

PLAY NICELY WITH THE WORLD

GERRY FISHER, LICSW

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20 Academy Street, Suite 201-D
Arlington, MA 02476

Phone: (781) 929-6341
E-mail: gfisher-LICSW@rcn.com
Internet: <http://www.gerryfisher.com/>

Imagine this: you have a 10:30 a.m. doctor's appointment across town. You chose this appointment time specifically because it is after the morning rush hour. This will allow you sleep late, linger over a home-made breakfast and coffee, and easily drive the 10-minute drive to the medical building. You leave your house, and you soak in the sun as you walk to your car. Life is good!

Half way to your doctor's office, traffic slows... slower... dead stop. Up ahead, you see flashing red lights. Accident. "No problem," you think. "I still have plenty of time to get through this traffic and make the appointment." But the dead stop continues.

You start to think about how much you hate being late, and you even imagine how embarrassed you will be to walk into the doctor's office, all eyes on you. You reach for your cell phone, don't find it, and curse yourself for being so casual when walking out the door this morning. Your breathing quickens. You start to think about ways to cut through side streets to avoid the mess, but you can't do anything in a dead stop. The traffic moves just one car-length occasionally and then dead stops again. The car in front of you allows a car to cut in front of them. "Fine. Just what I need. More delay!"

Next, you start to think of all the things that could assist you in your quest to make your appointment. If only the cleaning crew would get the broken glass off of the road quicker. If only the idiots who got into the accident had been driving more carefully. If only the police were better at detouring traffic through the surrounding side streets. If only the world would give you one, FREAKIN' BREAK! You slam on the breaks, because, in all your thinking, you didn't notice the car in front of you stopping again to let yet another car cut in front. You lean on the horn and swear at the driver. You KNOW you're getting out of control, but you just NEED ONE BREAK!

Finally, the bargaining begins. You swear that you'll be better at getting up earlier in the morning, if only the traffic would clear. You'll never swear at motorists again, if only the traffic would clear. You'll be much, MUCH better at remembering your cell phone, if only the traffic would clear. You'll be very, very nice to the driver in front of you, if only he will not let in any more cars.

And on...and on...and on....

* * *

There are many ways that this scenario can conclude. Maybe you got to your appointment 7½ minutes late, you walked into the office, and the receptionist said, "No problem...she's running a bit late, anyway." Perhaps it was one of those nightmare accidents that lock up traffic for a half hour or more. You may have walked into the office very late, and the receptionist, although very understanding about the traffic jam (she heard about it on the radio station playing in the reception area), needs to reschedule your appointment.

Instead of focusing on the outcome, however, focus on two other things:

- ◇ The miserable emotional state
- ◇ The complete focus on you making your appointment

There are many situations that resemble the "stuck in traffic" scenario. Many of them involve you having a goal and something blocking you from successful completion of that goal. Whenever you are in a situation in which circumstances largely outside of your control are either delaying you or preventing you from reaching your goal, think to yourself, "Play nicely with the world."

“Play nicely with the world” is a powerful cognitive technique (a technique that involves managing what you think). It reminds people that the universe, the world, and your community all involve many, many powerful forces and factors that have absolutely, positively nothing to do with you getting to your doctor’s appointment on time. Life is about so much more than any one of your or my goals. Sorry to bring it up, but it’s true. It’s important to remember that. It can help to put things into proper perspective.

Another aspect of “play nicely with the world” that I like is that the word “play” is a gentle reminder not to take life too seriously. For example, although we would all prefer to make our doctor’s appointment without having to reschedule it, what severe hardship would come from being very late and having to reschedule? No major hardship at all. So, smile and relax. You can cope with the consequences!

Finally, I love this phrase, because it emphasizes cooperation. In addition to realizing that any one person’s needs and desires are not the center of the universe, the whole notion of “cooperation” takes things a step further. Regardless of how much we like to pretend otherwise (especially in the United States, land of “pull yourself up by the bootstraps”), we need each other. The people possibly hurt in that car accident need you to care. The person in front of you trying to assist other drivers needs your support. A driver having a bad day or getting momentarily distracted needs your understanding (if, for no other reason, because you would want that same courtesy extended to you the next time YOU are in that situation). “Play nicely with the world” emphasizes our connection and need for community.

So, “play nicely with the world.” If you can get yourself into this emotional and spiritual place as you are being temporarily blocked from reaching your goal, you can chuckle at your own mistakes, and you can remind yourself that the worst thing that can happen (having to reschedule the appointment) is no big deal at all. In this more accepting and relaxed state of mind, you can take pleasure in the music on the radio as you wait in the dead-stopped traffic, you can roll down the window and enjoy the gentle breeze, you can stare at the beautiful clouds, and you just might be delighted to find out that, even though you would not have planned things this way, you can create some relaxation and pleasure in the middle of a traffic jam. Not bad for a shrinky self-help phrase, eh?

I have just introduced a set of tips to my available writings. If you would like an online, PDF copy of “8 Tips for Controlling Anger,” please send e-mail to the address listed in the header of this essay.