

Self-care is good care

Dealing with anger and anxiety



THE DOCTOR IS IN
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Already late, toting a mug of tea, a tall glass of water and my cellphone, I went to sit down and log on for my two-hour Zoom meeting. I saw it coming, but too late to do much. My entire glass of water went flying onto my computer, keyboard and mouse.

The desk was drenched, and I literally held up the three items, allowing water to fall out of the keys. In despair and not knowing whether to laugh or cry, I briefly smiled at the stupidity of it all and tried to remain positive as I ran to get towels. Sopping up the mess, I advised my colleague that I would be late.

I finally logged on to our Zoom meeting only to discover that the document we were working on had totally vanished. It had completely disappeared, and in its place all I got was an error message. OMG! Now what was I going to do?

Many people, far more knowledgeable than me, might press a series of random keys, and without thinking twice, be back in business in no time. My first thought was that I needed an emergency shout-out to “our computer guy” in the hopes that he could save me, because the one thing I know with 100% certainty is that I know almost nothing about computers.

Technology scares me – usually with good reason. My husband says I’m dangerous when I stray from my comfort zone on the computer, and I must reluctantly admit, on this he is right. He is also right that liquids do not belong anywhere near the computer, but clearly, I don’t always listen.

Years ago – while typing up my doctoral dissertation for publication and after having spent many hours on data entry – with absolutely no warning, little happy faces (the 1980s version of an emoji that somehow was supposed to represent an error) started dancing across my computer screen. Then, with all of the suddenness with which these little creatures appeared, my many hours of hard work disappeared. Lost!

The disappearance was so traumatic that to this day I am reluctant to touch any button on my computer whose purpose is unknown to me. I watch my children press any and all buttons, all the while thinking naively that everything is good in the world and that anything they do can be undone. That is because they have never seen those nasty happy faces dancing around on their screens merrily replacing their data. They have never experienced that sudden fear and horror that all is not right in the world and that nothing they can do will fix it.

TRAUMA CAN be defined as an event that overwhelms the nervous system. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. Trauma occurs when an event is over but the nervous system still thinks it is ongoing, and reacts accordingly. Adaptive behavior requires living life in-between events (such as we tried to do when missiles were raining down on us in Israel) and not connecting one incident to another, making them into one long, continuous, unending event. The latter response results in our “staying stuck” in the trauma.

In my example, little triggers arouse big fears. For example, even though my data was lost years ago and the happy dancing faces were a one-time event, pressing a button today might bring back fears of them returning to wipe out my work again. This could be enough to prevent me from exploring, just in case those faces suddenly return!

Today, as the glass tipped, while the image of little smiling faces never crossed my mind, the concern that I might lose all my work did. My initial instinct, rather, was to do something, anything, and in particular, to clean up the water. This meant pushing aside any negative thinking, such as, “What if I lost my important document?” Only after sopping up the water could I allow myself to think, while attempting to remain positive.

The evidence suggested that everything might be fine. I could open some things,



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(Christopher Ott/Unsplash)

albeit not the important document I needed for my meeting. Nonetheless, I forced myself to remain (remarkably) calm as I participated in the meeting without my document, and without knowing whether it could be retrieved. I automatically took a breath, grounded myself to stay focused, used positive self-talk and created a backup plan: If the document didn’t appear soon after the meeting ended, I would seek emergency help.

Spoiler as to how this ended: After the meeting, while still afraid to touch any key and risk forever losing my document, I tempted fate. I very reluctantly closed an “X” and with great trepidation tried a few keystrokes when, miraculously, I was somehow able to retrieve my document. Looking upward, I said a heartfelt prayer of gratitude. All would be good.

This story is just one example of how easily fear and anxiety can develop. Exposure to experiences and how you coped at the time (as a child or adult) will influence how you respond today and in the future. Your primitive nervous system (the limbic system) is not so specific as to selectively warn you only about the dangers of an identical event, but of any event that might be perceived as posing a similar threat.

SOMETIMES THE limbic system is correct, and you should be concerned. At other times it overgeneralizes and tells you to flee, fight or freeze, and possibly even to feign death when you don’t actually need to do anything. This may lead to unnecessary stress and anxiety, creating lots of undesirable emotional and physical symptoms, and resulting in anger turned inward or toward those you love. When you “get triggered,” you may inadvertently misinterpret responses that are not meant to cause you angst.

Your job is to become aware of when, why and how you get triggered by a “perceived” past threat. Then you must learn how to correctly respond so you can master your fear, reduce your anxiety, respond to your children or partner with love and care, and feel good about yourself. That is a tall order but the very foundation upon which you grow. |

Here’s a final example: When driving into the intersection where you had a previous accident, it is normal to feel a twinge or reminder of the past. “Mr. Checker,” the little figure I describe as sitting on your shoulder and whispering (or screaming) into your ear, says, “Hey remember this intersection, it’s dangerous!” You might be fine and ignore this unnecessary warning or you might panic. Your job is to discern if Mr. Checker is overreacting, and if so, thank him and continue driving.

For you to evaluate this correctly, you must be calm. When perceiving danger, whether real or imagined, the primitive or lower-functioning, more irrational brain automatically takes over and quickly responds. Imagine a predator suddenly appearing out of nowhere. You will either run very anxiously in the opposite direction, angrily attack, or freeze in your tracks.

Similarly, in a relationship, you might respond in a way that helps you avoid conflict, or by attacking, by acting helpless or becoming paralyzed with fear. If your partner has yelled at you in the past, even if he does not think he has, you may feel unsafe, overreact to his tone, or even avoid him altogether.

You can bring your brain back “online” and function rationally and reflectively by using your body’s own ability to restore calm (through proper breathing, positive statements, grounding, orienting techniques, and other stress-deescalating techniques). These tools are amazingly easy to learn and they work. Imagine not needing to avoid something because you are anxious, or feeling calm on the road, in a crowded theater, with your children and partner, and being able to let go of any anger. Imagine, too, how your physical health could change for the better as a result of greater inner calm.

Finally, recognizing your triggers, being mindful and aware of just how you are feeling, and actually being able to do something about it has the potential to not only be life-changing for yourself, but for those you love. ■

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