

Learning Package Six

Managing Your Responses



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In this Learning Package we will consider some techniques which allow you to better manage your response to stressful events. Conflictual events can often be stressful and are better handled when emotional reactions are minimised. When we stay calm we are able to make better decisions and to choose appropriate responses to the situation.

The focus of this Learning Package will be on:

- Calming breathing and thoughts; and then
- Choosing appropriate responses

Although we can't always control what is happening around us, we can manage our responses to that situation. When we are in a panic or anxiety mode there is a number of stress hormones released (primarily cortisol and adrenaline) which affect the brain's ability to make good judgements and to think clearly. It is therefore critical that we try hard to stay focused and calm. There are simple but powerful solutions which work remarkably well.

There are two main strategies which allow people to feel (and be) more in control in stressful situations:

- Slowing breathing to calm and reduce physical arousal symptoms
- Replacing negative thoughts with more helpful ones (or 'self-talk')

The Australian Psychological Society has developed some tips on controlling breathing and thoughts. The section below is based on that material, which can be found at the Society's Website together with a number of related Tip Sheets.

http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/

Learning to breathe and think more calmly

- To slow your breathing, take smaller breaths and pause between breaths to space them out. When you have breathed out slowly, hold your breath for a count of three before inhaling your next breath. Sometimes people find it helps to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth.

- While concentrating on breathing out slowly, say to yourself 'Relax', or 'Stay calm', or 'It's OK, I'm managing OK'. These are good words to use because they are associated with feeling relaxed and in control.
- Try not to focus on the negative outcomes which could happen and remind yourself that the calmer you are, the better you'll be at managing exactly what needs to be done.
- Remember you need to be able to draw on your own strengths and survival resources and your coping ability. It's important not to let unhelpful feelings and thoughts get in the way of careful and well planned actions.
- Remind yourself that this is a stressful situation and that it's natural you are feeling anxious and stressed. You may not be able to directly control what's happening but you can manage your responses in this stressful time and you can influence its impact on you.

Choosing Appropriate Responses

The calming strategies discussed in the preceding section allow for more clear-headed decision making. With a calmer approach, you will be in a better position to select the right response for the circumstances, or to plan for an effective approach to tackle the situation. Refer back to Learning Package Three ("Personality Differences and Conflict Handling Styles") and refresh your understanding of the times when it is appropriate to use each of the different five main styles of dealing with conflict.

We are now going to discuss how you may choose appropriate behaviours in each of those situations.

Competing

Used:

- When quick, decisive action is vital – for example, in emergencies
- On important issues where unpopular courses of action need implementing for example, cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline
- On issues vital to group welfare when you know you're right
- To protect yourself against people who take advantage of non-competitive behaviour

Avoiding

Used:

- When an issue is trivial, of only passing importance, or when other more important issues are pressing.
- When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns e.g. when you have low power or you are frustrated by something which would be very difficult to change (national policies, someone's personality, etc).
- When the potential damage of confronting a conflict outweighs the benefits of its resolution.
- To let people cool down – reducing tensions to a productive level and allows you to regain perspective and composure.
- When gathering more information outweighs the advantages of an immediate decision
- To aid in the managerial development of your staff by allowing them to experiment and learn from their own mistakes.

Accommodating

Used:

- When you realise that you are wrong, to allow a better position to be heard, to learn from others, and to show that you are reasonable.
- When the issue is much more important to the other person than to yourself, to satisfy the needs of theirs, and as a goodwill gesture to help maintain a cooperative relationship.
- To build up points for later issues which are important to you
- When continued competition would only damage your cause, when you are outmatched and losing.
- When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important.
- To aid in the development of your staff by allowing them to experiment and learn from their own mistakes.

Collaborating

Used:

- To arrive at an overall solution when the concerns of both parties are vitally important to them and cannot be compromised.
- When your objective is to learn – for example, testing your own assumptions, understanding the views of others.
- To merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem.
- To gain commitment by incorporating others’ concerns into a decision.
- To work through hard feelings which have an interpersonal relationship.

It will be apparent now that there is a degree of control which can be exerted over our reactions (both physical and cognitive) and as a result we are better able to choose more complex reactions.

The effect of different temperament style on outcomes is summarised in the table below.

Strategy	Effect on You	Effect on them	Effect on the relationship
Fight	Win	Lose	Lose
Give in	Lose	Win	Lose
Avoid	Win a bit	Lose	Win a bit
Compromise	Lose a bit/ Win a bit	Lose a bit/ Win a bit	Win
Collaborate	Win	Win	Win

How do you prefer to handle conflict?

Exercise Six

Practice the calming strategy model at times of stress and note how you feel following the exercise. What difference does it make to the way you handle stressful situations?

Recall a past incident where you were involved in a minor conflict and consider which of the five styles of managing the situation may have delivered a better outcome.