

## Being in Control When You Feel Out of Control

**“To err is human; to manage error is system.”**

**Kevin Kelly**

People sometimes use a common saying, “Things are out of control.” At other times, referring to a specific individual, they will say, “He is out of control.” or “She is out of control.” Perhaps, in describing your personal actions, you say, “I just can’t seem to control myself.” At the core of each of these statements is the idea that being “in control” is valuable and being out of control isn’t so great. The idea of being *in control* is wonderful as long as you are the one doing the controlling; it is when others want to control you or when you experience an inability to control someone or something that you don’t like the concept of control. To many people, the concept seems harsh, cold and mechanical, especially when it is associated with human behavior. Dictionaries give the most common definitions of the word “control” as having to do with power over something or someone, and “skill” is included only in the least common ways of defining the word. To someone who knows Perceptual Control Theory, the irony in this is that living systems spend all of their time controlling which is defined as maintaining a specific condition. The cruise control on your car is a good illustration; it maintains the specific speed at which you want to travel.

According to William Powers, “Behavior is the control of perception.” Controlling is the process by which all living systems maintain the conditions that they want. It is the process a sunflower uses to get enough sunlight; it is the process a baby uses to get rid of a sensation of hunger; it is the process you use to pump blood throughout your body to maintain the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to your cells. It is also the process you use to build the life you desire, to bring about the relationships you cherish, and to create the career of your dreams. Behavior does not consist solely of the actions we take; actions are one part of what we do to maintain control. Control involves three basic components: action, perception and comparison. Control is the essence of living.

For example, a sunflower perceives the amount of sunlight it is receiving, it compares that to the amount of sunlight it wants, and it takes action to decrease the difference between the two. It measures the amount of received sunlight, and when it registers not enough, it rotates until it senses “just the right amount of sun”. As humans, we like to think our actions are conscious choices; however, in many cases, our systems simply do what is necessary to maintain control, to maintain a specific condition. This very basic process of constantly comparing what we want to what we are recording and taking action to get a closer match is called living. Living, therefore, is about reducing error; the error between the desired state and the perceived present state of anything. In fact when we can’t *control* something for a long period of time we experience stress. We often express this as feeling *out of control*.

So stress can be thought of as the perceived inability to control; we experience it when we are in a constant state of error; and no matter what actions we take, we cannot get that

‘just right’ feeling. There are three areas in our lives for which we tend to perceive a lack of control: relationships, wealth and health. Once we understand that stress stems from experiencing constant error when we compare a desired state to our perception of our present state, we may comprehend how we can reduce the stress in our lives or handle it more quickly and more effectively when we do experience it.

The first step we need to take is to *tune into* what we really want in the areas of health, wealth and relationships. We need to remember to compare our perceptions to our ‘just right.’ If we carefully define our personal ‘just right’ relationships, health and wealth, we will be more likely to look for opportunities to bring these into our lives and to recognize and walk away from relationships, health practices and money situations that don’t fit our ideal pictures. If we amend or adjust the pictures of our ‘just rights,’ we can be more receptive and responsive to other opportunities.

The second step we need to take is to look into each of these areas and answer the question “Which part of this am I in control of?” Glenn Smith calls this the serenity prayer question. We often try to control things that are impossible for us to control. We think we can control other people or override our genetic make-up or determine who is laid off when an employer down sizes. When we understand Perceptual Control Theory, we emphasize personal responsibility, internal motivation, and control as maintaining a specified condition. Look at the following statements and ask yourself which represent you as the actor having total control.

1. Making others feel better; making them love me.
2. Making people listen to anything I say.
3. Taking care of myself, so that I may be more effective in a relationship or healthier.
4. Getting someone to change his/her beliefs, habits or desires.
5. Actively listening without making judgments.
6. Deciding how much money I’ll spend.
7. Selecting my genetic make up and the circumstances into which I was born.

Do you experience stress when people don’t seem to love you or listen to you or believe what you want them to? Can you control those behaviors? The key here is to know what you can control and to let go of what you can’t.

The third step we need to take is to recognize our error signals as warnings that we are experiencing a mismatch. Many people describe their error signals as feelings or as strong emotions. When we feel emotions, powerful chemicals called neurotransmitters are moving through the blood stream. From release to peak to subsidence, the chemical cycle takes about 90 seconds. Sometimes if we just take a few deep breathes and let our blood flow through one cycle, we feel more settled. The chemical cycle explains the effectiveness of the old strategy of settling yourself down by counting to ten. Once you recognize an error signal, ask yourself “What is it I want right now that I’m not getting?” Awareness is always the first step to change, to reducing error. If I’m not aware I’m experiencing error, and if I do not act to reduce it, over time it can manifest in my system

in some very unhealthy ways: high blood pressure, heart attacks, ulcers and other equally unpleasant conditions.

The fourth step is to remember that we have the ability to change both what we want and how we perceive. Granted, it is usually easier to change what we desire, but with time and practice we can change how we perceive incoming information. For example, I grew up in an area of the country where the word “Baby” was used as an endearment between a man and a woman who were involved in an intimate relationship. In other parts of the country, the word “Baby” is nothing more than a playful greeting between a man and a woman. Before I understood this more casual use of the word, I created a lot of stress within myself by thinking it meant more than a friendly hello. Over time I have learned to perceive, or to record, the word in a new and different way.

The fifth and most important step is to practice alignment. Alignment is correctly positioning various beliefs and principles with respect to each other and to our actions. We need to align our beliefs in each area of our lives with the principles we are trying to live by, and then we need to monitor how we spend our time and energy so that what we do is aligned with our beliefs. If I believe in abundance, and if I live the principle of being generous, then I will view requests to donate my time or money to a cause I believe in as an opportunity, not an obligation. My use of my time, energy and resources will be aligned with my principles and beliefs.

Understanding control can help us feel a lot more in control even in some very difficult situations. A few minutes of an inner inspection of self can help us journey through life with a lot less stress!

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