

The Parable of the Second Arrow

I want to share a story with you and it's the story of the two arrows. This is a story originally from Buddhism, and is often used in mindfulness

So the story goes like this:

You are walking in the woods and suddenly you get struck by an arrow (someone fires an arrow at you) and it hits your arm and it really, really hurts - it's very painful and you feel that physical pain in your arm, and it's bleeding. And then immediately your mind starts to think - "Oh my god, what will happen? What if I bleed to death? What if this is infected and I can't walk back properly? Or I lose energy and I can't get back to my family? What will happen to my family? What will be happening to my husband / my wife / my children? What will happen to me or what's going to happen to their future, how will they be doing?"

The Buddha describes the first arrow as the physical pain and the second arrow is what your mind does - it starts thinking about the worst scenario that can happen. And he says **"be warned of the second arrow."**

The first arrow represents the pain - the actual physical pain, and the second arrow represents what you call suffering. So we distinguish between pain and suffering.

Understanding the Second Arrow Story

There's a sense of resistance to it - not accepting it, not allowing it to be there and accepting the reality of the situation. We fight with the reality of the way things are

right now and so we turn the pain into suffering or we add suffering on top.

There's an equation that's often used in ACT (acceptance commitment therapy) which is:

$$\textit{Pain} \times \textit{Resistance} = \textit{Suffering}$$

The more that you resist or deny or fight or argue with the pain- which is already there, the more suffering you experience.

That's a useful story to remember whenever you have any kind of difficult situation. It could be difficult internal experiences - there could be difficult emotions like sadness, anxiety, frustration, or anger, or it could be to do with difficult thoughts; it could be difficult sensations like literal physical pain or chronic pain.

How do you reduce that suffering? Here are some ideas:

1. **Just remembering that story** is a good start to reflect on how your actions, your behaviour, and the way you're thinking about it may be actually leading to more suffering than you need to actually experience.
2. **Meeting the feeling of pain with self-compassion** and kindness. Place your hand gently wherever you feel the pain, and see if you can make space for it.
3. **Rate your level of acceptance of the pain.** Is it 1/10 or 5/10 for example? Then ask yourself 'how can I gently increase how much I'm accepting this difficult experience right now, as it's already here?'

That's the story of the second arrow - it's there to help you distinguish the difference between pain and suffering.