



“It is what it is” speaks to life’s unchangeable truths, a quiet surrender to what cannot be altered or undone. It is an acceptance as deep as the earth, steadying us in the face of the unknown and inviting us to release our need to control or resist. This phrase carries the wisdom of resilience—a reminder that peace often lies not in fighting reality but in embracing it as it stands.

Chapter 13: Acceptance - It Is What It Is

“It is what it is” has become a common way of expressing acceptance when things are unplanned. From small frustrations to major life challenges, it acknowledges reality without getting trapped in resistance. I used this phrase often after Hurricane Sandy devastated my New Jersey beach home. Sorting through the wreckage, I’d say, “It is what it is.” It wasn’t just a line but a way of processing what had happened and finding a path forward.



The hurricane destroyed years of work and memories. Standing among the wreckage, I had two choices: resist what had happened or accept it. Saying “It is what it is” wasn’t about denying the loss or the pain—it was about acknowledging the reality and focusing on what I could control next. Acceptance didn’t mean ignoring the hurt; it meant choosing not to expend energy on what couldn’t be undone and directing that energy instead toward what could be rebuilt.

Today, I keep a sign of the expression in my office as a reminder of the power of acceptance. Incidentally, the phrase first appeared in American writing in the 1940s when a rancher described the challenges of farming tough, unforgiving land, saying, “The land is what it is.”

This sentiment reflects a long-standing philosophy of acceptance, notably in Stoicism, where thinkers like Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus emphasized that while we cannot control the world around us, we can control our response to it. As Epictetus said, “There is only one way to happiness, and that is to stop worrying about things beyond our control.” This is the heart of “It is what it is”—a reminder to let go of what we cannot change and focus on managing what remains.

Acceptance vs. Resignation

There is an essential distinction between acceptance and resignation. Acceptance is active—acknowledging reality and choosing to move forward. Resignation, however, is passive, a feeling of giving up. When we say “It is what it is” from a place of acceptance, we free ourselves from frustration and turn our attention to what we can control. However, when we say it with resignation, the phrase can make us feel powerless and deflated rather than empowered.

Acceptance in Daily Life

We often find ourselves in situations where things don’t go according to plan. Maybe it’s a job loss, a relationship ending, or an unexpected health issue. In these moments, the inclination to resist is strong. We long to rewrite the past or cling to the way things were. But resistance is exhausting, like swimming upstream against a powerful current. We expend all our energy fighting, only to be frustrated and worn out.



Acceptance, by contrast, is like flowing with the current. It allows us to conserve energy and focus on what we can control, moving forward with greater peace. In my life, I've seen people become trapped in anger and bitterness because they resisted change, clinging to what could have been instead of embracing what is. Meanwhile, those who accepted their circumstances, painful though they might be, found a way to move forward calmly and clearly.

Learning from the Stoics

The Stoics often used metaphors to communicate their philosophy, and one metaphor that resonates deeply with me is that of the gardener. As someone who spends hours in my greenhouse, I can relate to the notion that while we can plant and nurture, we cannot control every



aspect of growth. The weather, pests, or even unforeseen circumstances may affect the garden, but the gardener accepts this, continuing to nurture what they can.

The approach of “It is what it is” works much the same way. We make plans and invest effort, yet life doesn’t always follow our script. Just like a gardener must work with nature’s unpredictability, we must also learn to work with life’s uncertainties, accepting what is beyond our control while focusing on what we can nurture.

The Stoic view of acceptance doesn’t mean passivity or surrender. Rather, it’s about cultivating an attitude of resilience, understanding that while we may not control every outcome, we can choose how to respond. Acceptance becomes a tool for emotional freedom, releasing us from the grip of frustration and allowing us to focus on the present moment.

Accepting Reality

Acceptance doesn't mean inaction. It means understanding what we can't change while choosing to act where we can. After Hurricane Sandy, I accepted the damage but didn't sit in the rubble feeling defeated. I chose to rebuild, taking one step at a time, balancing acceptance with purposeful action. In relationships, work, and personal challenges, this balance is key. Acceptance grounds us, while action propels us forward, helping us to find meaning and purpose in difficult circumstances.



Accepting reality doesn't mean giving up on change. On the contrary, it often gives us a clearer view of the path forward. By facing what we can't alter, we free up mental and emotional space to consider what we can influence. Acceptance doesn't close doors—it opens possibilities, enabling us to act from a place of clarity rather than frustration.



Freedom Not Surrender

At first, “It is what it is” might sound like a surrender phrase, but it’s about freedom. It frees us from the relentless pursuit of control, from the stress of trying to force life to fit our expectations. When we embrace “It is what it is,” we open ourselves to the present, facing reality directly without the burden of unrealistic hopes or illusions.

This acceptance doesn’t mean that we stop hoping or dreaming. It means we cultivate a mindset that can adapt and adjust as life unfolds. We’re not locked into one version of happiness or success. Like a gardener nurturing a struggling plant, we don’t give up hope—we learn to accept and work with what is, finding beauty and purpose in each stage.

Acceptance as a Tool

Getting serious about “It is what it is” brings an inner peace that is hard to achieve when we constantly resist reality. Instead of wasting energy on “what if” or “if only,” we focus on the present moment, directing our attention toward what truly matters. This perspective doesn’t just bring calm; it also helps us become more resilient and able to handle life’s challenges without being overwhelmed.

When we fully accept reality, we are better equipped to deal with whatever comes our way. This mindset can be transformative, enabling us to find peace even in difficult circumstances. Acceptance becomes a compass, guiding us away from bitterness and toward clarity, compassion, and growth.

Life Philosophy

“It is what it is” has grown beyond a catchphrase for me; it’s become a way of life. In each challenge, large or small, I remind myself of this truth. Acceptance doesn’t eliminate pain or difficulty but changes our relationship with them. Rather than seeing challenges as obstacles, we see them as opportunities to practice resilience and adaptability.

This philosophy of acceptance also teaches us to find contentment in the present. When we’re constantly striving to change what is, we overlook the value of what we have. Embracing “It is what it is” helps us appreciate life as it unfolds, finding gratitude in the small moments and meaning in each journey step.