

I Had to Stand Up

“What kind of idiot ignores the signs to merge for 10 miles and waits until the very last second?! I clearly had right of way!!! I feel terrible that I didn’t stand up to that bully and not let him in, but he got so close to my car, I just got scared he would hit me!”

Gwen started our session relaying an upsetting incident that happened on a recent road trip. Another driver had tried to force his way in front of her just before the highway narrowed to one lane. She avoided letting him in until he came so close to her car that she was afraid they would collide. She was still furious at him for his bad judgement and blamed herself for not being stronger.

As we explored the possibilities, Gwen was certain he would have hit her if she had not yielded. While he would have been the one at fault, Gwen would be without a car while hers was getting repaired.

More importantly for Gwen, she felt she should have taught the other driver that he has to respect other drivers and drive more safely.

Gwen had been around plenty of scary people in her life. Her parents were unpredictable, often unavailable, and sometimes quite violent. Her husband is very controlling and often emotionally abusive, and sometimes physically violent. I understood why Gwen was worried that she had ‘let herself’ get mistreated by someone again.

As we imagined how it might have happened if she had handled the situation ‘correctly’, Gwen felt sure he would have hit her car and blamed her for it. As we imagined further, Gwen wasn’t sure the driver would have ‘learned his lesson’, and she admitted that she probably would never see him again to reinforce the message. So, what she was imagining was a ‘strong’ response would have led to a damaged car and only a slim chance that the other driver would change.

As we talked more about the accident, Gwen realized that she had been far more upset about the encounter than the other driver likely had been. In fact, she guessed that he hadn’t given it another thought.

No one likes to have to accommodate thoughtless others – people who cut in line, those who monopolize attention, etc. And sometimes we need to stand up and interrupt this behavior, for the good of the group, the thoughtless person, or even ourselves.

But not every thoughtless act needs to be challenged. In this case, it was an incident that was not personal (he didn’t know or care that it was Gwen at the wheel), and she would likely never have to drive near him again. And there was almost no chance he would have learned to be a more respectful driver if she had refused to let him in line.

Gwen’s upset was hers alone to deal with. Gwen came to understand that it was easier to be furious at someone she was not connected to than it was to be furious with her parents or her husband. But she was furious at them, it was just more complicated and scarier to deal with them directly about her feelings. In fact, it could be dangerous to confront her husband directly.

Over time, Gwen got more relaxed about handling smaller upsets as she leaned into her journey of more effectively handling conflicts. She started to ask herself if this was a mutual upset, or if she was the only one. And further, she started to ask herself if this an issue that needed to change and was this the person who could change it.

So, where might you be fighting others when you are really fighting yourself?