

Impulse Control

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

Whose patience hasn't been sorely tested by a computer? The other day my laptop was insistent about giving me an error message, accompanied by a dull "clang!" that sounded like the closing of a prison door, every time I tried to access my e-mail. Thoroughly frustrated, I threatened to throw the machine into a leaf shredder. I never imagined this threat would carry such force. The e-mail program immediately opened and has worked flawlessly ever since.

Unfortunately, many computers do not display such discretion. I have heard of machines being attacked by hammers or smashed on the floor when frustrated users lost their cool. The ability to refrain from working out your anger on inanimate objects—or worse, your dog, spouse, or child—is called impulse control. One doesn't have to be a psychiatrist to note that this aspect of self-regulation often is in short supply these days.

Many of us have observed, been the objects of, or succumbed to road rage. In its worst expressions, people have been injured or killed in traffic accidents. A few have been murdered in their cars. Road rage is a common—and dangerous—consequence of someone's failure to control his or her impulses. Its danger is compounded by the fact that the enraged person is at the wheel of a two-ton blunt instrument.

Angry or violent impulses may be regulated externally (e.g., by a police officer with a Taser) or internally, by training. Obviously, it's best to work on these issues from within before a breakdown in impulse control results in embarrassing legal or unalterably tragic circumstances.

When I was a child, I used to hear people talk about “counting to ten.” It was good advice then and continues to be so now. It’s amazing how helpful it is to put just that little distance between the precipitating event and our response to it. It may mean the difference between smashing the computer on the floor and waiting for your grandchild to fix it. On the highway, it may mean the difference between life and death.

Another bit of hoary advice that I continue to find useful is “Bite your tongue.” In literal practice this may be painful, but hastily spoken words can inflict more pain. Like an e-mail sent in the heat of the moment, such words cannot be retrieved. “Go for a walk”; “Chop some wood”; “Take a cold shower”; “Just say ‘No!’” All this advice seems trite, but such strategies may turn out to be lifesavers in situations where giving in to an impulse could change your life forever—and not for the best.

Impulse control has its origins in earliest childhood: “You cannot open your presents until Christmas”; “Susie was playing with that toy. You can’t just grab it away from her”; “Your bedtime is eight o’clock.” Self-control, respect for others, and a healthy work ethic all begin to emerge before a child ever enters the structured environment of a classroom. It should come as no surprise that parents who are unable or unwilling to establish structure, routines, and reasonable expectations in their households rear offspring with poor impulse control.

None of us is immune to situations that try our patience or tempt us to say or do something we might later regret. The ability to respond to such situations in a healthy way is called maturity. Maturity isn’t magically attained in the late teens or early twenties. Rather it is taught and modeled during every stage

of a child's development. So the next time you feel like smashing your computer, you may want to think first about who might be watching and learning from you the virtue of impulse control.

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