



SPRING SEMINAR SERIES

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First You Win, Then You Play: Acceptance, Mindfulness, and Values in Food, Body Image, and Health

- Foundation Professor at the University of Nevada in the Psychology Department
- Has published 32 books and 400+ scientific articles
- One of the most highly cited psychologists in the field
- **Why is psychology and physical health so elusive in a developed world?**
- Why are we going backwards and not forwards?
- There is not enough money to stand up to obesity and create an effective health care system to fight it.
- Today we spend billions of dollars on sleep medications, just to sleep!
- There is something afoot in our culture: we need to look at the assumptions. We assume that we, as humans, are meant to be healthy. This is a myth! We see the joy and innocence in a child playing which tells us that we are meant to be healthy and happy, but a child is not yet a cognizing human being so our assumption is FALSE.
- **Destructive Normality:** it is hard to be a human; it's not easy. So what is normal is often destructive.
- **Story of Adam and Eve:** they were ashamed to be naked? But why? Who told them it was bad to be naked? Kids have no problem running around naked, playing with other kids, but we as adults would never do that.
- **Swimming in a Sea of Language:** we're swimming in a sea of language, and it's not just the amount but what's in it. We are hyper-exposed to pain and horror around the world. Kids are exposed to more violence today than our grandparents ever were!
- **Constant Flow of Judgment:** we pay to watch an idiot fail (reality TV). It is fun for us! The more we watch TV, the more violent we become, the more we objectify women and race, etc.
 - The problem is not the model, but the judgment.

- Commercialism feeds off living a good life! Science and technology make it worse because they enable us to not have to do anything, to not have to suffer.
- **Pain:** we used to be taught that pain is part of the human condition through religion (e.g. fasting) and that we were part of something bigger than ourselves.
- Now we are moving faster but connecting less in a toxic world of shame, judgment, and objectification.
- Obese people are probably the most objectified group.
- **Attractiveness is an –ism:** we make fun of people based on how they look, which is the same as making fun of someone based on race, but it flies under the radar. You can say an ugly joke and it is ok but it's not ok to say a race joke. Try living your whole life being the butt of the ugly joke.
- **Judgment is like tree roots:** it digs into our psyche. We are not educated elite who know better; it affects us all. We have to suppress our judgments because we know the right action.
- **Shame and blame are built into the human process:** this has resulted in an increase of support for mindfulness and acceptance. Why now? Maybe because the world needs more from a health system. We need a more flexible system. Why is it hard?
- **Humans learn arbitrary relations:** we learn that a nickel is smaller than a dime, but if you ask a little kid he'll say the nickel is bigger. We say "I am successful, but not successful enough," yet we have everything we need to live a happy life. This is still not enough.
- You can look in the mirror and find lots of things to criticize, even who you are as a person. How do you stop it?
- **The game: First you lose, and then you play.**
 - If you are obese you've lost the game and you think that because you're bad you have to do all these things.
 - **Imposter Syndrome**
 - The outcome you want is to be happy, healthy, and secure.
- **Acceptance Action Questionnaire (AAQ):** A weight-developed measure of self acceptance
 - Example of questionnaire items: "it's ok to feel fat" and "I should be ashamed of my body"
 - Also includes weight stigma questions
 - The more judgmental you are of others the more likely you are to use the same process to judge yourself, the less open you will be to your feelings, the more self stigma you'll have. You'll also be more likely to have a higher BMI, a decreased quality of life, and a decrease in mental health.
- **Wagging the finger is a toxic process!** Our culture feeds off this pathology.
- **What happens if we flip the game around?** What if first you win and then you play? What if it is okay to be ourselves and not slap ourselves silly?
- **Behavioral therapists use the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) model:** we try to run away from our world within in order to be

accepted by the world without. This therapy teaches diffusion, in which you recognize your thoughts as thoughts. It teaches attentional flexibility, which allows you to let go of the clown suit. It is okay to be present as a conscious human being. There is more to me than a physical being. I am a conscious being connected to others. You then put in your values: what path are you on and what you want to manifest in the world. For example, beauty and love.

- **Acceptance and Mindfulness Process:** Will it help in the area of food and health?
- **Weight Maintenance Study:** 87 participants in a 6 month weight loss program took part in a 6 hour workshop on ACT, but did touch upon the issue of diet and exercise. They did regular ACT exercises and focused on weight stigma.
 - **Control Group:** had poor stigma and quality of life
 - **Experimental group:** 3 months after the workshop they had increased stigma scores and quality of life (huge effect size!)
 - **Holding Breath:** the control group couldn't hold its breath on average for more than 30 seconds. After the workshop the experimental group could hold their breath longer. Breath holding mediated BMI. It predicted what was going to happen 3 months later. It's not easy or pleasant to push away a candy bar. You need to be able to handle distress (i.e. holding breath) to be able to stick to a weight loss plan.
 - **BMI:** the control group gained 5 pounds but the experimental group lost 5 pounds.
- **Physical Education Study:** conducted at Drexel University where students' gym use was monitored by an ID card swipe.
 - Participants in the ACT group increased their exercise.
- **ACT and Diabetes Management:**
 - Participants spent 3 hours with ACT, which unlike traditional diabetes education programs, focuses on positive rather than negative values.
 - For example, they talked about what they want on their tombstone
 - 50% increased their control of diabetes 3 months later, which is fully mediated by AAQ and self management.
 - Diabetes education is logical, but it is not psychological.
- **Body Image Concern Pilot:**
 - Participants: 56 women who were at risk for developing an eating disorder
 - After ACT their risk decreased and their anxiety about their body decreased.
- **Motivate Physical Activity:**
 - During a spinning class they compared how hard participants were working when they were reminded how to exercise (straight back, pedal hard) and when they were told something they had said would motivate them to exercise (dance with boy friend, wear skinny jeans).
 - Measures participants' heart rate to the instructors and found people work harder when they are reminded what they are exercising for, not how to exercise.

- **WIN FIRST:** let's do it. We don't need to earn our way to be good. You're an adult and it's ok to be you, even if you're obese. You may never lose weight, but it is possible to be yourself and then from that connect with values and get moving from there.
- We need to adjust to the constant flow of judgment because there's going to be more.
- We need to create minds for the modern world.
- We live in a toxic environment that is so horrible and disconnected from health and happiness.
- Behavioral science has to step up to it!
- www.contextualpsychology.org