

LIVING AND WORKING WITH LTD

Introduction

Low Tolerance for Discomfort (LTD) is a term described by Albert Ellis with the Institute for Rational Emotive Behavior therapy in New York. It is a term used to describe a certain pattern of thinking or construing one's world or the Activity Events or Aggravators (A's) of life. LTD is not who you are, nor does it describe your personality. More accurately, it is a descriptor for your philosophy. In our work here at PPC, we tend to regard one's philosophy, attitude or belief system (B) as the cause of most, if not all, of our emotional consequences (C).

In other words, we have an A of life (adversity), which is filtered through our B (beliefs), which causes the C (emotion). While we cannot change or control our A (despite our best efforts), and while our C (once it gets above a 5/10), is very difficult (though possible) to control, we CAN control or chose a B, harmful or helpful to your life goals (G). The kind of B you select is often based on discerning the B you have at the moment, debating with yourself on its value, disputing it's truth and eventually deciding (D) on the most appropriate, goal-oriented B you think will make you the kind of person you want to be.

How It Works (or doesn't)

Now, if you have a LTD pattern, which nearly everyone does to some degree, your LTD philosophy or B will severely impair your G. In short, the degree or amount of your LTD will inversely reduce the G's you have in the short- and long-term. So, monitoring your B's and choosing High Tolerance to Discomfort (HTD) is a good thing! So good in fact, the higher your HTD, the more successful and free you will be in your life as a person, partner or parent.

LTD can be understood by these four attitudes towards A's:

1. I can't stand it
2. This is too hard
3. Things should be easy
4. I have to feel like it before I can do it.

There are countless variations and idiosyncratic combinations, but the base will be the same. The root or base or LTD is a false view that the A is intolerable. For example, most times when we ask ourselves “Is it true that my adolescent’s behavior is INTOLERABLE?”, the vast majority of people will quickly deny. Those that say it is indeed tolerable, find their C of frustration quantitatively drop from say an 8 to a 4. They may still feel a negative feeling, but the amount of the C will be low enough that it will prevent them from saying something they later regret.

Another group will say, “Well, it is not intolerable, but it FEELS like it!” This group of LTD’ers will achieve a lower level of goal attainment. By saying it feels like it, they infer or suggest to themselves that because it feels this way it must be true. Not so! Yes, the feeling of frustration is an accurate description of the C, but not an accurate description of the B. In other words, one has to be a bit tough on oneself and again ask “Is it or is it not tolerable?” As we say, “We know you are frustrated. Now, put aside the four letter f-word (feel) and ask a tough question of truth: Can I tolerate the A”?

Tolerating one’s C is not to be confused with wanting, liking or asking for the A. I do not want my adolescent to leave their clothes lying around (A). But, can I staaaaaaaaand it? Is it tooooooooooo hard? Should it be eeeeeeeeasy to parent an adolescent? Yes! You can staaaaaaaaand it! It is not tooooooooooo hard! No! It shouldn’t be easy. It is tough. Very tough. Excruciatingly tough. Toughest thing you have ever done perhaps, but not soooooooooo tough that you can’t staaaaaaaaand it!

You see, when you change your B from LTD to HTD, you suddenly are less aggravated (lower C). When your C comes down, your freedom and choices go up. Freedom and choice are good, right?

As another example, when I act in ways that are undesirable (rarely), my wife has an A. Can she control or change my A of a second ago? Of course not. Now, she has a C of say, discouraged. Will discouragement aid in her goal (which I hope) of marriage? No, so she will now have to go back to her B, find out what it is, then Debate and Dispute (D)

with herself (not me yet) to eventually Decide on a better B that will aid in her marital goal. Once she decides and is convinced for her sake, not mine, that while she does not like my behaviour, she can stand it, she suddenly has two choices. First, the freedom to ignore this last A of mine (because of my many other endearing qualities) or secondly, to lovingly approach me about my behaviour and seek a resolution. When she approaches me, she will do so with a lower C, thereby not only feeling more in control, but also in fact having more control. I can (not necessarily will) have a more appropriate response to her approaching me with a C4 than a C10. Note, I did not say C-zero. That would be possible perhaps, but highly improbable for the human nature.

Now, when we look at this marital A that I callously committed or omitted, my wife's HTD will either cause her to focus on her short-term goals (shopping without a fight) or approaching me on the spot to correct the A that I did (appropriately engaging me in a discussion about my behaviour).

Which of the two she chooses is dependent on a variety of factors beyond this essay at this time. Suffice to note though, that were she to think with LTD, she would either accuse me in a fashion I would probably not receive or in more probable LTD form, she would avoid the issue entirely by stuffing the A-C. Of course, eventually it will most likely arise by way of snipping, cold shoulder, distancing to the point that neither of us understands each other until, voila, a new man enters with whom she can talk. Now we are in even more trouble.

In an over-generalized way of approaching this, half of the people half the time make faulty decision or behaviour due to LTD. Decisions that have a common thread of attempting to avoid pain and discomfort. These decisions rarely focus on long-term goals but conversely, whatever is easiest, simplest or least discomfoting in the present moment. Hence, poor decisions such as self or other deceit (to admit a truth would or could cause discomfort), anxiety disorders (fear), inner blamefulness (outward blame would be even more discomfoting), addictions (use of the addiction relieves discomfort, immediately therefore chemical, sexual, financial, work addiction) procrastination and poor ability to delay gratification can characterize the LTD philosophy.

Now there are a lot of over-generalizations I made to this point. The human ability to compose multiple philosophies simultaneously and even contradictively is the basis of our irrationality. For example, one may have LTD in one relationship or one environment and not in another. One may be LTD in their thinking for a combination of A's then suddenly erupt in a contrary emotion/behavior mystifying those around him or her.

An employee may be generally known as a 'nice guy' (as LTD-ers often are), due to their external tolerance of smiling and apparent engagement. Internally they can be seething or frantically trying to avoid. So the LTD-er can be perceived as easy-going and pleasant. However, the day can come where he or she suddenly explodes with emotion, shocking everyone. Due to the hidden nature of the LTD thinking, they can be somewhat unpredictable.

Is There Any Virtue to LTD?

Now, lest we write the LTD off, the LTD style does have certain 'advantages'. As mentioned, they can be 'nice' (though remember their motive for nice often is to avoid discomfort). The LTD can be more diplomatic and work a variety of people negotiating differences and stitching conflicts together. The positive LTD approach can be the ideal person to go on a holiday with, as they appear flexible and be low maintenance. They may never go with you again because you "were so controlling", but the truth is the LTD rarely protests or makes his/her desires known.

Living, Working and Raising the LTD

So, how do you live or work or raise the LTD thinking? In one word: carefully. Remember they are the safety experts. If they detect (and are superbly capable of detecting incoming criticism), even the prospect of conflict or discomfort they will find ways to avoid ways to avoid physically (leaving the room, staying out, making excuses) or emotionally (depression, sullenful, reserved, non-communicative). When giving feedback (a word they hate) you need to approach the LTD in a manner that gives them escape routes ("Let's finish this after lunch"), where you offer complements to offset the

negative, slow the speed down to let them pace and process the information and pay attention to physical distance (an employee may need 20 feet while a spouse may need touch). The velocity, intensity and potency of your argument is better couched in more indirect and gradual terms. Confrontation is out of the question as are moralizing lectures where they can disassociate and go to another space in their mind. Tone and body language are cues for all of us but the LTD thinker is an expert on picking up on these cues before the communicator is even aware of them. One's choice of words is a sure fire way of prompting a LTD response. My wife had a habit in her conflict – approach family of origin to begin her protest with “I have a bone to pick with you!” For years she experienced her husband (that would be me) who would shut down and only agree with her. Knowing this was false consent, she would understandably push me further or harder which naturally got me to more desperately look for an emotional or behavioural hole to crawl into until it was safe. Until this trigger was overcome we had countless unsolved conflicts generating resentment in her and fear in me.

Again, since safety, comfort, and ease are the passwords for the LTD'd, do not use the John Wayne western style of “dukeing-it-out”. Push the LTD enough or ignore the avoidance long enough and they can attack suddenly, without warning. Instead, play smarter, not harder. Use the eastern style of combat where you use the opponents strength (in this case comfort and diplomacy) to your advantage. Open ended questions, expressions of mild curiosity versus confrontation, reflective contemplative responses to the vague LTD answers serve to reduce the defended LTD. Loving, caring, and supportive probes will earn you more mileage than any comment, question or sigh that even has the hint of judgement. The LTD is rarely oppositional but rather highly self-protective. In other words, their undesirable responses are generally more pro-self (protective) than anti-other (faultful).

Once you understand their behaviour rarely has much to do with you, but more to do with them, you can be more engaging, patient and kind, drawing them out. I often use the metaphors of a clearing in the bush. First you have to get them to come out of their entrenched, hidden hole in the forest (They only build forts as a last resort). Once they come out of their hole it will be a cautious advance, two steps forward, one back. Even

ten positive encounters offset by one negative will be filed as negative. Consistency is critical. Once they come to the edge of the forest, you may have to move the extra distance to the forest as they may regard walking into the glade is riskful. In fact, it may be to your advantage in the long term to cease any of your expectation to meet in the middle of the meadow for some length of time. Perhaps an agreement will be reached that most topics will be discussed on the perimeter only.

Remember this is tolerance. Tolerance can increase with exercise. No pain no gain. The LFT variation to this is “No pain, No pain”! But if the pain is perceived as too much, defeat sets in and passivity (the enemy of LTD) reigns. So, make your approaches, careful, slow, gentle and safe. Ensure the forays to the clearing are successful in the LTD’s mind, not yours. Yes, it is true, issues never get fully discussed and you may not reach agreement. But that is your short term goal. The long term goal is to have the LTD increase their tolerance to your approaches so that issues can be discussed and agreed to at the time. Pick your battles. Choose which hill you want to die on. The LTD can “go underground” for longer than you may imagine based not on long term thinking but on their short term safety.

If you want to achieve your relationship long term goal and achieve a positive outcome on the short term goal of the issue at hand, avoid all references that could be regarded as judgements. Blame, fault finding or criticism, even implied will bring out their worst. Remember, if they are not at their best, your long and short term goal will be impaired. Much of this problem of theirs is in your hands. Instead, of direct confrontation give them some warning of a worry or concern of yours (not a problem of theirs). Tell them you’d like to talk about how you can handle this A. Watch them carefully, remember your words are worth 10%, your tone, behaviour and non verbal communication is worth 90%. Do not expect them to suddenly warm up and say “Lay it on me!” Expect them to figuratively want to avoid, that is simply the reflex of the LTD. It is not right or appropriate, but it is their style. Remember they have a right to be wrong. Yes, you do too, but if you are overly aggressive or persuasive they will retreat and perhaps ambush you unpredictably.

LTD in the Movies

As an actor, Hugh Grant often acts like the LTD. He is perpetually trying to get out of some problem. He worries and is anxiety prone. He often looks like a wreck trying to unravel some relationship problem. Erin Brokovitch with Julia Roberts is perhaps the antithesis of LTD. Her determination and perseverance clearly represented HFT. Remember the odd couple? At first glance Oscar (the messy one) would be suspect of LTD. Poor discipline, procrastination, sloth, tardiness can be hallmarks of LTD thinking. But remember, it isn't so much the behaviour but the motive for the behaviour that distinguishes LTD. We are led to think Oscar "Couldn't stand the time required to clean up. There was "toooo much to put away". To tidy his place would have required discipline and effort which he didn't feel therefore he could not do.

Personal Example

One of the jokes in my family is my inability to find common household items. Invariably my wife will know where my possessions are even though she has never used them. Part of this is gender, part of this is her superior memory indeed. The other day though she sent me to get a canned good from the basement. Off I went with good intentions. I truly looked and rummaged through our small standing shelf but alas, no luck. I determinedly told her we are out. My wife of HFT for these matters went downstairs and returned not with one but THREE cans of the product! You see my thought while looking was I hate looking for stuff! (translated hate = can't). This is taking so long (translated tooooo long). I can't stand rummaging and wasting time (translated: I may as well quit). This can should be easily recognizable (translated: if it is not recognizable in 30 seconds it is too hard to look longer).

Extreme LTD

One can take LTD to an extreme. The person who detects something wrong with their health but won't see their physician for fear (get that – fear – the hallmark of the LTD) of finding a problem. The marriage partner who knows things are drifting apart but won't attend counselling or approach their spouse for fear of things getting worse. The

supervisor who won't approach an employee because of an anticipated reaction are all day to day examples of LTD.