

## What is Willingness? A Brief Lesson.

Written By: Jessica Eiseman, MS, LPC-S, NCC, CCTP

Willingness is a concept most utilized in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). ACT is an empirically supported behavioral approach that utilizes acceptance, behavioral strategies, and mindfulness techniques. This can be helpful for depression treatment, anxiety treatment and integrated into your counseling coping skills.

Willingness can be described as: **Suffering = Anxiety + Non-Acceptance**

Willingness is:

- Being open to your own experience as it is
- Directly
- Without changing it
- Trying to manipulate it
- Avoid it
- Escape it

Willingness does **NOT** mean:

- We like it
- We want it
- We approve it

Willingness is an action and has an all or nothing quality to it, it is a choice. We can sometimes confuse willingness for a feeling. But one does not have to feel willing to be willing. We can often mistake willingness for tolerance. Tolerance implies that negative experiences are to be withstood until something better comes along. Think about it, when you tolerate something, you normally aren't a fan.

Willingness on the other hand involves openness and allowing, not as waiting, or needing for something to change to a better thing if we are tolerant enough. Finally, willingness is not loss or resignation, as the word acceptance can sometimes imply.

Because ACT loves using metaphors, let's talk about our Cranky Old Aunt Ida. (Hayes & Smith, 2005, p.125-126).

*You can think of willingness in the same way you would think of welcoming a guest. Suppose you wanted to invite your entire extended family to come to your home for a feast. Everyone decides to come: your favorite Uncle Milton, your second cousin Jacques, your dear sister Sue.*

Dozens of relatives arrive at your house and everybody, including you, appears to be having a great time. As you look around, you're overjoyed to see that everyone came, and they all seem to be getting along so well. Then, when you see a certain car pull up in front of your house, your heart sinks. It's your cranky old Aunt Ida. She rarely bathes. She doesn't have any kind words for anyone, but especially not for you. She likes to wolf down your food but will rarely say so much as a thank-you. But you told your whole family, "Everyone's welcome!" The question is this: Is it truly possible to welcome Aunt Ida, even though you actually didn't want her to be there? Most of us have been in this situation and we know the answer: Welcoming is not the same as wanting. At its most basic level, you would welcome Aunt Ida by allowing her into your home, acknowledging her presence, asking her how she's been, and letting her join the party. You do so because you care about the family, and Aunt Ida is family. None of that requires you to first decide, "This party is missing Aunt Ida." Wanting her to come to your party is not the issue. Being willing to have her come is. Now, suppose you decide, "Hell no! I'm not letting her in!" You slam the door shut in her face, and when she knocks, you grip the doorknob and yell, "Go away!" Several things would be likely to happen. First, this is no longer much of a party. You aren't doing fun things anymore. You're just trying to keep Aunt Ida out. Second, the other guests are affected by all the commotion. They might become agitated, argue with you about your course of action, leave entirely, or withdraw into a distant part of the house. As they begin to leave the living room, Aunt Ida becomes more and more the center of attention. Third, you are no longer able to move. You are stuck to that door. For you, at least, the party is over. Suppose that instead of trying to keep Aunt Ida out, you decide to let go of your attachment to your wants. You hold to your original decision to welcome all your guests. You show Aunt Ida where the punch bowl is. You offer her a few tasty appetizers. Now, even though you still don't want Aunt Ida to be there, you and your other guests can have a good party. You can mingle. You are free to come and go. So is Aunt Ida. Willingness is exactly like that.

Here is a quote that expresses this idea succinctly:

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!

— Jelaluddin Rumi, translation by Coleman Barks (1997)

*After reading this what are your own experiences with being willing to do something without wanting to do it? If you haven't tried willingness before, try incorporating it to your week and see how it goes. Try something small and work your way up to something more difficult. Good luck!*