

LifeSkills: How to avoid overreacting

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Have you thought of this?

When you feel overwhelmed, build a bigger picture. Have you ever experienced a feeling of powerlessness that precipitated a sense of panic or a crisis? This sometimes happens when people feel frantic and don't establish a little distance from the problem. They may see only one part of the situation but feel as if they see it all.

Gain perspective. Here is some information about the process of building the bigger picture, which means increasing your distance from a situation—setting it in a context. That implies seeing things you didn't see before about a problem, or seeing the same things from a new angle.

Gaining perspective will allow you easier access to your personal resources when you find yourself in difficult circumstances. Imagine a village nested in a valley. If you walk through the village you will see all the people, the stores, the doors of the houses—you will hear engines and hammering and smell cooking fat—and you will feel the rhythm of the village. If you climb to the top of a nearby mountain, you will get a totally different view of that same village. There, surrounded by quiet and fresh air, you will see a pattern of houses and streets and yards set in the valley below you.

Building a bigger picture is about establishing some distance from a situation, stepping back from the press of its detail. Remember a time when there was tumult around you, but you didn't get caught in it. The good news is that most people have at least one experience in which they did keep some distance from a challenging situation. Unfortunately, people tend to forget how they managed this.

Make a mental movie in which you're the star. The purpose of the following exercise is to remember how you established some distance from a challenging situation in the past so you can identify a personal strategy that worked then and may work for you again in the future.

Give yourself time to recall an experience when you kept your sense of perspective. The idea of finding an example from your own life is central because it represents a situation in which you reacted with your own resources. Write down your responses to the following exercise. This will make the exercise easier and more effective. You will have the information sorted out on paper instead of mixed up in your head. And, you won't have to do the job again when you want to recall it—to play your movie.

Most people experience situations in which they overreact instead of calmly using their personal resources. See, hear, and feel yourself in the situation.

Remember, with as much detail as you can, the following elements:

1. What was the situation? For example: Last year Peter kept asking me to do things that were not part of my job and that I did not have time to do.
2. What did you do? For example: I took a deep breath and told him that I was sorry but I didn't think it was part of my job and that I was already very busy with my own tasks.
3. How did you feel? For example: I felt quite relaxed and I was glad about the way I said what I said. Afterwards, he stopped always asking me to do extra work. Identify your personal strategy . Identify what you did to give yourself some distance.

For example, in the above situation: I realize that, before reacting, I took a deep breath. That allowed me to delay a response while I summoned my own perspective and some courage.

Practice this strategy. Prepare for difficult situations by training yourself in your strategy, then use it whenever you face a challenge. Frequent practice will help you remember your strategy in situations that are critical.

Remind yourself to rehearse. For example: I will practice taking a few deep breaths as often as I can.

Persist. Doing this exercise is a way to prevent uncomfortable situations and to increase your sense of well-being. Don't expect yourself to never feel frantic again. But, the more you practice your strategy, the more likely you are to decrease the frequency of your overreactions. If you're getting frantic, climb a mountain in your imagination.

If, after real effort you feel like you need a hand, you should seek professional help.