

## CASE STUDY AND COGNITIVE SCHEMA OF SERENITY PRAYER: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

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*“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference”.*

Serenity prayer is widely known as psychotherapeutic instrument. Besides the great role it plays in addiction recovery in 12 steps program (1), many authors mark the effectiveness of usage of its main principles when dealing with different psychological and emotional problems and life situations. Alan Bodnar notes that “it is readily apparent to psychologists that the ideas expressed in the serenity prayer are consistent with a key tenet of cognitive behavior therapy” (2). Dr. John W Reich writes in his book “Mastering Your Self, Mastering Your World: Living by The Serenity Prayer” (3), that “the key employing a reconstituted Serenity Prayer is to examine (1) the nature of the client’s personal control beliefs, and perceptions in the context of (2) examining the dynamics of the events in that person’s life, optimizing the interactions of beliefs, and events’ properties” (4). Art therapist Christine Matteson states that “simple and uncomplicated Serenity Prayer is the substructure for many of the so called “third wave” psychological behavioral theories - ACT or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is one of these, along with DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) and MBSR (Mindfulness based stress reduction)” (5). ACT, to a large extent, is advanced and in-depth variant of usage of categories of serenity, acceptance, contemplation and readiness to changes, which are mentioned in or presumed by prayer. Lisa T. Perry mentions that “basic components of this well-known prayer can also be used as a means for Stress Management” (6). Andreas Dick-Niederhauser perceives such curative processes, that develop when using Prayer, as attainment of much valued goals, letting go of old or harmful goals and values and making room for more authentic needs, generating more realistic interpretations, analysis of life plan relate to such therapeutic techniques as rational-emotive therapy, Adlerian therapy or behavior modification (7). In proposed paper, religious aspect of prayer is not detailed, it is evaluated mostly as some kind of manual on development and improvement of three categories: ability to accept the situation, possibility of change of current and life-long circumstances and facts and opportunity to make a choice. Experience of usage of Serenity prayer in work with patient with anxiety disorder is described and some kind of cognitive schema of prayer that was composed following this work is presented.

*Case: Elena (name is changed – I.Z.), 46 years old woman; psychiatrist’s conclusion – panic disorder with agoraphobia (F40.0). Elena complained on periodical anxiety episodes mostly when leaving home, using public transportation (especially subway), visiting crowded places. Anxiety manifests itself as acute feeling of fear with apprehension of something terrible that is to happen (Elena fails to clarify what exactly may occur, in any case, it is not exactly fear of death), accompanied with sweating, palpitation, lack of air (“it is not shortness of breath, I know how it looks like”), hands’ tremor et al. At this moment, strong desire to run away or hide to “some kind of safe place” occurs, and at the same time “feeling of some kind of tetanus arises, it seems to me that I cannot move, though I know that I can”. Attacks last for 10-30 minutes and cease spontaneously, as suddenly as they begin, but feeling of “vague inner disturbance” can keep for*

*a long time after attack has ended. During the interview, Elena noted that sometimes she begins to feel undefined anxiety (“pre-fear”, as she called it), at home, some time before moving outside and facing potentially harmful situation. Sometimes the situation is limited to this “pre-fear”, and travelling can be rather safe, but even in this case some time is needed for elimination of this unpleasant feeling after coming home. Sometimes this feeling of apprehension of anxiety is so strong that Elena cannot leave home. As a result, feelings of dissatisfaction and guilt add to this vague disturbance feeling. Elena addressed to day psychiatric hospital, because it became impossible to ignore or neglect panic episodes, which began to prevent normal daily functioning. Somatic pathology is excluded by physician. Elena receives tranquilizers and antidepressant drugs prescribed by psychiatrist, addressed for psychotherapeutic support following doctor’s recommendation.*

It was demonstrated to Elena that the model of avoidance of potentially stressful situation does not work in her case. I.e., in the case of “staying at home” anxiety does not cease, while other negative feelings are being added to it. At the same time it is possible to say that facing similar situations does not definitely cause panic episode. It should also be noted that anticipation of anxiety episode often promotes its manifestation, and even if panic did not occur, turns out to be a long-term destabilizing factor itself.

Therapist: Let us see and evaluate what we can do in response to this situation for the time being. Couldn’t you tell me please, do you feel able to prevent the manifestation of anxiety episode?

Elena: No. I would be happy to do it, but I cannot.

Therapist: That’s it. I cannot say that I fully agree with this, but let us take it as a reality for the time being. Then tell me, please, can you say exactly, where and in what situation are you feeling afraid? In other words, can you more or less exactly predict the occurrence of anxiety?

Elena: (pause) only in general, in situations I told you about, but it may be in many ways.

Therapist: Couldn’t you describe in what ways can it take place?

Elena: Sometimes it occurs in crowded places, sometimes when I’m walking down the street, and it also may happen just at the entrance of my house. I do not see a clear pattern here.

Therapist: I see. Does it happen, that fear does not occur in all these situations?

Elena: (pause) yes, sometimes I don’t feel anxiety.

Therapist: So, there is nonzero probability that everything may be ok in these situations?

Elena: (smiling) yes, it seems so.

Therapist: Very well. So, nowadays, not the fear itself is inevitable in this situations (such cases happen in therapist ‘practice), but its possible emergence and inability to forecast it – did I understand you correctly?

Elena: I would say that it is feeling of helplessness that is inevitable in the case of possible anxiety emergence, but, in general, yes, it is so.

Therapist: Good. Then, tell me please, when anxiety episode ended\*, or, let us say in other words, when you return home after stories you're speaking about, how do you feel? (\* *I made a mistake here, attracting excessive client's attention to symptom, not to situation in general. That prevents decentralization of symptom in value-oriented approach (8).*)

Elena: Usually I feel safe and good. But if I had expected\*\* for beginning of panic attack before leaving home I need some time to recover. (\*\* *Important moment – Elena used the word “expectation” instead of “apprehension”, as she said before. “Expectation” owns quite different emotional charge and much lesser degree of inevitability. Such moments are to be noted and used.*)

Therapist: Elena, couldn't you tell me please, do you have the experience of expectation of something pleasant what possibly can take place?

Elena: (smiling) yes, sure, meeting my children at home after work, for example.

Therapist: How often do you see them?

Elena: Almost every day.

Therapist: If you know, when leaving the home, that you will see your children and feel good this evening, and you know you will see them anyway, couldn't it be possible for you to try to tune not on things that may happen (and may not happen) on your way, but on this pleasant thing that you will definitely feel when you will return home? Maybe you can try it?

Elena: (pause) Yes, maybe.

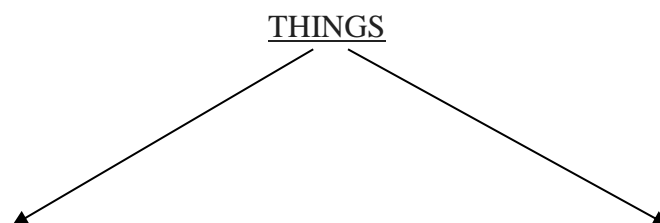
Therapist: Tell me please, do you know Serenity prayer (*I did not plan to speak about prayer; it just came into my head at the moment – I.Z.*)?

Elena: I don't remember.

Therapist: It sounds as (*Serenity Prayer-I.Z.*). I do not ask you about your religion and faith; let us simply look at this prayer as at some kind of manual. So, there are some things that you can change, while the others are unchangeable at the moment. As far as I can see, you can not change your fear now...

Elena: (quickly) I cannot predict it.

Therapist: Well. You cannot control the possibility of appearance of anxiety episode. You cannot change the fact, that “fear may happen” (I underline – not the fact that “I will feel panic”, but the fact that “I MAY feel panic” – and may not, by the way). Try to accept this fact as calmly as you can – like the fact that rain may fall at any time. And is there anything that CAN be changed in your situation? Why cannot we try to change what you called “expectation of anxiety”, trying to replace it with expectation of positive feeling in the result of seeing your children a little later? It is essential to learn the difference between this two moments (here we need what is called “wisdom” in the terms of prayer).



CHANGEABLE

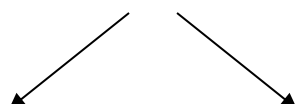
Expectation

UNCHANGABLE

Fear episode

Let's go further: you told me, that anxiety episode may happen or not happen in similar situations. So, emergence of anxiety episode itself in concrete situation is not inevitable. It lets us the opportunity to define anxiety episode in some situations as non-controllable, but possible, not necessary event.

UNCHANGABLE THINGS



INEVITABLE (?)

POSSIBLE (Fear episode)

It should be noted, Elena, that it was you who made this very important step during our interview when you changed category of “fear” to “possibility of fear” (Elena smiles).

From the other hand, “expectation of anxiety” is something that you can try to change, transferring the focus of expectation to another (pleasant) event or time period (actually, replacing the goal to be achieved by more positive – and, besides, no less probable one).

It is meeting your children in your case. In future, it may become regular and habitual, and, in this case, at least one of the factors that promote and strengthen the anxiety will disappear:

CHANGEABLE THINGS

*Expectation of anxiety*



CHANGE

*“Positive” expectation*



ADAPTATION

Or it is possible to refuse from expectations of concrete result in this or that situation, calmly accepting the consequences of your responsible actions and events taking place:

CHANGEABLE THINGS



DENIAL

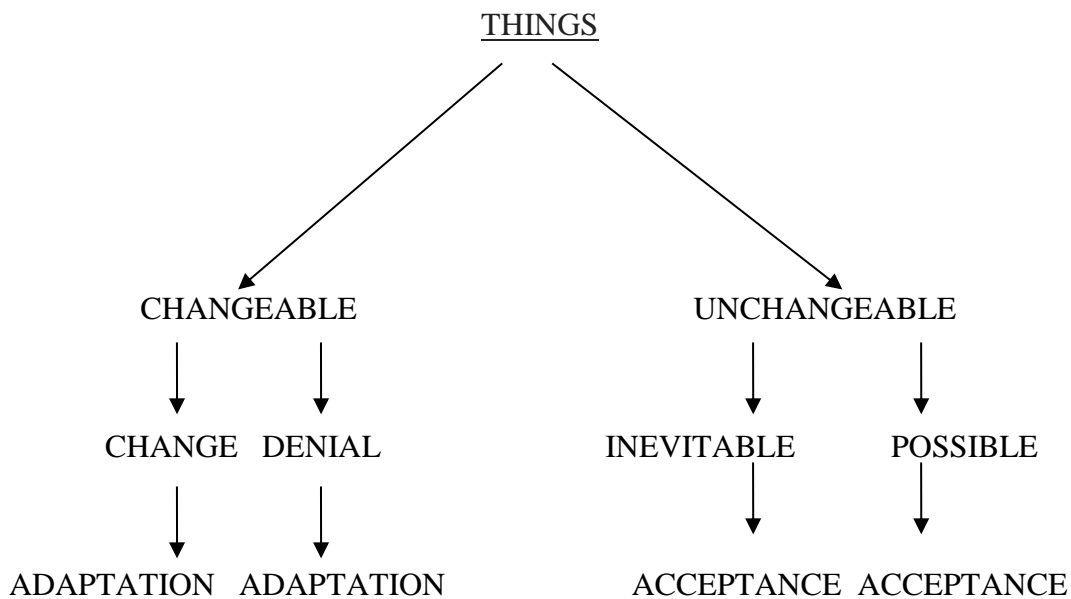


## ADAPTATION

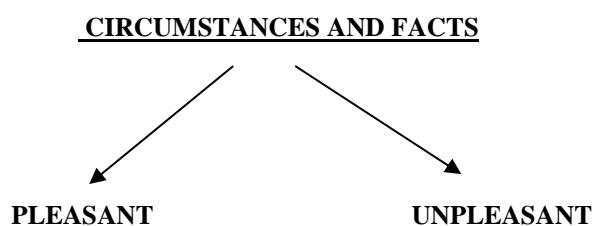
Elena: And what should I do in the moment of panic, in this very second? I feel completely helpless at this time and don't know what to do.

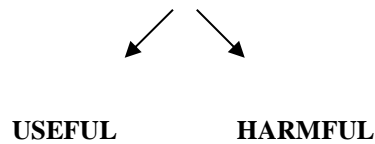
*I told Elena about some instruments of body-oriented psychotherapy, breathing and relaxation techniques that are to help to maintain more or less stable somatic status and, therefore, manage with anxiety episode to some extent. In future, when some of these exercises proved their efficacy in Elena's case, it helped to transfer the feeling of fear from the category of unchangeable things to category of changeable. I will tell about it later.*

Our interview was finished at this point, and I looked at the scheme that was drawn in the process of talk to Elena. It had the following shape:



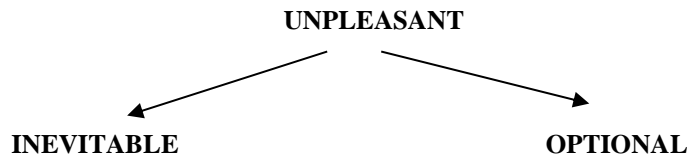
Schema seemed to be rather logical, but incomplete. First of all, I decided to replace neutral word “things” with “Circumstances and facts”, presuming that “circumstances” mostly relay to surrounding world and environment, taking place without active participation of a person, while “facts” can concern person’s inner space too. Then, distinction to “changeable” and “unchangeable” is not always obvious to the person (if it was so, Serenity prayer would not be needed), and, in any case not the primary one. All the scope of life events and facts is much more likely to be perceived as useful or harmful for the person. But exact use or harm of this or that fact sometimes cannot be evaluated correctly, at least immediately, so I decided to divide all circumstances and facts into Pleasant and Unpleasant (pleasant events may be harmful too), as it is the primary choice of any living subject:





Pleasant circumstances and facts can be divided into useful and harmful. **Pleasant useful** category is not the origin of problems and difficulties and is the object of keeping and development. **Pleasant harmful** essences, on the contrary, can be “cunning, baffling, powerful” (9) and should be dealt with thoroughly. Tasteful food that causes allergic dermatitis can be mentioned as the easily manageable example of this category. Other examples are listed below.

**Unpleasant events**, in principle, can also be divided into useful and harmful, but the reason to accept useful things that are not pleasant (taking bitter mixture, for example, or paying high taxes) is so obvious that usually does not cause difficulties, so I decided not to add this classification into the schema. Let us turn to dealing with different types of unpleasant circumstances and facts. Using the Serenity prayer words, **Wisdom to know the difference** is needed to define to what extent these negative essences are inevitable. Following it, we can divide unpleasant events to inevitable and Non-obligatory, or Optional.



Does inevitability of fact or event mean that it cannot be changed? No. Absolutely no. Of course (unfortunately), there are some hard situations that cannot be avoided, changed, decided or rescued from. All the attempts to “solve” such a problem or fight with it are *useless and dangerous*.

*What will help me, Sky and Earth?*

*Death.*

*What will rescue me from jail?*

*Betrayal.*

*What will pacify my sadness?*

*Madness.*

*So, my prudence tells: ‘It’s senseless*

*To attempt to cure your feeling,*

*If betrayal, death and madness*

*Are three origins of healing”.*

(Don Quixote, Part 1, Chapter XXVII) *(Translated by me– I.Z.)*

Miguel Cervantes wrote these verses more than three centuries before the Serenity Prayer appeared, but they have not lost their relevance. Such situations, like fatal diagnosis of the beloved one, can be accepted only, and Serenity prayer teaches to do it. From the other hand,

there are many circumstances and facts, that, though being inevitable and irreversible can nevertheless be changed. Scheduled trial is inevitable but not obligatory will be ended with conviction, if defendant will thoroughly and accurately prepare for it. Upcoming depressive episode of BAR can be inevitable, but patient can be prepared for it and bear it less traumatically and more comfortably than the previous one. Person needs **courage to change what he can** to prevent the negative consequences of upcoming unpleasant event and **serenity to accept the results of it**.

No let us turn to those unpleasant circumstances and facts that are not inevitable. Some of them may also be changed (relations, that become painful, for example), while other are unchangeable (communication with unpleasant neighbours, for instance). And here is the time for the person to use **Wisdom** from the prayer and ask him or herself – **Do I need these things? Are they necessary for me?** If the answer is “yes” and situation itself is unchangeable (for example, person cannot avoid the communication with undesirable person at work and doesn’t want to change the job because of it) he/she **is to accept the unpleasant fact as is and adapt to situation in accordance with new attitude formed in the result of acceptance**. If the circumstances and facts are changeable (painful and complicated relations in couple, that are the subject of family therapy, for example), than person is to ask for **courage to change the things that can be changed**.

If the answer is “no”, than the most logic and clear way (though not always the most simple – that’s what **courage** is for) is to **deny it** and **look for something new**. Elena, by the way, managed to change her attention to panic episodes and learned to deal with them after she recognized that fear attacks are a) not inevitable and b) can be softened and even prevented by corresponding self-therapy work. So, there is one more important thing that should be noted – circumstances and facts **can move from one category to another** in the process of therapy and re-evaluation.

So, final cognitive schema that was written looks like the following:

<schema in album format>

Here are some examples of circumstances and facts that fall in different categories (*it is my own interpretation; each may add his/her own examples – I.Z.*):

**PLEASANT - HARMFUL - UNCHANGEABLE:  
DRUNKENNESS**

**PLEASANT - HARMFUL - CHANGEABLE:  
ADULTERY; GAME ON TOTALIZER; JUNK FOOD; NIGHT SOCIAL NETWORKS SURFING;  
ASPIRATION TO SPOIL ANOTHER PEOPLE’S MOOD**

**UNPLEASANT- INEVITABLE - UNCHANGEABLE:  
LOSS OR HEAVY ILLNESS OF THE CLOSE PERSON; ADDICTION;**

**UNPLEASANT - INEVITABLE - CHANGEABLE:  
NEXT PHASE OF DISEASE; FORTHCOMING TRIAL; STRESSED SITUATION AT WORK;  
ACCOMMODATION ON ONE TERRITORY WITH A CONFLICT PERSON;**

**UNPLEASANT- OPTIONAL - UNCHANGEABLE:  
COMMUNICATION WITH UNPLEASANT PEOPLE; DESIRE TO GET A SYMPATHY FROM NON-  
INTERESTED PERSON**

**UNPLEASANT - OPTIONAL - CHANGEABLE:  
PAINFUL RELATIONS; ANXIETY EPISODE**

I want to conclude this paper with the citation from Second Edition of “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” by S.C.Hayes, K.D. Strosahl and Kelly G.Wilson:

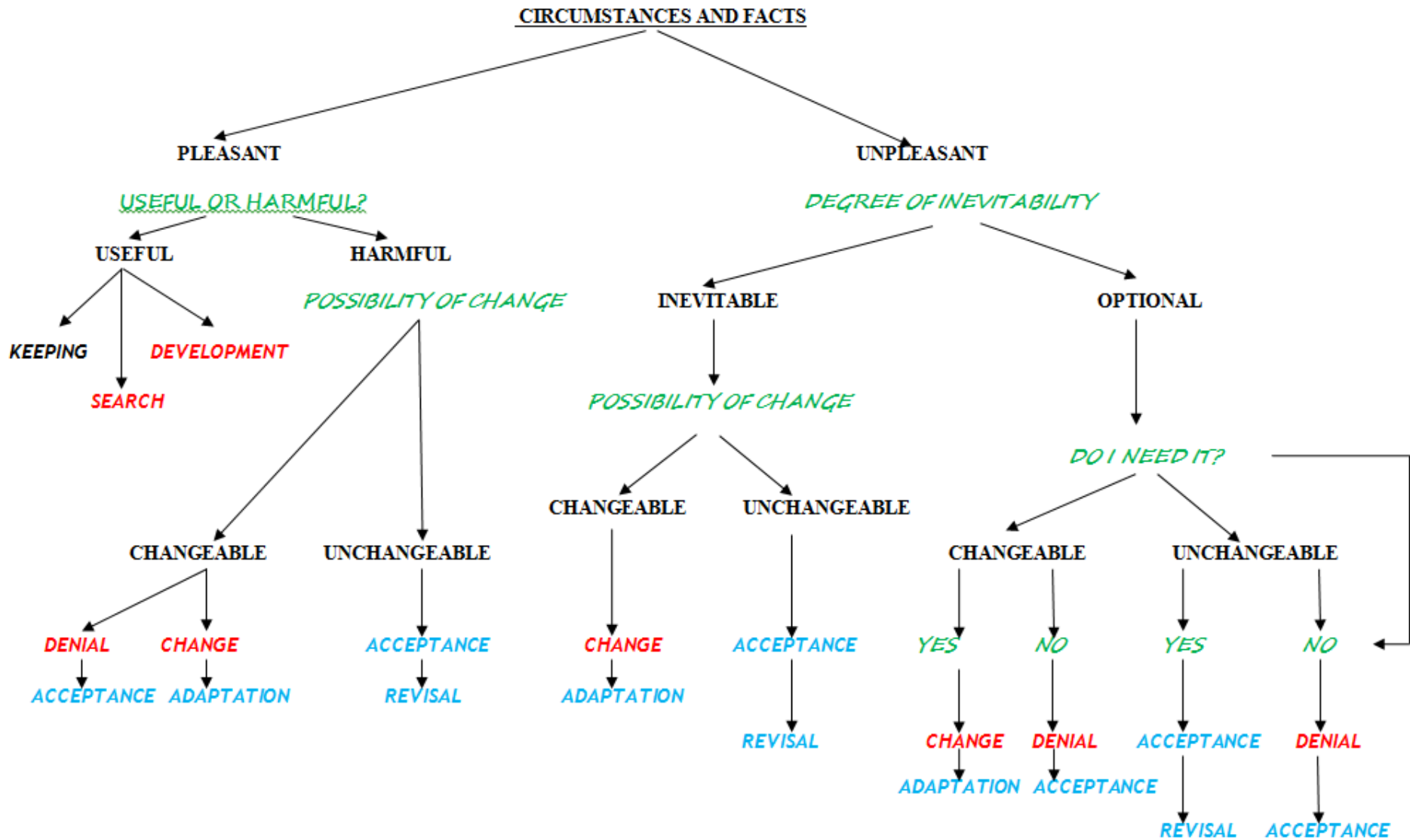
“The reason this simple prayer is so widely known is that it addresses a basic conundrum of our daily existence. What do we do when life delivers us the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? <...> How to proceed in the face of such pain in an important question that each of us faces over and over in a process of pursuing a vital life. This prayer says it takes a certain kind of “wisdom” to live life well. We must learn what can be controlled and what can’t and then redirect our energy accordingly. <...> It takes courage to exercise control when we can because this too can create distressful life content. So, it takes both wisdom and courage to live a vital life...” (9).

### **References:**

- 1) **Living Sober - Some methods A.A. members have used for not drinking, chapter 7 “Using the serenity prayer”** <https://sites.google.com/site/aspirtualrecovery/literature-pages/living-sober/using-the-serenity-prayer>
- 2) **Serenity prayer for psychologists – Alan Bodnar, PhD, Worcester State Hospital** <http://www.nepsy.com/articles/columnists/serenity-prayer-for-psychologists/>
- 3) **“Mastering Your Self, Mastering Your World: Living by The Serenity Prayer” – John William Reich, 2015** [https://www.amazon.com/Mastering-Your-Self-World-Serenity/dp/1782797270/ref=as\\_at?creativeASIN=1782797270&linkCode=w61&imprToken=20-IJIIWRsIg7.f27RZ53A&slotNum=1](https://www.amazon.com/Mastering-Your-Self-World-Serenity/dp/1782797270/ref=as_at?creativeASIN=1782797270&linkCode=w61&imprToken=20-IJIIWRsIg7.f27RZ53A&slotNum=1)
- 4) **“The Serenity Prayer: It’s not just for AA” - John William Reich,** <https://pro.psychcentral.com/the-serenity-prayer-its-not-just-for-aa/>
- 5) **The Serenity Prayer in Action! – Christine Matteson,** <https://creatingyourhealth.org/the-serenity-prayer-in-action/>
- 6) **Stress Management and the Serenity Prayer – Lisa T.Perry** <https://lperryipc.com/2016/07/stress-management-serenity-prayer/>
- 7) **Therapeutic change and the Experience of Joy: Toward a Theory of Curative Processes - Andreas Dick-Niederhauser,** [http://www.andreasdick.ch/curative\\_processes.pdf](http://www.andreasdick.ch/curative_processes.pdf)
- 8) **Anticipative reflection of reality: implementation of value-oriented approach to psychotherapy of anxiety – Ilya Zakharov, MBACP, 2018“**
- 9) **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” - S.C.Hayes, K.D. Strosahl and Kelly G.Wilson; second edition, 2016** <https://www.guilford.com/books/Acceptance-and-Commitment-Therapy/Hayes-Strosahl-Wilson/9781462528943>

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**BRIEF SERENITY PRAYER MANUAL (GRANT ME THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT THE THINGS I CAN NOT CHANGE, COURAGE TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN AND WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE)**

It should be noted that in the process of therapy and re-evaluation circumstances and facts can move from one category to another