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Editorial musings

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It takes real courage these days to go to an airport and attempt to board a plane. I say “attempt” because, as those of us who have tried to fly recently have discovered, there is no guarantee that you will be able to board that plane or that the plane will actually leave the airport. All too often, as I found, that dreaded “cancelled” message appears just an hour or so before the plane is due to depart. And there you sit, stranded and abandoned.

It's not fun, no question about it. But thinking about my own reaction to seeing my planned flights cancelled not once, but twice, has led me to consider reactions to stress in a more general sense. We all know the physical reactions: an increase in heart rate, sometimes a beginning headache, muscle tension, upset stomach. No doubt at some point we've also witnessed the emotional reactions of some people, including shouting, visible anger, and on occasion, physical violence or threats thereof. Those who react in that way are usually unaware that they have the choice of controlling that reaction—which seldom if ever yields a positive result—and redirecting their frustration and

energies into an effective solution to the problem. The question is, then, how do we control and redirect our own negative emotions?

The answer is to become more rational. “Oh sure,” I hear you sneer. “And just how do I do that when I’m mad as hell and have decided not to take it anymore?” Believe it or not, we all have the ability to retrain our responses and redirect them into paths that will keep us calm and ultimately deal successfully with whatever is causing our stress, anger, and frustration. The key question to ask ourselves when anger threatens to take over is, “What good will this do?” Or, rephrased, “Will my anger solve this problem?” The answer is usually “no.” So then, what do we do instead?

I’m a believer in self-talk, asking questions of oneself and then answering them. When my flights were cancelled, for example, I felt the usual and predictable surge of anger and frustration. But I already knew that these emotions would exhaust me without solving the problem. So I asked myself, “How can I redirect the energy that this anger generates into finding a solution?” And with that, I went to work. First I tried to email the airlines, to no avail. Then I tried telephoning all five preferred numbers, again to no avail. And at last, I decided that going out to the airport where I could actually talk to a real person was most likely that best solution. Once I arrived to the airport, I did indeed find a person who was happy to try to help me. I remained calm, controlled, and always polite, because rationally, I knew that would bring about the swiftest solution. Would uncontrolled anger get me where I wanted to go? Of course not! But self-control and politeness always go a long way to finding the required solution—and that is exactly what happened. We found a new flight and the problem was solved.

As I have learned over years of practicing this rational approach, a history of success in finding solutions provides its own positive reinforcement for the process of channelling emotion into rationality. We find out very quickly that emotion is quick and easy, but any solution remains elusive. Applying logic and reason, in contrast, takes some deliberate effort, but that much-needed solution becomes attainable. When we put this principle into practice several times over, we feel encouraged to be rational; and after a while, being rational becomes a happy habit that helps us to solve problems more quickly than emotional responses ever can. And at the same time, we can avoid the exhaustion that uncontrolled emotion always leads to, without anything productive to show for it.

I've used airline frustration as my most recent example, but the approach I'm suggesting works well with any stressful and frustrating situation. I know I can't convince people just by writing this little essay, but people can convince themselves if they'll just give it a try. Control that emotional surge in the knowledge that it won't solve the problem. Instead, take a deep breath, vow to approach the problem in a rational manner, and then take your saved energy and put it to work to tackle the problem. See for yourself! It's truly amazing how much control we can gain over ourselves when, first, we realize that we can do this, and second, when we see how much more effectively we can solve our own problems.

Bio

Dr. Kendra Gaines is the Editor-in-Chief of the IJHC. A professor with appointments at multiple universities, she is known for her clear and uncompromising writing.

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