

Controlling!? Who, Me?

The desire to control is a shared human experience, an instinct deeply rooted in our basic need to feel safe. But the need for control, when left unchecked, can spill into every aspect of our lives and come with significant downsides. Here are three strategies to let go of the need to control and regain emotional balance.

BY JULIE BONASSO

“You’re not controlling [long pause] as long as everyone is behaving the way you want them to,” my husband said when I declared that, thank God, I’m not controlling like my father. “Huh, what? Come again,” was my response. I was gobsmacked by his comment.

Me, controlling? I’m a highly evolved, super self-aware life coach who has spent the last 15 years helping clients with personal growth!

How did I miss this about myself?

Massive blind spot, that’s how.

After he said this, I started to pay closer attention to situations and people I was trying to control. As I reflected, I noticed some common themes. My attempts at control were often rooted in a fear of rejection, a desire to protect myself from perceived emotional harm, and the false belief that it was helping me manage my anxiety. Does any of this seem familiar?

The desire to control is part of the human condition, an instinct deeply rooted in our basic need to feel safe. Fear often fuels this drive. Psychologists have extensively studied this phenomenon, with Julian B. Rotter’s groundbreaking work on locus of control illustrating how human beings’ perception of control shapes our sense of security and ability to cope with uncertainty.¹ The desire to control our circumstances – and the people in them – stems from a primal fear of unpredictability. When we feel in control, even if it is illusory, our brains interpret that as a signal of safety and certainty, leading us to feel less stressed and anxious. According to research, this need for control often becomes heightened when we feel emotionally vulnerable, insecure, or unmoored. Further, it can rise up when we face potential threats (real or imagined), such as abandonment by a partner, a health crisis, or being excluded by friends.²

As lawyers, we get paid to fix tricky situations, solve problems, and craft solutions to

complex issues. We are rewarded for finding and exerting control over chaos. While these skills are invaluable in many instances, the need for control, when left unchecked, can spill into every aspect of our lives and come with significant downsides.

First, attempts to control other people often activate the brain’s stress-response system. I’m going to get “science-y” here for a moment. This process involves the hypothalamic, pituitary, and adrenal glands, which trigger the release of stress hormones such as cortisol – aka the fight-or-flight response. As humans, we are not meant to be in a heightened condition of stress for long periods of time; only for short bursts to ward off real danger. This “unnatural” length of increased anxiety from constantly trying



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to control others can impair cognitive functioning, including decision-making, memory, and problem-solving abilities. High cortisol levels have been shown to shrink the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain responsible for higher-order thinking – and disrupt the hippocampus, which is crucial for memory formation.³

Next, since the brain is perpetually scanning for potential threats to the “controlled” environment, the urge to micromanage people and situations

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creates a constant cycle of hypervigilance and anxiety. Research suggests this can lead to burnout, emotional overload, and potentially depression.⁴ Trying to control other people often backfires, straining relationships and creating feelings of isolation. Humans are naturally resistant to being manipulated, and attempts to do so can lead to conflict, resentment, and a breakdown of trust.⁵

Last, studies have shown that control-seeking behavior can undermine emotional regulation. People who excessively monitor, and try to change the behavior of, other people often experience intense feelings of frustration, anger, and powerlessness when outcomes don't align with their expectations.⁶ This emotional turmoil can trap individuals in a cycle of overcontrol, perpetuating the adverse effects on their mental health and overall well-being.

Understanding the science and psychology behind the need for control is useful; learning how to let go of that need and shift your focus back to yourself is where true growth happens. Here are three strategies to help you implement this shift and regain emotional balance in your professional and personal life.

Strategy 1: Mel Robbins' “Let Them” Theory

One of the easiest approaches to releasing control is Mel Robbins' “let them” theory. At its core, this concept is about releasing the urge to micromanage others by reminding yourself to let them do as they want.⁷ Whether it's letting a colleague take a different approach to a project or allowing your partner (or child!) to make their own decisions, the idea is to respect other people's autonomy.

Why it works: This approach shifts your focus from fixing or changing others to accepting them as they are. In turn, you conserve your emotional energy for what truly matters: your well-being and growth.

Try this: The next time you feel the urge to intervene, pause and say out loud, “Let them.” When emotions, ruminating thoughts, or judgment creep up, say, “Let them.” If you find yourself still annoyed or hurt, say, “Let them.” Keep repeating this until you feel the tightness in your body loosen and your mind begin to quiet. This simple statement can help you loosen your grip and cultivate acceptance.⁸

Strategy 2: Radical Acceptance

Radical acceptance, a cornerstone of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), takes the concept of letting go to a deeper level. It's not only about accepting other people's behaviors but also fully acknowledging the reality of a situation, even when the situation is painful or imperfect. This doesn't mean you agree with or approve of the situation – it means you stop resisting it.⁹

Why it works: Resistance to reality creates suffering. By embracing what you cannot control, you reduce your stress and free yourself to focus on

solutions or healthy next steps.

Try this: When faced with a frustrating situation, take a moment to silently tell yourself, “This situation is difficult but not unbearable,” “I can get through difficult emotions even if it is hard,” or another mantra that resonates with you. Pair this statement with a deep breath. Then, practice *specific* gratitude for something in the present moment (for example, “I am grateful for healthy lungs to take this breath”).

Strategy 3: The 90-Second Rule

When emotions run high, it's easy to react impulsively, especially when you feel the urge to control a person or situation. Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroscientist, explains that the physiological response to an emotional trigger lasts only 90 seconds. After that, any continued emotional intensity comes from our thoughts and engagement with the emotion.¹⁰ The 90-second rule teaches you to pause, breathe, and let the initial emotional wave pass before acting.

Why it works: This tool gives you the space to interrupt the cycle of emotional reactivity and control. By allowing yourself those 90 seconds, you can regulate your emotions and respond with clarity and intention rather than reacting from a place of fear or anxiety.

Try this: The next time you are in a highly charged emotional situation, set a timer for 90 seconds, take a deep breath, and focus solely on your breath. Allow the emotion to rise and fall without judgment. Observe any physical tension and actively relax those areas of tightness. Inhale and exhale again. Reassure yourself you are safe and ask, “What action aligns with my values or goals?” This practice grounds you and fosters intentional rather than reactive decisions.

A Challenge for Readers

I've got a challenge for you. Spend the next week noticing when you try to control the circumstances or people in your life. Jot it down each time. Notice what

is happening around you that prompted your response. Name the emotion underlying the desire to control. Which of the above tools can you put in place?

By applying these strategies, you not only release the emotional burden of trying to manipulate and manage people and situations you never had domain over anyway, but you also create space for greater self-awareness, resilience, and peace of mind. The practice of letting go is transformative – it can lead to healthier relationships, improved decision-making, and a renewed sense of balance in your personal and professional life. Remember: the real power lies not in controlling others but in the freedom that comes from mastering your actions, thoughts, and feelings. **WL**

ENDNOTES

¹Julian B. Rotter, *Generalized Expectancies for Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement*, *Psych. Monographs: Gen. & Applied*, 80(1), 1 (1966).

²*Id.*

³Sonia J. Lupien, Bruce S. McEwen, Megan R. Gunnar & Christine Heim, *Effects of Stress Throughout the Lifespan on the Brain, Behaviour and Cognition*, *Nature Revs. Neuroscience*, 10(6), 434-45 (2009).

⁴Christina Maslach & Michael P. Leiter, *Understanding the Burnout Experience: Recent Research and Its Implications for Psychiatry*, *World Psych.*, 15(2), 103-11 (2016). See also NeuroLaunch, *Controlling Behavior Psychology: Causes, Effects, and Interventions* (Sept. 15, 2024), <https://neurolaunch.com/controlling-behavior-psychology/>.

⁵Mel Robbins, *The Let Them Theory: A Life-Changing Tool That Millions of People Can't Stop Talking About* (Hay House 2024).

⁶Ellen Skinner, Kathleen Edge, Jeffrey Altman & Hayley Sherwood, *Searching for the Structure of Coping: A Review and Critique of Category Systems for Classifying Ways of Coping*, *Psych. Bull.*, 129(2), 216-69 (2003).

⁷Robbins, *supra* note 5.

⁸*Id.*

⁹Marsha M. Linehan, *DBT Skills Training Manual* (Guilford Press 2d ed. 2015).

¹⁰Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey* (Viking Penguin 2008). **WL**

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