

Reframe the experience

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On a June afternoon 3 years ago, I was driving home from picking my son up at my mother's house after work, and in rush-hour traffic I collided with the car in front of me. (I thought the driver was going to go through the just-turned-yellow light; she decided - once she was in the intersection - to stop.) Anyone who has been in an accident knows what that feels like - the jolt of impact, the sickening crunch, the sweat and shaking, the instant replay and imagining better and worse scenarios. I gathered my composure, we pulled our cars into a parking lot, and I called the police at the other woman's request. I helped her find her registration and insurance information and tried to keep my son from monopolizing the conversation with the cop who arrived at the scene.

How awful! I was so embarrassed about hitting her and consequently blocking traffic. My mind was filled with "what ifs" as I thought about my son in the backseat. It was humiliating to receive the citation from the cop and the calls to the insurance company were no picnic either. Having an older vehicle, I feared they would total it and we would have to look for a new car that was definitely not in the budget. I had to pay to have my car towed to the auto body shop, and pay toward a rental while it was being repaired, and of course I knew my premium was going to rise as a result of the accident. Then I had the dread of having to appear in front of a judge to ask for a reduction in the fine and the points assigned. It was a terrible way to start the summer.

Yuck, right? But perhaps there's another way to look at it...

How fortunate! Although we were in thick traffic, no other vehicles were involved, and most importantly, no one was hurt! We pay for really good auto insurance coverage, so the process moved smoothly. I had the ability to work from home, so I didn't miss any time the next day as a result of the accident. The accident occurred close enough to home that my husband could come get us and drive the car home so it was in my driveway, not a parking lot. And while my car was being repaired, I paid only a few extra dollars a day to rent a brand-new minivan which my kids loved (renting that van could have counted as a vacation in itself). I went before the judge and while I still had to pay, he reduced the violation and took away the points originally assigned. And rather than be traumatized by the experience, my son was quite delighted by the excitement of having the police officer arrive.

Reframing a negative experience is not about ignoring the facts, but about choosing to focus on the positive elements of an experience. We always have a choice about where we put our attention and that greatly impacts our happiness. I could have focused on how crunched my car was and the inevitable impact to my insurance premium, or I could focus on how grateful I was that no one was hurt. I chose the latter.

Here are some ways to reframe what you're experiencing:

- Replace "Why me?" with "What can I learn from this?" (I learned I need to keep a greater following distance.)
- Instead of listing all the reasons the experience was a curse, list the reasons the experience was a blessing. (Of course I wish I hadn't had that accident, but focusing on the positive helped me keep the stress of the situation from consuming me.)

- Change the way you describe less-than-great experiences. Do you emphasize every nitty gritty negative detail, or do you take a lighter approach? (This has been a powerful process for me, to really watch the way I retell experiences to others.)

Like any habit, the more you practice reframing an experience, the more easily you'll be able to do it. It really does make a difference. Give it a try!