

MANAGING IMPULSIVITY

By

Arthur L. Costa

and

Bena Kallick

Co-Founders, Institute for Habits of Mind

*"The sign of intelligent people is their ability to control emotions
by the application of reason."*

Marya Mannes

Do you ever find yourself just blurting out what comes to mind? After you say it, do you regret it? Do you find that you begin to talk to yourself and say, "I really shouldn't have said that. It isn't what I really meant?"

Perhaps you find yourself jumping in to do some work before you read the directions. Then you realize that, if you had read the directions, you would have realized that you did not have to do one thing but you did have to do another.

Do you observe others, when you are working in a group, who jump to conclusions without considering what the alternatives or impact might be?

These behaviors all point to the need to manage your impulsivity. So, what does it look like when you are managing impulsivity? Here are some tips:

- When you are problem solving, you are more deliberate. You stop and think before you act. In fact, we often use the reminder: Stop, think, act!
- You might intentionally form a vision of what you are intending to do with a project. What is the product you would like to see as a result of your research and design work? What is your goal? What plans of action will you take? How will you know that you are progressing on the right path?
- As you complete a project, you could reflect on whether the paths and directions you took got you to where you wanted to go. Or, whether you took another path and it proved to be worthwhile.

It is the conscious act of being aware of your thinking that helps you to manage your impulsivity.

Managing Impulsivity and the Brain

The main purpose of your brain is survival and many of the structures in the brain are involved in making certain you do just that. Originally these structures were designed to survive attacks from wild beasts or enemies. In contemporary society, the dangers are often not physical but social. However, the brain doesn't differentiate between the two; the same mechanisms are at play no matter what the source of real or perceived threat.

When a person believes a situation to be threatening, a number of changes occur in the brain. Chemicals are released that increase heart rate and lung capacity, increase visual alertness, provide glucose for extra strength, and decrease all unnecessary functions such as digestion and immune function. This biological response is commonly called the "fight, flight or freeze" response. All these changes occur in the neo-cortex of the brain where rational thinking and problem solving take place. It is also where one manages

impulsivity. During a time of perceived threat, the neo-cortex becomes less efficient. (Think about a time when you were insulted and couldn't think of a good retort until the later!)

The upside of the fight or flight response is that after the initial reaction, we have a choice of ways to respond. For example, if while you are hiking you see a curved shape on the path that looks somewhat like a snake, you may jump and scream. A few seconds later you realize that it is a stick not a snake. At this point you send a message to your brain saying, "Calm down, it's just a stick." The same thing occurs in social situations. Suppose your teacher, parent or friend says something you don't like. Your immediate internal reaction is to become angry and the fight or flight response is activated. But seconds later you send a message to your brain saying, "I don't think either fight or flight is an appropriate response here." In this case you have the ability to manage your initial impulsive reaction.

Learning to Manage Your Impulsivity

Not everyone manages his or her impulsivity well. Examples are all around us: "road rage," gang violence, fights. What makes the difference between those who have learned to manage their impulsivity well and those that have not?

Age: The neural pathways in the brain that lead from the rational cortex to the emotional center of the brain and give us some control over our reactions and are not in place at birth. As the child matures, these pathways become more efficient and the child's responses become more appropriate. Full biological maturation of these pathways does not often occur until persons are in their mid 20s.

Experience: If the only response to anger a child experiences is lashing out, then it is likely that the child's brain will become "wired" to lash out. If delaying gratification is not modeled or expected of children, they are unlikely to do the first thing that comes to mind.

The brain, however, has amazing plasticity and this is good news! It suggests that we can continue to learn ways to manage our impulsive behaviors throughout our lifetimes. Following are some strategies to help manage your impulsivity:

STAR: Stop—Count to 10. Take a deep breath. Take a walk.

Think—What is it about this situation that's causing my feelings

Act—what actions can I take to relieve these feelings?

Reflect—Was this a good solution? What insights have I gained?

*SODAS: Situation--What, where and why is this happening that produces my feelings?

Options--What are my options for actions to take?

Disadvantages--What disadvantages are there with each of these options?

Advantages--What advantages are there with each of these options?

Solutions--What is the best solution for me to take?

So remember the words of Thomas Jefferson:

"When angry, count to ten, before you speak; if very angry, a hundred."

- Appreciation is expressed to the staff of the Community High School of Vermont for this strategy

Name it, reframe it, and tame it (Knight, 2015)

1. Name It: Identify situations where your buttons might be pushed and what is the root cause for your anger
2. Reframe It: Believe that you can change the way you react when others push your buttons. seeing it as an opportunity to learn about yourself, what troubles you and how you can avoid these situations in the future.
3. Tame It: Use one of the following strategies to keep your emotions under control: buy time by leaving the situation for a while, count to 10, take a deep breath, rewind the tape.

REFERENCE:

Knight, J (2015) *Better Conversations: Coach Yourself to Be More Credible, Caring, and Connected*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin