

Respond. Don't react.

We're often caught in what feel like automatic, habitual responses to situations. The key to escaping from these is to understand where our habitual responses come from, and what we can do to move from an emotive reaction to a more measured and conscious response.

Why we react, part 1: your inner chimp

This is a summary (and simplification) of the core idea in 'The Chimp Paradox' by Prof. Steve Peters.

Your mind has two independent thinking machines that interpret and respond to your experiences differently:

Your **chimp** is an emotional thinking machine. It is driven by **feelings**. It reacts quickly but thinks in black and white and can be paranoid, catastrophic and irrational.

Your **human mind** is a logical thinking machine. It is driven by **evidence, facts** and **truth**. It responds more slowly but can think in shades of grey, is rational and can use perspective and balance.

All the information you receive from your senses goes to your chimp first, before your human, logical mind. Your chimp is stronger and reacts faster than your human mind.

When you experience unwelcome thoughts, behaviours or an inner voice, you are being hijacked by your chimp. For example, your chimp may cause an emotional outburst or replay unhelpful or critical self-talk.

However, your chimp is only making you an offer about what to believe about yourself, or how to behave. You do not need to accept what the chimp offers you.

You are responsible for managing your chimp. You cannot change its nature, but you can manage its influence over how you think and behave.

You may find it helpful to give your chimp a name. This helps you to separate your chimp from your own personality.

Your chimp arises from a primitive part of your brain designed to help survival. But may draw on your experiences as a child by replaying what you were told, taught or experienced, or from other formative experiences.

It is normal to have chimp outbursts that can lead to thoughts or behaviours you do not want. You should expect that this will happen from time to time. Accept that you are not perfect and that your chimp is powerful.

Take care of your chimp when it is activated:

- Remember that you don't need to accept what the chimp is offering you.
- If you can, remove yourself from the situation that is activating the chimp.
- Take slow, even breaths.
- Listen to the chimp.
- Don't respond or comment.
- Use facts, evidence, truth and positive self-talk to calm the chimp down before you respond to the situation or person.

Why we react, part 2: Unhelpful parent or child ego-states

The ideas here come from transactional analysis, which posits that we each carry with us three ego states that we might use at any time. The key is which state we are using, and whether we are reacting or responding.

Child ego state

This is driven by emotion, instinct, and unmet needs. When reacting from the child, a person may feel overwhelmed, hurt, defensive or eager to please, and behaviour tends to be impulsive: seeking comfort, avoiding discomfort or recreating old patterns.

Parent ego state

This contains internalised rules, expectations and voices of authority figures. When reacting from the parent, responses are often automatic, judgemental, controlling, critical or rescuing, based on learned "shoulds."

Adult ego state

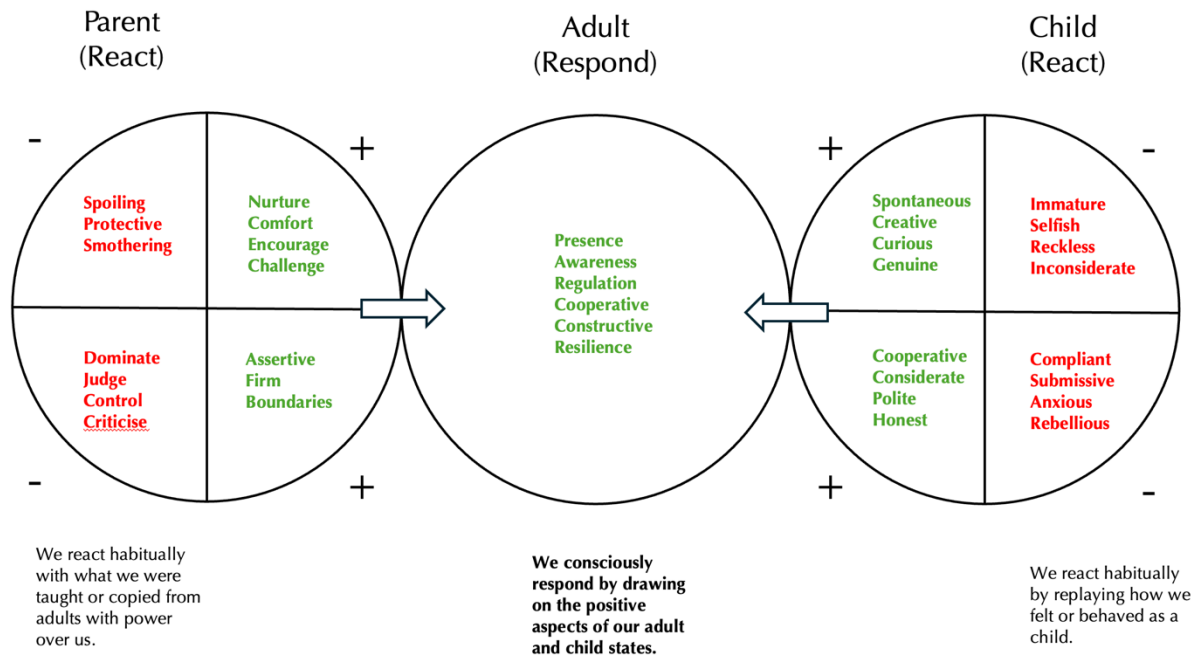
This is grounded in the present moment, logic, curiosity and proportionate reasoning. Responding from the adult means pausing, assessing the situation objectively, and choosing behaviour based on current facts rather than old scripts. It regulates the emotional child and moderated parent, enabling thoughtful choices rather than impulsive reactions.

The adult ego state lets us also respond by drawing on positive aspects of the child or parent state. Responding consciously from the child state involves choosing healthy spontaneity, joy, creativity and authentic emotional expression. When responding consciously from the parent, it can mean choosing boundaries, reassurance and protection without criticism.

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We can show this in a diagram:



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How to move from reacting to responding

Reacting is fast, emotional and patterned. Responding requires pausing, naming what's happening, assessing reality (what's really going on, not what you assume), and making a conscious choice. These actions create and then bridge a helpful gap between what happens and your response. This gap is where conscious choice, compassion, kindness, agency and maturity can all flourish.

1. Create a pause

Notice that you are reacting (or about to). A pause creates a space that interrupts your automatic emotional patterns and activates reflective, conscious thinking.

Count slowly from 1–10 or take 3-5 slow, deep breaths.

If appropriate, say: "Let me think about that for a moment."

Physically slow and relax your movement: unclench your hands, lower your shoulders, perhaps move position or sit down.

2. Label the emotion

Naming an emotion reduces its intensity and helps you to avoid attaching yourself to it.

Say to yourself: "I'm feeling frustrated/embarrassed/anxious here."

Avoid judgement words like telling the other person they are being dramatic or overreacting, or leaping to criticism.

Allow yourself to feel how this emotion arises in your body.

Then let that emotion dissipate away, like watching clouds move across the sky or a leaf float downstream.

3. Ask a clarifying question

Asking a question moves you into the adult ego state. It helps you respond based on the facts (what objectively happened or was said) rather than react based on assumptions that might be wrong.

For example:

"What do you need from me here?"

"Can you explain what you mean?"

"How urgent is this?"

"What exactly happened here?"

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4. Give yourself a time-out if you need it

Allow your emotions to fully settle before you respond.

Ask for a few minutes to reflect.

Change location if you feel overstimulated or dysregulated, or ask the other person to leave you for a moment.

5. Check your internal assumptions

Your reaction is often based on past experiences rather than the current moment. But just because something happened a certain way in the past does not mean that is the case this time. As well as asking clarifying questions, ask yourself:

Is this about now, or am I responding based on something in the past?

Am I imagining their intention, or the cause, or do I know it?

What evidence supports what I think?

7. Respond in neutral language

It's important not to add to the emotion of the situation, for example by moving to generalisations like "You always...", or "You never...". Instead, acknowledge the other point of view: "I hear what you're saying...", then state a measured response:

"Here's what we need to do..."

"I can do X, but not Y..."

8. Choose a positive action

Choosing a positive response shifts your thinking from impulsive to something more intentional and focused on solving the issue. For example, ask:

What outcome do I want?

What actions behaviour would move me toward that?

... and then act accordingly, for example to:

Set a boundary

Offer information

Agree conditions

Clarify expectations