

# COOL, CALM, COLLECTED

SCIENCE-BACKED  
ADVICE FOR  
LEARNING HOW TO  
BETTER MANAGE  
OUR INSTINCTIVE  
REACTIONS  
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**S**ome people seem to have a knack for staying calm in negative situations (perhaps to the envy of many of us with quick tempers). We all have those friends or family members who simply don't get angry when someone cuts them off on the freeway, or who seem completely unaffected by the comically incompetent cashier. What most of us don't realize is we actually all have a choice in how we react to the experiences and stimuli around us. Here are a few quick tips for learning to better manage our reactions in the pursuit of a more harmonious way of life.

**Put some space between the event and your reaction.** Although we can't physically see it, this is often the main difference between people who tend to "lose their cool" and those who are able to remain steady in difficult situations. Gregg Henriques, Ph.D., author of *A New Unified Theory of Psychology* and program director at James Madison University, explained that some of the main contributors to habitual adverse reactions are how easily a person might feel stress, how strongly they experience negative emotions, and how much time a person might need to calm down after a trigger event.

Even though we might feel extremely upset in the moment, our best practice is to take a minute to reflect before flying off the handle. Our emotional response can be quite strong – and

instant – so it will take some practice in taking a deep, long breath and asking yourself: "Am I going to let this affect me in a negative way? Is my innate response going to yield a positive result?" Giving yourself a moment to make this a more conscious choice will likely provide you with the extra time you might need to let your emotions settle before acting hastily and allowing the behavior of others to impact your own happiness.

**Understand the primary versus deliberative mind.** Dr. Henriques also advises us to acknowledge that we have two "minds" – the primary process mind (the feeling mind, or "heart") and the secondary process mind (the deliberate and self-conscious mind, or "head"). The primary is automatic, fast, and in the moment, while the secondary is more complex and considers not only the immediate but also the reasons behind our actions and what we are feeling. Drawing awareness to the factors that drive our reactions can aid in the formation of better experiences – ones that steer us away from that negative downward spiral and toward a more beneficial and positive goal. Of course, using laughter and humor is another great way to diffuse those difficult situations. It's good to remember that a simple deep breath and smile can often work wonders in guiding us past that initial primal response and toward a more level-headed and light-hearted approach. ■