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Staying Buoyant While Under Attack:

Dealing with Racism and Other Personal Attacks While Supporting People with Intellectual Disabilities

By: Roger Ramsukh

“I can’t stand P*ki’s !”

“You’re f****ing disgusting!”

“You’re an idiot!”

Growing up as a person of colour, I had heard it all and then some. Indeed, I’d heard it so much that it sort of lost all its intended meaning...like a noise you get used to in the background that is only really noticed when it stops. I had become acclimatized to a school environment where insults, racial slurs, snide comments, and demeaning remarks were uttered out loud in the school yard, as well as sotto voce in class. Yet this was not school, and I was not 12 years old any more.

This was my workplace, and this was not the gang of ruffians who hated school and only cared about playing sports; these were people with intellectual and oftentimes physical disabilities who I chose to work with and who, often, needed MY help just to get some of their basic needs met. How much more insulting then was it to be the object of disdain, derision, and disparagement by someone who, in the next hour, was going to ask me to help them get cleaned up in the washroom, or prepare their lunch, or – insult on top of injury – yell at me because I was not able to take them out for a coffee until the program vehicle returned to the home.

After years of working in direct supervision, I started working with the staff that supported and cared for, and nurtured the mind, body, and soul of the members under their care. The more I spoke to them, the more certain themes repeatedly showed up, like the verbal abuse direct care workers endure while doing their jobs. This troubled me. Not just because having the proper mindset is often the difference between a ‘good’ staff and a ‘poor’ one, not just because having the right frame of mind is the difference between having a peaceful shift and one where staff are continually ‘putting out fires,’ and not just because enjoying your work can make the difference in how many behaviours I have to track and deal with programmatically (a.k.a. how hard I have to work!) but because, on a very personal level, I’m brought back to the school yard as a young child, and I still feel for and identify with the shamed, the dismissed, and the hurt.

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Through all my years in this field (I note my impending decrepitude when I realize I'm more than two decades in this field), I realized I had created a number of mental constructs that enabled me to do my job better, reach people quicker, connect with a difficult person deeper, and helped me keep my blood pressure in check in those trying times when my less-than-sublime-self wanted nothing more than to levy a punishing consequence on the person with whom I was working and sit back in self-contented (yet paradoxically conscience-stricken) righteousness!

The more I read on the topic, the more I found, and I realized the pervasiveness of this problem – not just in this field but in many work environments. The governments of most first-world nations have all written legislation to combat the problem of violence and harassment in the workplace but having legislation is one thing – empowering people to deal with aggressive and racist language while maintaining professionalism, AND ensuring that they are not going home every day with a coil of anger in the belly, and a dent in the steering wheel from all the pounding done on it – well talk about an impossible mission!

Clear your mind for a moment of all the distress the imagery I've created elicits in you. Decide (from the Latin meaning to cut off [all other possibilities]) that you will master this situation and not let the situation master you. With a mindset that is open to suggestion, here are tips I and others have used that may help you to maintain your calm and keep your spirit buoyant:

1. Mindset: Reconnect with why you are in this field

While I am not so naïve as to not realize that, for some people, this was the only job they could get at this pay scale, I know, however, that many – and I expect most of you – are in this field because you value meaningful work, and contributing to the world and the society in which you live in some way. While better pay is appreciated by all invariably in this field, I find people who live from a perspective that value work that satisfies their heart, as well as their bank account.

What was it for you? For one of my friends, it was seeing a four-year-old child backhanded by her drunken father when my friend was a young teenager that ignited the smoldering fire within her to serve the weak, the downtrodden, and the victimized. For another staff, it was coming from a country where human rights were something that was printed on a flyer and touted by his government at the United Nations but was almost non-existent in actual practice. Coming to a country where fringe members of our population could actually find representation in government and social groups made him hunger to be part of the push for greater freedoms. For yet another staff, it was because she had a sibling that had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and she knew she wanted to help him with as many tools as she could learn by being in this field.

Regardless of what the reason is for you, I ask you to remember it in those less than sublime moments in your job. There is that part of the spirit in all of us that is touched when we see the battered rise up one more time, or the child that suddenly yells, “NO!” and discovers his previously unknown strength, or the woman who, with quiet dignity says, “That is the last time you will ever...” and then walks out.

If you feel your heart touched, your spirit bursting or your fist pounding on the table while you exclaim, “That's right! You tell 'em sister!” then you know the heart-work that many in this field associate with their work.

Here is the key: keep ready in your mind for when you are having a bad day, or with an infuriating individual, three or four key moments in your work of which you are supremely proud. These need to be the kind of moments where you think about it and unconsciously smile to yourself, and/or you think, “I did that – and that person’s life will be changed (in a small way or big way) forever.” One of mine is when I was working with an older woman with Down’s syndrome. She was tiny (less than four feet tall) and moved very slowly, showed very little emotion, and had difficulty with many things because of her size. Often, staff did things for her just because it took her so long to do anything for herself. Well, I decided that I would help her put on her own seatbelt because I’d witnessed her attempt it a number of times only to have well-meaning staff do it for her. Time and again, I tried ways to position the belt and the buckle so she could do it, and DOZENS of times, she was unsuccessful until the one time that she finally managed to get the two parts of the belt and buckle touching. She got it inserted in the slot but needed to push the two parts hard enough to make it click...I was jumping with anticipation, mentally urging her to just push a little more, ‘Go for it! You can do it! Just a little harder! Go! GOOOO!’ and, with a mighty effort, she made it click! I literally shouted with joy while standing outside the van. The moment that I carry in my heart to this day was the slowly spreading smile that stole across her usually unexpressive face, as she slowly turned her head in my direction.

2. **Mindfulness: Pay attention to your thoughts and the feelings they create**

There has been an explosion of work and uses for the practice of mindfulness in the media and training centers in North America. Mindfulness is used to help in such diverse areas as pain control at the dentist, smoking cessation, music appreciation, building automobiles (I am not kidding), sports and athletic performance, most types of mental therapy and sales training. I even attended a mindfulness course on food and wine pairing for, um, research. (Actually I think I did that one twice!)

At the core of mindfulness training is the central triad that proposes that:

Thoughts (lead to) **Feelings** (which lead to) **Actions** (which lead back to **Thoughts**)

If you think a certain way about something – say the individual you are working with hates people of my race – then this line of thinking will create certain physiological reactions in your body which you will feel as unpleasant emotions. As you feel the ugly snake of anger slowly uncoil in your belly, and subconsciously your breath becomes shallower, and your hands start to tremble in agitation, you act a certain way based on this line of thought and feeling. I will not mention what actions you may take as this is not an article about condemning what you think about doing or what you have actually done, as a result of this line of thinking. But know this: your desired actions are usually in line with what you think and feel. As you act a certain way, your mind will look for justifications for your decisions: ‘They have to learn they don’t get anything from me when they act this way,’ or ‘They are just going to curse me out anyway.’

Psychologists call this cognitive dissonance, and it is a fancy way to say that, when we hold two competing ideas about ourselves, and we are faced with a personal action that conflicts with one of them, we look for ways to justify that action in order for us to feel better about what we have done.

We are all subject to this line of thinking, at times, and it can create feelings of guilt, anger, frustration, and even illegal behavior. So how do you make this work for you? Great question. Glad you asked. There are two ways:

1. Reverse the Thought, Feelings, Actions triad. If you want to change the way you think about something, act the opposite of what you think. Physiologically acting a certain way will make you feel a certain way, and feeling a certain way will change the way you think about that thing. If you want to feel more relaxed around a person, then first stop acting so anxiously. *Notice* how you are feeling around the person that makes you upset. Without awareness, you cannot make a change. When you notice your shaking hands, your quickened breathing, your jittery movements, *then* you can change them. Deliberately act calmly. Make your movements smoother and slower, and project a feeling of calm on your face even if you are nervous inside. Force a serene smile on your face.

The very act of acting calm can physiologically calm you down. I have used this technique to overcome feelings of claustrophobia at times. When in a tense state, I've forced myself to smile. Wide. Really wide. I have even forced a laugh and a cheer. The act was in opposition to how I was feeling, and my body didn't know what to do with the incongruence. The more I acted giddy with happiness, the less anxious I felt, and the less I felt like I couldn't breathe or that there wasn't enough oxygen in the space. Act the opposite of anxious around an individual that upsets you. This will trigger you to feel calm or peaceful, or giddy, or...you get the idea. Finally, consciously think a new and better thought. Instead of, 'This person is going to bad-mouth my kids,' think a positive thought: 'My kids are awesome, and I'm an awesome parent!' or 'This person has never had a good role model in their life. How could they possibly understand how awesome I am?' Do this often enough in the face of a tense situation, and you will start to think differently about it, and you will have effectively rewired the nervous system that was causing you anxiety to now calm you down.

2. Change the meaning you associate with the thought. For example, can a person be hungry and suffer pain because they feel society does not care for or look after them, and so become bitter and suffer from poor self-esteem? Can another person go on a hunger strike because of the way their people are treated by a government and, instead, feel a certain sense of nobility of spirit or pride because, *in their mind*, they associate a higher moral cause to their actions? Same actions but different thought processes create outcomes that are experienced differently.

Dear reader, you can do this too in your work. Instead of harbouring thoughts like, 'This person is going to intimidate me and threaten me again today' or 'I know I'm going to get angry as soon as this person opens their mouth,' change the meaning you attribute to their words.

Upon hearing an individual's insults, curses, remarks about your looks or upbringing, and thinking this person hates me or means to do me harm, think instead that this person is hurting, or is sad, or does not even have the words to express how awful they feel inside, or how sad it is this person did not have great role models in their life and this is all they know, or even this is why I'm here – to help this person through this problem in their life, and I am the person best suited to help them with it.

By associating a more constructive thought (to the same words) you will have effectively changed how you feel about them. I know. I have been there when an individual in an escalated state suddenly turns on me and flings comments about the inadequacy of ‘my people’ or the low level of my IQ. It usually takes a good amount of willpower to not...laugh in their face! I totally find it hilarious and am not offended in the least. Why? Quite simply, I find it difficult to associate any meaning of ill intent coming from someone who cannot even see me as a person. Or I know that the whole purpose for why I am there is because they do not have the skills necessary to live independently...because, if they did, I wouldn't be there to hear it! This is part of the job and I am no more offended by their insults than I am about having to collect data – it is but one aspect of the job. The meaning I get from my work is not tied to the insults I receive from those I support when in an escalated state.

3. **Embrace a higher power: God, spirit, universe, source of strength**

I have my own personal belief system. It is guided by organized religion and also by the ideas and conversations I've shared with many people in my life. My belief system is the only one that is correct. Joking! (Yet how many people actually believe this to the point that they go to war over it! But I digress). Whatever you believe in – whether it is one God or many gods; whether you believe in going to limbo for a time, or coming back in another life, or you believe in the strength of your own right hand – wherever you draw your strength from is something to call upon when you need patience the way Einstein needed a comb.

Think about the higher purpose of your life, and the trials you face in it as a source of growth not a source of punishment. (Really you can think whatever you want about it – I am merely suggesting that, if you want less stress in your work and in your life, to think about your faith as an opportunity to live the highest and best version of yourself including when at work). When faced with a difficult individual, it may be helpful to think about what your faith calls upon you to do about it. Do you think that maybe you were ‘sent’ to learn something from this experience or this person? Then embrace it. Do you think you were ‘sent’ to teach the person something from this experience? Then embrace it. Do you think you were ‘sent’ this experience as a punishment for something? Then embrace it. (Do you see a pattern here?) Regardless of what you believe, if you remember your faith in times of trial you will find renewed peace in your work.

4. **Verbal Aikido: This is a game – play it**

Aikido is a martial art and, like most martial arts, it is founded on the principle of not counteracting force with force but rather guiding force away from you. Aikido takes it one step further and purports that Aikido is the “art of reconciliation.” “If you have the mind to fight, you've lost connection with the Universe.”

When a punch is thrown, in properly executed Aikido, you end up turning and facing the same direction as your attacker when blocking, and you literally see their perspective. What a great metaphor for maintaining your calm when you are verbally abused based on your race or some other personal aspect of your being! (Thank you I'm rather proud of the connection myself though I didn't invent it!)

The individual you are working with is playing a game by trying to ‘push your buttons’ and get a reaction out of you. They do this by using every ounce of knowledge they have about you to pick out something that, if said to them, would insult *them*. In truth, their insult is nothing more than a string of words designed to elicit a reaction. They win this game when, even in a situation where they have very little control in their life – most of their choices are given to them, they have a disability, and they know and feel disrespected, and staff pretend to be in charge – they are able to get a reaction from you, then they have ‘won.’

Don’t let someone else steal your joy! Play a different game. In this game, you don’t even want to answer back with anger – you want to protect them. You play this game by seeing their perspective, and you hold them (metaphorically) in a protected state because, when you understand them, they have no power to hurt you. Think of it this way: If I got into a fight with a man at a bar because he thought I was looking at his spouse, then we would both get hurt because I’d try to hurt the man as much as or more than he was trying to hurt me, and we’d both pay the price. But what if I knock the man down and he can’t continue, but his five-year-old son comes up to me and starts trying to fight me because I beat up his daddy? (Don’t ask why a five year old is in a bar – just go with me on the example ok!) When faced with the prospect of fighting a five year old, I would do the exact opposite of what I’d just done to his dad: I would do everything I could to protect the child even as he was doing his utmost to hurt me. He can’t hurt me, so I do everything I can to protect him from getting hurt.

This change in perspective is available to me because I am so much more powerful than he is, and my understanding is so far above his, that I am not threatened in the least. If I take the attitude that my understanding of the situation is much more complex, I understand the connection between a sense of powerlessness and lack of choice, or how power combined with a history of experiencing prejudice and outbursts of extreme anger can lead to a desire to hurt others. I also realize that I have so many more options and resources for dealing with my feelings...such as following a journal like this one. They can do little to upset my equilibrium, and I must do everything in my power to NOT win this game by the individual’s rules but to win by my rules. In the case of me versus the five year old, I *win* not by knocking his teeth out (he may already be missing one or two), I win by giving him the chance to defend his father’s honour and leaving his spirit intact. In the same way, when faced with the vilest of insults from an individual I support, I *win* by being able to correct them if I can, or help them to calm down from a difficult state (which I do frequently). How do I do this? I ask questions and use statements such as:

Is there something else you’d like to say?

What would you like to know?

I hear what you are saying.

Thank you for your opinion.

Are you telling me that...?

Am I right in saying...?

Tell me more.

Tell me what you heard me say.

All of these (and many more) can help an individual gain insight into themselves, and can help you gain insight into how they think and what they are feeling. Play this game often and it soon becomes fun to see just how quickly you can help a person regain their calm. Like in effective Aikido, it starts with turning to see their perspective.

5. Use Imagery

The mind cannot differentiate between an imagined event and a real one. Prove it to yourself right now. Imagine a verbal (or physical) fight you had with someone. Relive in your mind everything you can about it. What did you say? What did they say? What do you wish you had said? What would you say now? If you can imagine the incident with enough clarity, I'd be willing to bet you are angry right now and maybe you can even feel your heart beating fast!

Elite athletes use mental imagery all the time to imagine themselves performing in peak state so that, in a real game, they can perform to that same standard. Basketball players imagine the ball swishing through the hoop. Golfers imagine the path of the ball, and the sound it makes as it goes into the hole. Olympic medalists imagine clearing the hurdle, crossing the finish line, touching the wall or hitting the bullseye.

Tibetan monks practice a type of meditation of which the highest test is called the Tummo (meaning inner fire) wherein, beside an icy stream up in the mountains, a cloth is soaked in the cold water and hung around the naked monk's neck, and the monk must imagine his inner fire welling up within him and drying the cloth out by raising the temperature of his body. The cloth is then soaked again, and he must continue drying it all night long until daybreak. Western researchers have found that monks can indeed raise the temperature of their body several degrees just by imagining it. Why do I write about this other than to show off my somewhat disturbing knowledge of Tibetan monkhood? Only this: you get angry when an insult is hurled at you because you get angry when an insult is hurled at you. No, that is not a typo. You get angry when insulted because you choose to get angry when insulted. Choose instead to NOT get angry when insulted (hint: it is just a decision away). How do you choose to not get insulted? Imagine a place of calm, or peace, or imagine what you would look like if you could be outside your body, and you could see yourself reacting calmly while insults were hurled at you. Rather than comments about your uncertain parental identity stiffening your spine, imagine laughing at the wit necessary for an individual under your care to be able to come up with an insult like that. Imagine going home to your partner and relating the insult to them, and *you both dying of laughter over it*. Just imagining something the way you'd like it to happen can totally change your perception of the event...and your perception is the point. Your perception is your reality, and the exact same event from someone else's perception can be totally different.

That is the power of your imagination. Now. Use it for good.

6. Teach, Teach, Teach

One of the obvious solutions is to teach people with disabilities to express their anger in a different way. You may wonder why I haven't covered that topic here. The answer is simple. When writing this article, I was aiming to provide solutions and strategies for direct support staff in supporting people with disabilities who use hurtful and hateful language to attack their staff. I'm currently writing a second article on approaches to supporting people with disabilities to make the connection between how their language can affect people, and how to curb the tendency to target staff simply for being who they are.

Adversity can either make you or break you. The very things you dread now can become the source of some of your most valued skills...or it can reduce you to quivering indignation, health problems related to high blood pressure and pent up stress, an unhappy one third of your life at work, and a strain on your family. Think about these tips as a springboard to a new mindset. The work we do is rewarding. It is also frustrating, unpredictable, unfair, and, at times, unforgiving. Success in your job – much like success in your life – starts with the proper mindset, and the effective use of the right information and tools. Using these tips with the mindset that this is a situation that you can overcome can help create order from chaos, joy from despair and peace from conflict.

About the author:

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