or is it perhaps judging and criticising you — calling you foolish or stupid?

If your mind is judging or criticising you, rest assured: you're not foolish or stupid (even if your mind disagrees). These strategies you've used are universal; every person on the planet uses them to avoid or get rid of pain.

We all try to distract ourselves; we all opt out of things that are difficult; we all try to think our way out of our pain; and we all put substances of one form or another into our bodies. Indeed, our friends, family and health professionals often actively encourage us to do these things!

The point is ... no matter how hard we try to avoid or get rid of these thoughts and feelings ... in the long term, they keep coming back! And unfortunately, often what we do to get short-term relief makes our life worse in the long term. It's a vicious cycle, which we all get stuck in, at times.

Part 5: Are you open to trying something new?

Given all of the above, are you open to exploring a radically different way of responding to painful thoughts and feelings?

Are you willing to try something new that is completely and utterly different to everything else you have ever tried?

Are you willing to learn some brand new skills for handling your pain in a completely different way?