



ISSWSH WEBINAR

Radical Acceptance: Third Wave CBT Tools to Thrive with Chronic Illness

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What does “third wave” mean?



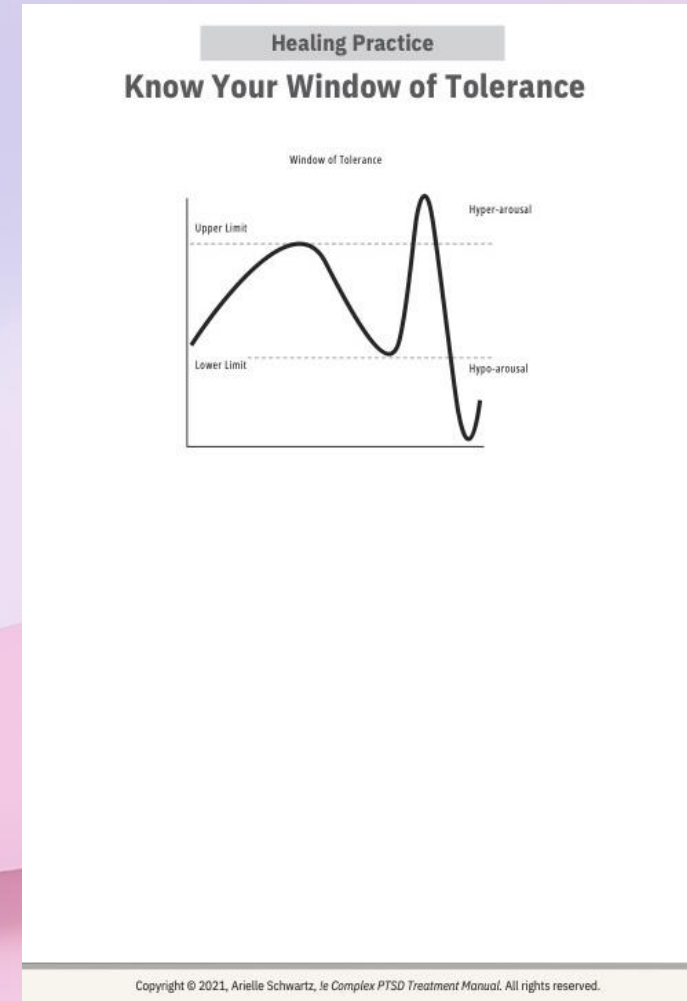
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- Reframing alone misses the mark!
- Address the realities of medical trauma, which include both mental and physical responses to serious illness, medical procedures and frightening treatments (International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, 2024)
- Third wave can help address complex, ongoing trauma
- CPTSD is a result of “repeated or chronic exposure to extremely threatening events from which escape is impossible” (Schwartz, 2021)
- Create safety in the body with grounding and mindfulness tools
- Identify unhelpful thought patterns and create more flexible thought patterns
- Embrace radical acceptance, self compassion and process the journey of grief

What is down regulation?



- Consciously shifting our nervous system from fight/flight/freeze state to regulated state
- Acknowledge barriers to autonomic function with chronic illness
- **Stimulate the vagus nerve**
- Hyperarousal vs. Hypoarousal vs. **Window of Tolerance** (Schwartz, 2021)
- “Talk” to your amygdala (Pittman, 2015)



Tools for Patients



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- Bilateral stimulation
 - Butterfly tapping
 - Facial tapping
 - Tens machine
 - Bilateral beats playlists
- Grounding tools
 - Yogic Breathing
 - Notice 5 Things
 - Self Havening
 - Visualize Safe Space
 - Cold compress on neck/face in ice water

(Schwartz, 2021)

What is dialectical thinking?



- **Two Opposing Things Can Both Be True**
 - We need both the emotional mind AND the rational mind.
 - Our “wise mind” acknowledges both the emotional and the rational mind.
 - This allows us to acknowledge our emotional experience, not minimize our feelings , while also inviting our rational mind to help ground us in facts.
 - Using our wise mind may feel uncomfortable. Our goal is not “positive” or black and white thinking-our goal is to turn the volume down to foster more neutral thoughts.
- (Linehan, 2015)

Goals of Dialectical Thinking



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- Recognize unhelpful thought patterns
- Create flexible thoughts
- Turn down the volume on distressing emotions
- Higher distress tolerance
- Greater self acceptance

(Linehan, 2015)

Distress Tolerance Tools for Patients



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- Healthy distractions (ACCEPTS)
- Using the five senses to self soothe
- Mindfulness skills (IMPROVES)

(Linehan, 2015)

- Create a menu to reduce the mental load for low, medium and high pain days

What is radical acceptance?



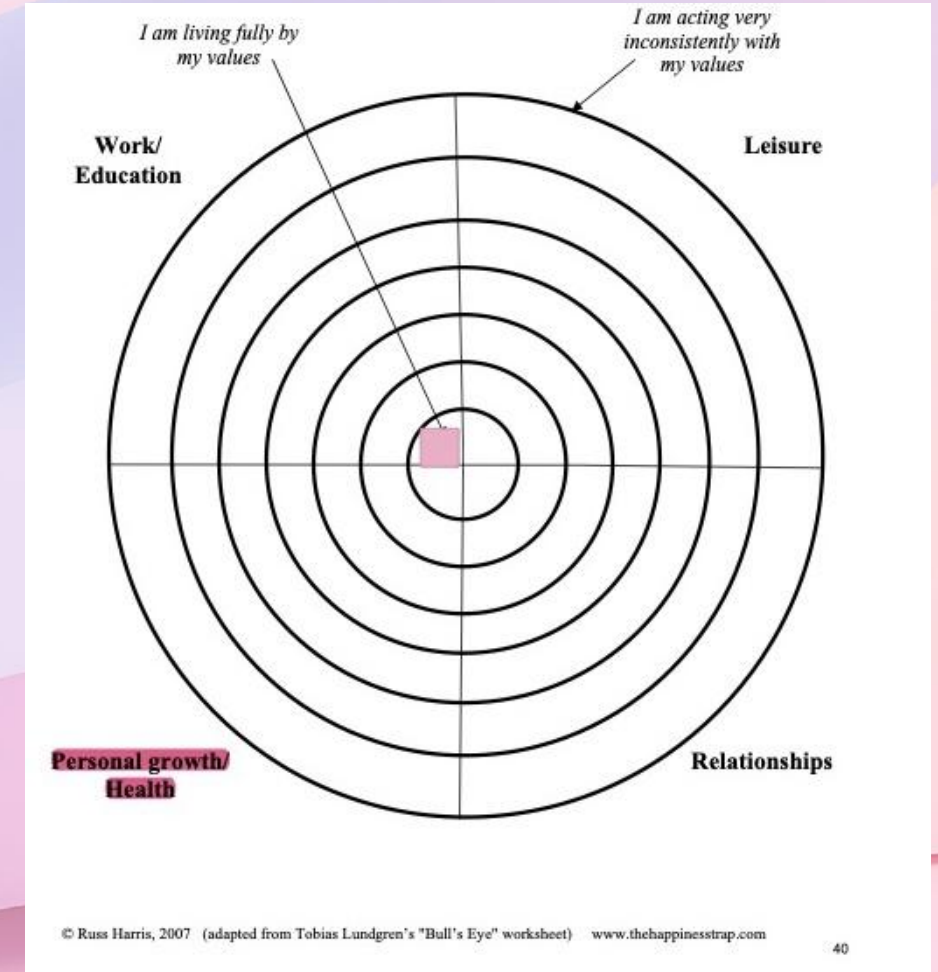
- Radically accepting (acknowledging) the reality of your situation and the painful reality that chronic illness is outside of your control
- **AND** taking committed actions where you can/where you do have control towards a meaningful life in alignment with your values.

What is it not?

- Giving up
- Giving in
- Defining yourself by your diagnosis
- Saying you are “okay” with having a chronic illness or that you are “okay” living in pain
- Not continuing to go to doctors or taking other actions to find more tools for stability and less pain

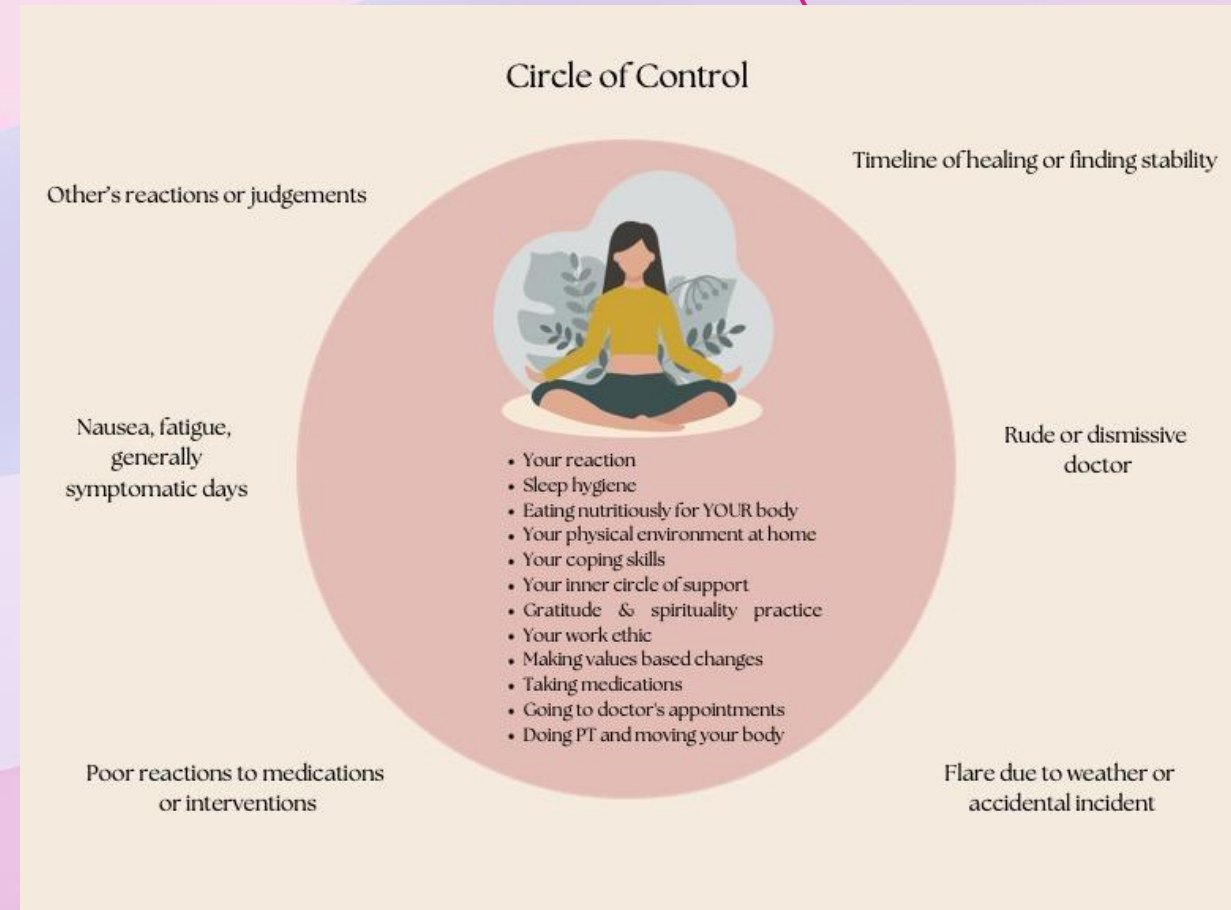
Tools for Patients

- Bullseye exercise (Harris, 2008)
 - Adapt your bullseye if needed-it is okay if your bullseye has changed.
 - Working intense in person job has shifted to high achieving role with remote options
 - Vacations abroad have shifted to restful trips within driving distance to cities with good emergency care
 - Workouts like running have shifted to walking with a dog in your favorite neighborhood
 - Revisit your bullseye from time to time to assess if changes need to be made
 - Pair with reframe “I don’t like that my current abilities for vacations have changed from hiking mountains to walking flat paths AND I am taking actions to get closer to the bullseye I want.”



Tools for Patients

- Self Compassion meditations
 - RAIN (Brach, 2026)
- Acceptance phrases
 - “I feel _____ AND just for the next month/week/day/hour/five minutes, I accept this is what my body needs.”
 - “I can tolerate/withstand this.”
- Circle of Control exercise
 - What is in your control inside the circle?
 - What falls outside?
- Self Compassion journaling (Neff, 2026)
- Containment journaling (Schwartz, 2021)
- Mindfulness to increase thought defusion
 - Leaves on a Stream



Message to Patients



- Reality Gap-The bigger the gap, the bigger the pain.
- “The reality gap is the gap between what we want and what we’ve got.”
(Harris, 2008)
- **Committed actions close the gap.**
- **Radical acceptance is not giving up.**
- Small steps are important committed actions:
 - Taking medications
 - Going to appointments
 - Doing physical therapy
 - Meditation/mindfulness
 - Pacing
 - Doing one thing instead of everything

Why Multidisciplinary Care Matters



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- Chronic illness is not psycho-somatic
- Anxiety and depression can intensify symptoms
- Therapy plays one role on a team of medical experts-we can only provide one set of tools.
- Clients need mental and physical tools.
- We are able to coordinate care with other physicians to enhance mental health tools, reduce mental load and increase utilization of tools outside of session:
 - Breathing exercises
 - Gathering evidence from doctors to challenge health anxiety
 - Helping client pace appropriately
 - Manage fears surrounding new medications based on evidence
 - Manage avoidance surrounding new exercises or protocols based on evidence

References



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