



HITTING THE RAPIDS

We will all hit the rapids, at times. Afterall, we are emotional beings.

What I am calling the “rapids” is an amygdala hijack where we have become so emotionally activated that signals bypass our rational brain and go instead directly to our emotional brain (our limbic system.) At this point, we lose our ability to think clearly, or listen with any real attention.

We will notice our racing heart, sweaty palms, inability to think clearly, etc. If we want to be able to listen and stay engaged in a conversation but we have “hit the rapids,” the following strategies can help:

1. Self -Distancing

Self-distancing developed by researchers Ethan Kross and Ozlen Ayduk: When becoming triggered and overwhelmed with our strong emotions, we can zoom out and detach. We can shift to a neutral perspective by switching from first person to third person pronouns as we talk to ourselves. This creates psychological distance as it reduces the intensity of our emotions.

One day I was in a conversation where someone said something that clashed intensely with my core values. I noticed myself getting hot, literally! I felt my heart racing and was about to either walk away or say something snarky and dismissive. Instead of saying to myself “I am so angry” which is typically what I might do, I shifted to “Why is *Denise* so angry?” By making just this small shift in pronouns, I gave myself enough emotional distance to allow me to stay curious about her position, to stay in the conversation and not shut down.

2. Andrew Weil’s 4 | 7 | 8

Breathing increases the supply of oxygen to your brain and stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system which brings on a state of calmness.

My favorite technique comes from the physician, Dr. Andrew Weil. It is often called a “breathing tranquilizer.” Use it to return to sense of calm presence whenever you notice yourself becoming activated.

1. Exhale completely through your mouth making a “whoosh” sound.
2. Close your mouth and inhale through your nose to the count of four.
3. Hold your breath to the count of seven.
4. Exhale completely through your mouth, again making a “whoosh” sound to the count of eight.

Dr. Weill suggest doing this practice for four cycles twice a day.

3. ‘Name it to Tame It’

‘Name it to tame it’, says psychiatrist and professor Dr. Dan Siegel, who is the Co-Director of Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA. By consciously labeling intense emotions and sensations, it signals to the body to calm down and feel more in control. It then brings back your pre-frontal cortex, which is associated with higher cognitive functions like reasoning. For example, you may say “anger, anger, anger” and feel the heat in your face, feel your blood pressure boiling, notice your thoughts scrambled. The more you notice and name the feelings, along with taking slow deep breaths, you begin to feel your body slowly calming down. Besides naming the emotion, you can also notice the physical symptoms in your body. Once you have slowed down your reaction, you can spend time in curious investigation.

NFIR: The practice is to **Name** the emotion, **Feel** the emotion, and eventually, with curiosity to **Investigate** the emotion. We are then more capable of **Releasing** the emotion and notice how it transforms. For example, we watch anger transform into sadness, sadness transforms into compassion, fear transform into courage. Our emotions are fluid when we listen and allow them to be.

4. Just Listen

Once you are calm enough, return to active listening and let go of any need to defend your position. Just listen with a desire to understand what others care about- their values, their hopes, and fears. This quality of listening will de-escalate the intensity as it provides needed ventilation for the situation. Just listening can calm us all down!