

THE KNOWLEDGE-ACTION FAULT LINE: A COMMON DILEMMA IN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND IN LIFE

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Many people have heard the statement, “ Knowledge is power,” and most would probably agree. Indeed, we attend twelve years of schooling and then, for some people, another four years of college attempting to acquire as much knowledge as possible. But, what do people do with all this knowledge? I am sorry to report; some people do very little with what they learn. All types of “unapplied knowledge” seem to fall surreptitiously into the gap I’ll be describing in this article.

Useless Knowledge

Over thirty years as a psychologist, I’ve noticed this strange phenomena: People accumulate knowledge, understanding, or insight, yet they don’t always turn that valuable information into daily action in order to truly benefit or improve the quality of their lives. It appears that a lot of what people learn falls through the cracks and never gets put into practical application. In short, people don’t always benefit from the good ideas they’ve acquired. I believe this gap between understanding and doing is not unique to the therapy arena. I believe it is a universal problem that affects people of all ages, in all aspects of life, both personally and professionally.

As a therapist, I’ve treated people who appear curious to understand the “*why*’s:” why they’ve become depressed; why they’ve developed a particular phobia; why they have a fear of committing in relationships; why they’ve never been able to hold down a job; etc. Clients clearly hold the answers to “Why questions” as precious and valuable. They’ll tolerate painfully digging into experiences of childhood abuse, parental neglect, sibling rivalry, etc., supposedly, to understand why they are like they are so they can change and become symptom free or more functional in their lives.

For many years, I naturally presumed that clients would take their newly discovered insights and use them to create a better life. Yet, I’ve repeatedly observed people failing to use their newfound knowledge. Instead, I’ve heard common laments such as, “Now I understand why I’m always seeking other people’s approval, but I just can’t stop.” Sure they can...but they don’t take the next step and put into action, what they’ve learned already. Instead, they want to keep exploring *other reasons why* they engage in this nonproductive behavior that makes them feel worthless. This classic problem has historically been described as a “mind-body split.”

Reasons for this gap between knowing and doing

This article presents what I’ve observed about the factors that contribute to this surprising knowing-action gap and why and how some people are more successful than others in implementing their knowledge for immediate change or gain.

What has created this problematic fault line between what people know and what people do? Let’s be clear. Some people seem better at turning knowledge into action than other people. Perhaps, they have more skills, less personality problems, greater tolerance for change (required in doing new things), fewer deficiencies, less overall fear, etc. Maybe they’ve had better role models (i.e. parents who taught by example and encouraged their children to do things alongside them without being overly concerned about failing, etc.). Maybe they’ve had better mentors and coaches who emphasized getting down and dirty

in life, rather than watching from the sidelines. In short, while individual differences exist, sometimes the life opportunities that people have had did not prepare them to view life as a constant “laboratory” where hands-on experience is presented as the pathway to wisdom. When people have knowledge, but don’t apply it, they unwittingly forego moving to the next stage of transforming their understanding into true wisdom.

To Do or not to do: that is the question

In addition to individual differences and differing life experiences, there are some specific things that people do or don’t do that cause them to fall into the knowledge-action fault line. Let’s explore a few of these.

Sometimes, people believe that the map is the location! In other words, they are satisfied with traveling in their fantasy via a representational map, rather than actually getting into a car or airplane and experiencing the real terrain symbolized by the map. Satisfied with the map (or similarly, the menu versus the food) results in complacency where real doing is not even considered. I suspect “fear” keeps many people prisoners to the mistaken idea that knowing something is just as good as being able to really apply that knowledge in some practical way.

Other people become stuck in contemplation and mentally obsess about their knowledge without having to experience what their knowledge is all about, first hand. For instance, you could set out to learn about racecar driving and read all the specialty car magazines available, but if you never actually drive a racecar, you’ll never really understand what you’ve studied. *We learn through doing*, not just reading about something. If reading becomes the focus, the “doing” step in learning becomes lost in the fault line and behavioral action dies on the drawing board.

When therapy holds an individual accountable to make changes in the day-to-day world, the barriers described above can be overcome. Most of us learn more by hands on doing than by listening or reading about something. In fact, we only retain about 10% of what we hear. *We retain about 90% of what we hear, observe, and do!* Through making attempts to do something new, we gain first hand experience, as well as learn a lot through our various failures.

Some people naturally seem to learn early in life that in order to master something new, they have to go ahead and just try it. For instance, I remember being told how to ride a bike (keep your balance, hold on with both hands, keep peddling, etc.), but until I actually did it a few times, I didn’t have a clue what my parents were talking about! Yes, I ended up with skinned knees, but I also learned how to ride my bike after a few spills. If I didn’t risk trying to ride that bike, knowing what to do would have been useless information.

Personal Experience is Key

Another key to remember is this---Feedback through one’s own personal experience is more valuable than hearing about other people’s experiences. There is no escaping the obvious: If we don’t learn how to bridge the fault line between knowledge gained through reading or listening or mulling over something and implementing that knowledge into real action, we won’t progress or change. When we take actions suggested by our knowledge, we generate our own experiences that we can subsequently learn from, too. Hence, our new knowledge occurs as a result of our own behavioral performance and

practice. The problematic fault line between what you know and what you do is automatically eliminated when your knowledge has been acquired through doing! Sociologists describe this type of knowledge gained as a result of doing, "working knowledge." This is the best quality of understanding that is obtained from direct experience. Of course, fear is the reason many people never attempt to try new things and hence, miss out on integrating their mind (knowledge) and body (action/doing).

I'm hoping that this article will prompt you to think about personal areas in your life where you've felt stymied. Next, ask yourself if you've been stuck because you've refused to attempt or implement various solutions you've heard about or been told to do? If the answer is "yes," commit to push yourself or hire a coach to push you to put into practice what you already know. **Sometimes people don't need more exotic, creative solutions to solve their problems. They oftentimes just need to apply what they've already been told to do!**

Author and organizational guru, Jack Canfield, says, "There are only three ways to grow in life:

- to stop doing what you've been doing that doesn't work;
- to start doing more of what you know that does work;
- and to try doing things that you've never done before and see if they work."

You'll notice that all his advice includes the crucial verb, "do."

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