

A LINE ON LIFE

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Perception of Control

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At least to some extent, we like to be in control of what is happening around us. However, psychological studies have shown that the more important aspect is our **perception of control** — not the actual control itself.

This is supported by a study of aircrews during World War II. *Post-traumatic anxiety* was found to be highest among the bomber crews, less among bomber pilots, and least among fighter pilots. Bomber pilots had more control than their crews, but bombers were restricted to flying in a level formation. Even though fighter pilots had more flexibility to engage in evasive maneuvers, their actual casualty rate was the highest of the three groups. Thus it is the *perceived control* — not actual control — that determined their level of anxiety.

**To reduce anxiety,
you only need to *believe* you are in control.**

In 1971, psychologist David Glass and his associates demonstrated this point again in their studies. They exposed male college students to random (unpredictable) tape-recorded noise. The noise was at 110 decibels. This sound is near the threshold of pain, about as intense as listening to a loud motorcycle engine at close range. Four groups — under varied conditions — worked at verbal and numerical tasks with the random noise, while a control group did the same tasks in a quiet environment. Here are the varied conditions for the four groups.

1. Subjects were told they could stop the noise by signaling another "*subject*" (actually the experimenter's confederate) to push a control button. However, subjects were asked to tolerate the noise and not signal the other "*subject*" to stop it.
2. Subjects were told another "*subject*" could stop the noise by pushing a control button, but they were unable to signal him.
3. Subjects worked in pairs, but neither had a control button for noise.
4. Subjects worked alone without a control button for noise.

During 24 minutes of random noise, the subjects under noisy conditions performed their tasks as well as the control group. They didn't even show higher levels of physiological

arousal than the controls. In other words, they adapted well to the noise. However, they later paid a price.

After the 24-minute task, all subjects were taken to another room and asked to do a proofreading task under quiet conditions. In contrast to the control group, the groups under previously noisy conditions did worse at proofreading. However, the first group — who could signal the confederate — did significantly better and showed less tension than the other three groups. Although the first group did not exercise their option to control — their perception of control improved their later functioning and reduced their tension.

How does this relate to you? To get others to cooperate with you, it helps if they can perceive themselves in control. How can you do this? First, **asking** — in contrast to ordering — allows the other person to feel more in control. Rather than saying, "*Take out the garbage,*" you are more likely to get a better response if you ask, "*Would you take out the garbage?*"

It is even better to say, "*Would you please take out the garbage?*" Why should you say "*please*"? Essentially "*please*" is a shortened form of "*if you please.*" It is like saying, "*if you are willing*" or "*if it is agreeable to you.*" Essentially "*please*" gives the person who is asked a greater *perception of control*.

If anyone receives an order — "*Take out the garbage!*" — they lose their sense of control. They will tend to respond in a hostile manner — "*You can't make me!*" However, if those receiving the request *perceive* themselves as in control, there is nothing to resist. In this case, the request is more likely to be fulfilled. Beside the words, **nonverbal communication** — tone of voice, facial expression, and body language — also needs to make the question seem like a request rather than a thinly disguised command.

On a larger scale, essentially all rebellions around the globe are caused by **perceptions of powerlessness** — not having *any* control. If you believe you are powerless in terms of using peaceful methods, the only options to gain some sense of control are rioting, open rebellion, terrorism and war. To avoid these violent acts, others must have some perception of control — whether they have actual control or not.

Even though it might be easier in the short run for those in power to force compliance, it is much less effective in the long haul. This is why it is wise for powerful people to give a limited amount of control away to those who think they have none. **Compromise** is a good way of giving a feeling of control to others. It is a good way to get others to work with you rather than against you.