

# Psychotherapy, Spirituality, and Self-Acceptance

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Most of us believe that certain aspects of who we are, are unacceptable. What is unacceptable varies from one person to another. For one person it may be feelings of rage, for another it may be the appearance of his/her body. We try to eliminate, suppress or improve on the unwanted quality. But, whenever we attempt to do away with or suppress unwanted feelings, thoughts or behaviors we run into a dilemma.

We have all had the experience of getting into a laughing fit. Everything is humorous. We cannot stop laughing. If this happens in a setting where uncontrolled laughter is unacceptable, in a classroom or church, for example, our deliberate attempt to suppress our laughter, leads to renewed outbursts. The laughter becomes even more out of control. This exemplifies a fundamental principle of human life: “whatever you resist persists”. Resisting an undesirable thought, feeling or behavior actually strengthens it.

If, while playing with an inflated ball in the water you push the ball under water, the deeper you try to push it down the more effort you will expend. Eventually you will tire and let go and the ball will rush to the surface. This is what happens when we try to suppress, deny or avoid our feelings. When we try to suppress some part of ourselves we can keep it in only so long, then it suddenly expresses itself in an uncontrolled outburst. We see notable examples of this in public figures such as politicians and ministers who are found to be compulsively doing the very things they have been railing against.

When you resist or try to eliminate what you do not like you become stuck in a stalemated tug of war. That quality does not want to be annihilated. It fights for its survival. Your resistance actually keeps you stuck for it creates an equal and opposing resistance coming back to you. Whatever you resist will continue to plague you until it is finally accepted. So what is a person to do? I suggest that he/she shorten the phase of being stuck in resisting by making friends with the unwanted.

When we turn our back on what is undesirable we are running from ourselves. We do not really know what we are avoiding. We have been so busy running away from this aspect of ourselves that we have never turned to see it for what it really is. We have never really gotten to know it. We are running away in panic, from the horrific image we have in our mind. But if we were to turn and face it we may discover that it is not as threatening as we presupposed. In being open to examine the unwanted with a new sense of acceptance it will reveal itself and its true purpose and we will no longer be stuck in opposing it. It will begin to unravel, and will no longer plague us. It will be integrated as a meaningful aspect of our personality.

When someone comes to a psychotherapist or spiritual teacher he/she is usually trying to change some unwanted feelings, ways of thinking or behaviors, to become a “better person”. Healing begins when that person is encouraged to befriend those unwanted

aspects, indeed all aspects of him/herself. In this process we become all that we are. Instead of regarding oneself conditionally (I or the world must meet my conditions) we unfold a new way of being. We discover that we can actually live in unconditional acceptance. This way of being takes our breath away.

Most people fear that if they embrace an unwanted aspect it may run rampant, rather than being kept under control. But when we surrender our attempts to control ourselves and the external world we find that we are guided by our intimacy with life, as a plant is guided to turn toward the sun. We discover that there is a benign space that supports our unfolding.

People also mistakenly believe that if we accept all that we are we will have no motivation to improve ourselves or the world around us. In fact, instead of being motivated by attaining our goal we find that we are moved by all that we are experiencing and actively participating in our lives.