

Responding, Not Reacting, to Feelings

Objective: To manage difficult situations more skillfully by learning about the difference between reacting and responding.

You Should Know

Good mental health means becoming familiar with and accepting of all of your feelings and not trying to escape or avoid them. Simply noticing your feelings, especially unpleasant ones, without doing anything about them, can be a powerful skill in learning to deal with emotional problems.

The world is full of triggers that cause us to react rather than respond wisely: those uncooperative, unsympathetic, or demanding people; events and situations beyond our control; disappointments and dashed expectations; crazy drivers—they're everywhere! But it doesn't mean you ignore your reaction; rather, you can learn ways to work with the reaction.

As with any new skill, it takes practice and a willingness to experience something new and unfamiliar. There will always be external events that bother us, but if we learn to respond and not react, we can make things better for ourselves, even if we can't change the world to our liking.

Does This Sound Like You?

Reacting

After a long, stressful day as a nurse, Kenneth arrived home tired, hoping for a peaceful evening with his family. Right away, his three-year-old son started whining and clinging to him. The last thing Kenneth wanted to do was deal with an annoying toddler. He felt his jaw clenching and his blood pressure surging. He reacted immediately by getting angry and yelling, "Stop it! Leave me alone!" His son wailed louder, and then they both were miserable.

Reacting happens in an instant, usually stemming from anger or fear or feeling overwhelmed. We all do it. Usually it happens when we're not thinking clearly or logically—that gut reaction.

Responding

When Kenneth arrives home and his toddler starts whining and clinging, Kenneth stops, takes a breath, checks in with himself, and notices his body is very tense; he is feeling angry, tired, and overwhelmed. His shoulders are tight, and he has a slight headache. Although his impulse is still to yell, he stops himself because he is aware that yelling will only make the situation worse. Instead, despite his upset feelings, Kenneth stoops down and gives his son a big hug, and after a few moments, asks his son what's wrong.

When we respond, we stop, notice what we're feeling, assess the situation, and then decide what to do next in a thoughtful, wiser manner. This definition is very similar to mindfulness—noticing what's happening in the present moment without judgment and with acceptance. Then, mindfully, you can choose what to do next.

In this situation, Kenneth turns his understandable feelings into a positive action, rather than popping off impulsively. He chooses a nonverbal response at first (hugging) because he can't trust that he won't say something he regrets. Then when they are both calm, he can approach his son with words.

How are you like Kenneth? How are you different?

Can you think of a time when you reacted; that is, became emotional without thinking through your response? What about a time when you responded rather than reacted? Describe each instance briefly.

What to Do

Now that you are more familiar with your feelings, you can begin to notice where in your body you experience feelings and what their intensity is. This will help you respond instead of react. Remember not to judge yourself harshly. That won't help. Start with these steps:

- Take a deep breath. Better yet, take three conscious breaths.
- Notice what you are feeling and where in your body you are feeling it (for example, jaw, neck, shoulders, chest, stomach).
- Note the intensity of the feeling (mild, moderate, strong).
- Let go of any tension you are aware of, to the best of your ability.
- Consider what is at stake—is it worth it to react with anger or impulsive actions? What will the consequence(s) be?
- Respond to the person or situation with compassion, using clear, simple language.

For one week, keep note of any incidents that might normally cause you to be upset and even do something you might regret. See if you can respond to the incident in a positive way.

Sunday

Situation: _____

Reaction: _____

Feeling: _____ Intensity: _____

Where you felt it: _____

Response: _____

Outcome: _____

Monday

Situation: _____

Reaction: _____

Feeling: _____ Intensity: _____

Where you felt it: _____

Response: _____

Outcome: _____

Tuesday

Situation: _____

Reaction: _____

Feeling: _____ Intensity: _____

Where you felt it: _____

Response: _____

Outcome: _____

Wednesday

Situation: _____

Reaction: _____

Feeling: _____ Intensity: _____

Where you felt it: _____

Response: _____

Outcome: _____

Thursday

Situation: _____

Reaction: _____

Feeling: _____ Intensity: _____

Where you felt it: _____

Response: _____

Outcome: _____

Friday

Situation: _____

Reaction: _____

Feeling: _____ Intensity: _____

Where you felt it: _____

Response: _____

Outcome: _____

Saturday

Situation: _____

Reaction: _____

Feeling: _____ Intensity: _____

Where you felt it: _____

Response: _____

Outcome: _____

Reflections on This Exercise

<p>How helpful was this exercise? _____ (1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)</p> <p>What could you do differently to make progress in this area of your recovery?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
