

## **French Fries and Food Fights: How to Stop Overreacting**

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The husband of a couple I had been seeing for marital therapy called me one morning when they returned from a trip. On one leg of their journey, “Jim” and “Heather” had stopped at the drive through window of a restaurant to get lunch before getting back on the interstate. Once back on the road, Jim had asked his wife to pass him his food. As she did, he suddenly began angrily yelling at her. Both of them agreed she had done nothing to warrant this emotional outburst. He wondered what I thought might explain why he had reacted that way.

Most of us have experienced our own awkward moments when we find ourselves overreacting to a situation. It typically occurs without warning. You recognize your sudden emotional intensity doesn’t fit what is happening. There is an out-of-control feeling to it – you don’t want to be talking/feeling this way. You’ve probably been on the receiving end of moments like these, too. You’ve asked a simple question or made a benign comment when your spouse or a co-worker unexpectedly responded in an angry or sarcastic manner. The natural reaction is a defensive one with its own counterattack that is also sarcastic or angry in tone, “Well, *excuse* me!”

The truth is it’s no fun being on either end of a conversation at such times. Worse, these moments can accumulate to drive a wedge deeper and deeper into an otherwise healthy relationship. You may decide not to discuss an issue with someone because you have come to anticipate he or she may overreact. You may begin to feel as if you are “walking on egg shells” in an effort to steer clear of such moments. Maintaining open communication in a marriage – or any relationship – becomes increasingly difficult the more that one or both of you overreact to comments or situations. The more frequently or more intensely that you overreact, the more important it becomes to understand what has been continuing to trigger you, and then eliminate the trigger.

When Jim came in for his next appointment I taught him a simple model about how memories work that you can use to help identify the source of your own triggers – and then get rid of them. Our brains organize and store memories in categories to help us learn. These categories facilitate our remembering things later, much like file folders help us locate specific information more quickly. With children, this process of categorizing can lead to some humorous anecdotes. One day my three-year-old son excitedly came to tell me there were two cows in our front yard. Since we live in a residential neighborhood, I was pretty sure he hadn’t seen cows, but I was curious what he had actually seen. Going to the window I saw two huge Great Danes slowly lumbering across our lawn. To Matt, a four legged animal that big had to be a cow. Nor are adults immune to problems categorizing things incorrectly. As a college freshman I learned the hard way that the fact a red sweatshirt is old and faded still doesn’t mean it is safe to wash it with white underwear! As we grow we learn that some things go together well and some don’t. Most parents will not pick certain names for their new baby because of unpleasant associations those names have with childhood acquaintances. Color choices can be influenced in similar ways. To this day I still won’t wear slacks that are a certain shade of brown.

Jim’s overreaction in the car with Heather was a striking example of how memories are stored and remembered. Every complete memory has four parts as shown in the box below. Sometimes we forget some of the details of a memory such as the name of the lead actress in a movie or whether we liked the taste of a particular wine. But the fact that you forget a detail doesn’t mean that it doesn’t continue to influence you in some way. (Before I began to routinely hang my car keys on a hook in the kitchen, I was regularly influenced by my forgetting where I had put them!)

**The four parts of a memory:**

Behavior – What you are doing

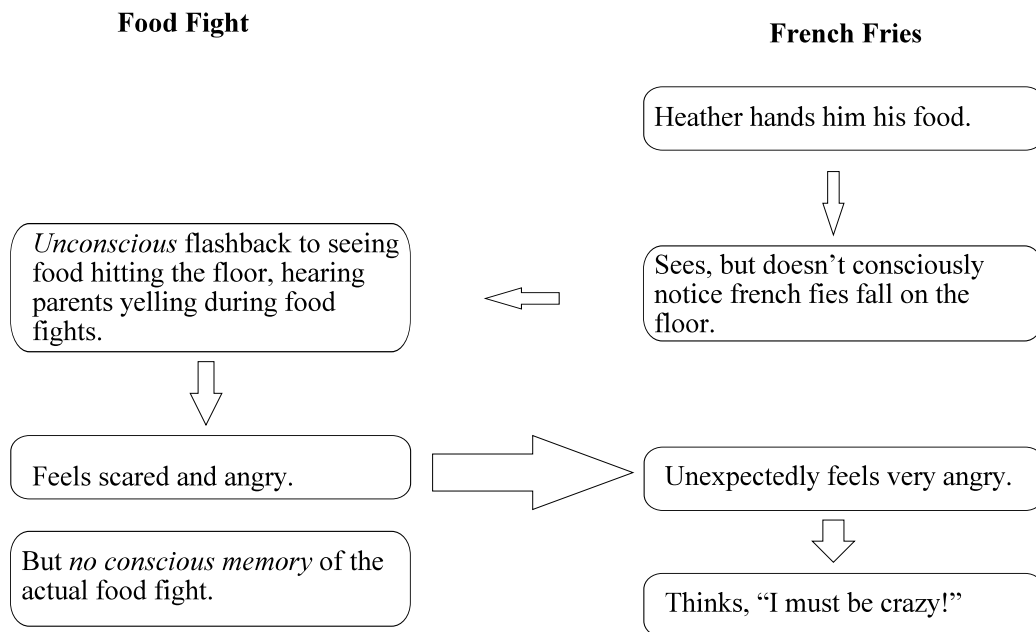
Sensations – What you see, hear, smell,  
etc.

Feeling – What you are feeling

Thoughts – What you are thinking

When Jim arrived at my office for his appointment I had him describe in detail what had taken place in the car with Heather. Then I had him close his eyes, take a moment to relax, and let his mind remember the past event that had triggered the situation in the car. A few seconds later he exclaimed, “Wow! I hadn’t thought about that in years!” He was remembering how his parents used to have occasional food fights when he was a child. He would hide under the table, scared and angry, to avoid being in the line of fire as they threw whatever they could get their hands on at each other. While this memory had clearly stirred up some intense feelings, at that point neither of us understood what this memory had to do with the incident in the car. Both events had food as a common component, yet he had not thought about the food fights for years, despite the fact that food was a daily part of his life. The critical missing piece emerged a moment later.

I had Jim imagine a split screen in his mind’s eye. On the left screen I had him project an image of one of his parents’ food fights; on the right, an image of the scene in the car with Heather. Then I asked him to notice anything that linked to two images together. In a matter of seconds he exclaimed a second, “Wow!” On the left screen from his vantage point under the kitchen table he was watching food falling to the floor. On the right screen he noticed that when his wife had handed him his bag of French fries, a few of them had accidentally spilled onto the floor of the car. He hadn’t even been consciously aware that this had happened at the time. The visual image of food hitting the floor in the car had triggered the memory of the food fights from his childhood. But here was the critical piece: it had only triggered a partial recall of the memory. Only one of the four parts of the memory had re-emerged in the car: the feelings. The emotional outburst had occurred when the old feelings came flooding forward as an overlay to the current situation. The diagram on the next page shows what had happened.



The subtle visual trigger of seeing food hitting the floor had an emotional impact similar to that of puncturing a can of spray paint. In the years since those food fights he had never dealt with how angry and scared he had felt as he hid under the kitchen table. All of those old, but still intense, feelings had come flooding forward. He had felt embarrassed and not a little crazy because he knew his reaction was way out of proportion to what was actually happening in the car at the moment. Unfortunately, this is usually what happens when a person overreacts. Only the feelings from the earlier memory reemerge, and not the other three pieces. The old feelings piggyback on the current feelings, producing the unexplained overreaction.

Now that he understood the link between the two events, I had him replay the scene in the car one more time. This time, when he noticed the falling French fries, the entire childhood memory came flooding forward. In his imagination he heard himself telling his wife, “Agghhh! Seeing those French fries hit the floor just brought back an awful memory of my parents having food fights when I was a child. I used to get so scared and angry hiding under the table!” Now his intense feelings matched what was happening. Instead of yelling at his wife, he was sharing a painful memory with her.

Identifying the link was the first half of our work. We spent the remainder of the session dealing with his memories of the food fights. If you have old memories of your own that still evoke strong feelings, you might play with the exercise I used with Jim. I had him imagine walking into his parents’ kitchen – at his current adult age – during one of the food fights. As an adult I had him stand between his parents and the table while he told them what he thought of their childish behavior. When he was done, he turned to face the boy he had been as a child. Taking the boy’s hand, he led him out of the kitchen to a safe place. He affirmed that the boy was right to be so scared and angry, and how sorry he was that the boy had had to deal with his parents behaving that way. He also reassured the boy that the food fights were not his fault, nor was he responsible for stopping them. Then I had Jim take care of one final piece. I asked him to repeat the sentence, “I forgive myself for not knowing as a child what else to do when my parents

behaved that way.” If you do this exercise yourself, consider the following sentence if you have trouble modifying the one I used with Jim. “I forgive myself for having accepted wrong teachings about me as truth.” Say it out loud three or four times, pausing to take a deep breath each time after you say the sentence.

I teach my clients a simple rule of thumb: *If your emotional reaction to a situation is more than you expected (or less), the difference is history.* If you expected to be mildly annoyed but found yourself much more upset, the additional emotional intensity is coming from some earlier event that was triggered by the current one. Similarly, if you *aren't* as sad or upset by some event as you thought you would be (such as the death of a friend), the missing emotional intensity is probably being blocked by an earlier event where you didn't or couldn't express similar emotions. When something triggers old grief, many people “shut down” to avoid having to deal with the sad feelings. There is no statute of limitations for these old, unresolved feelings. I once worked with a woman who had never grieved the death of a sibling who had died in an accident some 40 years earlier. In another case a man's supervisor had told him not to return to work until he dealt with his sadness, and his anger, over his father's death. A few weeks later both felt emotionally much lighter having finally dealt with these losses.

Your feelings serve a critical purpose for you, just as the many sounds we hear from such diverse things as a microwave oven, a telephone, a doorbell, a car horn, or a smoke alarm. While we may not like the message implied by some sounds, we take a risk if we choose to ignore them. That odd grinding sound coming from the car wheel could be your warning of a failing wheel bearing getting ready to lock up while you're driving down the highway at 65 mph! Every one of your emotions, but particularly the strong ones, provides you important information about what you are thinking. Your feelings don't really go away if you don't deal with them. They just get pushed to the back like leftovers in the refrigerator. Like those leftovers, the potency eventually begins to contaminate everything around it.

So the next time you overreact, thank your emotional self for the message. Acknowledge to yourself (and the other person) that apparently something about the current situation is triggering some leftover emotions from your past. Set aside a few minutes where you can sit quietly, and invite yourself to become aware of the memory from the past event that contains the emotional leftovers. If you need to, use the split screen to help you recognize what connects the two events. Then replay the current event, this time allowing the full memory of the earlier event to emerge. Notice that the sense of overreacting has disappeared. Then imagine your adult self intervening in the earlier situation as I had Jim do. Conclude with a statement about forgiving yourself. Be sure to say it out loud – the words have much more impact that way. I'm confident you'll like the results!

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