

## Beginning With The End In Mind

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“It just got out of control. Before I knew it I was saying things I regretted.” I suppose we have all been there. The words are coming hot and heavy and the pain is being inflicted on someone else, someone we really don’t want to hurt. It doesn’t have to be that way.

Something I tell couples I see who say things such as this is: “IT doesn’t have a life of its own.” What I mean is that IT didn’t just swoop in out of nowhere and take control. To state what happens more responsibly, the speaker would need to say, “I just lost control.” The point is that control doesn’t reside “out there” somewhere; it resides within us. That’s good news for relationships. If the control actually does reside within us, then we can learn to exercise it more effectively.

But, let’s be realistic—exercising that control is difficult, especially in emotionally tense situations. That said, it is possible to learn how to do it, and in this article, I am providing a few tips.

The concept of beginning with the end in mind means *to be clear about the outcome that is desired in a given situation before you act*. In the long term, that might require that I ask myself what I would like my spouse (or the word I prefer: partner) to remember about me when I die. Would I want my partner to remember I was frequently critical? How about mean-spirited? Or sharp tongued? Certainly not! I would much more likely want my partner to remember me as supportive and tolerant, as gentle and quick to forgive.

If I want that outcome, then I must focus my energy *in the present* on being the kind of person I hope I am remembered as being. **First tip:** make a list of the kinds of things you would want your partner to remember about you. Review the list frequently, especially in the first month or two. The purpose of this review is to

begin to shape the way you think about yourself.

**Second tip:** write beside each characteristic on the list any behavior change you need to make. If you listed “patient” as a characteristic, you might write beside it, “Take a couple of deep breaths before I speak. Remember that not everybody sees the world as I do. Remember that while it is nice to be on time, it is almost never essential.”

Those are the long term tips, but there are a couple of things you can do in the emotionally charged moment. **Third tip:** As you feel your temperature rising or as you are preparing to “let your partner have it,” visualize a STOP sign as big as a football field! Let the growing irritation be a stimulus which produces the sign. Then, pause and ask the key question, “How do I want us to feel when this interaction is over?” Then, answer the question!

The answer will almost always be something such as, “calm, close, working together.” Thinking about that, decide what words, tone, inflection and volume you could use to accomplish that. Maybe instead of, “What’d you do with my car keys,” said with irritation in your voice, you might say, “Have you seen my car keys,” with an simple inquiring tone of voice.

You will be amazed at what a difference such changes can make in how you feel and how you feel about your partner. Oh, one more thing: I find it helpful to remember, (1) this is the person I love more than anyone in the world, and, (2) this is a person for whom Christ died.

I think either of these thoughts can help stop people from acting in destructive ways. Remembering to say them takes discipline. Perhaps in your daily prayers, you can begin to ask the Spirit to help you develop the discipline to be more gracious and more loving.