

Keeping your cool

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A few weeks ago I stood in awe watching the behavior of my two weekend house guests as they prepared to depart. With the rental car packed and sunscreen applied, they got into the car and with key in ignition, suddenly realized on this sizzling day that they had no idea what the security code was.

Having driven to our house Friday afternoon straight from their 24-hour flight, now, mid-day Sunday, they were for the first time since then preparing to drive. After a frantic search for close to an hour, opening closed suitcases, leaving clothes strewn all over the yard, checking pockets, passports, phones and car rental information, neither could remember what the paper with the code even looked like. After the rental agency repeatedly disconnected their call, they finally received the code, repacked their car and headed off.

Can you imagine what words were exchanged and what their behavior toward each other was like at this point? They were boiling hot, but to each other they remained sweet and polite. There was no name calling, no blaming and only terms of endearment that left me wondering whether it was their Canadian passports, their knowing I was witnessing this fiasco, or an unusual manifestation of heat stroke.

With over 35 years of experience treating couples, I must admit that even I was surprised by their calm, kind and caring behavior toward each other. While always easy to focus on what's wrong in a relationship, it's what is right, and always trying to do more of it, that should be our focus. Focusing on the positive creates amazing couple dynamics, which in turn helps lead to well-functioning, happy families.

How we behave and speak to and with one another is a choice within our control. Taking responsibility for our own actions and our role within a relationship is critical, yet we all know how easy it is to blame others without looking inward. How might you or your loved ones have responded in the above scenario?

Given the exhaustion, heat, frustration and more, it would have been very easy to lose control and respond with anger or blame. These are very normal reactions and, when you're upset, it's easy to react without much thought. Learning to not merely react but to intentionally take a step back, breathe and calm yourself before responding, can dramatically change what happens next, within that moment, the ensuing few hours and the entire vacation. Taking the time to respond intentionally can help you feel calmer and better about yourself emotionally, be physically healthier, and actually lengthen your life. Relationships can be strengthened, and feeling both valued and validated, each partner can feel safer and more loved. Given these benefits, here are some very simple tools for helping you achieve these goals.

1. Most people don't breathe effectively, especially when stressed. You forget to breathe, hold your breath or hyperventilate, neither taking in nor letting out the air in your lungs in a way that calms you down and does so quickly. Breathing is typically automatic; you're generally not aware of or thinking about your breathing. Good and effective breathing techniques, which take under five minutes to learn, can have dramatic and life-changing effects. Not bad for something so simple. I witness the positive ben-

not wait until it becomes red, because by this point it's already too late and responding now may prove dangerous (getting hit from behind, for example).

So too, in order to respond intentionally in a relationship, you must be aware of when you're just starting to get angry or upset. If you only notice "when the light is red," you find yourself going quickly from being "fine" to furious, without the awareness that you passed through a previous stage (the yellow light) during which the anger or upset began.

Responding "at the red light" of your anger means you're not noticing what is going on in your own body, not noticing that you're starting to get upset until it is too late, when you may already have reached the point of no return with your anger. So, to first have the awareness of the onset of anger, equivalent to a light turning yellow, you must notice the changes occurring in your body as you are getting angrier. Are your hands clenched, does your throat tighten, your pulse increase, your voice get louder, or do you perspire and lean forward as if to attack? Everyone experiences frustration differently. Once you train yourself to be constantly aware of what you are feeling in your body, you can remain calm and be connected with your partner in a healthier way.

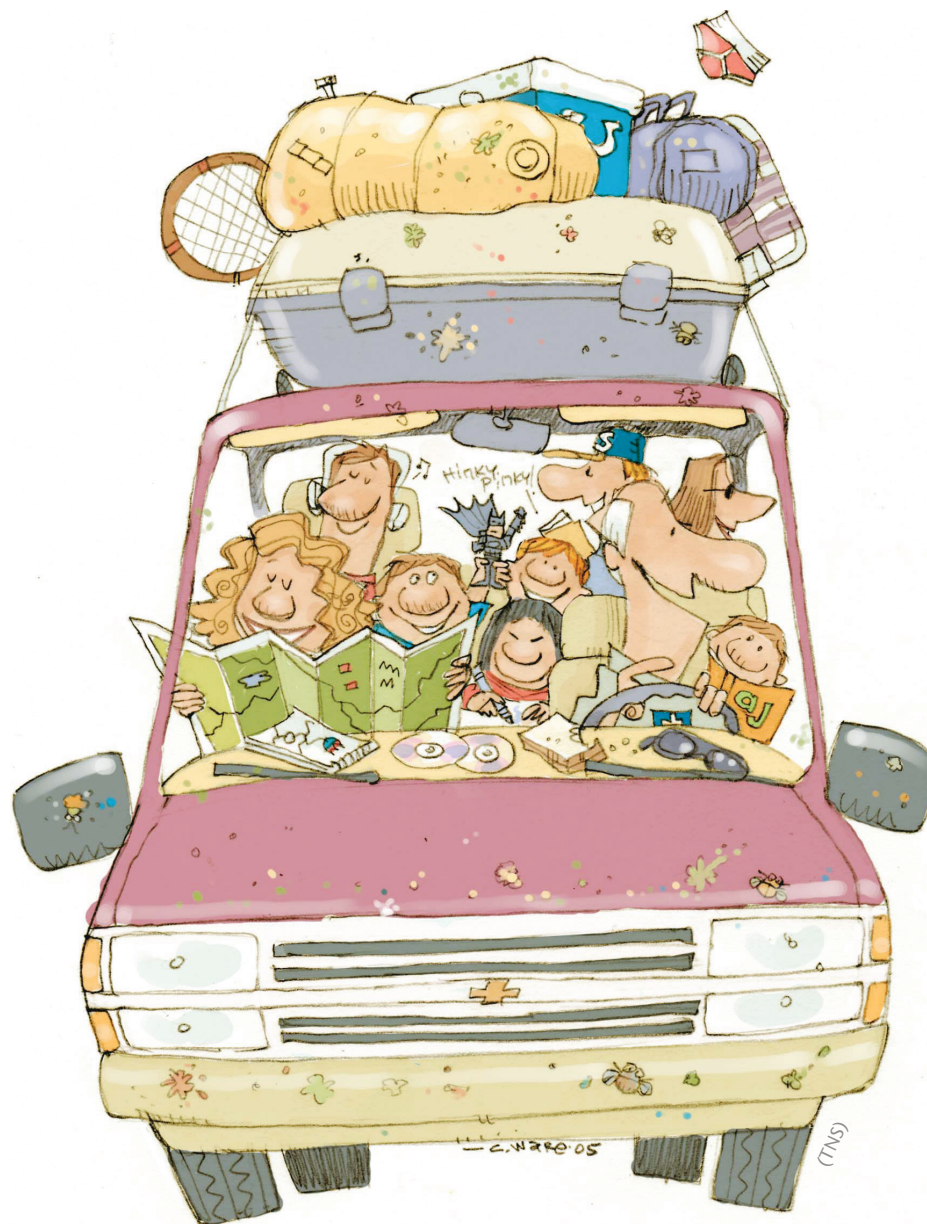
3. Finally, ask yourself a few questions that can quickly enable you to assess just how to proceed. For example, how important will this be in three years? For our stranded couple, the answer was obvious – not important at all. In three years, if they even remember, they would either have learned to be more attentive with the code for the car or would laugh at the mishap.

A similar question is to ask yourself, honestly, on a scale of zero to 10 (with 10 being super important and zero being not at all significant), how important is this incident when compared to what you would define as your "10"? If we set 10, for example, as terminal illness or suffering, forgetting the code to the car may rank no more than a 2, and thus is not at all worth stressing about.

Our friends have been married 23 years. They are on the same team – a team that is as solid and sweet together now as when they first got married. Heading into the fall after

a long hot summer, when some are grateful for the start of a new school year and others need a vacation, take the opportunity to stop, think and learn from my friends. Breathe deeply, examine each of your relationships, treat others as you would like to be treated, forgive them for their imperfections and move on. It is worth it!

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efit of patients being more focused and mindful of their feelings, actions, and behavior on a daily basis.

2. Next, you cannot be calm and stressed at the same time. These are feelings at opposite ends of the same continuum. So by learning how to calm yourself when you start to feel stressed, you can perform certain responses and various relaxation techniques, that will immediately lower your arousal level and put you in a better place.

Imagine yourself driving a car. You know that a green light changes to red, but only after it first becomes yellow. Your job, as a good driver is to identify and respond (stop) when the light turns yellow, and