

Ep #238: Accepting Pain



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With Your Host

Brooke Castillo

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Welcome to *The Life Coach School Podcast*, where it's all about real clients, real problems and real coaching. And now your host, Master Coach Instructor, Brooke Castillo.

Well hello there, my friends. Some very, very exciting podcast material for you today. It's all about accepting pain. And I think that one of the lessons that I have been teaching as a theme throughout this podcast, especially this year is how to accept negative emotion, how to recognize the 50/50 duality of the world and the contrast, and a big part of that is learning how to accept versus resisting pain.

And I think that one of the most important skillsets that we can develop is the capacity to feel. And I think pain presents an opportunity for us to deepen our ability to feel. And I will say that the most painful things that I've gone through in my life have been the things that I have resisted feeling the pain and created a lot of unnecessary suffering now.

I think about break ups that I went through when I was younger in my relationships or disappointments that I suffered. And when I look back now on the actual circumstances of what happened versus what I was actually believing and thinking, it's astounding to me how much pain I generated on top of something that would have been painful had I not created so much drama around it but I intensified it so much because I was unwilling to just accept the pain of loss in that situation.

So I think it's really important to understand pain and recognize how our brain interprets pain. And it's not something that we spend a lot of time thinking about. We don't think about what pain is and we very rarely distinguish between the two types of pain that we experience. So in many situations, we have the sensation of physical pain, and I actually work with lots of clients who have physical bodily aches and pains that they are dealing with on a daily basis in their life and I find it really important to distinguish that pain from the emotional pain.

Now, a lot of my clients tell me that they think their physical pain, the sensation of pain is coming from the way that they're thinking and their

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emotional pain. And I believe that that's true in many of the cases, but I still think that it's very important to distinguish between the two in the moment. So you're going to have the physical pain of maybe a disease that you're working with and then there's also your thoughts about it.

So I want you to think about it this way: the sensation of pain is being triggered in your body and the message is being sent to your brain that there is pain in your body. And emotional pain is when you have a thought that creates pain in the body, so it travels the opposite direction. So there's the sensation of pain that's letting your brain know that you're in pain and then there's the thought of pain that travels through that - what they call the limbic system that creates the pain for us.

So I think - thinking about physical pain, I think is fascinating because all pain is interpreted in the brain, even physical pain. So when I was researching this specific episode, I had like this, total a-ha moment that made my brain hurt a little bit and it's because of this: so I just recently broke my toe, and that is no joke, my friends.

That hurt. It hurt so bad. I seriously was like, laying on the ground. I was in a hotel room and I caught my toe on the edge of the bed and I hurt it crack and I was laying on the ground like, holding myself. Like, comforting myself from the physical pain because it hurt so bad. And then of course afterwards it hurt. It was excruciating to walk on and of course I only had high heels with me so I was like, gimping around in my high heels.

Anyway, one of the things that I thought was really fascinating is that there's this part in the brain, they call it the anterior cingulate cortex, where your brain registers pain as unpleasant. So one of the things that I read is people who have damage to this part of the brain, they still experience the sensation of pain but they don't experience it as unpleasant. I was like, what? I don't understand, how does that work?

But then I started thinking about this, I started thinking about my best friend, Erika, who loves a deep tissue massage. She thinks it feels so good. Like, she loves it when someone like, puts their elbow in her back and

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pushes as hard as they can on her back muscles. Like, for her that's very pleasant and for me, that's excruciating pain.

And I was thinking about this in terms of all physical pain like, physical pain is basically just our brain interpreting a sensation as unpleasant. And in many situations, we don't have control over that reflex reaction for most of the pain, and it's designed to protect us, right? A hot stove or stepping on something sharp. It's a way for you to tell yourself, your brain to tell you not to do that again because it's not good.

So I was thinking about this in terms of how we manage pain, how we manage physical pain and how when we go to the doctor and we're going to be in a lot of pain or they're going to help us manage their pain, they might give us something like morphine. And what morphine does is it just changes the way that we perceive the sensation of pain. It makes us perceive it in a different way. It doesn't mean that the pain isn't still there. It just means our brain is perceiving it differently.

So when I think about my toe, I recognize that the pain isn't being created in the toe. The pain is being created in my brain. And I don't know why but that like, made my brain explode because I've always looked at the location of the pain as being where the pain is and being able to understand that the only place that pain ever is is in our brain was profound to me.

Because for example, right now, if I touch my toe, my toe hurts and so I want to point to my toe as the place where pain is. But the place where pain is is really in my brain. So physically, I think that's fascinating to recognize that all of pain is happening in our brain for physical pain, but that we're also doing that the other way around for emotional pain.

And even though the effect of emotional pain is in our body through a vibration, it may cause us to feel negatively in our body, it's all being created in the brain. The brain does pain. That's what the brain does. And so it makes us kind of understand that all of the treatment for pain is something that we're going to do in the brain.

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And as I was researching this, it was so fascinating to see people's perception of physical pain and how much it changes, depending on circumstance. So there can be the same kind of shock but if a loved one is holding their hand, the pain is perceived as less, or if they're in a room with sunshine or if they have a beautiful view, they will perceive something as less painful than if they didn't have those things.

And so the question becomes well, is it actually less painful or are they just thinking it's less painful? What? So I'm not meaning to tell you this to kind of like, twist your brain around. I just want you to think about pain in a different way.

So the question becomes how do we treat physical pain, what is the best solution for that, for those of my students and clients who are in chronic physical pain, this is a very real question for them, and then how do we treat emotional pain and how different are they?

And one of the things that I think is super fascinating is that some drugs that treat pain in the brain treat both emotional and physical pain, and this is why so many of the people that I work with become addicted to pain medication because pain medication that is taken to solve physical pain also solves the emotional pain. So long after the physical pain is over and the emotional pain is still there, the medication can actually become an addiction for the person to use as a way of solving their emotional pain.

So the treatments of pain are first of all, eliminating the cause of the pain when possible. So for example, when your toe is broken, you need to stop stubbing it on purpose. Be careful. And noticing that physical pain with your body, like if you're stepping on something sharp, obviously you're going to eliminate the cause when you can, treat the physical injury when you can, and I'm all for that. And I'm actually - people ask me this all the time. I'm actually a huge fan of medications that work to treat pain, as long as they're not addictive and they're not something that's going to then have a negative consequence.

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And there are medications that treat the nerve reactions in the body that prevent there from being so much pain in the brain and then there's medications that treat the brain. And so you want to understand which medication that you're using, is this the medication that's working on my brain or is this a medication that's working on the body that is signaling the brain. That's really important.

But the other way that we can treat pain and make it either worse or better for ourselves is psychological management, and what I mean by that is just managing yourself cognitively, managing your brain and your thoughts about your pain. So there is the actual physical pain that's happening in your body and then there's your thoughts about the physical pain that's happening in your body.

If you think about the Model, the physical pain that we're experiencing, the sensation of pain would be in our C line, and then we're going to have a thought about that physical pain that is either going to make us feel a negative emotion on top of the physical pain or it'll make us feel something neutral, or it'll make us feel something positive that will help us negate the pain, which is like the example I gave you of the study where they had people were administered shocks but holding the hand of a loved one changed their thinking about what was going on and therefore they experienced the pain as less painful.

So we have to remember that pain has a purpose in our lives, and when we avoid it and when we negate it without being conscious of its cause, we miss the opportunity to solve it. So for physical pain, I think it's very important to try to understand what the cause is without just treating it relentlessly because I think a lot of times when we treat it, we aren't able to find a cause, and I think that's true for physical pain and actually emotional pain.

Why are you depressed? Why are you feeling anxious? Why are you feeling heartbroken? Understanding the why and the thought patterning that's going with that is really important because when we attribute our emotional pain to something outside of us that we don't have control over,

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that is when we get into trouble in terms of managing our ability to manage our own pain.

So pain is designed to command our attention, and it commands our attention so we can solve whatever it is that's causing it. But when pain is chronic and not an indication of something acute that needs immediate attention, the key actually may mean paying less direct attention to the pain if our thinking about it seems to make it worse.

So this is kind of what happened with my toe. Like, I didn't want to talk about it or think about it or complain about it, but I wanted to accept it. I wanted to accept that my toe was broken and it was hurting and I wanted to accept that that was the cause of it but not make it worse with my thinking about it. And I didn't want to resist it and then just run on it and pretend like it wasn't there.

And it was such an interesting metaphor for me and I think can be such an interesting metaphor for emotional pain as well. I think a lot of times we just want to treat it and medicate it and not actually accept that something we're thinking is painful. Now, the reason why accepting it is so important when it comes to emotional pain is that's when you are able to establish some consciousness of it and some authority over it and that gives you the opportunity to change your thinking about it.

So there has actually been so many studies around pain that teach us that accepting it and breathing through it has been found to decrease it. Accepting it and allowing it makes us more comfortable with it and less likely to avoid, resist, or buffer against it. So I want you to think about the fact that emotional pain is harmless.

I remember the first time I said this to myself. It seemed like I was saying pain isn't pain because my definition of pain was always that pain harms. Pain is harmful, and that things that are harmful are painful. But it's a paradigm shift in the way that we look at pain and if we can accept that pain is there and accept that pain is part of what we're experiencing right

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now, it actually isn't harmful, it's harmless, and the more we're able to see it that way, the less it hurts.

I worked with a student one time who came to coach training who is in stage four cancer and experienced a tremendous amount of pain in his lungs, and one of the things that I said to him was that he was upset about his pain. Like, he woke up and he was angry that he was in pain because he was at the training and just really wanted to be able to be present. And what I showed him is that not only did he wake up in pain but then he woke up with pain and anger and resistance.

So he was like, compounding the pain by resisting it and being mad at it and generating negative emotion because of it. And the next day what he tried to do was accept it and be present with it and allow it to be part of his 50% of the day. And of course that completely changed how he was able to show up for the class and relate to the class.

And the same is true with his wife. His wife was at the training too, which was super fun, and I was talking to her - or actually, I was talking to him about her right in front of her, it was very interesting, but one of the things that was fascinating about it was when he was in pain, she wanted to resist his pain. She didn't want to accept his pain so she was always trying to fix his pain so it would go away.

And one of the things that we talked about that was really powerful for the two of them is that when he's in pain, she can just accept that he's in pain too. And that there can be a layer of truth there that he doesn't have to hide pain from her and she doesn't have to try and fix it. They can both just be present with the pain that was both physical and of course, tremendously emotional for both of them.

And I have found that in my own relationships and even in my relationship with the two of them as my students, that the three of us in that room holding space for his pain was one of the most intimate experiences we could have had. And I think everyone in that room would agree that just being present with the pain, without trying to change it or fix it or go to

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rainbows and daisies was so much more profound. It was just me and him and his wife and everyone else in the room just accepting and being present with the pain that was real for him right there.

And I think that's true for people and emotional pain. I think a lot of times people will come to us in emotional pain and we want to get them out of emotional pain. We don't want to accept it, we don't want to be present with it, we want to delete it. And accepting it is what makes it so much less harmful, right? We just can be present with it, and from there, if we decide to change it, we can.

And what feels interesting about accepting pain is once we've accepted it, we're not in such a hurry to change it because what I've seen with a lot of my students who are in emotional pain and in chronic physical pain is they're in a huge hurry to get out of it and in that hurry, they're stressing themselves out and creating a lot of tension on top of the physical and emotional pain that they're already having, which of course, makes it worse.

So when you can be patient with your pain and be present with your pain, that's when there's a space around it that makes it easier to breathe. I've told this story before about my sister when I went into the labor and delivery room and she told me that she wanted to have a natural childbirth. And I went in there and I was like, watching her literally try to get out of her own body.

I remember telling her, "That's not going to work. You got to be present in the body to deliver the baby, so how can you be present with the pain? If you want to do this naturally, you're going to have to make peace with the pain." And here's the thing that was so powerful for her and for so many women that have gone through natural childbirth is that when we see pain as part of the process, as something that's supposed to be happening, we can endure it in a much more peaceful and wondrous way. We can be present with pain and know that it's supposed to be there.

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And there are times when pain is seemingly not supposed to be there, but there's always a purpose. It's either telling us that something's terribly wrong or it's telling us that something is hurting and that we can be present with the hurt that is part of our human experience.

So it's important when we're learning about our pain that we put it in the C line when it's a sensation and that we put it in the F line when it's an emotion. And it's important to distinguish between the two, and here's something I want to offer: if you find out something with your brain from the external world consciously, like for example, if someone has told you that someone's betrayed you or someone's lied to you or someone's passed away, you will have a thought about it that will cause emotional pain that may turn into physical pain.

And so if you've ever had this experience where somebody's told you something and you've almost had a panic attack or you feel like someone's punched you in the stomach and your stomach is hurting and you feel the physical effect of the emotion in your body, you want to make sure that you put the emotion that you're experiencing, whether it's horror or terror or shame or whatever in that F line in that model. Because it's your thought that's causing it. Even though someone has said to you someone has died, your thought is causing your pain. That person has died and I don't want them to have died. Doesn't mean you shouldn't be feeling the emotion, it just means your thought is causing it.

Now, when you experience the pain first before you have a thought about it, meaning it's a sensation in your body, then you want to make sure you put it in the C line because your thought about it will add an emotion to that physical pain. So if you think about it, the physical pain is in the C line and then the emotional pain that you're experiencing because of the way you're thinking about your physical pain will be in the F line. I hope that makes sense.

Because there's our pain and then there's thoughts about our pain, and then there's the thoughts that cause our pain. So the bottom line is physical pain is made worse by our thinking about it and emotional pain is always

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caused by our thinking. So I want to give you some ideas on some thoughts that I choose and that I share with my clients when there's a lot of pain in the C line, a lot of physical sensation of pain.

Now, I have and I do recommend that you do put the effect of emotional pain in the C line too when your emotional pain becomes the physical sensation after an extended period of time, then you can put it in the C line as well. Because it's important to manage your emotional and your physical pain with acceptance.

So sometimes, I'll put intense shame in the C line, I'll put physical sensation of shame in the C line, I'll put chronic physical pain if it's caused from my toe being broken or it's caused by autoimmunity or fibromyalgia, whatever it is that you're experiencing pain from physically you put it in the C line or if it's chronic emotional pain you can put it in the C line.

Here are some thoughts that I use that I think are very helpful when you have pain in the C line, and it really helps with acceptance. One of the thoughts is, "This is pain." And sometimes I'll just say, pain, pain. I just name it. Pain. I experience, and then I say pain. Sometimes I say, "This pain isn't harmful. This pain isn't permanently harming me." Sometimes I'll think, "This pain is just a reaction in my brain. How I think about my pain matters."

These are all different thoughts you can put in the T line. This is pain, and that's okay. Pain is from the nerves talking to my brain. I can feel pain. This is pain. This pain might be temporary. I can breathe into pain. I can move towards the pain. Sometimes I'll make a suggestion to myself and I'll say, "Moving towards the pain might help."

And one of the conversations that I've had with myself is this: I'll say, "If I will be in pain either way, my choice of what to do now is mine alone." I can choose to complain, I can choose to rail against, I can choose to resist, and those are all valid choices. But what I have found is that it's important to pay attention to what my choice is and then to notice how it affects the pain. Notice what happens when I avoid it, notice what happens when I

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medicate it, notice what happens when I resist it, and notice what happens when I accept it.

And I want to offer this: when I practice accepting pain and being present with pain before I ever try and change it, I get better at processing pain. I don't want to get better at being in pain and then always being in pain, but I want to get better at processing and digesting pain so I'm not constantly resisting it and making it worse. I can accept pain. I can accept that I'm in pain right now and that's okay. This won't harm me permanently. This is temporary. This is emotional pain. Or this is physical pain. And then breathe. I can handle pain. It's okay.

And when we can do this on all levels, I've practiced this when I'm fasting and I do it with hunger, I've practiced this when I'm working out, I've practiced this when I'm holding a pose in yoga. I've practiced this when someone's telling me something that feels super painful. I've practiced just being in the space of experiencing pain in my brain and knowing that I won't be harmed by it.

The harm from pain is what we do with it emotionally. How we turn it against ourselves in thinking negative thoughts about it and feeling like we can't escape and that it's harming us and that we're in danger. We breathe in, it's okay, we're going to be fine.

The other day I was driving in my car and there was a bee in the car. There was a bee flying around in the car. And I think a bee flying around in the car is really just the anticipation of pain, right? The fear and the freak out that we have with the anticipation of pain. And I was thinking about the pain that that bee would cause had he stung me and my anticipation and freak out and how completely out of correspondence they were, right?

You would have thought that I was going to be tortured by the bee when really, it would have been fine had I been stung by a bee. It would not have been - the reaction that I was having was not indicative of the experience of the pain, and I think so many of us dramatize our own experience of pain by the thoughts we have around it.

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So I just want to say this: if you are someone who's currently in a tremendous amount of emotional pain or even physical pain, I want you to try imagining that there's nothing wrong with you just because you're in pain. I think a lot of times we think when we're in pain, there must be something wrong with us. And I'm talking about personally as humans.

Now, there might be something wrong with your body and there may be something that needs to be diagnosed or found out to be solved, and that's important, but beyond that, I want you to be careful on how you interpret that pain against yourself. And I want you to see if you can use the pain to become more skilled at being present in the world no matter what. That is one of the gifts that pain gives us, and nobody goes through this life without experiencing it. None of us.

Unless something is really wrong with our brain, we all as healthy humans experience pain. And the better we can get at accepting that as part of life, the less unnecessary suffering we will create for ourselves. Pain is required. Suffering is optional. Have a beautiful week everyone. Talk to you next week.

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