

A Positive Relationship With Reactivity

LaShelle Lowe-Charde

Creating a positive relationship with reactivity is one of the most important parts of preventing it from taking over and doing damage. There are three basic dimensions to attend to as you create a positive relationship to reactivity:

1. **Become a compassionate witness:** This means catching the signs of reactivity early and then being kind and gentle with yourself about it.
2. **Engage with wisdom:** This means seeing reactivity for what it is— a misperception of threat and a distortion of what's happening.
3. **Take new action:** Reactivity will always tell you to fight, flee, or shut down. Finding the strength to remain engaged and pursue connection and clarity weakens reactive impulses over time.

1. Become A Compassionate Witness

To begin to cultivate a compassionate witness, commit to reflecting on moments of reactivity. Perhaps setting aside a time at the end of the day would work best. As you reflect on reactivity, write down all the signs and symptoms of it. Here are a few common ones:

- You feel your shoulders get tight (or any part of you contracts)
- Heart rate increases
- You start to talk louder and/or faster
- Your mind starts to go fuzzy
- You shut down and/or feel numb
- You feel angry
- You criticize yourself or others
- You think in extremes (always, never)
- You feel defensive and start explaining yourself
- You feel anxious and fearful
- You feel overwhelmed

Accepting reactivity is sometimes more difficult than recognizing the signs and symptoms. Truly accepting that you are reactive in a given moment means maintaining a sense of larger truths, such as:

- Everyone gets reactive. It doesn't mean that you are failing somehow.
- Even though reactive impulses are strong, acting from them will only make things worse.
- Reactivity is a constellations of habits that arises from a lifetime of conditioning. They are not *who* you are.
- The most helpful thing you can do to manage reactivity is be kind and gentle with yourself.

To help with acceptance, create the habit of responding to reactivity with a soft, gentle, and clear tone. You might adopt simple phrases such as,

- "It's okay."
- "I am reacting and that's okay."
- "It's okay to react."
- "It's okay to feel nervous, anxious, panicky, angry, defensive, etc."

2. Engage with wisdom

Name for yourself, clearly and explicitly, the central truths from which you want to live your life. In your most connected and grounded moments what do you know to be deeply true? Set aside at least one meditation session a week to ask yourself this question and hear the answer. Over time you will find that your answer evolves and becomes ever more subtle. As you give consistent attention to what's true, it becomes easier to recognize what's not true; moments when you misperceive a threat.

In the midst of reactivity, asking yourself key questions can also open the door to wisdom. Such questions might include the following:

- What's most important to me in this situation?
- Do I want to invest my precious life energy in pursuing this reactive thought?
- What need do I perceive to be threatened right now?
- What's really true right now?
- What do I notice is happening in my body?
- What feelings are arising?
- Do I believe my thoughts right now?

3. New Action

Naming reactivity as it arises, expressing compassion for yourself, and seeing through reactivity to what's really important all come together to give you a true choice to take new action. If you are persistent in this practice, you will find yourself accessing forks in the road as reactivity beckons you to shut down or get angry, while compassion and wisdom call you to stay engaged, give the other person the benefit of the doubt, or simply take more time to get grounded before responding.

Every time you choose to take the road to new action born from compassion and wisdom, the pull to go down the reactive road gets a little bit weaker. Life gets a little easier for you, and for those around you. When your partner or someone close to you notices you feeling reactive, and then sees you take responsibility for it in this way, they can breath a sigh of relief that they won't be the target for reactive energy and words. And you build confidence that you can live from your values and care for yourself and others.

Practice

This week begin cultivating a positive relationship with reactivity by creating your own list of the signs and symptoms of it. Each time you notice a sign of reactivity, practice meeting that experience with compassion using a phrase, a mindful breath, an image, a sound, a movement, or whatever helps you to access compassion most easily.