

## We're on Our Worst Behavior

But do we handle them well? When talking turns tough, do we pause, take a deep breath, announce to our inner selves, “Uh-oh, this discussion is crucial. I'd better pay close attention” and then trot out our best behavior? Or when we're anticipating a potentially dangerous discussion, do we step up to it rather than scamper away? Sometimes. Sometimes we boldly step up to hot topics, monitor our behavior, and offer up our best work. We mind our Ps and Qs. Sometimes we're just flat-out good.

And then we have the rest of our lives. These are the moments when, for whatever reason, we either anticipate a crucial conversation or are in the middle of one and we're at our absolute worst—we yell; we withdraw; we say things we later regret. When conversations matter the most—that is, when conversations move from casual to crucial—we're generally on our worst behavior.

Why is that?

*We're designed wrong.* When conversations turn from routine to crucial, we're often in trouble. That's because emotions don't exactly prepare us to converse effectively. Countless generations of genetic shaping drive humans to handle crucial conversations with flying fists and fleet feet, not intelligent persuasion and gentle attentiveness.

For instance, consider a typical crucial conversation. Someone says something you disagree with about a topic that matters a great deal to you and the *hairs* on the back of your neck stand up. The hairs you can handle. Unfortunately, your body does more. Two tiny organs seated neatly atop your kidneys pump adrenaline into your bloodstream. You don't *choose* to do this. Your adrenal glands do it, and then you have to live with it.

And that's not all. Your brain then diverts blood from activities it deems nonessential to high-priority tasks such as hitting and running. Unfortunately, as the large muscles of the arms and legs get *more* blood, the higher-level reasoning sections of your brain get *less*. As a result, you end up facing challenging conversations with the same equipment available to a rhesus monkey.

*We're under pressure.* Let's add another factor. Crucial conversations are frequently spontaneous. More often than not, they come out of nowhere. And since you're caught by surprise, you're forced to conduct an extraordinarily complex human interaction in real time—no books, no coaches, and certainly no short breaks while a team of therapists runs to your aid and pumps you full of nifty ideas.

What *do* you have to work with? The issue at hand, the other person, and a brain that's preparing to fight or take flight. It's little wonder that we often say and do things that make perfect sense in the moment, but later on seem, well, stupid.

“What was I thinking?” you wonder.

The truth is, you were real-time multitasking with a brain that was working another job. You're lucky you didn't suffer a stroke.

*We're stumped.* Now let's throw in one more complication. You don't know where to start. You're making this up as you go along because you haven't often seen real-life models of effective communication skills. Let's say that you actually planned for a tough conversation—maybe you've even mentally rehearsed. You feel prepared, and you're as cool as a cucumber. Will you succeed? Not necessarily. You can still screw up, because practice doesn't make perfect; *perfect* practice makes perfect.

This means that first you have to know what to practice. Sometimes you don't. After all, you may have never actually seen how a certain problem is best handled. You may have seen what *not* to do—as modeled by a host of friends, colleagues, and, yes, even your parents. In fact, you may have sworn time and again not to act the same way.

Left with no healthy models, you're now more or less stumped. So what do you do? You do what most people do. You wing it. You piece together the words, create a certain mood, and otherwise make up what you think will work—all the while multiprocessing with a half-starved brain. It's little wonder that when it matters the most, we're often at our worst behavior.

*We act in self-defeating ways.* In our doped-up, dumbed-down state, the strategies we choose for dealing with our crucial conversations are perfectly designed to keep us from what we actually want. We're our own worst enemies—and we don't even realize it.