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RICHARD DRURY/GETTY IMAGES

Most of us have been “feedsmacked” at some point in our life. In the midst of a meeting, an innocent walk down the hallway, or a performance review, someone delivers a verbal wallop that rocks our psychological footing. We looked at 445 such incidents when we conducted an online survey asking people about the hardest feedback they ever received.

Some of the comments were downright harsh (“Think about leaving — I need warriors not wimps” and “You only want to be right. You are manipulative. You don’t care about others”) and others were

less intense while still direct (“When you lose your temper, it can make others feel less respected” and “You need to improve your emails by only stating facts and not making them so flowery or soft”).

Many respondents to our study were still haunted by a harsh comment they received decades ago. I know this feeling from personal experience. I still feel a tightness in my chest and a sense of profound dread when I recall an episode where a colleague who didn’t like the way I handled an email called me a “f—ing idiot” and threatened to destroy me.

My hunch was that those who received such high-octane criticisms were likely to feel worse than those who received gentler comments. But, surprisingly, people who received less severe comments reported being just as overwhelmed and upset.

I was also surprised that few in our study became combative in the face of criticism, regardless of its severity. In fact, close to 90% described their immediate emotional response with words like dumbfounded, flabbergasted, shocked, stunned, or numb and 40% described a “shame”-related emotion like: embarrassment, worthlessness, hurt, sadness, and self-doubt. A scant 15% reacted with feelings that focused on the other person: anger, betrayal, or violence.

Why would anodyne observations create just as much agony as scathing assaults? The answer is this: we all crave approval and fear truth. And critical feedback feels traumatic because it threatens two of our most fundamental psychological needs: **safety** (perceived physical, social, or material security) and **worth** (a sense of self-respect, self-regard, or self-confidence).

Let’s address safety first. There are times when feedback does include financial threats (“I’m going to fire you”), relational threats (“I’m going to leave you”), or even physical threats (“I’m going to hit you”). In these instances, fear is the right response. But our analysis of the 445 episodes people reported in our study showed that immediate threats are a rare exception. In most cases, it is our defensive, combative, or resentful response to feedback that puts us at risk more than the feedback itself.

Now let’s talk about worth. If learning truth is beneficial, why would its reception provoke shame, fear, and anger? Because we live with an undercurrent of terror that we aren’t worthy and feedback risks pointing this out.

Many in our study argued that feedback hurts worse when the messenger has malicious motives. In truth, motive is irrelevant. The reality is that most of us crave the approval of powerful people. Our secret hope is that their positive endorsement might finally quiet feelings of nagging inadequacy. But it doesn’t.

I’ve spent much of my life believing that the best way to help people receive and act on negative feedback is to help those who are delivering it to improve their message. But I’m now convinced I

was wrong. Rather than focusing on saying things the “right” way, we need to all get better at finding truth in negative feedback, no matter how it’s delivered.

I’ve witnessed first-hand how people can do this by taking responsibility for their own safety and worth. For the past three years, I have studied and worked with a nonprofit called The Other Side Academy (TOSA) in Salt Lake City, Utah. Approximately one hundred adult men and women with long histories of crime, addiction, and homelessness live at TOSA in a self-reliant community that thrives on feedback. Their fundamental belief is that relentless exposure to truth is the best path to growth and happiness.

Twice a week, students engage in a process called “Games,” which is two hours of nonstop feedback. It can be loud. Vocabulary is sometimes raw and colorful. And a single student can be the focus of relentless attention for 20-25 minutes from as many as two dozen colleagues. Peers present you with evidence that you are dishonest, manipulative, lazy, selfish, or mean. There is little emphasis placed on diplomatic delivery of the message. Instead, they focus on helping the individual learn to “take their game.”

A few students react to their game defensively. They’ll withdraw, deny, or lash-out against those who are telling them things they don’t want to hear. But most don’t. They quickly learn that they are the primary source of their own safety. Reassuring themselves of their own efficacy is the fastest path to peace, and the best way to increase their self-efficacy is to scour the feedback for truth. The feedback is either true, false, or more often, a mix of the two. And if the truth is going to hurt you, it is more likely to do greater damage when you don’t know it than when you do. So, learning it is *always* beneficial.

What I’ve learned from the TOSA students is that we need to build our resilience in the face of criticism. Here are four steps you can try the next time harsh feedback catches you off-guard. I’ve organized them into an easy-to-remember acronym — CURE — to help you put these lessons in practice even when you’re under stress.

1. **Collect yourself.** Breathing deeply and slowly reminds you that you are safe. It signals that you don’t need to be aroused for physical defense. Noticing your feelings helps, too. Are you hurt, scared, embarrassed, ashamed? The more connected you are to these primary feelings the less you become consumed with secondary effects like anger, defensiveness, or exaggerated fear. Some students collect themselves by consciously connecting with soothing truths, for example by repeating a phrase like, “This can’t hurt me. I’m safe.” or “If I *made* a mistake, it doesn’t mean I *am* a mistake.”
2. **Understand.** Be curious. Ask questions and ask for examples. And then just listen. Detach yourself from what is being said as though it is being said about a third person. That will help you bypass the need to evaluate what you’re hearing. Simply act like a good reporter trying to understand the story.

3. **Recover.** It's often best at this point to simply exit the conversation. Explain that you want some time to reflect and you'll respond when you have a chance to do so. Give yourself permission to feel and recover from the experience before doing any evaluation of what you heard. At TOSA, students sometimes simply say, "I will take a look at that." They don't agree. They don't disagree. They simply promise to look sincerely at what they were told on their own timeline. You can end a challenging episode by simply saying, "It's important to me that I get this right. I need some time. And I'll get back to you to let you know where I come out."
4. **Engage.** Examine what you were told. If you've done a good job reassuring yourself of your safety and worth, rather than poking holes in the feedback, you'll look for truth. If it's 90% fluff and 10% substance, look for the substance. There is almost always at least a kernel of truth in what people are telling you. Scour the message until you find it. Then, if appropriate, re-engage with the person who shared the feedback and acknowledge what you heard, what you accept, and what you commit to do. At times, this may mean sharing your view of things. If you're doing so with no covert need for their approval, you won't need to be defensive.

It turns out that the misery we feel when "feedsmacked" is a symptom of a much deeper problem. Those who acknowledge and address this deeper issue don't just get better at these rare startling moments of emotional trauma, they are better equipped for all of life's vicissitudes.

Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an [innovator in corporate training and leadership development](#).
