

## Tenet #2: Think Rationally, Not Emotionally.

### The Deeper Cut:

How often have you heard the adage: “When you come to work, leave your problems at the door.” As if we could easily separate our work identities from our early childhood upbringing, initial schooling, adolescent angsts, and the rest of our adult experiences and problems! It’s just not possible.

What is possible is developing a much keener awareness of the personal experiences, issues, and beliefs we carry. Equipped with this awareness, we have a better chance of avoiding a survival response based on our personal baggage when faced with crises in our schools.


### Understanding Our Survival Response

This sounds like an easy thing to do — just remind yourself that it’s nothing personal, right? But it’s harder than it seems, because our Thinking Brain doesn't work well during crisis. Instead, our instincts take over, and these instincts often lead us to react very strongly.

In moments of genuine danger, our survival sense is activated. Our amygdala uses input from what we see, hear, and feel to assess a threat, then activates the body's stress response system. The hypothalamus communicates with the pituitary gland, which in turn triggers the adrenal glands to release stress hormones, creating an “adrenaline rush.” You’ve felt that rush before, haven’t you? In fractions of a second, our eyes widen and our skin tightens, allowing us to better sense danger. Our hearts and lungs go into overdrive, providing a rush of oxygen and energy to our muscles. Our skin capillaries constrict, dulling our pain sensors and reducing bleeding from injuries, allowing us to continue functioning

TACT2 Tenet #2

**Think rationally, not emotionally.**  
Don't let your gut instincts get the best of you.



Many of us have a tendency to overreact to misbehaviors, especially if we are caught off guard. In a crisis, take a few moments to activate your Thinking Brain. Respond professionally rather than reacting personally.

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if damaged. This finely-tuned autonomic survival response is like a turbocharged engine kicking in, offering a gust of power to fight, run, or hide, then fading away in the minutes that follow.

This survival response is habitual, hard-wired into our biology. Unfortunately, our Survival Brain often has difficulty distinguishing between a threat to our safety and a threat to our dignity. We instinctively react to a thrown insult in the same way we might to a thrown chair: flight, flee or freeze. It is possible to alter this reaction, but it takes a very deliberate effort. Change is hard!

As an illustration of our natural resistance to change, try this 30-second experiment.

1. Clasp your hands together, interlacing your fingers as if in thought or prayer. (C’mon, just do it!) Look down and notice which thumb is on top. Left thumb or right?
2. Open your hands and shake them for a moment. Now clasp them together again,

however they naturally go. Look down: Same thumb right? It's a habit developed over years of repetition. It is resistant to change, but it can be broken with practice. Let's prove it.

3. Clasp your hands together again, this time deliberately weaving your fingers together differently so that the OTHER thumb ends up on top. Feels weird, doesn't it?

4. Repeat this five (5) more times to establish the new habit, intentionally guiding your fingers and thumbs into this new pattern. Apart and together, five times. After several repetitions, it should begin to feel a bit easier.

5. Finally, briefly shake your hands, and one last time, clasp them together however they naturally go. Look down: Despite all the practice, you instinctively went right back to your original way, didn't you?

2. **Reflect and Relax:** Use a personal code phrase to trigger calm reflection. For example: 'I've got this' or 'God help me.'

Then, intentionally relax the muscles of your face, shoulders, and limbs. Taking a second or two to reflect and relax allows the Thinking Brain to come online and evaluate the situation more objectively. It helps to prevent impulsive and potentially regrettable actions or responses.

3. **Use Self-Talk:** Finally, use positive and reassuring self-talk during tense moments. Remind yourself: "Okay, stay calm... think rationally... remember your training." Intentional self-talk requires work from the Thinking Brain, so it automatically shifts energy away from the Survival Brain.

### How to Re-engage the "Thinking Brain"

Even short-term change requires a deliberate and concentrated effort to maintain. And if it is this hard to alter such a meaningless habit, how can we counteract the brain's natural, fear-driven survival instinct? That answer is to re-engage the Thinking Brain so that we can make a rational decision. This requires an effort, but with practice can be accomplished in less than 10 seconds. Before entering a crisis:

1. **Two Deep Breaths:** Deep breathing triggers the body's relaxation response, which helps to reduce stress and activate the Thinking Brain. Take two slow, deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. This can help regulate emotions and bring clarity to the situation.

Once we are able to think rationally, we can respond (rather than react) to a stressful situation. And just as panic triggers fear, our self-control will inspire calmness in others.

Summary: It is easy to overreact in survival mode when we become overwhelmed, especially since our survival brains have trouble distinguishing between true threats to our safety and perceived threats to our dignity. However, not every problem is a crisis. When stress, anger, or panic begin creeping in, take a few seconds to reactivate your Thinking Brain and regain self-control. Breathe deeply to bring an abundance of oxygen to your brain. Use a code phrase to trigger a moment of reflection while deliberately relaxing the tension in your hands, body, and face. And finally, use your reawakened rational brain to remind yourself to stay calm and make good decisions. You've got this!

*Dr. Steve Parese is a former special educator, crisis counselor, and university faculty member, currently an international speaker and trainer. He is the author of the crisis intervention program "Therapeutic Aggression Control Techniques" (TACT2), in use since 1997 with thousands of staff around the nation. For more information, please connect by email at SBParese@aol.com, or visit the website at <https://www.tact2.com>.*