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For Peace of Mind, Act Instead of React (3 min read)

Some people's lives seem like a soap opera. But though endless crises and confrontations can be entertaining on TV, they make for frustrating, unsatisfying lives. If you'd rather have peace of mind than daily dramas, you need to take charge of the script.

"Learn to act for yourself instead of just responding to what's happening in your life," advises Gretchen Grindle, M.Ed., N.C.C., CEAP, a counselor in Virginia. "Make deliberate choices about how you look at things -- and how you want to deal with them."

Most people react without thinking, "especially in situations in which they feel hassled or threatened," says Ms. Grindle. "We're constantly responding to stimuli -- an annoying co-worker, a whining child, a grumpy spouse. Instead of considering what's really going on or the most constructive way to respond, we often lash out in ways that aren't very helpful."

Of course, this usually results in negative consequences. If another person is involved, the result is likely to be hurt feelings, angry responses or out-and-out resistance.

Even when people are alone, they often let circumstances control them, instead of the other way around. For example, when you're caught in traffic, you feel powerless, so you make yourself miserable with anger or frustration.

"Instead, choose to use the time in a way that builds positive thoughts," says Ms. Grindle. "Do relaxation exercises, listen to a book on tape, plan what you'll do the rest of the day. You'll arrive just as soon, and in a much better frame of mind.

"Learn to separate what you can control from what you can't," says Ms. Grindle. "You can't control another person, and many situations are also beyond your power. You can only control how you act, so your focus should be on your contribution."

Act with care and courtesy

To start acting instead of reacting, Ms. Grindle says, "reflect on what has been working in your life and what hasn't. In the big picture, has your behavior been getting you where you want to be?"

Here are some more strategies that can help you be more active and less reactive.

- Make a daily to-do list. "Start each day by planning what you want to do and setting priorities. Even if you don't get everything done, the process is important," says Ms. Grindle. "You're reclaiming control instead of just putting out fires."
- Maximize your physical health. Being "all that you can be" increases your confidence and sense of control. A healthful diet, regular physical activity and enough sleep all help you feel up to daily challenges.
- Get a handle on anger. You may have a right to be angry, but you don't have a right to act destructively on that feeling. Walk away until you get hold of yourself.
- Let go of resentment. Carrying around old grievances is like keeping a 10-pound weight tied around your neck. You don't have to forgive old wrongs, but you can accept them and move on.
- Learn to listen. "Listening gives you power because it helps you learn more about the other person. It puts you in a better position to create a win-win situation," says Ms. Grindle.
- Speak respectfully to everyone. Simple courtesies set the stage for constructive interactions. Consider how others will respond to what you're about to say. If it's likely to cause hurt or anger, find a more positive way to make your point.

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- Give others the benefit of the doubt. If someone in the express checkout line has a couple of extra items, forget it. If you make it your problem, it will haunt you the rest of the day.
- Count your blessings. Reminding yourself about the good things in your life is a great way to feel more competent -- and confident.

"Most people today lead lives that are ripe for stress," says Ms. Grindle. "Take time to claim some happiness -- kiss your spouse, hug your children. Whatever else you need to do, this is a very important action to take."

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