
The Unwanted Guest

The goal of this metaphor is to explain the long-term consequences of **emotional avoidance** and importance of acceptance-based coping. It was designed to clarify the meaning of the function of acceptance-based coping, namely, to cultivate a different relationship with emotions.

Acceptance of emotions means that you open the door for both the positive and negative person. You allow both to have a seat at your kitchen table.

Imagine you decide to invite the negative person in. Do you think it will be a good time? Probably, the answer will be “no”.

*Note that the goal of acceptance-based coping is **not** to create positive emotions or to make the negative emotions go away. The goal is **to cultivate a different relationship with these emotions.***

Although both positive and negative experiences are inevitable parts of life, many of us have developed a completely different relationship with them: *we tend to accept/embrace pleasant experiences and fight/resist negative experiences.* In the long term, our attitude and different way of dealing with both types of experiences creates a certain relationship with the feelings these trigger in us.

After reading the metaphor, you can reflect on your own way of coping:

- How do you typically deal with unwanted guests?
- What could you do to deal more effectively with difficult emotions?
- What would it be like to open the door for every kind of guest?
- What would it be like to give an unwanted guest a hug?
- Rather than keeping the door shut for the negative person, what are other options?

The Unwanted Guest (metaphor):

Imagine, the doorbell rings. As you open the door, there is someone standing in front of you. He is in a good mood, smiles, and has a positive attitude. You have a nice chat and then he leaves. The next day, he shows up again. You invite him in for a cup of coffee. You spend the afternoon together and have a lot of fun. Over time, a positive relationship is built. Every time he visits, you open the door and let him in. He is welcome.

On another day, the doorbell rings, and as you open the door, you are confronted with a completely different person. This person is in a negative mood, looks sad, and has a negative attitude. He is having a difficult time and asks if he may come in. You respond that he is not welcome and that he should leave. You immediately shut the door and try to forget that he was there.

After a while, the doorbell rings again, and as you are walking to the door, you are hoping to see the positive person. Unfortunately, it is the negative person again. Slightly irritated, you tell him that is not allowed to come in and is certainly not welcome. It does not matter how much you would like this person stay away, he continues visiting you from time to time. Although you have never allowed the two of you a chance to get to know each other, in your mind he gets more hostile and dangerous. Sometimes, out of the blue, you fear that he might show up randomly. Maybe you even decide to barricade your house or place cameras in front of your house. Over time, a negative relationship has been built.

This metaphor illustrates how we can develop a relationship with positive and negative experiences, even without meaning to. The positive and negative people in this metaphor represent positive and negative experiences. Just as we do not allow the negative person to come in, we are not willing to allow negative or difficult experiences to be present. We try to avoid them by suppressing or ignoring them or wishing they would go away – we do not get to know them. **Generally, we develop a relationship with negative emotions that is characterised by non-acceptance and avoidance.**

Naturally, there are many reasons why we want to keep the negative experiences out. First, they are unpleasant, and by shutting the door, we think we can prevent them from hurting us, at least temporarily. Second, our environment can implicitly or explicitly teach us to keep negative experiences out.

A father who tells his son that “big boys don’t cry” is effectively telling his son to block any emotion that can cause tears or emotional pain. There are several problems that emerge as a result of keeping negative experiences out. We fail to extract valuable information from the emotion. Emotions are data. They can tell us something valuable about ourselves.

Anger, for instance, can tell us that someone crossed a line. We should be aware and examine this emotion rather than keep it out. It could be a personal value which should not be transgressed, or it could be a submerged belief which is actually erroneous and requires revision. If we never let negative emotions in, we fail to develop what can be referred to as emotional self-efficacy: the belief that you can handle difficult emotions. You are probably not letting them in because you are afraid of what might happen. Trying to keep negative emotions out means fighting them. Consequently, in addition to the negative experience itself, the fight and struggle can create additional suffering.

In order to deal effectively with emotions, this metaphor illustrates the importance of cultivating an acceptance-based relationship with emotions.

Rather than keeping the door shut, one should be willing to keep the door open and allow emotions, both positive and negative, to be present.