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# Reflexive



VS

# reflective responses

Words by Marie Rowland

We all know the feeling of being provoked to the point of being so emotionally charged, we react purely on impulse. There's no thinking involved. Auto-pilot kicks in, and we bypass fastening our cognitive seatbelts resulting in a bumpy ride. Acting without thinking is a reflex response that comes from a place of self-protection or when we have taken offence. But is attack the best form of defence? Rather than reacting, if we can respond in a reflective manner then we can fly above the turbulence to ensure a safe landing.



We are all familiar with a doctor tapping just below the kneecap to see if our reflexes are working. A reflex response is one that operates on a hair trigger, literally. There is no cognition or premeditation involved – you just do it. We have no cognitive control, hence the term “knee-jerk” reaction. In psychological terms, this is called an “action tendency”. It is an instinctive urge or default behaviour linked to a strongly felt emotion. The action tendency for fear might be to run or hide. For anger, the body will go into attack mode.

These coping mechanisms occur in the moment when in a state of overwhelm or feeling threatened, often resulting in ill-advised responses with undesirable repercussions. The emotional reflex activates a behavioural response that comes from the stress centre in our being. This amygdala-driven reaction is a reflexive stress response when the body goes into fight, flight or freeze.

This action tendency happens in everyday life when interacting with others where our emotions swell and hit like a tidal wave. When incited, we instinctively sidestep conscious thinking and we act on an emotional pivot where there can be unforeseen fallout, from spewing forth invective or jumping on the defensive. However, when we think in a reflective manner we can act in a considered way where we keep our top-note emotions in check. This form of self-regulation doesn't mean our reflex response is wrong but rather our reflective response allows for us to not get caught up in the heat of the moment and to communicate our feelings accurately, explaining our hurts and anger.

#### To act or to react

The reflex response is rooted in the unconscious, tapping into the deep recesses of our mind where repressed memories and feelings reside. But it is also where our fears and insecurities lay dormant waiting to be triggered. This is where our trauma sits. For instance, when a war veteran hears the backfiring of a car, they can run for cover as it evokes the gunfire that happens in the fog of war.

Similarly, when we are under enormous pressure in our immediate environment or activated by unwelcomed or unexpected news, we can fly off the handle and say things we don't mean. How many times can we remember situations where we reacted on impulse, shuddering when we recall things that were said, screamed or shattered. When caught off-guard, we can also be overcome by tears and even shut down. The unconscious mind operates without reason or management – it is a force of innate nature. Because it is instinctual, it is reactive.

The problem arises when these emotions lead to judgments made without the facility of awareness or prudent analysis. There is the sense of things but no recognition of what the reality of a situation actually is. While feelings can be effective indicators, when under pressure, they are prone to mislead or be deemed as unreliable resulting at times in rash outcomes.

#### The reflect effect

Unlike reflexive responses, emotional reflection uses a range of devices in order to circumvent the amygdala framework for re-diversion back into the pre-frontal cortex. This process means we take a step

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back from something that has upset us and consider why it has had this effect. We revert to the executive function where we can regain clarity and perspective on a situation. This form of reflection is effectively emotional processing.

The emotional reflex centres on the subjective experience, the physiological response and consequently the behavioural outcome. We behave impulsively based on that initial emotional reaction, however reflection allows us to literally be more thoughtful through self-regulation.

Reflecting is a contemplative act where you take the time to recognise the pain or distress you are feeling even as you are experiencing it. It is a form of self-observation where you accept the feeling but do not validate it instantly. Instead, you analyse and consider your reaction and determine the right course of action. Reflection uses your cognitive faculties but recognises that emotions are real.

In the moment, it is not an easy task to literally stop and think. Unlike emotional reflexivity, being reflective does not come naturally. In effect, this process needs to be cultivated. It is the ability to observe the instinct to react and subsequently to pull back from the reaction using self-awareness. It is a mindful act where we do not discard or dismiss our emotions as being faulty but rather investigate the validity of them. Now this is, at times, impossible in the moment. But with practice, we can get better at reining in our reactions. The aim is to manage them before they manage us. The following techniques can help to keep a lid on things:

- Breathing techniques, also known as breathwork, is one coping tool.
- Knowing what your triggers are is also helpful in avoiding situations that can incite an emotionally reflexive response.
- Enhancing body awareness so as you are reacting you can recognise that feeling in your body as it rises inside of you.
- Develop a range of tactical responses to cope with this physiological response: these can include breathwork, closing your eyes, squeezing your fists, repeating a mantra or even walking away. It is best to devise an approach that suits you.

### Wiser counsel

In 1938, Harvard University began a longitudinal study tracking the lives of more than 2000 participants. Its mission was to determine the factors that comprised a happy life. The main finding was that engaging in meaningful relationships was the primary determinant for life satisfaction.

The current director and associate director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, Robert

Waldinger and Marc Schulz, have co-authored a book called *The Good Life: Lessons From The World's Longest Study On Happiness*. In this book, they have devised a technique to assist us to slow down our reaction time and to develop strategies to manage stressful situations. They coined it the WISER model.

WISER is an apt acronym where each letter represents the progression in the self-regulation process: Watch, Interpret, Select, Engage and Reflect.

- **Watch:** this first step is the act of self-observation in the moment of provocation. Think of hitting the brakes at traffic lights and take that moment to observe your emotions, the other person's emotions, your environment and what the issue is at hand. As opposed to being impulsive, this is an intentional activity. Waldinger and Schulz regard this phase as pressing "the pause button to prevent a potentially harmful reflexive response". This is the most important step as you endeavour to replace contempt with curiosity.
- **Interpret:** This second step is about making meaning of the situation by identifying all the determinant factors at play including pre-conceived assumptions. Considering the situation including pressure-testing the validity of your own emotional responses is pertinent at this juncture. You can assess the environment and other forces at play that may have factored into why you reacted as you did. This step is also about delving into the other person's perspective.
- **Select:** Now in the third step, while considering the other's perspective, you also consider your own and select the parts that are valid based on your values and lived experience of what has occurred in the encounter. The aim is to communicate your perspective clearly and respectfully. The authors write, "The key is to try to slow things down where you can zoom in and move from a fully automatic response to a more considered and purposeful response that aligns with who you are and what you are seeking to accomplish."
- **Engage:** Now that you have explored your reasons and rationale for your response, effective engagement is the fourth step. How and when you engage may also be a consideration. Rather than choosing to engage there and then, you may opt to choose a different time and place to encourage a better outcome.
- **Reflect:** This final step is all about assessing how the above implementation went and whether you achieved an optimum outcome for all parties, ensuring you felt seen and heard, without diminishing anyone else.

Remember, at any point, you can take a "time out" in order to decompress where you can use any of the

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positive coping strategies, from breathwork to fist-squeezing as you initiate the process of regulation.

#### The mindful balancing act

Feeling and thinking are not incompatible when managed effectively and in concert. It is in the unconscious state where we react and in the conscious mind where we act. These are binary responses and opposite in nature. Usually, we do one or the other, but wouldn't it be helpful for our sense of wellbeing to be able to incorporate or integrate them?

We can use both reflexive and reflective approaches to help us navigate life. They can lead to internal conflict when used in isolation or in a mutually exclusive way. But used in tandem, they can work powerfully together. Reflection is the mind and reflexion is the gut reaction. Finding the balance between both means we respond holistically. Self-awareness means we come to know how these two processes work and over time we can learn to integrate the two so that we never lose our balance.

Think about how you might view what happens to you in life if you draw on and use both your emotional as well as your cognitive responses. After all, we can both experience as well as evaluate a work of art, a piece of music or even a dish of food. Experiential is to feel and evaluative is to think.

We can be moved by art or music while also technically assessing its artistry or compositional structure. Think of those foodie shows when judges are taste-testing contestants' dishes. There is the flavour sensation that elicits reactions of yum or yuck but is balanced by the cognitive appraisal of sweet to sour critically ranking culinary skill. We can savour as well as score. The intellectual or considered response complements the visceral or instinctive response. The conscious and the unconscious can combine like yin and yang. In the end, it is all about balance and appreciating that all parts of our being have a place when handled with self-compassion and self-awareness.

The reflex is to leap. The reflect response is to look before you leap. The trick is to reflect on the reflex and then just relax. 🌀



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