



The Stories We Tell

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I used to have a terrible temper when driving. When someone would cut me off or drive too slowly in front of me or tailgate me, I would begin yelling at them or making gestures that I hoped would give them the message that I thought they were an idiot.

One day, as I was yelling and making gestures at an offending tailgater, I was so enflamed with rage, I actually turned my head clear around (they were behind me) to yell at them as they turned a corner. When I turned back around I was frightened to see I had careened off the road and was about to go over a tall curb and straight into a gas pump at a local gas station! I slammed on the breaks and avoided a terrible consequence to my lack of attentive driving.

That scare made me realize that I absolutely must take steps to change my angry driving. I decided that each time a car cut me off or tailgated me or drove what I considered too slowly, I would make up a story about why they were doing these things. "That man must be rushing to the hospital because his wife's in labor," I would say out loud when someone cut me off or was tailgating. "That person sprained their ankle and is trying to drive to her sister's funeral despite the pain," I would say when someone was driving too slowly.

It worked! Not only did this activity entertain my husband and kids, it made me feel better that I was accommodating someone with an urgent need, and it took away all the anger I felt. The end result was a much safer and stress-free driver.

You, and only you, create your emotions. You get to decide how you feel based on how you allow yourself to think about the actions of others.

In the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high*, by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler, the authors discuss the fact that all people tell themselves stories just *after* we make an observation and just *before* we feel an emotion about what we saw.

The book says, "That is, we add meaning to the action we observed. To the simple behavior we add motive. Why were they doing that? We also add judgment – is that good or bad? And then, based on these thoughts or stories, our body responds with an emotion."

These stories are our interpretations of the facts. They help us understand and explain what happened. The problem is, our background and individual beliefs often color our interpretation in either a positive or negative way. For instance, if we grew up in a very quiet home, and our supervisor often yells, we may interpret that differently than someone who grew up in a very loud home environment where parents often yelled.

What stories do you tell yourself? Are they useful to you? If not, how can you change them, as I did with my poor driving attitude, to better serve your needs as a business person, parent, spouse or friend?