

Stillness In The Eye Of The Storm

Maintaining Clarity Of Thought In The Face Of Turmoil



*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs...*

She found herself mumbling Kipling's words under her breath all too often today.

In Katherine's opinion, work had been going pretty well for the past week, even after the monetary meltdown hit in earnest. Jeff, her CEO, declared a full alert and produced a calm, reassuring, companywide video emphasizing the organization's essential strength and ability to weather the current financial storm. Even though the market tumbled, the financial crisis spread, customers canceled orders, and the next quarter looked to be the worst in a decade, people were staying on task and making the right choices. Katherine trusted her subordinates to continue the past pattern of taking wise actions in favor of their business. Executive management looked steady-handed. The company felt pretty well run and in good condition. That is, until the CEO's e-mail yesterday. 'Someone in corporate must have gotten to him,' Katherine thought. His new message fanned the flames. Stop everything! Pull back! Do nothing! Meltdown! Crisis! In less than an hour, ten thousand people went from a relative state of focus to outright panic.

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Now, Katherine and the top 100 officers in the firm were spending nearly all their time reacting, questioning, and responding to the new message in constant e-mail exchanges with each other, with subordinates, and in back-to-back meetings. "What did Jeff mean by...?" "Does that mean we should...?" And another crucial question, although mostly unspoken, "What about my retirement plans — or my job, given that our stock has tanked?" Amazingly, these queries and concerns came from corporate officers, who, presumably, had the most information and seasoning. Imagine the reaction of someone lower in the organization caught in this crossfire! In such a collective mental state, Katherine knew their decisions — and there would be precious few — would be far less than optimal. Worse, unnecessary mistakes would be made and opportunities would be missed. A lot of good planning and other excellent possibilities would just get tossed out the window. In addition, the mental turmoil meant people would under-



perform horribly.

Familiar? Of course. Every one knows that the state of calm is inherently a good thing but what many people forget is that it is a highly leveraged state. When calm, we have more insights, we see opportunities that would be otherwise missed, we make wiser decisions, and we make fewer mistakes. The natural paradox is that when we're not calm, we forget that all these benefits are available. The other aspect of calm that most people don't realize is that it isn't a place to get to – instead it's built in and always available. If you've ever been in an argument and had to answer the phone in the middle of it, you have experienced this immediate shift. To take the positive (and successful) path in a crisis, you don't actually need to *do* anything more. Instead, you need to *stop* doing. Period. You don't need to learn anything; you simply need to remember something you already know. Not convinced? We'll explain how easy it is for almost anyone.

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All appearances to the contrary, mental turmoil of any sort is not caused by circumstances, threatening or otherwise. Such turmoil is caused by how you think. You can be in a state of calm in the face of terrible adversity, or you can be whipped up beyond belief by something that matters very little. Your psychological experience is generated by your thoughts, not by your circumstances. If you think about it, you will remember many incidences of experiencing calm under enormous pressure. You might even try mentally reliving some of those experiences now. If you are in a calm state of mind, you generally make better choices and decisions, you avoid mistakes, and you see opportunities others miss. Just remember a time when you were with a person who was harried and could not find something they needed, such as their keys or a kitchen utensil. When you looked it was in plain sight yet they could not see it.

Even if you don't easily remember ever having a calm mind, even if you've convinced yourself that rapid, high-pressure thinking is the pinnacle of success, and even if such thinking has been a continual source of positive acknowledgment your entire life, know this: A calm, reflective state of mind is an inherent capacity, always available. Take a good look at your best decisions and try to remember your state of mind when you made them. Most likely, you were the calm one in the room. Then, remember how you accessed this calm state so many times before.

The only reason you may not be in that state right now is because you are unknowingly



thinking your way out of it, succumbing to the same pressures everyone else seems to be a victim of lately. If you step out of yourself and observe your own behavior, you immediately recognize the agitated state that produces chaos. The moment you acknowledge your distress, you probably stop whatever thoughts cause the agitation. This state of calm is what you naturally return to when anxious, agitated, worried, high-pressured thinking ceases. There is nothing for you to *do* to get to equanimity; you simply have to *stop* whatever thinking is keeping you away from that state. Wisdom comes from the ability to remain calm and collected when everyone else no longer is, as Kipling's poem alludes.

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Looking for the easy way? You can recognize the calm state by the presence of a characteristically good feeling, like when you awake and before mental churning starts — you feel all's right with the world. When you've left calm and want to return to it, you could ask yourself what that feeling is like for you, and at what other times you have you experienced it. You could try reliving some of those feelings right now. Make that feeling a priority in your life, and you will be surprised how easily everything else handles itself.

Everybody wants a recipe to use in the face of crisis or challenge, but finding a state of calm doesn't work that way. You can't force your mind to do something. You have to realize what your mind is *already* doing. Notice: does your mind settle and bring you that good feeling when you run, shower, golf, take a long walk or a hot bath. . . ? You have your favorite conducive conditions, and so does everyone else. We all have these moments of peaceful lucidity. Any approach might work to regain it, but none, absolutely none, work all the time and for every person. If something did, don't you think that, sometime in the last 10,000 years, it would have been discovered?

When you are in a bad thought storm, recipes rarely work. No recipe. No prescription. No tool. Nothing to start. And, actually, nothing to do. You simply cannot use your mind to outfox your mind. The storm is caused by thought. Like the storm, if you don't do anything to make it worse, if you don't feed it, if you look instead for the good feeling of calm, the storm will pass.

How do you recognize the state of calm in your life? Simply reflect on your own thought process. How are you thinking right now? Not *what* are you thinking about, but *how* are you thinking? Do your thoughts feel pressured, worried, or like they're



racing along at break-neck speed? Stop for a moment. Reflect. Look for deeper awareness of how *you* think. Use the present moment as a tutorial to discover your mental processing, and you will find your mind settling down with no real attention on your part. The more insight you have into how you inadvertently create agitated thinking, the less you will do it.

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If you still want something to “do,” be thankful. Seek out family, friends, and co-workers, and sincerely thank them for something that truly matters to you, for being in your life, for the contributions they make to your relationship, business, or company. You know what’s appropriate for each person. Gratitude and gratefulness always trump anxiety — and flood you with good feeling.

Finding equanimity just takes an instant because, in any moment, you are only one thought away. As you discover this coolheaded space, your state of calm becomes contagious for every person with whom you interact. Just as a disturbed person creates a disruptive mood, a calm person elevates the mood of everyone in the vicinity. Imagine the positive effect of having people around you access such a gentle, productive state! Then, imagine this calming effect leaking out to all your co-workers, customers, suppliers, and partners. What will you get? A more effective organization able to skirt hostile mental weather and operate safely, without hesitation, from the eye of the storm. What could be more valuable?

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