Lean into the pain

September 1, 2012

Original link

This post is part four of the series Raw Nerve.

When you first begin to exercise, it's somewhat painful. Not wildly painful, like touching a hot stove, but enough that if your only goal was to avoid pain, you certainly would stop doing it. But if you keep exercising… well, it just keeps getting more painful. When you're done, if you've really pushed yourself, you often feel exhausted and sore. And the next morning it's even worse.

If that was all that happened, you'd probably never do it. It's not that much fun being sore. Yet we do it anyway — because we know that, in the long run, the pain will make us stronger. Next time we'll be able to run harder and lift more before the pain starts.

And knowing this makes all the difference. Indeed, we come to see the pain as a sort of pleasure — it feels good to really push yourself, to fight through the pain and make yourself stronger. Feel the burn! It's fun to wake up sore the next morning, because you know that's just a sign that you're getting stronger.

Few people realize it, but psychological pain works the same way. Most people treat psychological pain like the hot stove — if starting to think about something scares them or stresses them out, they quickly stop thinking about it and change the subject.

The problem is that the topics that are most painful also tend to be the topics that are most important for us: they're the projects we most want to do, the relationships we care most about, the decisions that have the biggest consequences for our future, the most dangerous risks that we run. We're scared of them because we know the stakes are so high. But if we never think about them, then we can never do anything about them.

Ray Dalio writes:

> It is a fundamental law of nature that to evolve one has to push one's limits, which is painful, in order to gain strength—whether it's in the form of lifting weights, facing problems head-on, or in any other way. Nature gave us pain as a messaging device to tell us that we are approaching, or that we have exceeded, our limits in some way. At the same time, nature made the process of getting stronger require us to push our limits. Gaining strength is the adaptation process of the body and the mind to encountering one's limits, which is painful. In other words, both pain and strength typically result

> from encountering one's barriers. When we encounter pain, we are at an important juncture in our decision-making process.[1]

Yes it's painful, but the trick is to make that mental shift. To realize that the pain isn't something awful to be postponed and avoided, but a signal that you're getting stronger — something to savor and enjoy. It's what makes you better.

Pretty soon, when you start noticing something that causes you psychic pain, you'll get excited about it, not afraid. *Ooh, another chance to get stronger.* You'll seek out things you're scared of and intentionally confront them, because it's an easy way to get the great rewards of self-improvement. Dalio suggests thinking of each one as a puzzle, inside of which is embedded a beautiful gem. If you fight through the pain to solve the puzzle, you unlock it and get to keep the gem.

The trick is: when you start feeling that psychological pain coming on, don't draw back from it and cower — lean into it. Lean into the pain.

In agile software development, there's a phrase: If it hurts, do it more often.[2]

For example, imagine Jane and Joan are working on a software project together. They both have a copy of the code; Jane is making the error messages friendlier while Joan is adding a new feature. They both work on their task for days and days until it's finally done. Now they face a problem: they need to *merge* their different changes back together.

Maybe you've had this problem, either with code or with text documents: you send a draft of a report to two friends, both suggest different changes, and you have to merge all their changes back into the original document. It's incredibly annoying — and doing it with software is way worse. So people put it off. Jane thinks "you know, let me just make the thank you messages a little nicer before we merge" and Joan thinks "you know, let me add just one more feature before we merge".

They keep putting the merge off, and every time they do the task gets bigger and more painful. But they have to do it eventually. By then, the merge is so big that it takes days of painstaking work just to piece together the already-written code. It's an arduous, painful process — which makes Joan and Jane just want to put it off even longer next time.

The agile approach, however, is to do the opposite: merging hurts, so we'll do it more often. Instead of merging every couple weeks, or every couple months, we'll merge every single day, or every couple hours. Even if Jane and Joan aren't even close to finished with their work, they'll check in what they have so far (maybe with some special code deactivating it until it's finished) so they don't

end up in merge hell later on. These very small merges tend not to be painful at all, they're so easy that you hardly even notice.

The same principle shows up all across software development: from testing to releasing, your natural inclination is to put off painful things, when doing them more often actually is much easier.

And I don't think it's limited to software. I think the same principle would work even if, for some odd reason, you were required to touch a hot stove for an hour. Procrastinating and putting it off until you had no choice but to hold your hand to the stove for a full hour would end up being very painful. But if you did it in small frequent bits, just quick taps of the stove with your finger that eventually added up to an hour, it wouldn't be so bad at all. Again, the trick is not to run from the pain.

Of all the self-improvement tricks I've learned, this one was by far the most surprising — and by far the most impactful. I spent most of my life hemmed in by my talents. I knew I had strengths and weaknesses and it just seemed obvious I should find jobs that fit my strengths. It seemed crazy to take a job that probed my weaknesses.

Sure, there were somethings, over there, that I wished I was better at, but they seemed so far away. Meanwhile, there were lots of things over here that I was good at. Why not just keep doing them? Sure, I realized intellectually that I could get better at the other stuff, but it hardly seemed worth the pain of trying.

I'd learned not to shrink from hard truths, so I'd literally have this conversation with myself: "Yes, I know: if I got better at selling things to people [or whatever it was], I'd be much better off. But look at how painful I find selling: just thinking about it makes me want to run and hide! Sure, it'd be great if I could do it, but is it really worth all that pain?"

Now I realize this is a bogus argument: it's not that the pain is so bad that it makes me flee, it's that the importance of the topic triggers a fight-or-flight reaction deep in my reptile brain. If instead of thinking of it as a scary subject to avoid, I think of it as an exciting opportunity to get better, then it's no longer a cost-benefit tradeoff at all: both sides are a benefit — I get the benefits of being good at selling and the fun of getting better at something.

Do this enough times and your whole outlook on life begins to change. It's no longer a scary world, hemming you in, but an exciting one full of exciting adventures to pursue.[3]

Tackling something big like this is terrifying; it's far too much to start with. It's always better to start small. What's something you've been avoiding thinking about? It can be anything — a relationship difficulty, a problem at work,

something on your todo list you've been avoiding. Call it to mind — despite the pain it brings — and just sort of let it sit there. Acknowledge that thinking about it is painful and feel good about yourself for being able to do it anyway. Feel it becoming less painful as you force yourself to keep thinking about it. See, you're getting stronger!

OK, take a break. But when you're ready, come back to it, and start thinking of concrete things you can do about it. See how it's not as scary as you thought? See how good it feels to actually do something about it?

Next time you start feeling that feeling, that sense of pain from deep in your head that tells you to avoid a subject — ignore it. Lean into the pain instead. You'll be glad you did.

Next in this series: Confront reality

---

1. Ray Dalio, *Principles* (2001), part 2 (visited 2012-09-01). This whole section was inspired by his argument.

2. I first heard this phrase at a ThoughtWorks training. See also Martin Fowler, "FrequencyReducesDifficulty," *Bliki* (28 July 2011).

3. See, for example, Derek Sivers, "Push, push, push. Expanding your comfort zone," *sivers.org* (13 August 2012).