

AN EPIDURAL FOR YOUR MIND

Pain x Resistance = Suffering

I can't remember where I learned this "equation", pretty sure it's derived from stoicism, but it's popped up in my brain many times when I'm engaging in something I don't enjoy (ie, running, boring meetings, long drives, etc). The idea behind it is that pain and discomfort exist. It's a fact and, for most people, an unpleasant one. Discomfort is made exponentially more unbearable if you resist it, fight it, or judge it in some way. The more negative thoughts or emotions you pile on top of the "pain", the more suffering you will experience. You make the situation harder when you ruminate about all of the negatives, such as: *"I don't enjoy sitting at home for months. If this doesn't end I'll go bonkers. I hate this. Zoom meetings are the worst, I wish they would stop scheduling them. Why doesn't the city open restaurants? Why doesn't the disease disappear? They have to find a vaccine soon, there's no way this can last any longer... I can't deal with this!!!"*. While those emotions and thoughts exist, you're spending a lot of energy resisting an uncontrollable discomfort and rather than refocusing your mindset more productively.

I once worked with a runner training for the Boston Marathon. A big part of his success came from a phrase he repeated to himself, "Jump into the Fire", which he took from a book he read about Native American distance runners. He liked the idea that when you run distances, it's going to hurt, it's going to burn, so instead of trying to run around the fire and avoid it, take a "bring it on" mentality. By accepting the pain rather than fighting it you free your mind to perform better. He redefined the pain as a sign he was pushing himself towards success, which helped combat the desire to slow down. Personally, I'm not there with running, I don't like to bring on the pain. Instead, about a tenth of a mile in when my joints start to hurt, I tell myself, "Yes, it sucks, but it is what it is" and then I focus on my music. I don't pretend I enjoy pain, I don't give myself a pep talk, I just make a conscious decision not to focus on it.

Right now, most of us are experiencing some type of discomfort with the new circumstances of the world. You don't have to like it, but you do need to accept it and you can change the equation:

Discomfort x Focus = Experience

Discomfort is the constant and isn't always in your control. Focus is variable and controllable. How you view your circumstance, either negatively, matter-of-factly, or as an opportunity or challenge, will undoubtedly result in a different experience.

A good exercise is to make 3 columns and write a list of all the things causing you mental or physical anguish. Then, choose a realistic focus or emotion and think about the resulting experience you anticipate. This not only helps you choose your multiplier, but changes your mindset from being wrapped up in the discomfort and instead looking towards the experience you want to have. I've done this with my kids to show them how changing their focus will change their experience, it's a simple but effective exercise. It also helps you to recognize that a lot of your discomfort revolves around the same handful of topics rather than 1000 different things, which can also make it more manageable.

Discomfort	Desired Focus/Emotion	Outcome/Experience

Ultimately, you can have pain/stress/discomfort without having to suffer through it. Women are given the option to get epidurals during childbirth to allow them to choose to have a more tolerable experience. We may not love the process of giving birth, but we can enjoy HAVING given birth. Choosing to focus on the positive that comes from the pain makes everything a lot easier to handle. Therefore, think of taking a more accepting focus as being an epidural for your mind, allowing you to be more present and less pained about the stress you're experiencing.

Make it Great!