



PERMISSION TO FEEL

By Marc Brackett

Blog: Emotion Scientist (<https://www.marcbrackett.com/the-emotion-scientist/>)

Being Our Best Self During Challenging Times

I have to confess, over the last few weeks I've been having trouble regulating my emotions. The littlest things activate me and bring out my worst self. And it's taking toll on my own well-being and the quality of my relationships at home. All of our fuses are shorter and we're getting on each other's nerves much more than usual. Here's a glimpse of what's going on in my family. This week I snapped during dinner about something trivial. My mother-in-law (who lives with us) then said, "are you really the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence?" I'll spare you with what happened next.

Being cooped up is hard! Can you relate?

When we're triggered, especially when we're tired and stressed, we first need to bring down our emotional temperature –to lower our activation levels—and give ourselves the space required for rational thought. For me that means taking a few deep breaths, or a few steps back, or excusing myself for a minute, or even a walk around the block. I didn't do any of these things that night a dinner. Arghh!

Many of us have to retrain ourselves – to go from our automatic, habitual reactions (saying something we're likely going to regret) to more deliberate and helpful responses that preserve our well-being and relationships.

In my book, *Permission To Feel*, I share how about a decade ago Robin Stern, the



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associate director of our Center and I were wondering why as a society, so many people are hooked on strategies that derail them from both having healthy relationships and achieving their goals. Robin had worked with hundreds of patients in her clinical practice who were unsuccessful in their relationships even after learning helpful strategies, and I observed schoolchildren and educators who didn't use the strategies they were learning, even when they knew they were helpful.

Robin and I were determined to create a tool that could help people see the benefit of *using* helpful strategies. A tool that would help us take responsibility for our lives.

So we developed the "meta-moment". In simplest terms, it's a pause. The meta-moment is you hitting the brakes and stepping out of time. We call it *meta* because it's a moment about a moment.

It's where we stop the action and say, "I need to take pause and a deep breath right now so I don't blow my top or break down sobbing or otherwise react in a way I will probably regret."

Instinctively, we sense that this will help, and biology proves us right. Pausing and taking a deep breath activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which reduces the release of cortisol, the stress hormone, and automatically lowers our emotional temperature.

It also gives us the chance to quickly ask a few questions that might be useful, such as: "What would my *best self* do right now?" That ideal, hypothetical person is comprised of attributes we would use to describe our best selves from our own



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perspective and from the perspective others –how we’d like to be experienced, seen, or talked about. For some people it’s a set of adjectives like *compassionate*, *empathic*, or *conscientious*; for others it can be an image or an object. A good friend who is a manager at Facebook has a photo on her desk that reminds her to be her best self.

Visualizing our best-self redirects our attention away from the “trigger.” This helps us to choose a helpful emotion regulation strategy, like positive self-talk or reappraisal, and then respond accordingly.

The meta-moment is not just for down-regulating emotions. Sometimes, our best selves help us to stand up for what’s right. Once, many years ago, one of my direct reports was bullying people on his team. I hate to admit it, but I can be conflict avoidant, and I didn’t address it as quickly as I should have. Fortunately for everyone involved, I activated my best self (courageous in this instance), regulated my feelings of anger and anxiety, and had the difficult conversation with this person. Channeling the Dog Whisperer, Cesar Millan, during my conversation with the manager, I was both calm and assertive making it clear that his behavior was unacceptable. He appreciated the feedback and changed his behavior. That was a meta-moment victory for me!

What about you? What are your go-to strategies when you are stressed or overwhelmed?

Do you ignore your feelings, act out, or meeting them head on? When a family member criticizes you and you feel annoyed or devastated or even resentful, how successful are you at taking a meta-moment?



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Here are the steps to take so you can begin practicing the meta-moment.

1. *Sense the shift:* You are activated, caught off guard or have an impulse to say or do something that you might regret. You notice a shift in your thinking or physiology.
2. *Stop or Pause!* You create the space before you respond. Step back, breathe, breathe again.
3. *See your best self.* You activate your *best self*. You think of adjectives or even an image that helps your *best self* appear. You might also think about your reputation: how do you want to be seen, talked about or experienced? What would you do if someone you respect were watching?
4. *Strategize and Act* You reach into your toolkit and start closing the gap between you and your emerging best self. (Always the last step.)

Many of us were exposed to unhelpful or even harmful strategies, starting early in our childhoods – negative talk, yelling, blaming, and so on – strategies that we acquired and now use ourselves. These strategies require little cognitive effort, but are often effective at getting rid of the negative feeling and providing (temporary) gratification. In the moment, we fail to realize that these strategies also can damage our relationships, are anesthetizing, fail to take in longer term consequences, and derail us from achieving our goals.

Taking a meta-moment can help.

So the next time you're about to snap or make a snide remark, try to activate your best self. Better yet, before entering into a situation with someone who might trigger you, remind yourself of the qualities of your best self. We call that a proactive meta-moment.



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Like learning a sport or a musical instrument, being skilled at taking a meta-moment takes time and practice. This means we must be deliberate and set goals to use the tool, but also give ourselves permission to fail. And when we fail, we have to forgive ourselves (and have the courage to apologize) and try the process again. We'll never stop having to work at being our best selves. But the payoff is worth it: better health, better decisions, and better relationships. Better everything.

With the wisdom of emotions,
Marc

Marc Brackett, Ph.D.
Director, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence
Professor, Yale Child Study Center
Co-Creator, RULER
Yale University



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