DING-DONG, SOMEONE'S PUSHING MY BUTTONS!!

By Abby Anderson, MS, LPC, CEAP
Solutions EAP Program Coordinator

The pressures we experience today are tremendous. Global issues such as the economy, war, and natural disasters are prominently featured on the news and we also have pressures in our everyday lives. Competition for jobs, doing more with less, and financial issues are the norm. In addition, there are the personal concerns such as parenting, relationships, and managing our households. It's no wonder that with all of this going on we can be vulnerable to getting our buttons pushed.

There are lots of ways this can happen. It can be a person: the crabby child, an insensitive partner, a pushy customer, a complaining or negative friend. How many parents have been heard to say "You kids are driving me crazy!"?

It can be a thing: traffic, a deadline, a frustrating problem, a decision, public speaking, an uncomfortable task, or any obstacle in our way.

While all of this is true, it doesn't have to be that bad. We can all improve at not letting people and things get to us.

We'll look at specific strategies and tools to increase our resistance to getting our buttons pushed.

In order for us to know how to interrupt the button pushing process, we first have to understand where it starts. Dr. Albert Ellis, the originator of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, along with his colleague Dr. Arthur Lange discusses the process in their book "How to Keep People from Pushing Your Buttons".

The process of button pushing can be thought of as ABC as developed by Dr. Ellis. In this view, A equals an Activating Event, the B equals our beliefs about that Activating Event, and C equals your Feelings and Behaviors about the event.

Let's look at the Activating Events. For our purposes these are the daily hassles, the button-pushers that we allow to do a job on us. On the job it could be the constant interruptions, lack of privacy, the daily commute, a difficult coworker. In our personal life it might be conflict with a partner, the home workload, managing children, marriage, divorce, etc. Making a list of those things that are your personal button-pushers, things you believe cause you to overreact, is the first step to interrupting the process.

The B equals our beliefs about that Activating Event. We'll talk more about this later.

The C equals our feelings and behaviors in the specific Activating Event. For instance, let's say you're on your way to an important meeting and you run into delaying traffic. If you get really anxious, aggravated, and frustrated (your feelings at point C) as you become increasingly late, then how might that affect your driving (your behavior at point C)? You might tailgate, dart in and out of traffic, yell at other drivers. Under calmer circumstances would you drive like that? Probably not.

This is the first point to the process. Feelings largely cause behavior. The more excessive your feelings are, the more likely you are to behave in an ineffective manner.

Next we'll look at the middle part of the process to begin to understand where to intervene to keep those buttons from being pushed.

So here we are, stuck in the middle again! We're looking at the beliefs we may have about that Activating Event. What are we doing at Point B when we experience the Activating Event, that button pushing situation but before we begin to act or feel at Point C? We are thinking and that includes reacting, perceiving, analyzing, judging, assessing, and deciding. The way that we think in response to A will determine what we do at C and whether we let A push our buttons.

Now, some might believe that we do jump straight from A to C. "When she was late again, I just blew up!" "When the truck cut me off, I freaked out!"
But if you think about this example, it can help demonstrate that B, beliefs, cause C, behaviors. Suppose you hear a noise at your front door and go to investigate. When you open the door, there stands Cujo, the rabid dog, foaming at the mouth and growling. What do you do? Slam the door, run, yell? That might be your reaction but technically not accurate. The first thing you do is you *see* Cujo and *hear* him. That's your senses. And where does that information go first? To your brain.

That's when your brain does two things. It first has to label the event in an unemotional, factual way: "Big dog, foaming at the mouth and growling, two feet away from me." It then makes a judgment about the event: "Rabid dog! Danger! Danger!" and sends the message through your hypothalamus (the traffic cop part of your brain) to the rest of you body, telling it to react to the danger.

Now, all of this happens in milliseconds. You could have already shut the door and be halfway out of the room with that whole process having already taken place, and the first thing you did was *think*.

So here's a challenging statement: It's not what is actually true about Point A that matters, it's what you think about it at Point B that determines your feelings and behaviors at Point C. For example, being single is not a terrible circumstance, but if you think it's *terrible* to be single, you'll be miserable when you are and susceptible to getting your buttons pushed by others.

The good news is that means we have the potential to control how we respond.
There are strategies to help as we process our thoughts. Next we'll look at how we can better respond in button-pushing situations.

We have the ability to control our responses. Remember the sequence as Albert Ellis relates; A, the activating event leads to B, thoughts about it which leads to C, feelings and behavior.

The first step is becoming aware of our thoughts. Most of us, most of the time are not hearing what we are saying to ourselves. This requires self awareness and work.   Keep in mind it won't change right away but requires perseverance.

Once we can hear what we are saying, then we have the ability to change those thoughts by disputing and challenging their accuracy, giving us control over our reactions to the activating event. When you begin to react in a way that tells you your buttons have been pushed, ask yourself "What am I so upset about and what am I saying to myself about what that person said/did?"

If I'm single and meet someone I find attractive, I ask them out, they say no way and I feel crushed, what is the internal dialogue leading to that feeling? It may be "If they reject me, there must be something wrong with me, no one will ever want me, I'll be single forever and that would be terrible." Once you know that, you have the choice to agree with it and stay upset or to refute it.

This is the most powerful tool you have. To change your response, change what it is you are saying to yourself. So is it necessarily true that if someone I like doesn't like me back then I am somehow unacceptable or worthless? No, it simply means they have different values, perceptions, or tastes than I do. What they may or may not think does not alter who and what I am. Am I still the same person I was before they rejected me? The answer is, obviously, yes.

The process of refuting that internal dialogue takes practice and willingness to challenge ourselves, sometimes about long held beliefs. When the internal conversation is that something is horrible or terrible, it can be helpful to rephrase it to it's uncomfortable and/or unfortunate but not the end of the world. We probably won't die if we don't get that job, if someone doesn't like us, or if we're late to work! To keep it in perspective, ask yourself, "What's the worst that could happen?" Once that's out in the open, we usually find that while we may prefer things to be different, we may be a little uncomfortable but we can survive just fine.

First know what you are saying about the activating event then seek to question and refute that dialogue with a more realistic statement. Remember, it's not A, the event that triggers C, your reaction but B, what you think about A that results in C, your response. You always have choices. It's up to you.

If you would like to talk about this or any other problem or concern,
please call Solutions EmployeeAssistance Program at 1-800-526-3485
or go on line (safely of course) to www.solutions-eap.com