Big Explosions, Small Reasons

*Study Explains Why Social Rule Breakers Spark Angry Outbursts*

* By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN

Shortly after settling into his seat on a Manhattan commuter train one morning, Richard Laermer heard a familiar sound. A man across the aisle was tapping on his smartphone. Clickclickclick. Clickclickclickclick—for 45 minutes.

Fellow passengers rolled their eyes, sighed heavily and craned their necks to glare. Mr. Laermer, a 51-year-old Ridgefield, Conn., business-book writer, tried to bury his head in a book. But there was no escape from the annoying sound, and finally he decided to speak up. "Excuse me, would you please turn off the clicks?" he said.

The man's response? "It was like I'd kicked him or scalded him with coffee," Mr. Laermer recalls. He jumped up and shouted, "Is this what it's now come to? People want you to type more gently?" He ranted for several minutes and ended with, "Who do you think you are? Do you really think you can tell me what to do?"

"Yes, that's exactly right," answered Mr. Laermer, who had remained quiet during the tirade. "Please turn the clicks off." People nearby began clapping, and the angry man sat down, red faced and turned his phone off.

Why do adults throw tantrums over seemingly trivial provocations? Sure, the decline of common courtesy is appalling, and some people aren't as nice as others. But times are stressful enough for us all. Shouldn't we have learned by now that indulging in a fit of yelling, whether at a customer-

Researchers at Duke University, in a yet-to-be-published study, looked for explanations of why people melt down over small things. Their findings suggest we are reacting to a perceived violation of an unwritten yet fundamental rule. It's the old, childhood wail: "It's not fair!"

Researchers call these unwritten laws of behavior "social exchange rules." We're not supposed to be rude or inconsiderate; we are supposed to be polite, fair, honest and caring. Don't cut in line. Drive safely. Clean up after yourself.

"We can't have successful interactions in relationships, mutually beneficial to both people involved, if one person violates these rules," says Mark Leary, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke and lead author of the study. "And we can't have a beneficial society if we can't trust each other not to lie, not to be unethical, not to watch out for our general well-being."

The feelings that linger after an angry outburst usually make the person who exploded feel worse. David Katz, 38, founder of a social-network start-up in Toronto, was walking a friend's elderly Shih Tzu recently when a well-dressed man, typing on his BlackBerry, nearly stepped on the dog.

Mr. Katz knocked the phone out of the man's hand and told him to watch where he was going. The two men swore at each other. The man with the BlackBerry said, "What's your problem? It's just a dog." Mr. Katz threw the man against a parked van and said if he saw him again, they would "have issues."

"I'm not proud of how I handled the situation," Mr. Katz says. He does often see the man in his neighborhood, and they each look at the ground without acknowledging the other. "It's really awkward," he says.

I am ashamed to admit that I once became so worked up, after a long time on the phone with a help desk trying to get my laptop unlocked, that I began to bleat over and over, "This is unacceptable!" The kind and exceedingly patient woman on the phone with me said, "Madam, please, can you breathe? May you take a glass of water?"

Dr. Leary at Duke decided to study people's overreactions to inconsequential events several years ago, after he witnessed the Pickle Incident. He was at a fast-food restaurant and saw a man in a business suit march up to the counter, throw his hamburger down and yell: "Why is there a pickle on my sandwich?" Loudly, he said he would have the counter clerk fired because she was "too stupid" to work there. The clerk looked as if she would cry. Another employee handed the customer a new hamburger, and he left.

The scene made Dr. Leary think there must be something critically important about unwritten social rules if we feel so deeply violated that we need to let the world know when someone breaks one. "It's not the pickle," says Dr. Leary. "It's that you are doing something that makes me not trust you, that you may harm or disadvantage me because you are not playing by the rules."

Often both parties perceive they have been wronged. Michelle Tennant, 43, chief creative officer for a Saluda, N.C., publicity firm, was waiting at a "Line Forms Here" sign at a Barnes & Noble when a clerk signaled for her to step forward. Right then, a woman who had been waiting four registers away snapped, "Hey! The line forms here!" Ms. Tennant pointed out the sign. The woman, with a young daughter in tow, bellowed, "That's right. I was standing in the wrong place and so what? Now I'm checking out. Get over it!" Ms. Tennant moved to the next register, where she and the clerk rolled their eyes about the other woman's behavior. Meanwhile, the woman kept yelling, "Get OVER it! I'm checking out before you!"

Experts advise people who are prone to outbursts to recognize the behavior, then learn to be "personal scientists," identify "triggers" and work on changing their response. Hate slow drivers? Leave for work earlier, so you'll be less rushed. Or practice anger management. Breathe and count to 10. Think of something pleasant. Remind yourself that tantrums aren't worth it and if you have one you will probably feel worse. "You can't avoid the noxious stimuli of life," says Stephen C. Josephson, a clinical psychologist and faculty member at Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York. "You need to not respond to every provocation."

In the Duke study, Dr. Leary asked 200 people in romantic relationships to think of something their partner does that is annoying or upsetting but fairly inconsequential. Then he asked them to rate the degree to which the behavior affected their lives—involving money, job or overall happiness—and the degree to which it seemed unfair, rude, selfish, disrespectful or otherwise violated social-exchange rules.

He found that, regardless of gender or personality, everyone could name something that drove them over the edge, although people who were more "rule-bound" tended to be more upset. Social-exchange rule violations had a 30% greater effect on the magnitude of a person's anger than the amount of tangible harm the person felt had been done, he concluded. In an earlier study, he found a third of the time, people who overreacted to a small annoyance said it was the last straw in a string of events.

Jonathan Yarmis was pulling into a shopping mall one afternoon, and he cut off a guy driving a dual-cab pickup truck. Mr. Yarmis pulled into his parking spot, and the truck came to a stop right behind his car. "Never a good sign," says Mr. Yarmis, 57, a technology-industry analyst in Stamford, Conn.

The irate driver, a large man, yelled, "What do you think you are, a race car driver?" Mr. Yarmis, who has driven in several amateur auto races, replied: "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am." The man seemed taken aback but replied, "Well, you're still an a—," to which Mr. Yarmis replied: "You're right about that, too."

"He laughed, I laughed—and we actually had lunch together," says. Mr. Yarmis. "My treat."