



BLOG

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reversing adversity



HOW TO CALM DOWN



by Carolyn Spring

I was brimming. And I hated it. I hated being upset. The surge of emotion through my body. Being out of control. The pounding heart, the air being crushed out of my chest, the pain-stretchy zinginess in my arms and legs, and the scream ... the lacerating, shrill shriek of a scream in my head.

Ugh. Emotions.

There are generally two ways we can respond when we get upset: up, or down.

When we respond 'up' we go into the amber zone, into a flight or fight reaction. That's the heart-pump. It's the zing. It's the scream. It's the alien-bursting-out-of-your-chest feeling. It's fast and high and hard and screamy. It is an imperative to *act*, to *do something*: to lash out, to speak out, to dash out, to knock someone's lights out.

Or we can 'down' into the red zone, into freeze. Everything goes still and vacant. Things feel a long way away. Time slows down. The body drifts away. Numbness takes over. It's the dissociative response. Can't deal with it? Switch channels. It's the imperative to not be there: to check out, to zone out, to numb out, to pass out.

That's how I used to experience upset. When someone said something hurtful, when something 'bad' happened, when life didn't go to plan: up into amber, or down into red. Lash out, dash out, check out or pass out.

It took a long time for me to find the third way. Growing up, my education in emotion had been somewhat lacking. I didn't know how to 'do' feelings. I could cheer when my team scored a goal, but most other emotions were beyond me. And when I got upset, I simply didn't know what to do.



1



HOW TO CALM DOWN



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When I was 17, I was driving back from the doctor's in the next village. There's a turn in the road, through ninety degrees. The right of way is with the bend, and a minor road carries on straight ahead. In other words, you turn to the right but you're keeping on the same route. If you want to go straight ahead, that's when you indicate and turn off. The road was clearly marked, the signs very visible. All locals knew about it. I had always known about it.

But on this grey afternoon, as I started back home, a car approaching from the minor road ignored the 'Give way' and nearly ploughed straight into me. I swerved to avoid them. And then off they went, as if nothing had just happened. As if they hadn't just nearly run me off the road.

I was furious. I went into amber. Adrenaline surged through me. Out of nowhere, I needed to put right this wrong. And so a quick U-turn and I chased them off down the street.

My intention was just to point out to them the error of their ways. Maybe to elicit an apology. *To put it right*. I didn't realise how much injustice was frothing up inside me, triggered by this innocent (although irresponsible) mistake. It was as if, all of a sudden, all the wrongs that had ever been done to me in all my life (and there were a lot) needed righting. Now. Right now. By this couple. By this *elderly couple*.

So I followed them and flashed them and honked them and gesticulated furiously to them to pull over. They didn't. With my front brain offline, I couldn't mentalise and see it from their perspective. Perhaps they were oblivious to their wrongdoing. And all of a sudden a road-rage car was charging along behind them, insisting that they pull over. In their situation, would you pull over?

So on they drove. And on I followed them. For twenty miles. Until, evidently terrified (this occurred to me only later) they pulled into the car park of a police station. Suddenly we were both arguing the point at the front desk. Gradually it began to dawn on me that I had gone too far, and I agreed with the police officer that maybe we should just both be on our way and let bygones be bygones. And off I drove. A twenty minute trip to the doctor's had turned into an epic two hour rage. And I realised, for the first time in my life, that I had emotions, and that I didn't know how to handle them.

Fortunately, I've never done anything like that again. But it was a wake-up call. The problem with that wake-up call was that I had no idea what to do about it. It wasn't until I was in therapy that I was able to begin to learn how to manage my feelings and what to do when I was upset.

More commonly in my life, I've gone into the red zone of freeze when upset. I've



HOW TO CALM DOWN



by Carolyn Spring

shut down, checked out and numbed the feelings away. Then instead my emotions would manifest through my body, with constant sickness and pain instead. On the whole I didn't even feel the feelings in the first place – I just somatised them.

It took a long time for me to learn an alternative, and it took a lot of practice for it to become automatic and habitual. But here's what I do.

First of all, I stop. And I notice. I notice that I'm upset. I notice that I'm having a reaction. And I literally say to myself, in my head, 'Stop!' Because emotions are guides for action, and so the immediate reflex is to *do something*. We feel a feeling, and we act on it: both in terms of actually carrying out a behaviour, or the passive response of withdrawing inside and dissociating.

It doesn't really matter which I'm triggered to do: the first thing I say to myself is, 'Stop!'

It's like trying to pause a stopwatch. 'Let's just wait a few seconds before we respond. Let's assess what's going on. Let's *just notice*.'

What am I upset about? What has just happened? What feelings am I having? What are they making me want to do?

I ask myself these questions and then say again, 'Stop.'

And then I breathe.

Being upset is a physical phenomenon, not just an emotional one. Our emotions are experienced and expressed through our bodies. We may tend to focus just on the stream of thoughts that is immediately flooding our minds, but the biggest battle is with our bodies. It's with the rush of stress hormones that have been released into our bloodstream. They're either inviting us to take action with fight or flight, or they're altering our consciousness, with freeze. Being upset is a physical thing.

So I engage with it on a physical level, by breathing.

Breathing sits on the interface between our conscious, voluntary nervous system, and our unconscious, involuntary nervous system. We breathe both intentionally and without awareness. We won't ever forget to breathe, but we sometimes need to remember to breathe.

If our body is in control of our actions, our breath will tell the story. Has it gone shallow and fast? Has it gone vacuous and empty, like there's no oxygen in the air? Our breathing will change, but we can take control of it and we can choose how to breathe.

And so I breathe. Deep, slow, diaphragmatic breathing, sucking the air all the way through into my belly and letting



HOW TO CALM DOWN



by Carolyn Spring

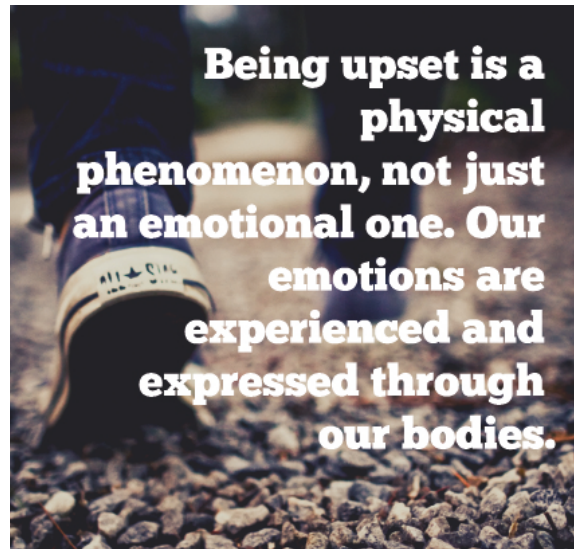
it out slowly, deliberately. Slowing it down. Focusing my attention on it.

It helps that I practice 'belly breathing' every single day, when I'm not upset. It means that I have the muscle memory for it, and a part of my brain knows that when I do this, things calm down. So I positively trigger myself into calmness as soon as I start to breathe deeply.

It's not easy to focus on my breath when I'm upset, because thoughts stampede through my head. I relive what just happened, or was said. I imagine worst-case scenarios of the consequences of this event. I rehearse a dozen conversations. I desperately try to think of a solution, something to make it all be better and to go away. That is my uninterrupted default, unless I say, 'Stop!' and remember to breathe.

I used to try to think it through. I'd engage in the chatter in my head. I'd jump into the middle of the stampede. If anyone were around, I'd talk non-stop to them about it. I'd churn out words and thoughts and feelings and *blah-blah-blah* hoping that by doing so I'd suddenly feel better. But more often than not, I'd just make things worse. It was like I was whipping up the stampede into more and more of a frenzy.

Instead, I learned to stop and to breathe. When we're upset, our front, thinking brain starts to go offline. We don't have the clarity of thought, the detachment,



the objectivity, the mentalising that we should have. Our thoughts race because they are being charged by stress hormones like adrenaline and noradrenaline. What I eventually realised was that whatever I thought, whatever conclusion I came to, whatever decision I made whilst in that state, would invariably be a bad one. Because most of my wise front brain was offline. Engaging with a stampede is not the way to calm a stampede. You have to let it pass.

So instead I learned to just notice the stampede of thoughts in my head, but not engage with them. And keep on drawing my attention back to my breath. *In, out, in out*, over and over again. Every second my focus would be drawn back to the stampede. As often as I realised, I would draw it back to my breath.

'Okay, stop, breathe, and let's calm it down,' became my mantra. My goal was



HOW TO CALM DOWN



by Carolyn Spring

to calm my body, reduce the flow of stress hormones, and bring my front brain back online. Until then, my deal with myself is that I will do nothing. I will not act. I will not react. I will not lash out, dash out, check out or pass out.

And I will certainly not act out. I just need to wait for the stampede to pass.

It sounds easy. It's not. It's really, really not.

Sometimes the stampede just keeps coming. And not just for minutes, but for hours. The hardest thing is to stop and to breathe and to just notice and to do nothing. I still fail at it. And every time I do, I regret it. Afterwards, when I've reacted rather than reflected, I realise that I've got it wrong, that it would have been so much better if I had waited until things were calm and then to have made a decision.

When something really big has happened, I try to insist to myself that I at least sleep on it before I do anything. I also have other checks in place: don't act, don't react until I've talked to one of my key people – team members, mentors, friends.

One of the hardest things of waiting until you're calm before you react is that, if the situation involves another person, they're rarely patient enough

to wait for your response. They've sent you an angry email, which has upset you. And you stop and you breathe and you wait, maybe for several hours, maybe overnight. But in the meantime they are incensed at your lack of response. They send another angry email, and another. They accuse you of stonewalling them. They get angrier and angrier.

But taking responsibility for my own reactions means that I can't act until I'm calm. And I can't be harried into it by the impatience of someone else. I have to act out of calm rationality, not a hot head. They're responsible for their emotions, and I'm responsible for mine.

Sometimes, of course, it's not that easy, because we're not afforded the luxury of time. It's a crisis situation and we *need* to act quickly. If this is really the case (and actually it's relatively rare) then the same principles apply. The better you are at managing lower-level upset, the better you'll be at employing the same strategies when something big hits. And if there isn't time to calm down, then all we can do is react the best way we know how, and be gracious towards ourselves afterwards. Beating ourselves up is never helpful.

Other things I find helpful when there is time to manage our reaction is to write. To splurge it all out on paper. I had to learn not to make the mistake of writing it into an email or a social media post



HOW TO CALM DOWN



by Carolyn Spring



(Mr Trump, take note). I find writing most useful when it's a situation that requires a quick response, and I write to formulate a list of options for that response. I write out the potential consequences of each option. I don't indulge myself by rehearsing my hurt: I focus on moving the thing forwards. By tomorrow, the hurt won't hurt quite as much. It'll be fine to deal with in the cold light of day. If it's an emergency situation, I need to act – sympathy (especially self-compassion) can come later.

And I stretch. I get up from my desk and I stretch out my long muscles. It's often remarkably effective at dissipating some of the effects of the stress hormones. My emotions are signalling to my body to do something, and here I am, doing something. If I need more, I move more

actively: go for a walk, do some cardio, lift some weights. It's a way of giving my body what it wants (action) without acting rashly or before I'm ready to.

How do I know when I'm ready to respond? When I'm calm. When my heart rate is back to normal. When my head is clear. When I can think about the situation without the sudden backdraft of feeling. When I can think through different options, and anticipate the consequences of each, and weigh it appropriately. When I can reflect, rather than react.

So that's what I practically do to calm down when I'm upset. I'm still not very good at it. But I've been getting better. *Stop, breathe, move, react.* It helps! •

