



Staying calm under pressure

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DEAR CHIEF: When the pressures of life hit me, I always seem to panic. Every day, even the little irritations, cause me to feel intense anxiety, anger, frustration, panic, and a general loss of control in taking the proper courses of action. Others tell me to “just breathe” but it doesn’t seem to work. I need advice--people tell me my inability to stay calm under pressure is making me prematurely age.

DAILY PANICKER



DEAR DAILY PANICKER: It is common for many people to react to adversity in ways that accelerate or exacerbate a loss of control. And you’re right: how we respond to the irritations of everyday life--such as delays, moments of anger, interruptions, disappointments, feelings of rejection or betrayal, broken appointments, untimely phone calls, financial worries, bad weather, traffic jams, wrong takeout orders, and deadlines--is a more accurate predictor of our psychological and physical health than the big pressures of life like final exams, marriage, parenting, divorce, job changes, illnesses or deaths of friends and relatives.

I, too, occasionally slip in my reactions to daily irritations. It is very difficult, at times, to stay calm under pressure. Nonetheless, I do apply some strategies I learned many years ago from one of my mentors, Robert K. Cooper, that have helped me drastically in keeping my cool and staying in control during life’s daily challenges. In his book, *The Other 90%*, Robert Cooper developed 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.

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 without interruption, smooth and steady.

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 and 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, you 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 paralysis.



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