



CONTROLLING IMPULSIVE BEHAVIOUR

By Wilson McCaskill

The importance of controlling impulsive behaviour and resisting the need for immediate gratification, in both daily living and in the pursuit of goals and successes, is widely acknowledged.

Our emotions are a call to action and when triggered, release an avalanche of hormones and chemicals that make it hard to control and resist the urge to act.

Not a problem if this call to action is infallible. But it's not and too often the call is not justified, appropriate, necessary or sensible.

Frequently our response to a situation is the hardwired flight or fight reflex and we find ourselves reacting and making matters worse rather than thinking our way around the situation or effectively managing it.

“Your feelings are not a passport to act. They must pass through the checkpoint of thought before being released as actions.”

Wilson McCaskill, By Wisdom Not By Force

In a society that promotes the belief that nothing is more important than how you feel and that your feelings are legitimate reasons for your actions, irrespective of the outcomes, it has become increasingly difficult to get children, and adults alike, to take control of their often irrational emotions and think before they act.

It is of great help to children to understand the following and I urge you to have the necessary exploration and discussion that creates a deep understanding of its truth.

“If your feelings are in charge of your actions then you are the victim of your feelings. If your thinking is in charge of your actions then you are the master of your feelings. Be the master of your feelings, never a victim.”

Wilson McCaskill, By Wisdom Not By Force

With an understanding of what the above means and with examples from their own life, and that of others, for the times when they were in control and masters, and for the times when they were victims, it becomes possible for them to see that it is possible to train to be a master.



“Feelings like nothing more than to take charge of actions. Don’t let them. They are, and are meant to be, the servants of thought. As servants they reward our lives with a multitude of experiences. As masters they lead us to ruin.”

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In all the following scenarios, T = Teacher

Scenario 1

Asher and her friend Lucy are mucking around and spoiling the work of their group.

- T: Asher, please tell me if you think you are making weak or strong decisions?
A: Weak decisions.
T: Thank you for your honesty. Lucy?
L: Asher is right.
T: Thank you Lucy. Now, if you’re making wrong decisions and doing the wrong thing, please tell me what is in charge, your feelings or your thinking?
L: My feelings.
T: And if your feelings are in charge are you the master or a victim of your feelings?
L: Victim.
T: Asher?
A: Victim.
T: Girls, can I please ask that you use your thinking to take charge of your feelings? Do that and you will be making the strong decisions that help to get your work done.

Scenario 2

Darryl is annoying Hugh and it is working. Hugh is getting upset and retaliating. Sue and Paula, the two others in the group are trying their best to ignore what is going on.

- T: Boys and girls, would you stop for a while please while we help the group sitting by the door. Hugh, I have been watching your group for some time and if it’s alright I’d like to try and help. *(Hugh nods)* Could you find some feelings words to describe how you feel right now?
H: Annoyed. *(Thinks)* And upset. I want to sit somewhere else.
T: Accurate self-awareness Hugh. You could have so easily said angry but you didn’t because you’re not really angry yet are you?
H: No.



“The first step to soothing strong emotions is to identify and name them.”

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- T: And sometimes describing what you would like to happen gives you a clear picture of how you're feeling. I get what you mean when you say you want to sit somewhere else. Darryl, do you like the work we are doing?
- D: Nah, it sucks.
- T: If that's how you feel about it, I can see why you're working so hard not to do it. Sue, do you think Darryl is doing the strong thing?
- S: No.
- T: Darryl, does it matter to you that you are not doing the work required of you?
- D: Nah.
- T: Now that's the sad bit, because I do. Darryl, I'm pretty sure you don't know how important you and all your classmates are to me, and every teacher in this school. We care deeply about you all and carefully work out what is best for you to try and do. So, when you say you don't care, you think you're saying you don't care about the work, but what you're really saying is, you don't care enough about you to learn from the work.

Darryl, I believe you're important enough for me to always give you the work that will be good for you even if it doesn't feel good to you. And that Darryl, will never change. You will always be important and the work will always be good for you.

Hugh, when Darryl was annoying you, was he bravely doing the work or was he running away from it?

- H: He was running away.
- T: To stay and face the problem of the work, what does Darryl need to put in charge, his feelings or his thinking?
- H: His thinking.
- T: Darryl, can you see that. By annoying Hugh you were avoiding the work. You didn't like it. You didn't like how it made you feel and you let those feelings take over and they had you doing the wrong thing. You became a victim of your feelings and you tried to make Hugh a victim of your inappropriate behaviour. Sue, did ignoring Darryl help him to stop?
- S: No.
- T: Not a bad strategy though. It might have worked. Paula, what was the next thing to try?
- P: Ask him to stop annoying Hugh.
- T: Well that might have helped, but Darryl was facing a monster. What was that monster Hugh?
- H: The work.
- T: The work Paula. He didn't believe he could beat that monster alone so what might you have done.
- P: Helped him.
- T: Yes helped him. Offered a clue or two, or given some suggestions.



- P: But I was busy with my work.
- S: And I was busy with mine.
- T: Well, that certainly makes helping Darryl difficult. Darryl, what could they have done?
- D: *(With a strong hint of contempt and disregard).* I don't know.
- T: Hugh?
- H: Don't know.
- T: If a friend has some sauce on the side of their face and everyone knows except them, do you tell them or say nothing in case they get embarrassed?
- H: You say something.
- T: Darryl was annoying you because?
- H: He was worried by the work. He was running away.
- T: So, what could you have said?
- H: Darryl you're worried about the work that's why you're annoying me.
- T: And what else, Sue?
- S: And just stop running away and deal with it.
- T: Or, do your best. Do something. It's better than doing nothing. Girls, Darryl's behaviour was annoying you and you had reasons for not getting involved. However, were you thinking as well as you could?
- Both: No.
- T: Were your feelings having an influence over your actions?
- Both: Yes.
- T: Well, please don't think badly of yourselves. Our feelings always affect our actions. What's important is *how* they affect them. I think you both did pretty well in the situation and Hugh, as your feelings got more and more stirred up, it became harder and harder to work out how to manage what was going on. Do you agree?
- H: Yes. Darryl's monster was starting to get to me as well.
- T: Darryl, it takes great strength to face the things that frighten you or that don't feel good. Your power comes from the way you think, from what you say to yourself. Your feelings have had a lot of practise at being your boss. It's time to get back your power, to be strong, to be in charge of your feelings, to be a powerful thinker, to be a master. It can also take a great deal of strength to accept help when it is offered. You are important Darryl, too important to be a victim of your own feelings. I care deeply that you learn to be a master and I hope that you can decide to care too.

“Problems, much like monsters, are only satisfied when they have devoured you. Give them no such satisfaction. Tackle them head on and refuse to be eaten. Stare them in the eye, understand them for what they are, and with courage battle them until they are defeated. With success, will come greater strength. With greater strength, will come the confidence to beat even larger monsters.”

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