

Clean Pain or Dirty Pain  
by Marlene and Bob Neufeld

When you experience an “ouch” you are most likely feeling a combination of “clean pain” and “dirty pain”. Do you know the difference? These concepts have been popularized by Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) pioneer Steven Hayes.

“Clean pain” is what we feel when something hurtful happens to us. It is inherent in life itself – we will get hurt, the things we love will be broken or lost, the people we love will die, and our own bodies will grow old (if we're lucky) and die. Clean pain generates what Sue Johnson, Emotionally Focused therapist, calls primary emotions. Primary emotions are here-and-now direct responses to situations.

"Dirty" pain is the result of our thoughts about how wrong this is, how it shouldn't have happened, how we shouldn't have done it, how it proves we -- and life -- are bad. It is self-generated and self-maintained. It is the suffering we create for ourselves in the privacy of our own mind, spinning stories about what it all means and why our pain is "different" or “worse” or “unbearable”. Johnson calls these emotions secondary emotions, the reactions to and attempts to cope with these direct responses. Secondary emotions often obscure awareness of the primary emotion. In Buddhist teaching this is called Samsara, the world of pain which we ourselves create.

Dirty pain is the hundreds of daily assaults we put ourselves through in our thoughts. Dirty pain is the anger we feel at our partner for hurting us, or the self-criticism, self-flagellation or perceived attacks. Our hurt is the clean pain.

The vast majority of our unhappiness comes from this secondary response -- not from painful reality, but from painful thoughts about reality. "Dirty pain" is so painful in part because we are not biologically designed to combat it. All the adrenaline in the world won't help you fight an imaginary dragon.

However, simply recognizing the difference between the essential pain of being human and the self-generated suffering of your thoughts is the beginning of the end of that suffering.

Recently, Marlene experienced this first hand. She was with a group of friends. One of the friends did something which hurt Marlene. She withdrew. For the rest of the day, she was caught in a cycle of “I should have...” Eventually when she realized that she was stuck in dirty pain, she was able to feel the clean pain of the hurt and move forward.

The following has been attributed to a number of people, including H.H. the Dalai Lama:  
Pain is inevitable;  
Joy is available;  
Suffering is optional -  
But you'll have to provide it for yourself.

So the next time you are feeling pain, ask yourself whether it is clean pain or dirty pain. How much of this pain is current here-and-now pain and how much is your stories about the pain? Once you drop the stories and experience the current pain, you may be surprised at how quickly it passes.

*Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help individuals and couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. Much of this article is from Michael Neill [www.geniuscatalyst.com](http://www.geniuscatalyst.com). For more information call 613-594-9248 or see [www.marleneandbob.com](http://www.marleneandbob.com).*