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The Voices in My Head

Skills and Professional Development





Have you ever been out shopping or running errands and witnessed public discord between a couple? My husband and I have. In a lobby, we saw a woman turn from her conversation with someone to scold her husband for engaging in a conversation with another father instead of watching their young children. Granted, this was a brief glimpse of their lives, but it reminded us how public chastisement of a spouse can leave those watching with a bad impression. When we arrived home, we were still discussing it. I remarked to my husband, “Aren’t you glad we have a harmonious marriage?”

He replied with a grin, “Well, *mostly* harmonious.”

Indignantly, I replied, “What do you mean, *mostly* harmonious?”

He laughed, and then realizing that my immediate response just proved his point, I laughed as well.

Being “mostly harmonious” in any relationship is probably the best that many of us can and should work toward, given that we all walk around with our own internal plans, needs, wants, goals, and agendas.

In 2015, Disney released the Pixar animated movie *Inside Out*, which told the story of a young girl’s adjustment to her family’s cross-country move. In the film, five emotions (Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust) were personified. They guided the girl through the move to San Francisco and her struggle to adjust to her new environment. The movie illustrated that every situation requires a balancing of numerous emotions — or numerous voices in one’s head. It reminded the viewer that the balance or imbalance of those emotions drives one’s reactions. It also creatively showed how memories can also factor into our personalities and reactions.

Emotional awareness is an important, yet often overlooked, tool in life. Being cognizant of the emotional balancing act in our heads and taming those inner voices is a constant struggle as we interact daily with people at home, at the store, at the office, and in social settings.

Imagine a CEO who is hellbent on suing a competitor despite the lawsuit having a very poor chance of success. How can an in-house counsel overcome the CEO's emotions of fear and anger, which tag-team to drive the voice in his head? As CEO, his emotions affect the entire office, and it becomes hard not to let his reaction set the mood.

One of the biggest challenges when dealing with people's defensive, inflammatory, or spiteful reactions is to not allow their behavior to influence your responses. Negativism and insecurity breed contempt all too easily. I have found myself uttering programmed replies to certain people simply because I anticipate their damaging behavior. In those situations, I find myself letting the voices in that person's head influence me.

I constantly have to remind myself that I control my reactions — to everyone, to everything — all the time. By seeing someone else's behavior as "happening to me," I am viewing it from the wrong perspective. As opposed to the old saying: "It's not you, it's me," it's actually her or him. When someone approaches me with an attitude or reaction clearly driven by anger, fear, or even disgust, I need to remember to take a deep breath and step back. Or better yet, take a short walk before hitting send on that email or text or picking up the phone. Let the dust settle a little and quiet the voices that I perceive in their head and in mine. My husband wisely gave me a list of questions to mentally answer before responding or reacting to the behavior of others, especially in difficult situations:

- What reaction or response will move this relationship forward (or at least not set it back)?
- Does this need to be said?
- Does this to be said by me?
- Does this need to be said by me right now?

If I cannot answer yes to all these questions, perhaps it's best not to respond at all. Sometimes doing nothing and saying nothing can be the biggest challenge. It's human nature to want to set people straight or "fight back." However, we need to realize that the timing and tone of our response are key factors affecting the path forward for every interaction. Words, just like music, can be harmonious or discordant. We may not all be musicians, but we all have the ability to influence the composition of the voices both inside and outside our heads. Remember that music soothes the savage beast, both inside and out. So, take the time to properly listen and tune those voices.

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