

The Controversial Mental Skill of Indifference

Indifference helps us to detach ourselves from unhelpful thinking and find objective distance from a situation, explains Jason Liem

Mental and emotional resilience speaks to our ability to face adversity and bounce back from inevitable setbacks. On my sojourn to creating my podcast, [It's an Inside Job](#), the core focus has been to share stories and skills to build personal resilience.

After speaking to many interesting guests and hearing their tales, from turbulence to triumph, it is evident that overcoming adversity was due to experienced-based cognitive skills and reframing perspectives. For example, many people's stories centred on not being able to change their predicament, but more importantly, their ability to change their perception.

At the heart of all these stories, the protagonist reclaimed ownership and autonomy over their situation. They consciously focused their attention on dealing with the facts and the reality of the situation and were not engaging in 'why me?' thinking, speculation, or making assumptions. They stood vigilant at the gate of their mind and were selective about what they mentally allowed access to their minds.

In this article, I want to share one particular cognitive reframe that I find very effective and that fortifies my mindset when facing tough times and emotionally demanding situations. My approach is quite a contrarian one, but it's powerful. I am talking about the mindset of indifference. From my earlier work helping people with trauma to my current profession as a sparring partner in the corporate realm, indifference has been an invaluable tool that has sustained my mental health and wellbeing.

Doesn't Indifference Mean You Are Cold and Callous?

Of course, that is true if we define indifference on a superficial level. However, if we look beyond the veil, we discover



the true depth and value of the cognitive reframe of indifference. If this reframe is used appropriately, it can inoculate us from mental and emotional strain and stress.

Indifference helps us to detach ourselves from unhelpful thinking, learn from our emotions, and find objective distance from the situation at hand. This distancing keeps us from becoming attached to negative experiences, allowing us to maintain a more neutral and balanced perspective while preventing us from rushing down the rabbit hole of a negative mindset, and in turn, helps us not to spiral out of control and experience excessive stress or anxiety.

The Rabbit Hole of News Cycles

In the age in which we live, we are only a thumb scroll away from knowing what is happening in almost every corner of the world. As we are all too aware, news tends to obsess over the negative and is biased towards the tragedies. When the news continually bombards us, there are significant repercussions for our mental and emotional state.

The brain has a natural bias for seeking out the negative. This programming is a part of our evolutionary wiring to monitor our surroundings for any dangers or hazards

that could threaten life or limb. The brain's negativity bias is mandatory to keep us alive so we can thrive.

So the continual exposure to the stream of negative news cycles and images of suffering can be overwhelming and lead to feelings of hopelessness, sadness, and stress. It does not end there; negative news cycles can often create a distorted view of reality, making it difficult to see the positive aspects of the world. When the news is designed to trigger the brain's negativity bias continually, it can seem like everything is going south, leaving us feeling apathetic and overwhelmed.

By using the cognitive reframe of indifference, we can limit the news's impact on our emotional wellbeing. Our cognitive capacity is finite, and we can better decide where to invest our attention. We can choose to watch or read the news selectively.

In a demanding world, we want to be vigilant as to what we give access to our minds. Indifference helps us maintain a balanced perspective and avoid getting caught up in doom-scrolling and negative news cycles.

Suffering and Empathy

There are two types of empathy: cold empathy (also called cognitive empathy) and hot empathy (also referred to as emotional empathy). The former means you are present with the other person, trying to understand their emotions and perspectives without becoming emotionally invested or affected. It is about consciously maintaining an objective view that is, as best as possible, freeing us from personal bias, preconceptions, or being drawn into their emotional tempest.

The indifference of cold empathy can help us view situations objectively by limiting the impact of our own emotions and biases, allowing us to see things as they are. Maintaining an objective distance gives us



a better perch from which to help people deal with their subjective storm.

On the other hand, hot empathy is trying to feel what another person is feeling and relating to the person's subjective position. As a result, hot empathy leads us to become overly emotional about the suffering of others; we may become overwhelmed and unable to take effective action to help.

Cognitive indifference means adopting cold empathy, allowing us to view events objectively and respond most effectively. I have worked as a sparring partner with scores of people over the years. Those leaders, facilitators, coaches, and health professionals who were able to minimise hot empathy and maximise cold empathy were the ones who were the most effective at helping people who were struggling while preserving their mental health and wellbeing. But, unfortunately, those who used hot empathy often burned out and crashed.

At the end of the day, one of the core skills for these professions is to maintain objectivity to help people out of their subjective storm. It serves no purpose to be pulled into the personal bubble. Then you have two people who are fumbling about and co-ruminating.

It is crucial to state that cognitive indifference does not mean we become callous and insensitive, or that we ignore the suffering of others. Instead, indifference allows us to maintain a sense of compassion and empathy for those suffering while avoiding becoming overwhelmed by their emotions.

Compassion Fatigue

During the pandemic, part of my client base was first responders. Unfortunately, those individuals who did not mentally and emotionally shield themselves

from the suffering of others eventually became the ones who suffered. Many of them mentally and emotionally hit a wall. These professionals fully and completely enveloped themselves in the subjective experience of those they were trying to help. This led to two distinctive states. Either they were drowning in hopelessness and despair, or they experienced compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that occurs when we are constantly exposed to the suffering of others. People who experience compassion fatigue come to a point where they can no longer care or become apathetic, knowing that nothing they do will make a difference.

My clients who fortified themselves with cognitive indifference limited the emotional impact of and exposure to trying events. In turn, this afforded them the ability to continue to support and help those in need. In addition, indifference enabled them to maintain a balanced perspective, ensuring they were also taking care of their mental health and wellbeing. In simpler terms, they became mentally robust and emotionally resilient.

I can't overemphasize the benefits of adopting a mindset of indifference when it comes to buffering the detrimental effects of compassion fatigue, emotional overwhelm, mental imbalance, increased stress and anxiety, and lack of self-care.

The Advantages of Indifference

Indifference affords us the ability to:

- View situations objectively, without being swayed by emotional biases or preconceptions

- Respond calmly and objectively to conflicts or disagreements rather than becoming emotionally invested and defensive
- Regulate our emotions and avoid getting caught up in negative thoughts or feelings, which improves overall emotional wellbeing and reduces stress and anxiety
- Improve mental clarity by allowing us to objectively view our thoughts and emotions and see them as information and not as directives to act blindly
- Shift our mindset from reactive and imbalanced to reflective and balanced
- Utilise cold or cognitive empathy when helping people to avoid burning out or experiencing compassion fatigue
- Maintain a sense of balance and resilience when facing adversity and challenge

Conclusion

It is important to note that indifference should not be confused with apathy or a lack of empathy. Instead, it involves maintaining a sense of balance and distance. By cultivating a sense of mental detachment, we help ourselves and improve our ability to help others.

The cognitive skill of indifference may be controversial – so be it. It has served me well and continues to help me help others. I've always tended to be a bit of a contrarian anyway.



Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-based leadership and personal resilience programs

to individuals and to teams. Learn more at www.MINDtalk.no. Subscribe to Jason's free podcast, "It's An Inside Job," here: <http://www.mindtalk.no/its-an-inside-job.html>.

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