

Overreacting

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All of us have **overreacted** at one time or another. Overreacting comes from past anger over a real, or perceived, undesirable outcome or when we are met with an unexpected confrontation.

The current situation triggers our memories about what did not go our way in the past, and we suddenly feel **out of control**; we don't want the outcome to repeat itself, if it was unpleasant in the past. "This can't be happening again!"

Mental distortions like "*I am sure I messed up,*" unrealistic expectations like "*Why can't I be perfect,*" irrational assumptions like "*Everybody will learn about this,*" and dysfunctional schemas like "This always happens to me" all support over reactivity.

When we don't know how to handle our strong negative emotions, it's easy to reach harmful levels. This can leave us irrational, antagonistic, impulsive and agitated. Many damaging interpersonal problems can result from our inability to stop escalating conflict. In that state, it may be hard to decide on the right course of action as the situation becomes more complex.

But...our rage is truly **not** the issue but, rather, it's how we **handle** it that makes all the difference.

Once all the drama has died down, we often realize how unrealistic our expectations were and then regret sets in. We may have wished we had listened to our emotional "control tower" instead of acting impulsively. When we know that something is wrong inside, we can choose to pull back from our negative emotions and ultimately change our behavior.

On the other hand, **anticipation**, or just having **situational awareness**, can be quite useful, and completely normal. All of us need warning signs, or heightened sense of alertness, to better manage our emotions.

Here are some tips for accessing your own traffic control tower.

Hello Control Tower!

Think of your own "control tower" just like the one at the airport. Air traffic control personnel must abide by Federal Aviation Administration (F.A.A.) rules. Using this metaphor and mnemonic, your own emotional traffic control tower tells you when it's okay to let other people's planes land on your own personal runway.

Your personal F.A.A. stands for F= Freeze, A= Analyze or A=Act.

Thus, people who, in the moment, forget set their emotional control buttons are more likely to act out their negative emotions and delve into negative reactions...i.e., overreact.

Using the F.A.A. is a skill you can acquire to handle your anger or emotional ups and downs before it gets the better of you. It helps you act in your own best interest as opposed to overreacting and feeling worse.

The Components of F.A.A.

Each of the 3 components of F.A.A. (Freeze, Analyze and Act) can be further refined into smaller components.

The Freeze Tool lets you:

Catch Your Breath: Breathing slowly and regularly helps to quiet your body and also helps you stay "in the moment" and focus on your situation calmly.

Check Inside: Notice your bodily tension and changes in skin temperature. Turning inside can help reduce the negative effects of racing heart, sweating,

and panic related symptoms. By doing so you can begin change your vocal quality from yelling to using a quiet inside voice.

Cool Down: Essentially this means cooling our emotions when our anger is red hot. Health-wise it is much more damaging to yell, or act out of anger, than to just to walk away. Unproductive confrontations raise our blood pressure, stress hormones, and have other damaging physiological effects. Exercise is a great way to release anger. Counting to 10, stepping away, and imagining a safe place are just a few of the ways we can "cool down."

The Analyze Tool helps you:

Find Your Inner Compassionate Voice: When we start to take the inflamed situation apart, it is easy to see that no *thing*, or no *one* made us feel this way. We made **ourselves** feel this way by our perceptions, reactions, assumptions and generalizations. Negative thinking can be converted into positive self-talk if we just reframe the situation to see how it can **benefit** rather than harm us:

"I just knew things would turn out this way," can turn into "*Not everything goes my way but, it could be worse or this way may end up being better for all.*"

"Everyone is just out for themselves," can turn into "*Some people might have a selfish side but, most people are like me self-full.*"

And "There is at least somebody or something out to get me," can be turned into "*The only one who can truly get to me is me so why don't I give it or them a chance.*"

Avoid Personalization: When we are so self-consumed that we are blinded by our emotions, all we see is how everything and everyone affects us, or vice versa. This mode of inner self-centered thinking is dangerous and will only feed our sliding into self-loathing.

Personalization also leads to self-persecution and ultimately limits our ability to think outside the box. To create an injunction against personalization, we need to repeatedly say to ourselves "*This situation most likely has nothing to do with me!*" When in doubt it is better to check it out ("be objective") rather than act it out ("be impulsive").

Discover the Best Alternative: After you take a few cleansing breaths and lower your heart rate, your mind will be more engaged and focused. In a calm state you can more easily recall the objective options you have and the risks associated with each one. Being calm can aid you weighing each option and every possible consequence before taking action.

Ignore and Conquer: At times ignorance can be bliss and by doing so you neutralize the beast in not only you but in others.

Learn and Let Go: See it as a lesson and then move on.

Postpone with Dignity: Most of the time leaving the scene and calming down can divert violence and further emotional eruptions. *"I'm too upset now, let's talk later."*

The Action Tool lets you:

Restructure and Redesign Your Life: This is especially useful when you fully accept that you may never be able to change the other person but can instead improve yourself. Your first step toward positive change is committing to yourself that you'll make every effort to avoid putting yourself into these types of over-reactive power struggles in the future. Having back up options if plans fall through, walking away when someone is screaming at you, and taking better care of those things that mean the most to you are just a few action items that may prevent a no-win situation from happening again and again.

Assert Yourself: In a direct, clear and respectful manner express yourself by using "I" statements and asking for what you need in the moment such as *"I am very hurt by your words and I need you to find another way for you to tell me what you are feeling."* A word of obvious caution here: you may not wish to assert yourself to someone who is being controlling, or is about to physically retaliate, or be combative in other ways.

Rechannel Your Rage: This might be the best choice if expressing your angry feelings might fall on deaf ears, be minimized or challenged. Drawing pictures or journaling about your anger or writing mock letters that you just keep and reread for yourself can be very effective. Others forms of releasing your anger that can be useful are to vigorously exercise, create a song, or reach out to a compassionate buddy.

Affirm and Empower Yourself: There is nothing like rewarding yourself for a

job well done. If you don't take the time to notice your positive steps, then who will? One step at a time is fine.

Delay Action: Walk away. If you think you might get verbally or physically abusive, leave the situation and take time to cool down.

Seek (Professional) Help: Ask someone you respect to help you think things through. This gives you a different viewpoint and/or more information.

Most importantly, if you find that dealing with your own emotions is just too hard, find a professional you can talk with, or join a self-help group in order to get a better grip on your feelings and reactions. Doing so can help you become more objective, focus on self-improvement and come to terms with your limitations. Also by writing about your feelings and rereading this article you can practice diffusing an escalating argument, support the other person without fueling negative behaviors and prevent on-going resentments on both sides.

Conclusion

Once you understand the role your emotions have played in the scenario you can recognize the source of your overreaction, better manage the emotions that obstruct rather than help, and remain calm.

You will feel greatly empowered when you can handle your emotions under pressure. This however, takes practicing self-awareness in emotionally charged situations. Omitting judgments and staying clear of other people's drama.

Note: Check our other articles in the RealPsychSolutions.com [Free Resources](#) page, and visit our [Store](#) for additional, in depth materials.

SIX EXERCISES TO PRACTICE SELF-CONTROL

1. Sit for 2 minutes staring at something familiar and see it an different way
2. Practice for a few seconds daily making yourself a statue before transitioning to the next task
3. Daily do a **feelings** check... Am I mad, glad, sad, afraid etc.?
4. Every other day write down something you can't change about your life and one thing your blessed for in your life
5. Make a list of your fears, misperceptions, and negative assumptions and share it with a nonjudgmental friend.
6. Preface your important requests with "It would mean a lot to me if you."