

Oops, I Didn't Mean to Say That!

We all like to think we are good communicators, just as we all like to think we are good drivers. Yet, about 85% of traffic accidents are due to driver error. Just sayin'....

The truth is that most of us are good enough at communicating to get by in most normal (that is, not emotionally charged) situations. We are usually able to put brain in gear before putting mouth in motion.

But someone's thoughtless comment can trigger an emotional reaction in us that results in our responding emotionally before we have a chance to think logically.

And, when we don't give ourselves time to think about what we want to say before we say it, we may regret what comes out of our mouth.

The answer, as we all know, is to slow down and think before speaking. Good advice but, in the urgency of the moment, when our emotional trigger has been pulled, how do we keep our mouth under control?

Dr. Donald Meichenbaum suggests a way. He calls it "Reading the Clock".



12 o'clock – Opening gambit. Someone says or does something.



3 o'clock – Emotional response. Your brain has an immediate emotional reaction.



6 o'clock – Brief time-out. You engage your logical brain. It objectively evaluates your emotional reaction. What are the possible consequences if you say what is on the tip of your tongue? Could your emotional response be misunderstood?



9 o'clock – Right action. Based on what your logical brain tells you, your response addresses the issue without the distraction your emotional response would have caused.

When we get hijacked by an emotional reaction (3 o'clock), it can be hard to get out of it. An example could look like:

12:00 o'clock – *Opening gambit.* Your significant other says: "Don't forget to fold the laundry. I took clothes out of the dryer a little while ago."

3:00 o'clock – *You respond emotionally.* You feel a bit guilty because you disregarded the dryer buzzer that indicated the laundry was dry. Nonetheless, it is easy to let your emotions hijack your reaction.

6:00 o'clock – Being hijacked, *you do not engage your logical brain.* Instead of a more appropriate response, you go directly to 9:00 o'clock and let your emotional response rip.

9:00 o'clock – *You say, "I know, I know. Are you saying that I never do anything to help out around here? (Voice rising) I carry my weight. I do plenty. Why do you always have to nag me about every little thing?"*

You can fill in the rest of the conversation. You are stuck in a vicious circle of recriminations that can only make things worse.

Now, let's look at the same scenario, but this time with your objective brain kicking in to get to a better outcome:

12:00 o'clock – *Opening gambit.* Your significant other says: "Don't forget to fold the laundry. I took the clothes out of the dryer a little while ago."

3:00 o'clock – *Your emotional brain reacts.* You feel a bit guilty because you disregarded the dryer buzzer that indicated the laundry was dry, thinking, "Yeah, yeah, I'll get around to it".

6:00 o'clock – *This time you take a brief mental time out to activate your objective brain.* You think, "Ok, right. It is my turn. It will only take me five minutes and then it's done."

9:00 o'clock – *Right action.* You fold the laundry and it only takes four minutes. You get a little feeling of accomplishment because, hey, you did something good.

"Reading the clock" changes a vicious circle to a virtuous one, but it is a habit that takes practice. Getting better at it is like learning to ride a bicycle. When you first try to ride, you tend to wobble a bit. Practice means you wobble less until you can get on a bike and just ride off. The same is true of learning to use the "Reading the Clock" method. Rather than pay too much attention to every little wobble, see the wobbles as an opportunity to better identify, and refuse to pull, your own personal triggers.

It just takes practice.

I had a professor who was a master at “Reading the Clock,” and he was a pipe smoker. When he was asked a particularly difficult question, he would gaze off into the distance, pondering the issue. At the same time, he would take out his pipe and tobacco pouch. Slowly, methodically, he would fill the pipe, and tamp down the tobacco, still reading in the distance various aspects of the question. He’d put the pipe in his mouth, take out a box of matches and light the pipe. Only then would he sit back, produce a small cloud of smoke, and give his answer.

And the answer was always worth the wait.