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It is common for many people to react to adversity in ways that accelerate or exacerbate a loss of control or a feeling of paralysis. In stressful situations, some people’s behavior returns to normal quickly while other’s remain out of control. Which behavior do you exhibit? How do you respond to the irritations of everyday life such as delays, interruptions, disappointments, feelings of rejection or betrayal, broken appointments, untimely phone calls, bad weather, traffic jams, wrong takeout orders, and deadlines? Your typical responses are a fairly accurate predictor of your psychological and physical health—more so than your reactions to bigger pressures of life like marriage, parenting, divorce, financial worries, job changes, final exams, illnesses, or deaths of friends and relatives.

All of us occasionally slip up in our reactions to daily irritations. We sometimes get mad at things we should just let go or ignore. And it is very difficult, at times, to stay calm in a pressure-packed situation. The difference between healthy and unhealthy, though, rests in our ability to return to normal behavior as quickly as possible.

Years ago I learned quite a bit from one of my mentors, Robert Cooper, about how to keep my cool and stay calm during life’s daily challenges. In his book *The Other 90%* he reveals a practical five-step strategy called the *Instant Calming Sequence (ICS)* that has received much praise from scientists and performance psychologists for being

effective in its application. I tried it and it really does work. Here’s the process:

ICS Step 1: Continue breathing. Your breathing is vital as a natural stimulus to the inner breathing of the 100 trillion cells in your body that enable you to produce biological energy, and in particular, calm energy. When you get tense, your breathing becomes short and intermittent. These short breaths propel you to feelings of anxiety, panic, anger, frustration, faulty reactions, and a general loss of control. So when pressures rise it is important for you to keep your breathing going smooth and steady without interruption.

ICS Step 2: Lighten your eyes. The muscles of the face not only react to our mood, they help set it. When the face or jaw are tense, within moments we feel increasingly tense throughout the body. Easing off on the intensity in your eyes and, at the same time, maintaining a neutral or slightly positive facial expression can make a big difference during stressful situations.

ICS Step 3: Release tension. It starts with maintaining a good posture and then doing a body-wide release of tension. Don’t slouch—try to keep balance in your body. Then perform a split-second tension check by scanning all of your muscles in one fast sweep of your mind—from your scalp, jaw, tongue, and face to your fingertips and toes—to locate unnecessary tension. At the same time, flash a mental “wave of relaxation” through your body as if you’re standing under a waterfall that sweeps away all unnecessary tension.

ICS Step 4: Notice uniqueness. The fastest way to get trapped in old patterns

(overreacting, lashing out at others, feeling victimized) is to instantly identify a new challenge or problem as if it were just like, or even worse than, a previous stressful event. Sidestep old mindsets and reaction patterns and sustain calm energy and heightened mental clarity. Notice uniqueness, that is, you take a conscious moment to identify the unique features of the situation or challenge at hand, pinpointing some of the ways it’s different from anything you’ve dealt with before. In this simple and direct way, you bypass the brain’s innate, lightning-fast tendency to categorize people and situations by snap judgments and magnified negative presumptions.

ICS Step 5: Shift your view. Take molehills appearing as mountains and turn them back into molehills again. Don’t get tangled up bemoaning every challenge you face. Don’t wish you could be somewhere else to avoid it. By wishing the situation weren’t happening, regretting you didn’t have more time to prepare, wanting to be somewhere else, or anguishing over life’s unfairness, you set off a biochemical avalanche of victimizing thoughts and feelings. Don’t do any of these things. Instead practice this key thought: What’s happening is real and I’m finding the best possible way to deal with it right now.

By using Robert Cooper’s *ICS* with senses alert, breathing steady, posture relaxed yet upright, emotions level, and your mind clear and looking for solutions, you are far better prepared to analyze your situation and take action rather than panicking yourself into loss of control or paralysis.

~ The End ~