

## Chapter Fourteen

# Staying Calm: Our Emotions

### Self-Preservation

#### *When the Well Runs Dry*

Teaching is one of the most stressful jobs on the planet. It has been estimated that a teacher makes more decisions in an hour than an air traffic controller. Being tired at the end of each day is considered by most to be just part of the job.

Being tired at the end of each day is also a prescription for burn-out. If you give more than you get day after day, the well will eventually run dry. When the well runs dry, you will have nothing left to give. You will suffer, your students will suffer, and your family will suffer. There has to be an easier way to do this job.

### Stress Management

Since stress is part of the job, stress management is also part of the job. It is your responsibility because it is your life.

As mentioned in chapter one, stress management must occur moment by moment *in the classroom*. It must be proactive. You cannot allow yourself to be stressed all day long and then somehow undo it once you get home.

Trying to undo stress after it has occurred is more damage control than stress management. You may exercise or meditate, but most of the time you will just poop out. As always, reactive management fails where only proactive management can succeed.

### Preview

- Any classroom disruption will trigger a mild fight-flight reflex.
- This reflex not only makes you vulnerable to becoming upset, but it also stresses you physically.
- Triune Brain Theory helps to explain how the brain "down-shifts" during a fight-flight reflex so that you end up functioning out of your brainstem instead of your cortex.
- To lead under pressure, you will need all of your knowledge, experience and understanding. The complex social skills required for leadership reside in the cortex.
- Thus, the fundamental rule of social power is, "Calm is strength. Upset is weakness."
- Remaining calm under pressure is achieved through relaxation. Relaxation is a skill that can be mastered with training.

### ***Teaching Without Exhaustion***

Meaning Business is on-the-job stress management. It deals with student disruptions and provocations calmly and efficiently. It makes us a better teacher. It makes our classroom a happier place. But first and foremost, it preserves us.

Natural teachers have told me, "I'm glad they pay me to do this job because I would do it anyway." These teachers find life in the classroom to be invigorating and enriching rather than exhausting.

That is the way we all wanted it to be when we entered teaching. Natural teachers show us that it can be done. But their level of success will not come for free. First, we must master our craft. We must learn to mean business.

### **Biology and Behavior**

#### ***The Fight-Flight Reflex***

Imagine that you catch some goofing off out of the corner of your eye. Let's begin with the very first thing that happens to you after you see the disruption. It is a reflex – a very primitive reflex that we share with all vertebrates.

We learned about this reflex in our high school biology class. It is the *fight-flight reflex*. This reflex is our natural response to anything that surprises us or threatens us. It could be a clap of thunder, a shadow passing across the window, a spider on our clothing, or a near accident with the car.

The fight-flight reflex, therefore, is the teacher's immediate and automatic response to goofing off. A room full of students can trigger the fight-flight reflex quite often during a school day.

#### ***Managing the Fight-Flight Reflex***

A reflex such as the fight-flight reflex is *immediate* and *automatic*. You do not choose to have it.

Yet natural teachers rarely become upset in the classroom. They remain cool, calm, and collected in response to goofing off. Yet, they have the same reflexes as everyone else. They just manage stress more effectively.

We will need to find out how they do it. But first, we must become more familiar with the fight-flight reflex.

### **Anatomy of the Fight-Flight Reflex**

The fight-flight reflex involves our entire body as it "revs up" as fast as possible to deal with threat. This mobilization occurs in two phases:

- **fast** (muscular tension)
- **slow** (adrenaline)

By understanding these two phases of the fight-flight reflex, we will lay the ground work for our own stress management.

#### ***The Fast (Neuromuscular) Phase***

The fast phase of the fight-flight reflex has to do with the *tensing of muscles*. Within a fraction of a second our bodies begin to mobilize – to get ready to move quickly if need be. The fight-flight reflex tenses muscles that you can *feel*:

- Eyes open wide (to maximize field of vision)
- Teeth clench
- Diaphragm flexes as we inhale (to oxygenate the blood)
- Skeletal muscles tense (to get ready for action)

The fight-flight reflex also tenses muscles that you may *not feel*:

- Blood vessels in the stomach contract (to shunt blood to the muscles). This interrupts digestion which leaves acid in the stomach.



- Heart rate increases rapidly (to prepare for exertion). This increases blood pressure.

The fight-flight reflex is crucial to survival – at least, for an animal in a state of nature. To experience the fight-flight reflex several times in the course of a day is normal for any wild animal, and it is not damaging.

But, our species left “nature” a long time ago to create an alternative – civilization. Civilization is accompanied by physical crowding and complex social organization. It requires us to constantly interact in order to solve prob-

lems, resolve conflict, negotiate solutions, and generally stress each other out.

Some of us even place ourselves in a room full of young people all day long in order to teach. In biological terms you might think of this as the petri dish for growing stress.

Within the classroom the fight-flight reflex is triggered not every few hours as it might be in nature, but rather, every few *minutes*. In this environment, every aspect of the fight-flight reflex becomes a potential symptom of chronic hypertension. Observe the ads on television to see how many are simply attempting to ameliorate the stress of a day on the job.

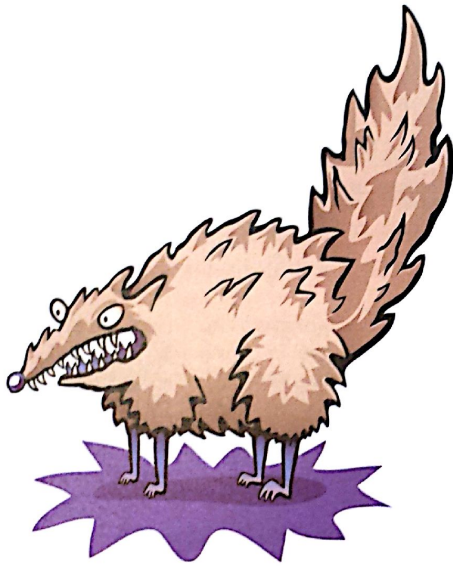
- Will it be aspirin or Tylenol or Advil or Aleve to help with that tension headache?
- Will it be Tums or Rolaids or Mylanta to help with stomach acid?
- Will it be Sominex or Nytol or Tylenol PM to help you relax enough to fall asleep?
- Will it be a glass of chardonnay – or two?

How many millions of dollars do we spend just trying to “come down” after a day at work? We pay a high price for working in a stressful environment. But stress just goes with the territory, right?

#### *The Slow (Biochemical) Phase*

The slow phase of the fight-flight reflex is more damaging. Within tenths of a second our bodies begin to dump adrenaline into the bloodstream.

Adrenaline *intensifies* the physiological mobilization of the fight-flight reflex and *maintains* it over time. It makes sure that the intensity and focus of the fight-flight reflex will stay with us throughout the crisis. The more upset we become, the more adrenaline enters the blood. Here are some things to know about adrenaline:



*The fight-flight reflex is our natural response to anything we dislike or do not expect.*

- It increases your metabolism, the rate at which your body burns sugars. This is where “nervous energy” comes from.
- It takes roughly 27 minutes for adrenaline to clear the blood stream. Consequently, it takes only two “squirrely” behaviors per class period to keep you “wired” all day long for the remainder of your career.

Everybody knows that you have to be “on your toes” to manage a classroom, right? It’s only common sense.

While it might seem like common sense, I would not recommend that you try to earn a living that way. Being “on your toes” for hours on end means that you constantly use adrenaline to create that extra energy needed to cope with the demands of students. In so doing you build

up an *energy debt* during the school day that must be paid back later.

Do you experience this energy debt when the kids go home? No, you still have another 27 minutes on adrenaline before it clears the bloodstream. Consequently, you have enough energy after dismissal to scurry around organizing books and materials for tomorrow’s lessons.

The energy debt hits you about a half-hour *after* the kids go home. A wave of exhaustion comes over you, and you look for a place to sit down. *What a day!*

Recovering from an energy debt that has been building for the past six hours will take you well into the evening. Who then pays for the fact that you are exhausting yourself in the classroom? As the song says, “You only hurt the ones you love, the ones you shouldn’t hurt at all.”

Your spouse says,

“Honey, we need to talk about something,”

and you say,

“Do we have to talk about it *right now?*”

Your child says,

“I just broke this,”

and you say,

“You broke it *already?* You just got it *last week!*”

You can’t be very good with your own family when you come home day after day with the tank empty. I don’t know what your pay package includes, but I doubt that anybody pays you enough to compensate for your physical well-being or your family’s well-being or your own personal happiness.



*Reflexes are immediate and automatic.  
You do not choose to have them.*



### Fight-Flight by Different Names

#### *Nag, Nag, Nag*

When you have a fight-flight reflex, your mouth tends to pop open. It may be a scream if your life is in danger. But in less emotionally charged social situations like the classroom, it sounds like this:

"All right class, there is *no excuse* for all of this talking! When I look up, I expect to see people working!"

"Where are you going? Would you please *take your seat*? I am sick and tired of looking up only to see you wandering aimlessly around the room!"

"Would the two of you keep your hands *to yourselves* and *pay attention* to what is going on in class? If I see any more of this behavior, you will see me after the bell."

You remember *nag, nag, nag* from earlier chapters? Let me give you a *technical* definition of nagging: Nagging is nothing more than a *fight-flight reflex with dialogue*. If you open your mouth while you are upset, you will nag.

We *all* nag. Nagging is normal biological behavior. If you have a friend who claims to never nag, you have a liar for a friend. The question that is relevant to classroom management is not, "Do you nag?" but, rather, "How often do you nag?" For some teachers it is a rarity. For others it happens constantly.

#### *Pheasant Posturing*

We talk with our *hands* as well as our mouths. When we talk with our hands while nagging, we engage in "pheasant posturing."

Pheasant posturing is a term from anthropology that refers to *a lot of squawking and flapping that produces no damage*. Male pheasants do a dramatic job of squawking and flapping during their mating combat without ever touching each other.

In the classroom *squawking* is the same as *nag, nag, nag*. We do the *flapping*, however, with our *hands*.

We are not attempting to fly, of course. We just want to kick up a little dust around the barnyard so the chickens know that we're serious. In such situations we use only *one wing*.

The two most common one-wing flaps are the "circular" and the "vertical." We use the circular flap as we motion for students to turn around in their chairs. We use the vertical flap as we motion for students to sit down.

When both wings become involved, the situation is obviously serious. Imagine a teacher, upset and impatient, standing in the front of the classroom with both arms raised announcing to the class,

"The longer it takes all of you to get *into your seats* and *settle down*, the longer I will be standing here... uh... with my arms up."

Nagging is  
nothing more than  
a fight-flight reflex  
with dialogue.

### *Snap and Snarl*

A trainee from the court schools of Los Angeles (you can imagine the student body in the court schools of Los Angeles) said,

"I have a different name for it. I call it 'snap and snarl.' You *snap your fingers* and point when you say, 'Take your seat!' or 'Stop talking!'"

We all had a laugh as we practiced snapping and snarling. It gives a feeling of primitive power. A dinosaur comes to mind with eyes narrowed, teeth flashing. These thoughts of primitive power reminded me of an interaction I had with my younger son not long before.

### *Snap and Snarl with My Son*

The altercation had to do with backpacks – the kind that kids take to school with their books and stuff inside. Patrick (my older son) and Brian (my younger son) used to drop their backpacks as soon as they came home from school – right at the bottom of the stairs. This was a dangerous place to put backpacks. I had taught the boys (I thought) to place their backpacks out of the way so nobody would trip over them.

One day, when I was jet-lagged from a flight home the night before, I found myself in a rotten mood. I was in the kitchen when Brian came home from school. He waltzed in the back door, dropped his backpack right at the foot of the stairs and started up to his room.

I snapped,

"Brian! Where is that back pack supposed to go?"

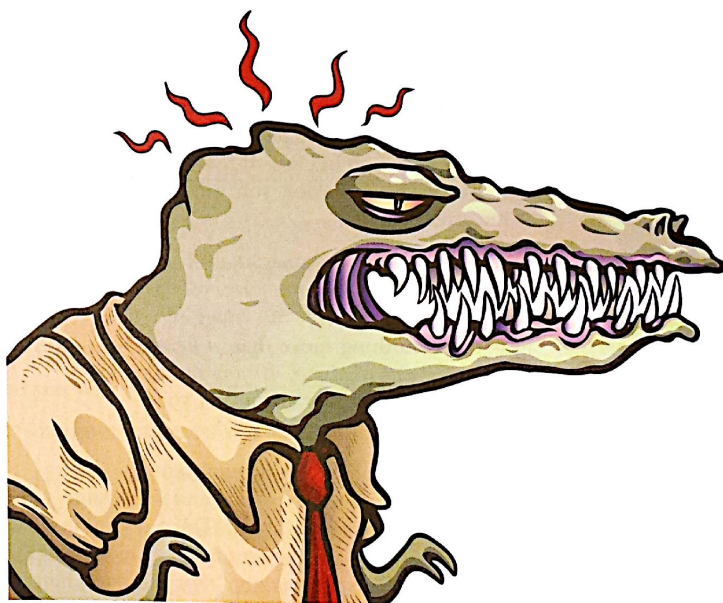
Brian said,

"Aw, Daaad!"

I must have been in good form to combine snapping and snarling with a silly question. And, I hadn't seen Brian in four days. Some greeting!

I felt bad. After I collected myself, I went upstairs to apologize and have a decent conversation. But later I thought at length about how inappropriate I'd been.

Let me put this whole thing into perspective. I have a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. At this point in my life, I had spent over three decades learning to understand peoples' *needs* and *feelings*, to solve interpersonal problems *constructively*, to structure *win-win* solutions for people, to be *therapeutic*! Where were all of these skills when I needed them?



*A common variant of the fight-flight reflex is "snap and snarl."*

Actually, I knew exactly where the skills were. I had studied it in great detail during graduate school.

### Upset Changes Brain Function

#### *Triune Brain Theory*

Triune Brain Theory explains what happens in the brain when we become upset. It helps to describe why we snap and snarl when we have a fight-flight reflex.

For starters, there have been three great epochs of brain development over the eons. These epochs of brain development produced characteristic structures. You can see them in a cross-section of the brain.

Triune means “three in one.” The “three brains in one” that we all possess are:

1. **Reptilian Brain (Brain stem):** These are the lower brain centers which regulate basic life functions. They include the spinal cord, the cerebellum (muscular coordination), the visual cortex plus ganglia that regulate bodily functions.
2. **Ancient Cortex (Paleocortex):** These are the mid-brain centers referred to irreverently by graduate students as “doggy-horsey brain.” To see what these brain centers do, compare the social behavior of a lizard with that of your dog. Can your dog love you and be loyal? You won’t get that from a lizard.
3. **New Cortex (Neocortex):** These are the brain centers that are responsible for “higher intelligence.” This refers to Plato and Socrates, Bach and Beethoven, Einstein and Fermi – and us. These brain centers give us the capacity to reason.

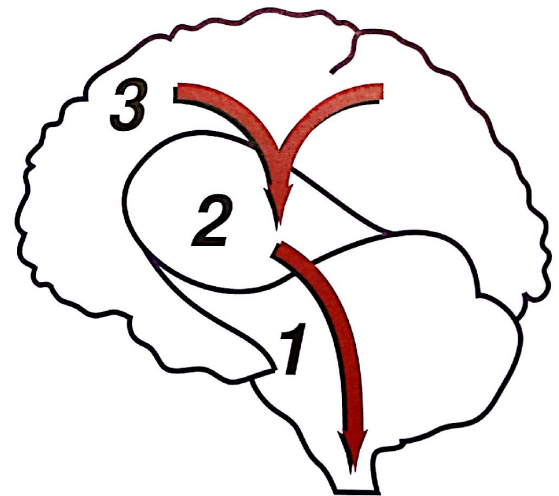
#### *Downshifting*

The fight-flight reflex is extremely predictable and reliable. Animals that failed to execute it properly over the past 500 million years became someone else’s lunch.

Reflexes are made reliable by fail-safe mechanisms. Triune Brain Theory explains the fail-safe mechanisms of the fight-flight reflex. How does the brain insure that, when your life is on the line, you “get it in gear” rather than dithering?

You can’t dither without a cortex. So, your brain eliminates its own cortex. This process is called “downshifting.”

Under *mild* arousal, the brain shifts from the neocortex to the mid-brain. This change can be disconcerting. Have you ever “blocked” on people’s names when you were a little nervous? Downshifting plays havoc with long-term memory.



*When we become upset, the brain “downshifts” from the cortex to the brainstem.*



Under *moderate* to *severe* arousal, the brain downshifts all the way to the reptilian brain and spinal cord – referred to irreverently by graduate students as “going brainstem.” We have all “gone brainstem” at some time, haven’t we? Have you ever blown up, gone ballistic, flown off the handle, lost your cool?

Now, let me give you a piece of advice about discipline management in the classroom. You will do a much better job *with a cortex*. When you downshift, a classroom suddenly becomes thirty cortexes manipulating one brainstem. These are not even odds.

### Social Power

#### Power and Control

Downshifting brings us to the real issue underlying this discussion of brain function, namely – *power*. Who runs your classroom, anyway?

Power is one of those words that leaves a bad taste.

“He is really on a *power trip*.”

In fact, power is value-neutral. It simply refers to *control*. But control is another word that leaves a bad taste.

“She is a real *control freak*.”

“He is the most *controlling person* I have ever met.”

We subconsciously translate these words into “overpowering” and “controlling” – terms that denote threat. Without this “spin,” however, they are just words that

describe what is happening in the classroom. Take, for example, the management of a simple disruption.

You look up to see two students *talking* when they should be working. You cruise over to them as you work the crowd, and you ask them to get back to work.

Chances are, they *will* get back to work. This, however, does not signify a scholarly bent.

Rather, it signifies the fact that these students have the brains to cool it when the teacher is standing over them. To find out whether or not the students actually get back to work, you will have to wait a minute or two.

Imagine that two minutes have passed, and, from the far side of the room, you look up to see these two students *still working*. Who is controlling their behavior?

Simply look at what they are doing as a result of your interaction with them. Since they chose to pursue *your* agenda (working) rather than *their* agenda (talking), *you* are controlling their behavior.

Power is simply control. Who is controlling whom? Who calls the shot? Who gets his or her way?

Now imagine that the situation with *talking to neighbors* turned out differently. When you look up two minutes later the two students who “shaped up” when you were standing over them are *talking again*.

When you  
downshift,  
a classroom  
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thirty cortexes  
manipulating one  
brainstem.

Who is in control now? Are they doing what *you* want them to do, or are they doing what *they* want to do?

As you can see, the outcome of this interaction is public knowledge. Any student in the classroom can look up to see whether or not you are capable of getting two students to shape up. There is no place for you to hide.

### ***The Art of Getting Your Way***

*Power* is control, and *control* is power. However, these two terms do not denote the “dark force.” Rather, they describe who is leading and who is following. The person with more power leads. The person with less power follows.

However, when some people try to lead, they rub everybody the wrong way and people resist their leadership. They lack the necessary skills.

Other people are born leaders. They lead gracefully, and people follow. They definitely have the skills. Leading skillfully is an art – the art of *getting your own sweet way*.

Leadership is often described as “getting things done through people.” It is the art of employing *social* power in order to achieve a *social* objective. In this sense leadership is synonymous with terms like “effective management” and diplomacy.

In political science, diplomacy is often described as “the art of getting the other person to do what you want them

to do and *thank* you for it.” Skillful diplomacy is definitely the art of social power – the art form by which *you* as a teacher earn your living.

All day in the classroom you will attempt to get students to do what you want them to do and thank you for it. You will take children during their sweetest years of youth and incarcerate them in a school building where you will require them to do one assignment after another all day long. And you will want them to like it so much that they do their best and look forward to doing it again tomorrow.

This will test your social skills to the limit. You will definitely need your cortex at all times.

### **Power Conflicts**

#### ***Two Types of Power***

There are, it would seem, *two* types of power within us – *social* power and *primitive* power. They compete with each other to control our behavior.

*Primitive* power is the power that we have used since time began in order to insure our physical survival. It is a direct expression of the fight-flight reflex. In social situations primitive power is

expressed as *upset*. It is *aggressive*.

Social power, in contrast, is not natural – it is *learned*. It is not instinctual – it is *skillful*. Rather than being simple, it is *subtle* and *complex*. It is *nonadversarial*.

## **Two Types of Power**

### **Primitive Power**

- Fight-Flight Reflex
- Force and Counterforce
- Reflex Behavior
- Brain Stem

### **Social Power**

- Social Skills
- Leadership and Management
- Learned Behavior
- Cortex

The conflict within us concerning these two types of power centers upon the fact that *you cannot do them both at the same time*. As we downshift to the brainstem when upset, we lose the cortex. We lose it for 27 minutes!

#### ***Calm Is Strength***

This competition between two different types of power in governing our actions brings us to the most fundamental principle of social power:

*Calm is strength.  
Upset is weakness.*

When you are *calm*, you can bring all of your wisdom, experience, and social skills to bear in solving a problem. When you become *upset* and downshift, none of that knowledge or wisdom is available to you. As the saying goes:

*"My life is in the hands  
of any fool  
who can make me angry."*

#### ***Who Is Controlling Whom?***

To put primitive power and social power into perspective, ask yourself the following two questions:

- If you are *upset*, who is in control of your mind and body? (Trainees respond in unison, "They are.")
- If you are *calm*, who is in control of your mind and body? (Trainees respond in unison, "You are.")

Before you can ever hope to mean business, you must be in control of the situation rather than the situation being in control of you. You will never be able to control a classroom until you are first *in control of yourself*.

One of the hardest lessons to accept about Meaning Business, therefore, is that it is first and foremost *emotional*. Unless you can be calm in the face of provocation, your fancy management strategies will avail you nothing. They will be in the cortex while you are in your brainstem.

But the biological game is played very quickly. Have you ever "flown off the handle?" How long did it take? The game is over before most teachers know that it has begun.

#### ***Calm Is a Skill***

##### ***It's a Matter of Breathing***

When you look up in the classroom to see disruptive behavior, you will have a fight-flight reflex. No amount of training can *prevent* the reflex. But you can *abort* it.

It takes only a few seconds for the concentration of adrenaline to build in your bloodstream. This gives you a brief window of opportunity in which to "put on the breaks."

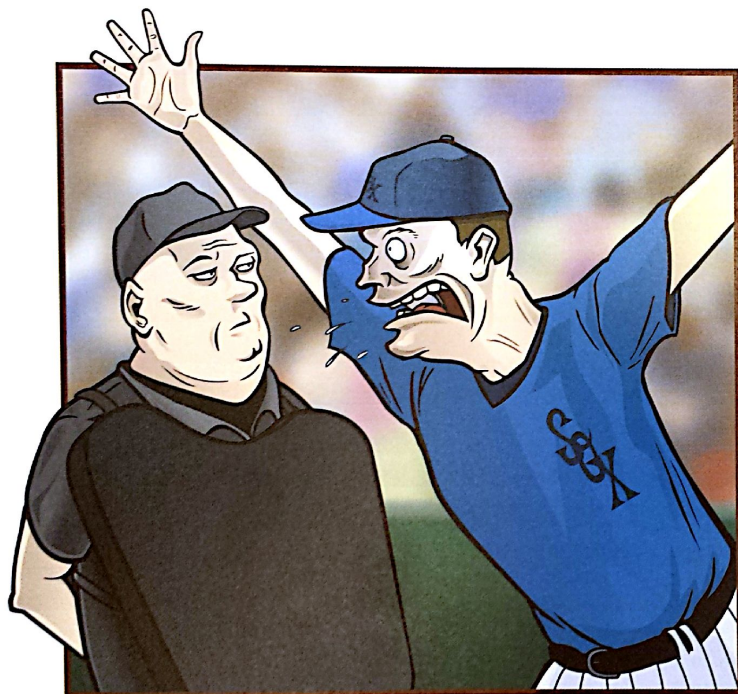
During this brief period you can override the fight-flight reflex with a learned response. That learned response is *relaxation* – the physiological opposite of fight-flight.

But how do you relax in the face of a provocation? For starters, you relax by learning to *breathe* properly. Relaxed breathing is part of any training program that involves stress reduction. It is used in prepared childbirth training, therapy for anxieties or phobias, yoga, and the training of baseball umpires. Learning to relax is an indispensable survival skill for anyone who works in a stressful environment.

Calm is  
strength.  
Upset is  
weakness.



A relaxing breath is slow and relatively shallow. It is the way you would breathe if you were watching television or reading a magazine. It lowers your heart rate and your blood pressure. Your muscles relax, and your face becomes calm and expressionless.



*Learning to relax is an indispensable survival skill for anyone who works in a stressful environment.*

### ***Calm Can Be Learned***

Relaxed breathing is learned like any other skill – with effective coaching and practice, practice, practice. It can eventually replace fight-flight as your *dominant response* to student provocation.

The more skillful you become at relaxation, the more quickly you can relax in response to something upsetting. With mastery, relaxation can be almost instantaneous.

### ***Emotions Are Contagious***

If you are calm, you will have a calming effect on those around you. If you are upset, you will tend to upset those around you. During training, teachers learn: *Emotions are contagious. You will get exactly what you give.*

Our objectives in managing classroom disruptions are two-fold:

- *Calm* the student.
- Get them back *on task*.

These objectives are two sides of the same coin. You must calm students in order to get them back on task. Adrenaline makes people jumpy. If you raise your voice to a student, they stay jumpy for quite a while.

If students are upset, they will not be able to concentrate. If they cannot concentrate in order to study, they will probably find something else to do. It will most likely be some form of disruption. This disruption will then become your next discipline problem.

Our goal is to make problems smaller, not larger. If we remain calm, we contain the problem while preserving ourselves. If we get upset, we become our own worst enemy.