

Building Resilience: One Step at a Time

Mind the Gap for Emotional Wellbeing

Most of us have our sense of emotional equilibrium based upon circumstances generally meeting our expectations. If the circumstance meets our expectations, we are happy and/or content. If circumstances fall short of our expectations, we often experience disappointment, anger, grief, or even despair.

Yet we still have hope as an option even if the circumstances are routinely negative. We can experience peace, encouragement, gratitude, and even joy. Victor Frankl, who was imprisoned in and lost many family members in Nazi concentration camps, wrote about how we can live hopefully when the situations around us are routinely negative.

Frankl stated this: *“In between stimulus and response is a space. In that space we can choose our response. And in choosing our response lies our freedom.”* We are self-programmed to choose most of our emotional reactions *automatically*, without thinking about them. Without thinking we choose our reactions and then blame our circumstance (or the people in them) for our emotional reactions.

And while these reactions may *seem* to be the result of our circumstances, they are our choice in the moment. Instead of reacting automatically, we can *choose* a healthy response.

Frankl’s point is that we can choose to exercise control over our emotions, including our most disruptive ones. To do this, we must insert a conscious choice into the space between stimulus – whatever triggers negative emotions – and the response. To do this, we must identify that space (“the gap”) and use it wisely.

With practice we can recognize emotions welling up in us and “mind the gap”. If we feel hopelessness rising in us, we can stop that emotion, create the gap, and begin thinking of things for which grateful or hopeful. If we are beginning to feel angry in the moment, we can create the gap and choose tolerance, prosocial concern, forgiveness, or simply walk it off.

We can choose to be hopeful, happy, at peace, forgiving, unoffended, and focused. Doing so restores our freedom. William James, the American philosopher and psychologist, once stated, *“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.”* After all, who wants to be controlled by circumstances or the choices of other people? That sounds like bondage.

What to do: Think through in advance the emotions you want when negative emotions begin to well up in you. When in emotionally taxing situations, “mind the gap.” Create the space to choose one thought over another and let an intentional response to replace reaction.

Think about friends, family, faith, and forgiveness, about hopeful things, about caring strategies. Then “mind the gap” and insert these new thoughts.