

## ACT and Weather: Value Clarification in Response to Snow in Boston

I am from Boston, where snow reached record levels this winter, 108.6" according to one official website. The topic of weather served as a social icebreaker for months. On the day that I am writing, almost a month into spring, remnants of this deluge are still spread around in dirty ice patches, like mammoth spines at an archeological dig.

Just a few days ago, at a social gathering with other therapists, I heard a man casually remark, "I had an awful year, but so did everyone else." Having just returned from Vermont, where the same snow remains four feet deep on ski slopes, promising a dynamite spring season, I objected internally. Then, I wondered: what makes my internal weather so different from his?

I was raised in Russia, in a region where summers came in intense two-month interludes. Through my early years, I made my way to school each morning through narrow walkways covered in packed snow. We owned hockey sticks, but it was too cold for skating, except occasionally, because of a potential frostbite. So, is my attitude toward this snow season effected by this early learning environment?

In the past, there were years when I resented New England winters. I recall dreading the drive home from work in March, when the road would wind past brown monotonous hills. Snow was long gone, and the green was weeks away. But, this year, I am yet to experience similar dread. So, is it because I am happier these days with my home life and work life and physical environment? Is my overall emotional state coloring my perception of the weather?

In my opinion, most psychology opinions are equivocal and multi-dimensional. Definitely, at any moment, my attitude is influenced by a combination of prior experiences and current mood. And, in my belief, there are other one important influences. According to research that lays the foundation of Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), a person's experience of vitality is affected by commitment to personal values. A value list is generated in a response to a question, "What kind of a person do you want to be? A year from now? Five years from now? As you approach the end of your life span?" Answers are individual, and they often they include, "success," "love," "security," "belonging" or "respect."

Back to weather: weeks ago, I found myself sitting in a parking lot, in a row of a handful of other cars, facing a cross-country ski center. My windshield wipers were just managing to keep glass clear of a steady downpour. Through my rear view mirror, I could see that the same rain was covering my hatch window with a coat of ice. It was that magic combination of water in the skies and icy slash on the ground. Still, the ski center website insisted that all trails were open.

It was a moment that, in ACT, we call "a choice point." I could drive home. I could pay \$14 and ski. At some moment, I had to shut off the engine.

I solved this dilemma by projecting myself forward. How would I look at myself a few hours from now, having skied and returned home, or having returned home dry? In ACT, we call such technique "perspective taking." Specifically, I remembered asking myself, "What personal value would I manifest by either staying or leaving." At that moment, I was aware of the value of "self-care." I always feel better after spending time

battling the outdoors. And, I am a better father, therapist and neighbor, for weeks after. For me, staying and getting wet was a move toward self-care.

And so, I stayed and, as soon as I found myself under tree canopy, I was protected from the rain. It turned out a fun, challenging ski day, away from the crowds.

I affiliate myself with ACT because it teaches specific skills that allow resolution of such choice points. The teaching of skills to clients is also translating into my personal life. Increasingly, I feel capable of resolving personal behavioral dilemmas with greater efficiency. So, this record snow season, I have discovered that clarification of values and commitment to values brought about much brighter weather, inside and out. As I had spent time intermittently waiting out the storms and skiing and battling the outdoors, I was periodically reminded of an article in the Atlantic, back in 2012, “How to be cold? – cold is an attitude – cold is from the inside.”