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## Keep Calm ... and Don't Take It Personally

By Debbie DeAngelo  
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*Editor's note: Following is the latest article by Jefferson health and wellness expert Debbie DeAngelo.*

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I wasn't born with a "thick skin." For much of my life, hurtful, insensitive comments directed my way left me feeling poorly. Letting things roll off my back is a skill I have acquired, and continue to work on, over time. This transition began when I finally realized that after someone hurled an insult my way, they happily went about their day without giving the encounter a second thought. I, on the other hand, was upset for a while afterwards.

"Why should I give them that much power and control over me?" I wondered. That was the turning point.

My progress became evident after a rather disturbing public verbal skirmish one Sunday at Starbucks. Two friends and I were listening to an acquaintance relay a story. When I interjected with a question for clarification, she promptly bellowed, "Are you stupid?" Stunned, my friends and I beat feet out of the coffeehouse and away from this unpleasant woman. Out on the sidewalk I laughed and said, "What kind of tapes are playing in her head?" "Wow," one of my gal pals replied, "that's a tough one not to take personally!"

She was right. There was a time when I would have allowed a derogatory comment like that to bother me all day. However, I'd been working on not taking things personally since reading "The Four Agreements" by Don Miguel Ruiz and apparently had been making great strides.

Most of us tend to take things personally. If you frequently suffer hurt feelings at the hands of others, then you probably personalize things on a regular basis. Whether someone makes an insulting comment, cuts you off while driving or doesn't attend your party, you're left feeling angry or upset and may ruminate over it for way too long. Learning how not to take things personally is very liberating because your mood isn't at the mercy of others. It **is** possible, and worth it, to reach this state of self-awareness. It just takes some work.

### **It's Not About You**

Hard as it is to believe, when the woman in Starbucks called me stupid, it had nothing to do with me. People's comments and actions are usually based on their own emotions, experiences, and perceptions. Although I don't consider myself to be the village idiot, something about the question or situation triggered her. Was she having a bad day? Did she have a sore spot about appearing stupid herself? Perhaps she was amped up on one-too-many espressos. I don't know, and more importantly, it really doesn't matter. What does matter is whether I let her issues affect me.

When we accept someone's emotional garbage, it becomes our emotional garbage. Since we encounter many offensive comments and actions on a daily basis and don't have time to psychoanalyze each and every one, we need to recognize that it's originating with others and really doesn't involve us. It could easily be anyone else in our shoes. This realization helps us to shrug it off and move on.

Remember, we don't need others to validate our self-worth. If we rely on others to make us feel good about ourselves, then the converse is true, too. When they reject us, we feel poorly about ourselves. In that instant we have just handed over our personal power to them, and we are no longer in control of our feelings; they are – and we are well on our way to becoming people pleasers.

### **You Have a Choice**

Every time we interact with people, we have a choice. We can listen and let go of what they are saying, or we can believe them and take it personally. By understanding that we are living in a world of opinionated people, we are acknowledging that we don't have to agree with what's being said. Just because someone says something doesn't make it so. For example, if your boss walked up to you at work and said you were a tree, would you believe him? Of course not. You know with absolute certainty that you aren't a tree. Now what if your boss handed back a report you submitted with his suggestions outlined in red ink and asked you to rework it? Would you feel incompetent, or would you take it as constructive criticism to improve your performance?

Reading too much into a situation is common when you take things personally. Your inner critic quickly takes over, and you end up feeling worse by the minute.

Before becoming defensive, take some time to ponder whether you are overly sensitive to feedback and delve into the reason. Do their words strike a chord from childhood or tap into an insecurity? Could there be a shred of truth to what they said? If so, are you able to take it seriously but not personally?

If important, it may help to discuss the situation with the other person, so you have a clear understanding of their intent. Chances are high that there was a miscommunication, or you read too much into a neutral comment. Worst-case scenario, the person is mean-spirited and has a total lack of regard for others.

Guess what? It still has no reflection on you, so don't take it personally.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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