Misunderstandings about "creative hopelessness"



Letting go means losing grip temporary. Not letting go means losing grip altogether

Søren Kierkegaard

Convenience serves people and we are surrounded by all sorts of gadgets and possibilities to make our lives easier. We no longer have to wash (and wash and wash) the sandy vegetables coming from the farmlands ourselves, it lays ready for us in the store. We don't have to walk for hours to a well, the water just flows out of the tap. If we don't feel like cooking, there are plenty of options for easy food. All that convenience has a price: we exhaust the earth and pollute it. And there is also a psychological prize for avoiding discomfort and unpleasant feelings or thoughts. That price consists of alienating ourselves from our own inner life, from each other and from what is important and makes life meaningful. An easy life is not necessarily a vital life. In ACT, we try to make people who have devoted their lives to avoiding discomfort and unpleasant experiences aware of that process and the price they pay. This process is called creative hopelessness.

There are a number of misunderstandings about what the process of "creative hopelessness" is and is not. Earlier we wrote a blog about the term and why it is important to understand the term well: <https://www.actcursus.nl/?page_id=1271>. Some therapists shy away from talking to someone about the hopelessness of the strategies that he or she uses (usually unconsciously) to control inner experiences. They are afraid that the client will feel hopeless about themselves, therapy or life. When clients see ending their lives as the only option to free themselves from the immense struggle they face every day, as a therapist you want to carefully maneuver the process of creative hopelessness to prevent the client being strengthened in his idea that his life is hopeless. However, most people can handle the confrontation, and that life or the person is hopeless is certainly not the message we want to convey with this process.

The process of creative hopelessness validates that people suffer and that they have already tried a lot to alleviate their suffering. It validates the experience that what they have already tried has not led to the desired result. And it offers hope. Hope that another path is possible, by stopping the fight with your own inner experiences, thus with yourself. By shifting the focus from "this must go" to " I want more of these valuable things " new options become visible. By letting go of the attempts to bring inner experiences under control, people gain control over their lives, their actions and their backs. The dirty pain, the painful consequences of not accepting the pain associated with life, will decrease if someone can let go of the struggle. You can offer that hope as a therapist. Sometimes I hear that therapists believe they should first take away all hope from their clients and let them go home completely hopeless. That is not what the process of creative hopelessness is about. It is about the insight, not rationally, but on the level of experience, that it is only possible to control your own inner experiences to a limited extent. That investing a lot of time and energy in controlling your experiences leads to a decrease in (working on) what makes life valuable and meaningful.

When clients come to realize that their actions to gain more control over their experiences do not work, they often ask the question: what should I do then? It is suggested in ACT books to not answer this question as a therapist. First of all, the answer could easily lead to someone following the advice in the hope of gaining more control. In addition, we try to tap into someone's experiential wisdom in ACT instead of "offering" this wisdom in the form of advice. But there is no simple answer either. Acceptance is not the answer to the question: what is helpful? You could say that psychological flexibility is the answer. The interplay of the six processes, of which acceptance is one. In the therapy you use the other processes to make letting go and approaching behavior (acceptance) possible. For example, when someone expresses the fear that his or her life will never be okay again, then the goal is not that someone accepts this fear. In this fear there is a belief that someone fuses with and that increases the suffering, the aversiveness of the experience. Defusion reduces fear to an emotion, a physically felt experience that is easier to carry.

Creative hopelessness is not a state where we bring the client in with one or a few interventions, after which the client has permanently abandoned the struggle with his own experiences. It is a process that you will return to again and again. It is a motion that people go through during a treatment session and during a treatment process. Sometimes it progresses and sometimes it is more difficult. It is important that the therapist and client agree on the purpose of the treatment: no symptom reduction, no 'getting better', no ‘more control over your thinking and feeling’, but getting more choices to live according your values. With the process of creative hopelessness, we motivate someone to leave the path of more control over their experiences and to step on the path of a value-oriented life.