Dropping the struggle

Why trying to control thoughts and feelings often backfires, and what to do instead.

We are taught that if something is unpleasant, we should get rid of it. That works well in the outside world. If the room is cold, close the window. With thoughts and feelings it works badly, and often makes them worse.

Two pictures

Quicksand

When you fall into quicksand, the instinct is to thrash. Thrashing pulls you under. The way to survive is to do the opposite: stop fighting, lie back and spread out, so that more of you touches the surface.

Tug of war with a monster

Imagine you are in a tug of war with a huge monster, with a pit between you. You pull as hard as you can. It pulls back. The harder you pull, the harder it pulls. There is another option. Drop the rope. The monster is still there. But your hands are free.

Ways we struggle

- [ ] Avoiding situations that bring up feelings
- [ ] Distracting, keeping busy, scrolling
- [ ] Drinking, eating or spending to take the edge off
- [ ] Arguing with thoughts
- [ ] Trying to think positively
- [ ] Telling myself off for feeling this way
- [ ] Waiting to feel better before doing things
- [ ] Searching for the reason or the fix

Most of these work in the short term. That is why we keep doing them. The question is what they cost over months and years: time, energy, health, relationships, and a life that keeps getting put off.

The alternative

Dropping the rope does not mean giving up or liking how you feel. It means you stop fighting your own thoughts and feelings, so that your energy can go into living.

What have I been struggling against?

If I did not have to win this fight first, what would I do with my time and energy?

These metaphors come from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson).

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