

# Transforming Habitual Reactivity into Self-Connection

## The View

*Background.* Humans have evolved over tens of thousands of years to react very quickly to perceived danger in the environment. This reactivity served us very well when the threats to survival were varied and pervasive; nowadays, it can often lead to suffering in both ourselves and others. We can learn to work with this reactivity in our lives, fully experience strong emotions, and transform them into self-connection and compassion.

*Reality and Perceptions.* We get all our information about our environment – “reality” – through our sense perceptions. These perceptions are necessarily limited; for example, if something occurs outside our field of view, we are not able to see it. Because our only “window” on the world is our perceptions, they define our reality.

*Story and Judgment.* When our minds perceive something happening, we instantaneously and unconsciously make sense of it by assigning meaning and value, telling a story and making a judgment about what we perceived. Stories and judgments arise from our deepest conditioning and habit patterns, learned since we were children.

*Emotional Reactivity.* The process of translating perception into story and judgment (“racing up the ladder of reactivity”) occurs in an instant. If our story and judgments are negative (the situation is “bad,” or does not meet our expectations), we may react strongly. The kind of reactivity mentioned here is typically anger, frustration, blaming, or self-criticism. We might act out this reaction, slamming a door, kicking the wall, or striking out; we might also repress or deny our emotional state. **NOTE: when highly “triggered” or in a state of high reactivity, rational thought is unlikely at best.**

*Wakeup Call.* We can also use this strong emotional reaction as an opportunity to “wake up” to what’s going on in our minds and as an indicator that something is deeply alive for us. Learning to recognize when we’re jumping into habitual reactivity is a valuable skill. Once this basic awareness is developed, we can begin to practice a different way of working with the intense energy of our strong emotions.

*Transformation.* The transformation, or “climbing down the ladder of self-connection,” is a step-by-step process that helps us fully experience our intense emotions, identify our stories and judgments, work with them in a way that

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depletes their “juice,” and arrive at a position of being able to make a rational observation of the situation and connect with what’s really alive for us in the moment. We can then work with what’s alive relative to the observation rather than reacting to our story and judgment. See pages 3 and 4.

*Practice.* This process is something you can do every day, in every situation or interaction that “triggers” you. Over time, you might find that you hear the wakeup call at increasingly lower levels of emotional intensity, perhaps noticing that you’re forming judgment and story before reaching the level of reaction. Whenever you notice your story, judgment, or reactivity, you can step off the ladder of reactivity and proceed down the ladder of self-connection. This process, like life, is a practice – you can come back to it again and again with gentleness toward yourself, letting go of habitual patterns and connecting with the aliveness in yourself and in the world.

## The Practice

*Wakeup Call.* When you realize you are experiencing a strong emotional reaction, stop, take a deep breath, and identify your emotional state. Realize this is a wonderful opportunity to practice, and take another deep breath or two. This begins to liberate the mind from the captivity of your thoughts and bring it into present moment awareness.

Example: “Where are my feet?” Bring your attention to the direct experience of the present moment.

*Identify the Story and Judgment.* Often the story and judgment are intertwined and deeply rooted. We can work with this, identifying all of the different stories we encounter and their associated judgments. Become aware of thoughts of blame, labeling, criticism, and evaluation and the stories behind them, and articulate them.

Example: “I think Joe is a complete jerk, and he ate the last of the ice cream although he knew I wanted some too.”

*Differentiate.* We can begin to differentiate our stories and judgments from our experience by acknowledging they are our own creations, existing only in our minds. Phrases like “I’m telling myself that...” or “my story about this is...” or “my judgment is...” can be helpful to begin this process. Eventually, we can deflate all of these thoughts so they do not have as much energy. If reactivity is

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reenergized, go back to the Wakeup Call and work with the emotional reaction, story, and judgment coming up this time. An indicator that this step is complete is a shift in emotional state away from the original reactive state.

Example: "I am telling myself that Joe is a complete jerk. I am telling myself that Joe ate the last of the ice cream although he knows I wanted some too."

*Observation.* Once we are able to drain the energy from our stories and judgments, we can think rationally and discern what we actually perceived. An observation is what could be recorded by a video camera.

Example: "After dinner, I told Joe I wanted some ice cream. Ten minutes later, I noticed the ice cream container was empty and in the trash, and saw Joe sitting in the kitchen finishing a bowl of ice cream."

*Self-connection.* When we consider our experience free from story and judgment, we will likely notice another shift in our emotional state. We might find that what's alive for us is sadness or fear, rather than the anger or frustration arising during our reaction to story and judgment. The result can be deep self-connection that invites us to practice gentleness and compassion for ourselves and others, and authentic presence in the world.

Example: "When I saw the empty ice cream container and Joe eating a bowl of ice cream, I felt sadness and despair because I was really hoping for sharing, comfort, and respect."

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<p><i>Emotional Reaction</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disengagement / denial.</li> <li>- Anger / frustration.</li> <li>- Self-criticism.</li> <li>- Shaming / blaming.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Present Moment Awareness</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Where are my feet?"</li> <li>- Return my attention to the direct experience of the present moment.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Judgment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I judge and label my perceptions and associated stories.</li> <li>- Good / Bad</li> <li>- Right / Wrong</li> <li>- Like / Dislike</li> </ul>	<p><i>Do I have a value judgment?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "He is such a jerk."</li> <li>- "I am so stupid."</li> <li>- These judgments, based on the story, produce an emotional reaction.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Story</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I make sense out of what I perceive by telling a story about it.</li> <li>- These stories are based on my habit patterns and personal experiences.</li> <li>- My stories are quite likely repetitive and similar.</li> </ul>	<p><i>What am I telling myself?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "He did this on purpose just to make me mad."</li> <li>- "I can never do anything right."</li> <li>- This is what I'm telling myself, based on my experience and habit patterns.</li> <li>- I react to these stories and their associated judgments habitually and emotionally.</li> <li>- I can differentiate my stories from my experience by reminding myself, "I'm telling myself..."</li> </ul>
<p><i>Perception</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I only see / hear / smell / taste / touch part of what happens.</li> </ul>	<p><i>What did I observe?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What would a camera record, free from the filter of story and judgment?</li> </ul>
<p><i>"Reality"</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stuff happens.</li> <li>- Situations arise, I interact with others.</li> </ul>	<p><i>What's alive in the moment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feelings</li> <li>- Needs</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Self-connection</b></p>

**LADDER OF REACTIVITY**

**LADDER OF SELF-CONNECTION**