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*Nix Your Tics! Eliminate Unwanted Tic Symptoms:
A How-To Guide for Young People*

T(r)IC(k)S #11: You Can't Judge A Reaction By Its Cover

Reactions to our tic symptoms come in all shapes and sizes, and come from PEOPLE of all shapes and sizes. Thus it is important to look at each reaction, and each person delivering it, individually. In my experience it is a natural tendency for us to label and categorize certain groups of people with certain types of reactions, however. It is part of a larger human nature to do so – we are compelled to find order in things, and will even impose an order where none exists. “Pigeon-holing” people and circumstances around us is advantageous in the sense that we then don’t have to think as much – we can anticipate based on prior knowledge, and can therefore respond to situations much quicker. The problem is that, when we paint with too big a brush, we sometimes overlie the true colours of people, places, and things with our own preconceived notions. By so doing we “find what we are looking for”; ironically we then further strengthen our own viewpoints, stereotypes, and beliefs by citing evidence that we ourselves contrived.

Myself, I developed a bias against two groups: the elderly and young women. The former, I held, came from a generation that believed such symptoms demonstrated weakness and should be concealed. They would all meet me with annoyance and disgust. The latter had the world wrapped around their finger: particularly ruthless in packs, they could treat me in my glass cage however they wished because...well, they could afford to.

Given the number of grandparents and girlfriends who flock to TSFC conventions and my website in ever-increasing numbers these days, it is embarrassing for me to now admit my past prejudice. Two experiences in particular, occurring on opposite sides of our great nation, were poignant enough to help me recognize how arrogant and assuming I had been:

☑ In British Columbia, in a grocery store, and next to an older gentleman I once vocally ticced (loudly) while appraising some milk. Without batting an eye or skipping a beat this individual turned to me and in a pleasant, completely disarming voice asked, “and what is that”? His tone was as conversational as if he was commenting on the weather, and demonstrated a simple, innocent, and genuine curiosity. In all my years (10 now!) that I have been ticking unabashedly, this has been my all-time favourite reaction. There I stood, in the middle of the cold section, launching into an in-service. My enthusiasm rose as his non-judgmental fascination with TS became more and more evident. Despite the fact that it was he who asked me numerous questions that day, I learned at least as much as he did from the exchange.

☑ On a plane bound for Newfoundland, I found myself sitting next to a woman perhaps in her 40’s, and across the aisle from a teenaged girl. I was expecting a juxtaposition of reactions (and was not disappointed) but my biases could not have been more at odds with reality. The woman beside me was in fact a childish girl, continually assaulting me with exaggerated dirty looks, elaborate sighs, and loud comments to anyone who would listen about how it was ‘just her luck’ to be sitting next to me. The girl across from me was in fact a mature, kind woman – casting me warm, supportive smiles and joining her father in quietly admonishing and educating those around them. I kept this girl and her father in my sight as I disembarked in Newfoundland – still looking for a way to fit this experience into my biases, I felt certain that they *must* have been heading to the same TS convention as I was. Perhaps she had TS herself and suppressed it, or perhaps she had a diagnosed brother. As it turned out, neither was true: she had no knowledge of the convention. Overwhelmed with admiration for this exceptional young lady, and within earshot of my sour, grouching seatmate, I shook my saviour’s hand. I told



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her that she already possessed enviable qualities that many never achieve in their entire lifetime. While I also told her that she should never change, I walked away from that day resolved that I needed to do some changing myself.

Other T(r)IC(k)S around reactions that I'd like to share can be found below, and in the next instalment...

☒ **Pets** – animals seem to be capable of the same repertoire of reactions as humans. Some are frightened, some are angered, some are curious but shy, some take it in stride and shrug their furry shoulders, and some are even attracted to it. The difference is that animals have no veneer of civility to throw you off. Quite simply, animals are blessed in their honesty about how they feel, making choosing the right pet for you an easy task. I recommend “testing” pets with your tics before purchasing. If that dog at the pound responds like a certain seatmate on an Air Canada flight, keep looking. If (s)he fires you a look of stunned adulation before launching like a missile into your arms and licking you with utter abandon then you've found your match. I can't imagine how I would have gotten through my childhood without the unconditional love of my dog – my father still chokes up when he speaks of Moppet and how I was able to say things to her that I couldn't seem to say to him.

Recognize good people who just don't know how to react –

☒ If a person looks away when you tic, often this means (s)he is embarrassed, caught off guard, and doesn't know what to do. Sometimes people seem to be just barely holding in their hilarity: they will snicker only after they go around the corner, they will share brief smiles with others after breaking eye contact with you, or you will see them grinning as they turn their back to you to get your order. These are people who know that they shouldn't laugh, would feel bad about doing so in your face, but must release somehow.

It is your responsibility to let these poor people 'off the hook' – leaving a Q&A from the TSFC on their table, wearing a pin that says “I ♥ TS Kids”, carrying ID and information cards (soon to be available from the TSFC), or finding a way to work Tourette Syndrome into a conversation (loudly, in case the people reacting aren't the ones you are directly talking to) are all shortcuts to 'clueing people in'. I have also compiled together a number of “ice-breaker” comments I find helpful – comments like, “WOW! Great echoes in here, eh??”, or “Sorry for startling you – would you like a clean pair of underwear?” can take that awkward energy between reactor and reactee and convert it to a bonding (or at least a learning) experience. A compilation of these ice-breakers can be found in a handout entitled “Beat the Bully!” on my website at www.lifesatwitch.com/Helpful.html. Whatever your overture, however people react to it is their issue; regardless of their receptivity or how the situation turns out you can walk away proud that you at least acted well.

Will conclude next time...

Cheers!

B. Duncan McKinlay, Ph.D.

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