

Dial Down Reactive Behavior—Theirs and Ours!

September 16, 2013 by [Mary Fowler](#)

You might have heard the old joke about the guy who goes up to a doctor at a party. "Doc," he says as he pokes his stomach, "Whenever I touch this spot it hurts. What should I do?"

"Stop touching it," the doctor replies. We laugh at the slapstick humor with its obvious simplistic solution for the suffering man's dilemma. Yet, somehow, when it comes to classroom management or working with a challenging student, we know we shouldn't do a lot of the things we do that poke an already delicate situation. Nonetheless, when buttons get pushed, we feel the unpleasant sensation that follows and get triggered into reaction. I know. I had Section 8C. Believe me—there was a whole lot of touchy-feely sensation going on with that class.

Reactions happen to the best of us. Why don't we do better, presuming we know better? What can teachers do to dial down reactive, knee-jerk behavior? How can we help students become less reactive as well? If only the answer were as simple as "STOP."

Why We React—the Legacy of Fear, Inaccurate Appraisal, Attitude, Attribution, Judgment, Belief, and Being Confounded!

The day I declared "zero tolerance" on Section 8C, I'd had enough of their behavior. At the time, I simply didn't know what else to do. Everything that I'd tried in other classes and other schools and with some really difficult learners wasn't working with this group!

After months of deep digging into my bag of tricks, reaching out to colleagues for suggestions, and still coming up short in my attempt to sustain a productive learning environment, I arrived one cold winter morning and laid down the newly revised rules of engagement: "You so much as look like you are not working and..."

By the end of class, a small group of students remained. During my prep period, the vice principal appeared with the pink stack of "write ups" in hand.

"Are you having a bad day?" she asked.

"No," I answered with wide-eyed assurance. "Why do you ask?"

"You don't normally kick students out of class."

True enough. Nor did I typically judge students as "bad" or "incorrigible" or "opportunistic," the polite expression for the worn belief of "give 'em an inch and they'll take a mile." In this case, I did begin to take their behavior personally. *After all*, I reasoned, *I care about these kids. Have their best interests at heart. They're just plain disrespectful.*

That word, that label "disrespectful," turned out to be the wolf in this sheep's clothing. It colored my attitude and wrapped my mental energy into what they should be doing. All the *you shoulds* spawned a power-and-control cycle. After enough battles, I assigned a motive to their disrespect: *deliberate.*

Now, I was justifiable angry and fed up with the defiance. Occasionally, I suspected that some of these students were out to get me. This was not supposed to happen to me! Sure, I'd known colleagues who'd been put through the mill, but me! Seriously? I had the "outstanding" checks on teacher evaluations.

This "deliberately disrespectful" attribution I attached to their behavior began to play on my last nerve. I'd tricked myself into believing that desperate times called for desperate measures.

In my heart, I knew "zero tolerance" wasn't a solution. "I'm open to suggestions," I said to the vice principal.

For the next few days, the vice principal sat in on the class, the exemplar of "the higher authority." After she made an example of a few key players, the class settled down. We managed to get through almost three weeks of instruction with minor disruption. The problem was far from over.

Reactive "discipline" methods may give us some control in the short haul. The momentary "success" may reinforce the belief that the method works. Still, when the effects turn out to be short-lived, we usually fault the student rather than make a course-of-action correction.

As I came to learn, the problem with 8C had little to do with disrespect, insubordination, a lack of regard for authority, defiance, or the desire for power and control. Their behavior was reactive and needs based. That's why the measures taken by me and subsequently by the vice principal to get Section 8C to behave did not stand a chance of going the distance. Why?

Highly stressed learners who flood easily have poor threat appraisal systems. They do not respond to reactive discipline methods—no matter how good we adults get at applying them.

In the next post in this series, I'll share more about Section 8C and how and why they were reacting to the stress in their lives.



Core Stability: What I Didn't Know About Section 8C

September 17, 2013 by [Mary Fowler](#)

I should tell you now that what happened in the end with Section 8C could be called a success story. That class turned out to be my most defining experience in education. Educators knew so little back then about the brain or stress reactions. I flew by the seat of my pants, followed my gut, and remained determined to reach and teach this group of learners. To do that, I had to *feel* them, to *sense* them, and what might set them off.

In this class of 28 learners, most of these students had rich histories of adverse childhood experiences. The child study team (CST) might easily have classified 10 as emotionally disturbed. Mental health professionals might diagnose them with post traumatic stress reaction or some other mental disorder. Believe me, there were so many times I wanted the CST to take these kids, fix them, and send them back in a "teachable" condition. How I laugh at this reaction now!

For children with these biographies, it is essential to understand the stress reaction and how to dial it down—for their well-being and for the health of the entire school community. Stress reactive behavior—theirs or ours—especially in high-risk environments significantly affects culture, climate, learning, and performance. Highly stressed learners operate with a volatile dynamic. They generally overestimate the severity of threat and underestimate their resources. Instead of developing as resilient learners, Section 8C students and the like become ardent survivors who defend, guard, and crackle quickly. They frequently avoid tasks and often escalate behavior to escape or deflect triggers and the ensuing unpleasant sensations that follow being offset.

If I only knew then that threat and trauma are initially experienced as a *felt sense* in the body, our turnaround moment might have occurred before April. Think about the last time something scared you and how you physically felt afterward. Sick to your stomach? Cramp in your neck? Headache? Shaky? As adults, we make up stories to explain our stress reactions. Children do not. They remain true to the felt sensation of what's happening. They generally discharge behaviorally to stop the discomfort or distress.

Whenever we sense threat, real or perceived, an unimaginable amount of neurons fire to flood our entire body with stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenalin. This neurochemical cascade shuts down all nonessential body-brain activities to increase the functions we need to survive the unfolding

drama. Heart rates increase. Oxygen to the brain decreases, because we don't need to think deeply, speak soliloquies, or set future goals and make plans for how to achieve them. Muscles tighten and backs hunch to protect vital organs (Sapolsky, 2004). Fight, flee, and freeze are the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) reactions that are commonly associated with the threat reaction.

There is a fourth reaction that frequently gets overlooked when helping students dial down reaction. The parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) also rises to the threatening occasion with a hormonal release. It arouses our executive brain network to appraise the threat for survival data: How dangerous is it? Where's the safest escape route? Do I have what I need to beat this threat? Is this a monster in my bedroom or is it the shadow of my teddy bear looking larger than a grizzly?

"Appraisal, the fourth reaction, is essential, especially for youth. It is the stillness in the eye of the storm, that state of calm awareness that gives us the ability to discern what is safe and what is dangerous even during a threat exposure" (Macy, 2009).

Basically, the SNS gives us the strength we need to survive the threat. The PNS helps us keep our appraisal wits about us to determine the degree of danger and the amount of resources we have to deal with the threat and begin seeking safety.

This delicate balance of arousal, appraisal, and reaction-action works like a finely tuned violin unless the severity or load of psychosocial stressors is overwhelming. Without the benefit of protective factors and resources, the appraisal process defaults to knee-jerk reactive behavior. The actions that follow usually lack the finer qualities of effective problem solving: thoughtfulness, responsiveness, creativity, and discernment.

Elevated stress reactivity can also alter our chemistry. Long periods of high stress, or an acute or sudden traumatic event, can raise the body's stress chemical baseline. We can become accustomed to the *feel* of excess stress chemicals in our body and do things that keep the stress buzz going because it doesn't *feel* comfortable when we begin to lessen the gap between optimal stress level and elevated stress levels (McEwen, 2000). We may react to low-risk situations with high intensity and a lot of drama. If the "noise" gets too low, such as during quiet seat work, expect a highly stressed student to create drama.

Without realizing, I expected an awful lot of emotional control from Section 8C. For many of them, language arts literacy had been a land of no return on investment. They sensed trouble everywhere. Life-overloaded, skill-deficient, and needing to protect the "warrior" image to save emotional face,

these learners did not want to take risks, especially in public. In addition, a lot of the emotional and thematic content in the literature we read mirrored the conflict in their lives. It triggered their mainstay survival strategy: disrupt to escape.

As author [Dan Goleman](#) noted in this simple, brilliant statement: "You can't learn with a hi-jacked brain." We can't teach with one either!

Reactive behavior has to calm before it becomes response-enabled. We may treat fire with fire in the wilderness, but in our school communities, we have to help students improve their appraisal systems and install more resources to extinguish any flames.

Core stability begins with this simple understanding: We have to help students hone their appraisal ability, identify safety zones, protective factors, and their natural resources. These are the fibers that build resilience. With awareness and compassion, designing such environments is simpler to create than it may seem.

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The Power of 3: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Dial Down Reaction

September 18, 2013 by [Mary Fowler](#)

"The more mindful we are, the more choices we have and the less reactive we become." —*Ellen Langer*

In my workshops, I often invite participants to draw a large circle on the back of my handouts. They listen diligently to the instructions. When complete, I ask everyone to hold their papers up so I can "check their circles." They then place the paper on a flat surface. "Now," I say, "put your forehead in the middle of the circle. Raise it up. Lower it down. Repeat. Keep repeating." That's what I call "mindlessness."

Using a combination of intervention and prevention strategies known to dial down reaction and build resource capacity, we can indeed help students and ourselves improve the ability to accurately assess threat potential, improve appraisal skills, and build the resource capacity to increase resilience.

Quiet the Biology to Manage Physical Sensations and Emotional Reactions

If you've ever been held hostage by the feel of "OMG" or the "what if" worries, then you understand what it feels like when threat-induced tension takes over your body and mind. You feel awful. You can't think straight. You react first and maybe later you think of the "could haves" and "should haves."

Reaction provides more than the sense that there's something we can do when we don't know what else to do. It's also a discharge behavior that relieves unpleasant physical sensations and emotions, especially anxiety and fear. This information explains a lot of what was behind the "seems" in Section 8C. Behavioral reflection didn't come easily to them. When reviewing a situation with a student, there was always a justified reason to blame behavior on what so and so did to force "me to do what I did, which I didn't do" or else I'd hear the perennial, "You're always accusing me!" They much preferred the safety of what they knew—default reaction.

A growing body of research provides evidence that a daily practice of stress reduction techniques, such as breathing and mindfulness, prove effective in reducing anxiety and behavior problems, improving emotional regulation, and increasing academic performance and attendance (Bradley, 2007; Zylowska, 2006).

I didn't know about "breathing" when I taught Section 8C. Subsequently, I came to know through personal recovery from traumatic experiences and studying mounds of research that the quickest way to lower unpleasant emotional and physical arousal is to stop and breathe. I began teaching this technique to students and then to teachers to use themselves and to teach to their students.

"Stop and Breathe" soothes the body and quiets the mind. Conscious, slow breathing increases oxygen, disperses stress chemical build up, and restores biological balance. Counting the breaths as we breathe in and out also makes it impossible to think about whatever caused the unpleasant sensation. The space created in between the arousal and the reaction enhances the ability to appraise a threat in a calmer, more rational manner. We develop better "eyesight" with regard to the resources we have at our disposal.

The quieter the biology, the better able we are to assess our resources and engage in problem solving to make reason-enabled decisions about what to do or not do next.

Teach Stop and Breathe:

- Teach a simple lesson about how stress affects the brain and body.
- Explain to students in simple terms about when and why to use Stop and Breathe.
- Practice the technique with the entire class until the students know how to do it without guidance.

Employ Four-Count Belly-Breathing: Put your feet flat on the floor and your hand over your navel. Gently close your eyes (or gaze at a spot in front of you). Slowly breathe into the abdominal cavity. Inhale to the count of four and then exhale to the count of four. With each inhale, imagine your belly as a balloon you are filling with air. With each exhale, imagine the balloon deflating. Belly-breathe for at least one minute or longer, if possible. If you are doing this strategy as stress prevention with your class, then breathe with them for at least five minutes at the beginning and end of the day. If this time is not possible, do a minute a day. Also consider giving extra credit to any students who practice at home. As with any skill, practice and use is habit forming!

Cue Individual Students to Stop and Breathe When You See Distress Signs: Use silent signals that catch the student's visual attention. Stress reaction and words don't play well together in the reaction sandbox. Using a "stop sign" hand signal triggers some students, especially those who have been physically hit or threatened a lot. Try cupping your hand at your navel as if gently gathering air and slowly move it toward your mouth.

There are other breathing techniques that work well, too. Alternate nostril breathing is one of my favorites. It's easy to do. Close both nostrils with the thumb and index finger. Release the left nostril. Breathe in slowly. Seal it again. Release the right nostril. Exhale the breath. Inhale through the right. Seal. Exhale through the left. Repeat for a minute or two.

Other techniques:

- Count ceiling or floor tiles.
- Listen to relaxing music and doodle or fiddle with a manipulative (squeeze ball).
- Drink water, go for a walk, or gently rock in the seat.
- Use self-talk and touch. Twirl a piece of hair or gently glide the hand over a wrist or finger. While touching, make positive self-soothing statements: *I'm okay. I have people who help me. I know where to go for help. I am not alone.* After a few weeks of pairing talk with touch on a frequent, consistent basis, the touch alone will soothe the mind.
- Humor. There's nothing like a hearty laugh to brighten the day.

As this new school year begins, keep your antennae up for the threat potential in tasks and activities. Be mindful of your own threatening language. Dissect situations to reduce their threat potential.

Positive practices:

- Engage students in a discussion of biology-quieting practices and ask them which ones they want to use. Train them to use Stop and Breathe as the new "default switch." Encourage students to use mindfulness practices: breathe, notice, observe without judgment, be still to be calm, and practice helpful thoughts.
- With student input, design a positive cultural practice that will be a part of the daily ritual.
- Ask students to help build a safe classroom and safe school. Using age-appropriate language, guide them to make a list of positive activities that promote emotional and social well-being. Put these into play by choosing one positive activity per week to promote and practice.

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Observe to Stop “Believing”

September 19, 2013 by [Mary Fowler](#)

"The basis of all good human behavior is kindness." —*Eleanor Roosevelt*

It's a curiously human trait to cling to beliefs based on assumptions and preconceived notions. What we tell ourselves about what's going on with a student's behavior matters greatly and sometimes gravely. Negative beliefs and attributions are known drama enhancers. Not sure you believe this statement? Recall a recent unpleasant interpersonal experience—perhaps with a partner, close friend, your teenager, or a toddler. What do you notice in your body? Tension or ease? More or less anger? Did the argument solve the problem? I mean, *really solve it?*

My zero-tolerance war on Section 8C felt powerfully good while I planned it. It provided some momentary satisfaction as one by one my students crossed the line and reaped the fruits of my reaction. For a brief moment, I even thought their behavior proved the point that they were "deliberately disrespectful" and had caused my reaction. Of course, the joke was on me. In the end, I still had the behavior, one less coercive trick up my sleeve, and needy 8th grade students who had to take the test.

Perhaps as an educator, you feel trapped in this "Test, No Time" (TNT) story that's triggering so much stress in schools. This belief drives these statements: "We don't have time to deal with social-emotional issues. We're here to teach and get our students ready for the test. Besides, the parents should be responsible for how their kid behaves in school." Sadly, I can say that this belief becomes a point of major angst and discussion in every regional training, school in-service workshop, or in-class behavioral coaching support session I give.

The concern is valid. The test is in play. Yet, the belief that there is no time to address social and emotional issues is a guaranteed lose-lose outcome. As I came to discover with Section 8C, their issues had to be the primary focus. Otherwise, most instructional time would continue to be eroded by behavior.

There was one additional major correction I needed to make. Too often I would jump to a conclusion about the motive behind a given behavior. "He's doing that for attention!" "She's trying to be difficult to fit in with her peers!" I was following countless footsteps to nowhere.

In all of these beliefs, we may be right. We may be wrong. How will we know? And if we are right, what changes? If we want things to change, we must change what we do.

Try this practice:

- Observe the behavior. What do you notice? Don't "believe" it. Don't judge it. Don't assign motive.
- Empathize with the student. Share what you've noticed. Ask and assure: *What do you need? How can I help? Hang in there. We'll figure this out.*
- Explore the story the student tells. What are his beliefs about the behavior? Chances are the student or the class may still be stuck in the old story that pokes the sore spot. Your compassion helps the student change the plot. (Section 8C, by the way, was the homogeneous group of poor performers with an eight-year track record to prove the point that they could barely succeed.)
- Partner with the student to explore possibilities that will solve the problem and meet the needs. Lose any expectation for immediate change. All learning comes with trial and error. Mistakes are opportunities to observe, empathize, explore, and try again.

When we move from judgment and expectations into observation and problem solving, we are preparing the soil for a personal and classwide culture that cultivates resilience. We improve the learning climate when we take conscious, deliberate action to assure a safe, stable, and nurturing environment in which taking a risk doesn't feel like risking a life.



Consciously Dial Down Reaction

September 20, 2013 by [Mary Fowler](#)

"Children should be taught to use their emotions and to be aware of them rather than control them." —*Mary Helen Immordino-Yang*

Succeeding "despite the odds" or overcoming adversity has a lot more to do with resource capacity than luck. We may have little control over what happens in our students' lives outside of school or the traumas that inevitably fall into each and every life. We can, however, influence outcomes when we construct the school environment in a way that reduces threat and increases the protective factors that we know build resilience and the skills needed to thrive despite adversity (Masten, 2001; Center for Disease Control, n.d.).

In an earlier post, I mentioned the role threat appraisal plays in reactive behavior. We decide if something is a threat or challenge based on whether or not we believe we have the necessary resources to meet the circumstances (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000). Highly stressed learners tend to interpret challenges as threats rather than opportunities. That was definitely my experience with Section 8C. My learners were threatened and so was I.

I'd love to tell you that wisdom and grace led to my turnaround experience with that class and their turnaround experiences as learners. My fear of their emotional reactivity and a riotous mutiny forced me to stop poking the sore spot and figure out how to help them channel their emotional reactivity into action that counted for something positive. I had to convince them that they could make a difference.

Part of the curriculum required teaching about the Holocaust. I understood that if I came into class with *The Diary of Anne Frank*, even though the literature text had adapted the story into a play, the students would be set off by their prejudices and by the story's intensity. The class still grappled with their own sense of social injustice and were way too reactive to take a broader view of man's inhumanity to man.

What could they handle? I wondered. I understood that these students needed to be engaged in a story larger than their own—a cause. They cared about their pets, so we began the unit with a simple, fictional story about animal rights. Then we bridged into nonfiction text about the controversial issue of animal testing for scientific research. In this safe space, they could express their voices.

Next, using a very low reading level Scholastic magazine article about China, we transitioned into reading about the human rights story. Speakers came to the classroom from Amnesty International and provided the students with facts and evidence that they could use as supporting details for the letters they planned to write, and they also empowered the students to express their opinions. Driven by a sense of meaning, purpose, and an authentic task, the students worked with each other to labor through letter-writing skills in order to write well-crafted business letters that they could send (with parental permission).

We were almost ready for the Holocaust. First, they needed background information. Student pairs were each given a short research topic: Kristallnacht, Selection, Yellow Star, and Warsaw Ghetto. We put these terms together to form a mental picture of the historical narrative. Everyone volunteered to read a part. Students came to class eager to know what happened next. Even the

strapping 15 year-old boy who was still in 8th grade and an angry and resentful young man cried at Anne's death.

In the trauma-healing world, resilience researchers talk about the power of turnaround experiences. The final week of the unit, a female student came to me with pictures her uncle showed her from the liberation of the concentration camps. With the vice principal's permission, I put the postcards on a table and invited each student to come in single file, view the pictures, and jot down images. From these they wrote poems. Each student listened to one another's poems with reverence, dignity, and respect.

From that moment, even through the end of June and the anticipation over graduation and summer break, Section 8C never had another behavior problem that wasn't handled in class with a simple redirection or humorous poke.

What can you do today to dial down your reactive behavior?

What adjustments can you make to the learning environment to build safety, stability, and nurturance?

What can you share with students that will help them become less stress reactive and increase their resource capacity?

How can you be the calm you want in riled waters?

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