How to Introspectively Reset When Your Buttons are Pushed in the Workplace

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What happens when your buttons are pushed?
What does that look like?
What is meant by the button pushing phenomenon?

- State of hyper-arousal - fight-or-flight response
- The brain activates the autonomic nervous system
- Stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, are released
- Blood and energy are diverted from digestion so that one can respond quickly in an emergency
- Increased heart rate, breathing, awareness, fear
- We move into ‘attack’ mode
- Lose the ability to be in the moment and think rationally

Melosevic, 2015

What’s the difference between getting your buttons pushed and a disagreement?
Health Effects of Suppressing Painful Emotions

• Elevated stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, can weaken immune function (Suarez & Sundy, 2017; Kemeny, 2003)

• Meta-analysis – majority of studies cited found that patients with surgical complications experienced psychological distress (Pinto et al., 2016)

• Can increase the risk of heart disease and cerebrovascular accidents (Helmer et al., 1991; Everson et al., 1997)

• Emotional distress is associated with slower wound healing (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1995; Ebrecht et al, 2004; Cole-King et al., 2001)

• Depression and anxiety weaken immune function (Irwin, 1999; Irwin, 2003)

• Can increase blood pressure (Cox et al., 2017; Harburg et al., 1973; Gentry et al., 1973)

More often than not, the situation that’s triggered for you has nothing to do with the button pusher
Sample Situations

• Example #1
  • Meeting with a colleague
    • My buttons are pushed as a result of a comment that was not directed at me

• Example #2
  • Meeting with a supervisor
    • My buttons are pushed as a result of performance feedback – I disagree with his assessment

What’s the process?
Acute Phase (in the meeting)

- You’re in the meeting with your colleague or supervisor
- Your buttons are pushed
- Now what?
- How do you handle the remainder of that meeting?

Avoid lashing out – one cannot unsay hurtful things
- You may choose to get quiet
- If you can do so calmly and prefer this route, buy yourself some time and leave the meeting
- What does that look like?
  - “I’m finding it difficult to talk about this right now. Do you mind if I think about this a little bit and we reschedule this meeting in a few days?”
**Acute Phase (meeting is over or you left the meeting)**

- Take a few deep breaths
- Go for a walk
- If you can, do something that doesn’t require a lot of brain power
- What else?

**Post-Acute Phase (at home)**

- When you get home, do SOMETHING to release the initial emotional reaction
- Call a friend or family member – talk it through
- Exercise
- **Goal:** Get to a place where you are more calm about the situation
Chronic Phase

- Here’s where the work starts
- You have to be willing to look at yourself and work through your emotions

Eventual Goal: Neutrality

* No emotional charge about the situation or person
Is this mine to deal with?

Has this situation happened more than once?

• Look for themes

• Could happen more than once with the same person

• OR

• The situation could happen repeatedly, but it doesn’t look quite the same
How do you look at yourself? To start:

- Find some time to be alone
- Allow yourself to feel whatever feelings are coming up
- There is a valuable gift and lesson in those feelings

Button Buster
Step One – State the Problem

- Write down the problem
- Write it exactly as you would speak it
- Don’t censor yourself
- Be as petty as you need to be
- Don’t send, save, or leave this document where others can see!!

Step Two – Discover the Bottom Line

Emotion

- Are you feeling rejected, misunderstood, betrayed, abandoned?
- Stay with those emotions
- However uncomfortable, feel them
- It is probably a familiar feeling that you have experienced before, so hone in
Step Three – The Trigger

- What is this experience triggering?
- What does it remind you of?
- When have you felt this way in the past?
- Our buttons often get pushed over something small because the upset has been sitting inside of us for a while

Step Four – Determine the Meaning

- What meaning are you giving to the situation?
- For example:
  - I’m not respected or appreciated
  - Others are selfish
  - I never get what I want
  - I was right and they were wrong
  - It’s always someone else’s fault
Step Five – Is the Meaning Serving You?

- Is the meaning you've given this situation supporting you in growing and communicating authentically?
- The meaning we give to a situation when we are hurt is not empowering
- If your answer here is 'yes', you still have some work to do

Step Six – Release the Emotion and any Attached Meaning

- You might write something like:
  - I am releasing my fear of never getting what I want.
  - I let go of my need to be right in this situation.
  - I release my need to blame Sally.
Step Seven - Forgive Yourself and the Other Person

• You might write:
  • I forgive myself for blaming Mark.
  • I forgive myself for buying into the misunderstanding that I can’t trust others.
  • I forgive myself for judging Ann as selfish and controlling.

Step Eight – Gratitude

• What have you learned from this experience?
• What did it teach you?
• How can you use what you’ve learned in your relationships at work?
• How opportunity did this situation give you to heal?
Sample Situations – What’s the Follow-up?

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- Is there any follow-up with your colleague in this situation?

- Is there any follow-up with your supervisor in this situation?

Other Techniques

- Do a verbal Button Buster
- Write a letter to the person
- After you write a letter or Button Buster, do a little releasing ceremony
  - Burn what you've written
  - Shred the paper

- **You may need to do more than one technique**
- Do something physical where there's contact:
  - Chop wood
  - Box a punching bag
  - Batting cage
Guided Visualization

Resources

- Duke Personal Assistance Service (416-1727)
  - Short-term counseling/referrals

- Duke Integrative Medicine
  - Psychologists/counselors on staff
  - Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction
  - Cultivating Resiliency: Harnessing Your Body's Adaptive Response to Stress

- Department of Psychiatry
  - Cognitive-Behavioral Research and Treatment Program – counseling/therapy, mindfulness-based sessions

- Crucial Conversations by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler
