

Why Small Things Feel So Big When You're Already Stressed

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It's 5:30 p.m. You've had back-to-back meetings, you forgot to eat lunch, there are three emails you still need to answer, and you're already thinking about everything waiting for you tomorrow. Then you walk into the kitchen and someone has left a dirty dish on the counter.

And that dish makes you irrationally angry.

You know it's a dish. You know there are much bigger problems in the world. You may even hear yourself thinking, *Why am I getting this upset over a plate?* But you're probably not really reacting to the plate.

Stress doesn't always announce itself

We tend to recognize stress when something significant happens, like a deadline, conflict at work, financial problems, or a difficult situation at home. What's harder to notice is the stress that accumulates quietly throughout an ordinary day. You move from one thing to another, solving problems and responding to what everyone needs from you, while your mind keeps track of everything that hasn't been done yet.

By the time you see the dish on the counter, your system may already be working pretty hard. In Mind-Body Bridging® (MBB), we describe this as I-System activity. When the I-System is active, our attention can narrow and relatively small things can suddenly feel much bigger.

There may also be a Requirement hiding underneath the reaction. Requirements are internal rules about how we, other people, or the world should be. Maybe yours sounds like:

They should clean up after themselves.

I shouldn't have to ask again.

I should be able to keep up.

The plate is real, and you may still want someone to put it in the dishwasher. But everything your mind attaches to that plate can make the moment much heavier than the plate itself.

When we add another layer

One of the easiest things to do when we notice ourselves reacting strongly is criticize the reaction. We start thinking:

This is ridiculous.

Why am I so irritated?

I shouldn't let something this small bother me.

Now there's the original stress, the dirty dish, and a new Requirement that says you shouldn't be feeling the way you're feeling. That usually doesn't help.

Instead, try recognizing what's happening without immediately trying to change it. You might simply notice, *My I-System is really active right now.* Maybe you can recognize the Requirement too.

That recognition begins the process of Defusing. You aren't pretending the dish doesn't bother you or convincing yourself that everything is fine. You're starting to separate what actually happened from everything the I-System has attached to it. That can create just enough space to decide what comes next instead of automatically reacting.

Maybe you still ask someone to put the dish away. Maybe you leave it there for ten minutes. Maybe you realize you haven't eaten since breakfast and dinner needs to happen before you have a conversation with anyone.

The goal isn't to never get irritated

Feeling frustrated, stressed, defensive, or overwhelmed is part of being human. MBB gives us a way to recognize when the I-System is active and begin to Defuse that activity before it takes over the rest of the moment.

Sometimes Bridging can help with that. You might pause long enough to notice a sound in the room, feel your feet on the floor, or pay attention to something you can see. Coming to Your Senses brings some of your attention back to what's actually happening around you rather than leaving all of it caught up in the I-System.

The next time something small feels surprisingly big, get curious before deciding you're overreacting. What else have you been carrying today? Is there a Requirement underneath the reaction? What changes when you recognize it instead of immediately reacting to it?

Sometimes the small thing really is annoying. And sometimes that dirty dish is carrying the weight of your entire Tuesday.

Want to learn more?

If stress has been showing up in the small moments of your day, MBB can help you recognize what's happening and practice tools to Defuse and Bridge. Join one of our [Building Resilience workshops](#) or learn more about our [free individual sessions](#).