



The Most Wonderful Time of the Year? 5 Steps to Keep Your Cool and Avoid Melt-Down During the Holiday Season!

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"It's the most wonderful time of the year..." Or so the song goes. With the holidays underway and ramping into high gear, many of us are over-extended and just one step away from an emotional melt-down! We're over-worked, over-taxed, over-looked, and have less sleep, less time, and less patience to deal with even the smallest of decisions and human interactions.

And so, in those moments of unexpected pressure, we snap, crumble, boil, and steam our way through the holidays.

Think back to one of those times when you lost your composure—a time when you reacted in a manner that even *you* didn't like! Was it at the office while working with *that person* who didn't meet his / her deadline on a joint project? Was it various clients who finally *used up all your patience* as nothing you did seemed to please them? Or was it a family gathering... interacting with a relative who made some remark at the holiday dinner table that just made you *lose* it?

Did losing it really get you the outcome you desired? Or did it just make you look like the one *out* of control?

For some of you a "melt-down" comes in the form of a louder, more demanding voice and rigid appearance. For some, it's over-the-top sarcasm. For others, it's deeply internalized and shows up in the form of raised blood pressure, migraine headaches, ulcers, or quite literally, a "pain in the neck."

In our over-extended lives of constant to-do-lists and day-timers, many of us are living just one step away from emotional exhaustion. We've had our buttons pushed one too many times and our gut instinct sends us into reactionary mode. We've been polite... we've tried to contain ourselves... but now, as the pressures mount, our natural defenses kick in and tact goes out the window. And holidays with the family are no exception! In fact, often our families encounter us in that "last straw" mode.

If you find yourself wondering, "*How could I have handled it differently?*" then read on, this information is for you...

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There are 5 easy steps to remember when your mind is a **BLURR** and you need to keep your cool:

1. **B**reathe!

Yes, I said, “Breathe”... not sigh! Take notice of the speed of your breathing and consciously slow it down. Whenever the human brain encounters some type of stress trigger, it often causes the body and brain to tense up. With this tension your blood pressure begins to rise in response to a “perceived danger” and you do one of two things: 1) You begin breathing faster and shallower, or 2) You hold your breath. Either one limits the oxygen needed for your brain to function rationally.

2. **L**isten *through* the emotions.

Let *your* emotion be understood by your brain and allow it to pass before reacting. Easier said than done, right? Your fight or flight mechanism just kicked in. But *you* are the only one who can control your reaction. Jack Canfield first introduced the equation: Event + Reaction = Outcome. Understand what triggered you to react and what your instinctive reactions are. Was it the other person’s tone of voice? Was it their choice of words? Was it their body language? Was it your perception of the situation? Maybe it was your expectations that were not met. You need to start being aware of what triggers cause you to react.

3. **U**nderstand / Identify the problem / behavior... not the emotion.

Stay in the moment and carefully listen for details. Listen through *the other person’s* emotions. What situation (not emotion) is he / she actually talking about? Is there something you can quantify... some result not being achieved... some deadline that didn’t get met? Is there something that is causing a perceived loss of control?

Charles Kettering, an American scientist, once said, “A problem well-stated is a problem half solved.” Beyond your emotions about the situation, what problem or behavior was the cause? What was the effect of that problem or behavior? When you can identify this, you are well on your way to finding a solution.

4. **R**educe defensive body language.

Most situations that cause us to lose our cool are generally due to our *perception* about how something was done, how we were treated, a lack of results, or the timeliness of the issue. When these perceptions invade our mind, our body instantly responds to the potential threat (perceived or real) and our body language tends to become more rigid and closed. So what are some practical ways to reduce defensive body language?

- 1) First, don’t take it personally! Easier said than done, right? Yet, most situations, while they may seem personal, are not personal. Often, situations are related to *what* happened, not *who*.
- 2) Open body language: arms comfortably at your side—not crossed, not rigid.
- 3) Regulators: use of occasional head nods to let the other person know you are actually listening and in the conversation.
- 4) Relaxed facial muscles: not a giddy smile—but not a sour scowl either!
- 5) Eye contact: maintain eye contact *without* those eye rolls!

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6) Keep your voice at a conversational level *without* sarcasm.

5. **R**espond vs React.

Reaction is the instinctual defense mechanism occurring *after* the situation has happened; response is proactive and requires *thinking ahead*. Reaction is often centered in protection of self; response can choose to respect both parties. When learning to respond, take time to choose your words, vocal tone, and body language.

But what about those times when you've been blind-sided with a situation and you didn't get time to choose? Congratulations! You just found one of your triggers. Take time to learn from this event. Figure out how you would handle that situation if it happened again. This experience will allow you to better respond the next time you find yourself ready to react.

Stressors are all around us. Sometimes they come in the form of situations; sometimes they come in the form of people we know—and even love! They are a natural part of life.

While we can't control every situation or person that comes our way, we *can* control our response. Our response will ultimately determine our success in business as well as in life relationships. Even more importantly, our response will determine our own state of health.

So as the holidays are underway and stressors push your buttons, remember these 5 easy steps and choose to respond rather than react to those around you as you *choose* to keep your cool... and make it "The most wonderful time of the year!"

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