

THE SECOND ARROW OF SUFFERING

“In life, we can’t always control the first arrow. However, the second arrow is our reaction to the first. If we judge, blame, ruminate or deny the first arrow it is like being struck by a second arrow. Therefore, the second arrow is optional”. Another way to state it: pain is inevitable, suffering is optional

Our interpretation of events plays a large role in how we experience them and we do tend to over dramatize much of what happens to us. We probably find ourselves dealing with the second arrow of suffering many times in the course of a day. The story is about having a choice in how to proceed next.

Over time, having an awareness of this choice, and refraining from flinging endless second arrows at ourselves, can help liberate us from unnecessary suffering.

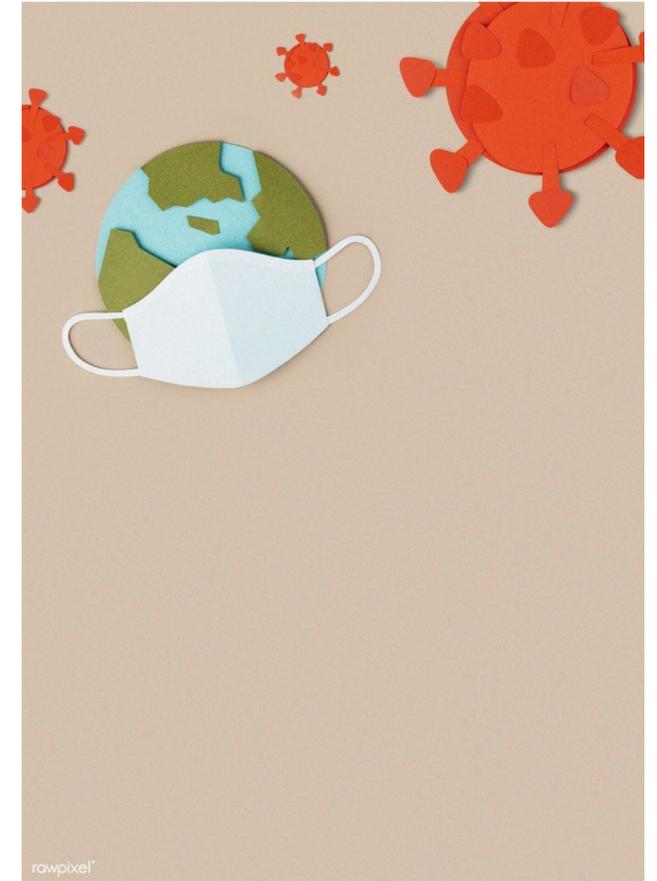
THE SECOND ARROW- IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT

We cannot control the first arrow of this pandemic. It is deeply painful and our fear is justified. While we cannot control the first arrow, we can learn from it. We can become adaptive, protective, and responsive. Evidence of that came very quickly in the early days and weeks of the pandemic.

We transitioned to work-from-home, rallied to make masks for frontline workers and keep vulnerable people fed, and accepted the hard reality that staying home keeps us all safe. The second arrow of rumination and catastrophizing, however, has no lesson to teach us.

The second arrow is self-inflicted; something author and therapist, Jon Fredrickson refers to as self-torture. When we constantly remind ourselves of the facts of our painful situation or imagine an apocalyptic future, we are unable to be adaptive.

We become frozen by our own suffering. [However, we can learn to control the suffering of the second arrow when we learn to avoid rumination and catastrophizing.](#)



Don't Take the Leap

It is tempting to predict the future by gathering facts we have accumulated and mixing them into a dangerous potion of catastrophe prediction. We create the worst-case scenarios not only for ourselves but for the world. The best way to avoid this (or at least tame it) is to slow down.



Identify The Breeding Grounds

When we are exhausted, already stressed, and disconnected from our healthy coping mechanisms, we are much more likely to suffer the second arrow. In other words, right now we are sitting in the fertile muck of catastrophic thinking. As the saying goes, “water what you want to grow.” That makes it all the more important to water our self-care gardens: being intentional about getting rest, managing our stress, and staying connected to our support systems. It can also be helpful to slow down and create a mental sanctuary (both literal and figurative) where you are surrounded by calming sensory experiences (music, warm sunshine, soft pillows, or hot tea).

Skillful management of Unpleasant Emotions

We normally react to pain or difficult sensations in one of two ways:

Blocking/ Avoidance: We try to block or deny the discomfort by pushing through it through force of will, by distracting ourselves, or by self-medicating with food, alcohol or drugs. As soon as you stop “pushing through” or your distraction/medication wears off, it can come back even stronger. In cases where the discomfort is a signal indicating corrective action needs to take place, missing the signal can result in injury or disease. In addition to this, self-medicating can create many problems, including complex side effects or even addiction.

Drowning: We become overwhelmed by it, drowning in the discomfort and its associated fears, judgments, and blaming (“I can’t stand this!”, “What if this continues or gets worse?”, “How could I have been so stupid?!?” etc.). This leads to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness.



Neither of the above two strategies is very effective or satisfying and a continual reliance on them usually makes things worse than they already are. There is a middle ground, a place where you are neither pushing away difficult feelings/situations nor being consumed by them. **This “middle way” involves learning to feel the sensations or emotions, but not being swept away by them.**

Reacting with avoidance keeps us in reactivity, as we keep interpreting our sensations as threats.

By simply practicing acceptance and bringing a level of curiosity to our sensations, we are interrupting the production of stress hormones-which in itself can help reduce the discomfort or pain. A surprising and counter-intuitive result of staying with something in this way is that the discomfort often lessens, or sometimes can even disappear.



PRIMARY SUFFERING

(First arrow)

CHRONIC PAIN/ILLNESS
(in the sense of basic unpleasant sensations)

RESISTANCE

SECONDARY SUFFERING

(Second arrow)

BLOCKING

DROWNING

• Hardening against unpleasant sensations	• Feeling overwhelmed by unpleasant sensations
• Restlessness	• Exhaustion
• Inability to "stop"	• Physical inactivity leading to loss of function, weakening of muscles, etc.
• Feeling driven	• Giving up
• Addictions of all kinds. e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none">– food– cigarettes– alcohol– recreational drugs– excessive talking– excessive working	• Lack of interest, vagueness
• Being emotionally brittle and edgy	• Being emotionally dull and passive
• Anxiety	• Depression
• Anger and irritability	• Self-pity and victim mentality
• Denial	• Tendency to catastrophize and loss of perspective
• Being "in head" not "in body"	• Dominated by physical experience
• Overly controlling	• Loss of initiative <ul style="list-style-type: none">– withdrawal– isolation