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How To Feel in Control When Things Are Out of Control

One of my favorite quotes goes something like, “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” This is perfect advice when it comes to feeling in control when things are out of control around you. Attempting to alter what may not be in your power to change will only exhaust you, but becoming resilient – learning to flex and adapt, in other words, with unpredictability – will allow you to ride the inevitable waves more easily.

These suggestions will show you the way:

Stop Trying to Control What You Can’t Control

There is so much we have no command over: traffic, the weather, and sometimes even the court system, to name just a few. And yet all of us waste time and energy worrying about and acting on circumstances outside our jurisdiction. We lie awake at night hoping that we’ll pass a particular test, get a certain job, attract an object of our affection, or sidestep a contagious illness. We tense ourselves up trying to beat the competition, win over others, prevent loss and heartache, slow the fast pace of America, and corral global movements that are much bigger than us. Even though we’re old enough to know better, we get caught up in the belief that we can will or force outcomes, avoiding the unpreventable realities of life, if we just push hard enough. Often, we notice that the more we try to control what we can’t control, the more out of control we become. And, we start to see that those things we can’t control are best left to do what they’re going to do anyway.

Strive to Control What You Can Control

While it’s impossible to control what we have no control over, it’s actually quite possible to *feel* more in control when we focus on what we actually *do* have control over: our responses. No matter what is going on around you, you and you alone

get to decide what attitude to take, how to prepare, what to say, how to greet bad news, how to treat yourself and others, how to cope. All of which adds up to your character – who you are. The more your character is based on even-keeled, reasonable responses to all that you can’t control, the more solid you feel and the more likely it is, because you’re not feeling anxious and spent trying to fight a battle you can’t win, that circumstances will go more your way. That, of course, is the irony of this control issue: it’s when we let go of what we can’t change that the sense of control we’re after begins to emerge.

Take Excellent Care of Yourself

To step away from the ever-evolving cacophony of what can’t be controlled and make pragmatic decisions about how to achieve a stature of calm stability despite it, you need to be genuinely rested and awake with a hardy constitution and clear head. This means making sure that you get enough sleep, eat relatively well, exercise sufficiently, protect yourself from people and environments that drain you, and keep your mind adequately nourished. This also means breaking away from work whenever necessary to take the edge off, have fun, and recharge. The advantage of taking full responsibility for your physical and mental health is that you’ll be in a better state of mind to discern between what can’t be controlled and what can. And you’ll be well-anchored with your wits about you when particularly threatening out-of-control situations trigger the all-too-human misleading impulse to try and make the madness stop.

Focus on What’s Certain

One sure way to feel centered when wayward happenings are challenging your sense of security is to swivel your attention from what’s tentative to what’s definite. This translates to

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recognizing your existing strengths and resources, counting your blessings, recalling the loved ones you know are here for you, remembering the coping skills you've learned from weathering past out-of-control periods. It's about zeroing in on what you know to be true, regardless of unsteady developments, putting your mind on what's working and what you actually have currently. Even if your health or home or income or family may be seriously at stake, reminding yourself that you are okay *right now*, regardless of what may happen next, will encourage peace of mind.

Make Letting Go a Regular Practice

It's most obvious amid a crisis that we don't have control over much, but the fact of our limited influence is a reality every single day. Even when things are going just the way we want

them to, anything can happen at any instant to thwart our sense of constancy. And that's why it's critical, if you want to ride the big waves deftly rather than get toppled by them, that you build up a regular practice of balancing what you can't control with what you can. Make it your intention every day, not just when you're utterly stressed by uncertainty, to fortify your mind, body and spirit; let others be who they are, allow for our up and down, unpredictable world order; *consider your responses*, and you will be in the best position possible to stand tall and ride out all sorts of crazy conditions. The more you build your life around steadying habits rather than just resist and react when those waves kick up, the more calm amid the storm you will find.

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