

## Just the facts

Don't let your imagination make life worse than reality

**W**e human beings get ourselves in a heap of trouble by becoming fiction writers several times every day. We perceive an action, hear or read some words, read some body language and we're off and running with stories we make up piled on top of the factual (whatever that word really means) event.

Well, I should say that I used to think it was strictly a human practice. There is this cat named Abby in my daughter's family. If Abby is presented with the fact of a suitcase sitting open anywhere in the house, she apparently creates a whole story about everyone abandoning her for days on end. She is very expressive and lets everyone know with loud meows and snarling sounds that she is upset. I'm pretty sure that it is her story about the suitcase that creates all that cat havoc, not the object itself.

The problem is, we believe those stories. The precipitating fact may be long forgotten, but now our thoughts, feelings and actions are based on the story we made up.

Someone might send a short e-mail. The fiction can go anywhere.

"That's odd. He's holding something back I bet..." It might go in another direction, "I'm sure she's mad at me, this sounds so clipped and angry." Perhaps someone doesn't send an e-mail, doesn't respond to ours right away. "HmMMM. Never heard back. I think he's blowing me off."

You might spot a customer having lunch with one of your competitors. By the time you get back to the office after lunch, you've got an entire novel written about that scene. And your peace of mind is blown because your emotions

react to your novel. You probably get indigestion as well.

One thing I like about Zen Buddhism is that it is full of encouragement to stay with what is. The now, if you will, is usually not half as scary as the fictional futures percolating in our minds in response to a fact. If you can catch yourself interpreting like crazy early on in the process, you will save yourself a lot of stress and grief. You can stop in your tracks and check out the situation.

Instead of "Hmm, Dave didn't say good morning to me in the elevator. Bet he's thinking about my performance review coming up tomorrow and he knows he's gonna come down hard on me, and probably I'm getting zero raise or maybe even getting cut from the project or even the team — or maybe I'm gonna lose my entire job!" You might think this is far-fetched. But, I assure you that I've heard this exact piece of fiction from clients.

If you tune in to your own mental chatter, you'll probably be surprised how often you are creating these instant stories, this popcorn of the brain — and then of course, your psyche believes the story, gets attached to it and reacts accordingly.

So let's say you stick with the facts. OK, someone did not respond to your e-mail, phone call or letter. Maybe it's been days, maybe weeks. Instead of tiring out your brain and ruining your good mood by supposing all the reasons why, check it out.

"Just called to follow up on my recent letter." Or whatever. Don't drag your fiction into this process. An example of doing that would be, "I'm afraid I said something to upset you in that e-mail I sent last week."

You've probably all heard that very old joke about the guy who had a flat tire way out in the country and started walking about a mile back to the nearest farmhouse to borrow a jack. The guy told himself bad stories all the way on that walk. "The farmer won't have a jack. Well he might have one but he won't loan it to me, a complete stranger and city boy at that. He's probably got about 15 mean dogs he'll sic on me or maybe even a shotgun sitting right by the door." By the time he got there, he was totally a believer of his own stories, saw the farmer in the doorway and screamed at him to keep his (bleeping) jack and suggested what to do with it.

These scenarios happen every day, and at great expense. Don't be annoyed if you catch yourself in the act. Patiently and kindly remind yourself that you're into the land of fiction now. Pull your story away from the event and look at the facts cleanly again. Then choose the action you want to take based on the facts.

This practice is a great stress management tool, one of the best.

Now, if you simply enjoy making up stories, you are welcome to join the fiction writing class I'm taking at the university. The rest of the time, sticking to the facts will save you a bunch of needless anxiety and free your beautiful mind for much more elegant work.



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