

PEOPLE  
CAN'T DRIVE YOU  
CRAZY  
IF YOU DON'T  
GIVE THEM THE  
KEYS

DR. MIKE BECHTLE



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Mike Bechtle, *People Can't Drive You Crazy If You Don't Give Them the Keys*  
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To Tim

What could be more rewarding than to have a son  
you respect and love?  
Your influence in my life has been priceless.

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# Acknowledgments

Someone said that if you took all the crazy people in your life and laid them end to end . . . it would be best to just leave them there. In a book about “crazy people,” the list of contributors could be longer than the book itself. Listing them by name would be impossible (and dangerous).

But I have to acknowledge them. Thanks to all the crazy people in my life. You know who you are. Well, actually, you probably don't. But without you, the book would have no reason to exist. Strange as it sounds, I'm grateful.

At the other end of the continuum are those life-giving souls who keep me sane. Without them, this book wouldn't exist either. They're the ones who shape my life and give me hope in the midst of the craziness. The list would be much longer than the crazy people, and any expression of thanks seems inadequate.

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## Acknowledgments

on my progress, I would have been scrambling to meet deadlines. I've learned the privilege of teamwork and partnership. Thanks, friend.

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Thanks, God, for walking with me—always.

Part 1

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# Stuck in a Crazy World



# 1

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## I'm OK, You're Crazy

Your day starts innocently enough. The kids will be in school, your spouse will be at work, and since you worked extra this weekend, you actually have the day free. It feels like a gift because it happens so rarely. You can run errands, catch up on a few phone calls, and tackle that project you haven't had time for. You might even get a chance to read or to relax on the patio.

High expectations. High anticipation. Low stress. It's going to be a good day.

*Then it happens . . .*

- Your child wanders down the stairs, crying because she just threw up in the hallway (and she has pink eye).
- Your spouse rushes back into the house and says, "My car won't start. I need you to take me to work . . . and pick me up this afternoon."
- Your mother appears at the door unannounced.
- Your mother-in-law appears at the door unannounced.

- Your child flushes the toilet and everything backs up into the tub.
- Your friend from church calls—the one who always has a crisis and never takes a breath while telling you about the latest one.
- A message from your boss says, “I know I told you to take the day off . . . but our client is only going to be here today. Could you drop by about one o’clock for just an hour?”

*People are driving me crazy!*

We all have crazy people in our lives. If we’re not in the middle of some dramatic situation, we probably just came out of one—or are about to go into one. It seems like there’s always something going on that causes stress. In those rare stress-free moments, we start worrying about what’s going to happen next.

Where there are crazy people, there is drama. No matter how hard we try to eliminate that drama, it keeps coming back—as long as those people are in our lives. Some people bring the drama innocently, while others seem to have a personal mission of demolishing our sanity.

We all have an emotional set point where we’re most comfortable. It’s that position where things are going well, we feel good, and no one is messing up our lives. When they do, we subconsciously take control of whatever we can to get things back to normal. We try to fix the problem, change the person, or alter the situation.

If it works, we go back to our set point and are comfortable again. If it doesn’t work, we feel agitated, worried, and stressed. We’re out of our comfort zone, and all we can think about is getting back where we belong.

That’s *drama*. It’s anything that makes us feel unsettled. And it always has something to do with people—people who drive us crazy. Crazy people and drama go hand in hand.

We assume that life would be better without all the drama. But when you talk to people about the life you’ve lived, what stories do you tell? It’s all about the drama, not the routine. We describe a person’s life as “colorful” when they’ve lived through harrowing escapades.

We talk about the thrilling adventures we had on vacation, not the daily routine of reading through the morning paper. Reality shows are edited to feature the moments of drama, not the hours of boredom.

A retired police officer I know described his career as “years of fairly routine activity punctuated by a few moments of sheer terror.” Somehow, drama adds richness to our lives when we look back on it. It’s the pain in the *present* we try to avoid—the pain that often comes from relationships.

Drama can take different forms and have different results in our lives. Having your schnauzer throw up on the carpet just as guests arrive causes drama, but not as much as having your kitchen on fire. Your spouse meant well when he accidentally put your favorite wool sweater in the dryer, but the fact that it now fits your canary causes another kind of stress—balancing your feelings about his good intentions with the unfortunate results of his choices.

In both cases, drama results from what others say or do.

### What Crazy Looks Like

Crazy people bring drama into our lives, but not all dramatic events affect everyone in the same way. For our purposes, we’re looking at drama that involves some of these characteristics:

First, it involves our *emotions*. It doesn’t matter what the event was or what a person said or did. The thing that makes it dramatic is how we *feel* about it. That’s why two people can be stuck in the same traffic jam and be late for the same appointment, but one person is upset while the other one isn’t. The event isn’t really the problem; it’s our response to the event.

Second, it usually involves *people*. When others don’t meet our expectations, we experience drama. They cut us off in traffic, show up late, or respond to us with sarcasm. If a specific situation bothers us, it probably has something to do with people. On a blistering hot day, we blame the utility executives for charging such high rates for

electricity to run the air conditioning, and then we blame our boss for not giving us the raise so we can adjust our thermostats.

Third, it's often *unexpected*. We're caught off guard because we didn't see the event coming. We don't plan for serious illness, the loss of a job, or the midnight phone call from the police about our teenager.

Fourth, it's *personal*. A lot of crazy things happen in the world, but not all of them impact us. We're talking here about the ones that directly take us out of our comfort zone. It's one thing to hear about a company president arrested for embezzling retirement funds; it's another when you work for that company and those are your retirement funds.

Fifth, it's often *exaggerated*. This isn't always true, but we often blow up a situation in our minds beyond the reality of the event. When your daughter isn't home ten minutes after her curfew, you're a little irritated. A half hour later, you're angry. An hour later, you panic. An hour after that, you're terrified and calling the police. When she finally walks in the door, you're wavering between relief and homicide.

### **It's a Control Issue**

Our discomfort with a situation varies depending on how much control we have. If we can do something about it, we tend to be OK. The car gets a flat tire; we get it fixed. The toilet overflows; we call a plumber and clean up the mess. We speak harshly to our kids when we're tired; we apologize.

It's those situations that we can't fix or those people we can't change that make us the most uncomfortable. When the doctor uses the word "incurable" and "cancer" in the same sentence, drama takes on a whole different meaning. When a good friend turns on us and betrays our confidence, we have no guarantee that our response will "make it all better." When a boss is simply unreasonable and won't listen to logic, we might not be able to change him.

What about those situations? How can we get rid of that drama?

It's like a dance between two people. We try to stay in step, but we aren't sure exactly what the other person is going to do. When they make a move we're not expecting, we scramble to respond in a way that keeps both people on their feet. They respond to our response, and the dance continues back and forth as each person tries to negotiate the differences.

### The Most Common Concern

A woman observed a man in a grocery store with a screaming, wiggling toddler in the seat of the shopping cart. The boy was totally out of control, trying to grab things off the shelf and yelling constantly. As the man moved up and down the aisles, he calmly repeated, "Billy, it's OK. You can do this. You can handle this. You don't have to get upset. Stay calm, Billy—it's OK."

The woman was so impressed by his demeanor that she felt she had to compliment him on his control. "I'm sorry to intrude—but I just wanted to tell you how impressed I am at the way you've been talking to little Billy."

The man responded, "Oh, my son's name is Jeremy. I'm Billy."

I teach seminars for a living. Several times a week I'm in a corporate or hotel conference room helping people discover ways to manage their time and life. We talk about discovering what really matters most and basing our daily choices on those values. Participants think through practical ways to arrange their personal and professional lives to accomplish the things that move them toward that goal.

At the end of the day, I'm approached by participants with questions about applying the concepts to their unique situations. The question I hear most frequently is reflected in Madelyn's concern:

I really love this, and I'm excited about putting it into practice. But I work for a boss who just doesn't get it. I can try this, but she just wouldn't go for it. She's demanding and unreasonable, and she just

doesn't get it. This all sounds good, but I'm stuck in a no-win situation. I don't feel like I have any options.

Sound familiar? You could replace “boss” with “spouse,” “friend,” “in-laws,” “parent,” or just about any other crazy person in your life who brings you drama. The bottom line is that no matter what you do, there is someone else keeping it from working.

My response to that common concern provides the structure for this book. I generally suggest a three-step process:

1. First, try to change the situation. Explore every possible avenue to impact the other person's behavior or alter the conditions. It might involve a careful conversation with that person in a nonthreatening environment, or coming up with a creative solution to a problem. It might involve negotiating with that person about a mutually beneficial way of dealing with the issue.
2. If you've tried everything possible and the situation isn't going to change, you're left with the second step—changing your attitude. The question becomes, “What can I do to change the way I respond or handle the situation so it's not constantly eating me alive?”
3. In some instances, it might be appropriate to leave the situation. If you get to a place where your boss isn't going to change and you simply can't handle it anymore, you might consider looking for a new job or transferring to a different part of the company. Too often, though, people choose that option before working to change the situation and their attitude. Their immediate, reactive response is, “I quit.” But that should usually be the final resort when other possibilities have been exhausted.

That third option isn't always appropriate. I'm not suggesting that people simply end a long-standing relationship with a family member because they're tired of the drama. Many people jump too quickly to this option before working hard on the relationship.

Here's an example:

Let's say that my house is the traditional family gathering place for Thanksgiving dinner each year. It's the biggest house and is centrally located. I love these people, but I'm a basket case by the time it's over.

Uncle Joe doesn't like turkey, so I always have to include ham as well. No one offers to bring anything, which means I pay for it all. Tina says she can't come but shows up anyway with two rather unusual friends. It takes days to clean the house and get everything ready, and everyone disappears to the football game when it's time to clean up. Instead of gratefulness, the only comments are about the dressing having too many raisins.

Here's how I might approach the three options:

1. Can I change the situation? If I'm committed to having Thanksgiving at my house, I can try to come up with alternatives:
  - Have Uncle Joe bring his own ham.
  - Send out an online invitation with sign-ups for food.
  - Hire a cleaning person to help get the house ready.
  - Disconnect the cable from the television.
  - Serve raisins in a separate bowl.
2. If people won't go along with my suggestions, I can work on having a good attitude where I accept the realities of people's behavior.
3. If I get to a point where the stress of the situation is affecting my health and my sanity, I can change the environment:
  - Simply say, "I'm not having Thanksgiving at my house this year. Just let me know where you'd like to meet, and I'll be there to help."
  - Reserve a room at a local restaurant and let the family know how much it will cost per person.
  - Arrange to be on a Thanksgiving cruise with friends or immediate family.
  - Arrange to have the house tented for termites.

It's a practical application of the Serenity Prayer: "Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

## Where We're Headed

In the first section of this book, we'll explore the possibilities for influencing a situation with the crazy people in our lives. There are no guarantees, but many of the approaches people use are ineffective. We need a new set of keys to unlock those relationships.

"But what if the keys don't work and the locks are broken beyond repair? And what if we're in a situation where we can't simply walk away?"

In the second section we'll look at the characteristics and attitudes we can build into our lives that tend to influence others the most. It's not about things we do as much as who we become. We'll focus on the seven most effective "keys" to handling crazy people—personal qualities and responses that keep us from becoming victims of other people's weaknesses.

The final section deals with the practical realities of relationships: when it's appropriate to leave, and suggestions for connecting with others in a healthy way.

## So, Is "Drama-Free" Possible?

Martin Luther supposedly said, "You might not be able to stop the birds from landing on your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." We can't stop various events from happening, and we can't choose what other people do or say. Crazy people will always be present in our lives.

"Drama-free" doesn't mean getting rid of the drama or the people who create it. *It means being free from its debilitating effects in our*

*lives*. This book is about getting free—not letting our lives and attitudes be controlled by the choices of others.

### **Fruit and Faith**

Becoming free from the craziness of others isn't an act or a role-play. We don't have to pretend to be something we're not or to feel things we don't feel. It's about actually becoming different on the inside.

If we want peaches on a peach tree, we don't glue peaches onto the tree. We make the tree healthy and it produces peaches naturally. In the same way, we don't have to try to act nicer or more patient in our drama-filled relationships. We need to become nicer or more patient on the inside. It takes too much energy to fake it.

When we've been driven by drama and affected by others for years, it might seem hopeless. But this isn't just a set of self-help techniques. It's all about genuine change, where we actually become the type of people who have the inner strength to handle the craziness that others bring into our lives.

We can't overlook the impact of faith on our lives, either. I've found that my resources for solving relationship problems are limited, but trusting God to build character in my life is the greatest source of strength. My relationship with him prepares me to have better relationships with others.

### **A Bold Promise**

Here's my promise to you. If you read through this book, are open to challenging your perspective, and commit to the journey of personal growth, you'll learn to be free from the tyranny of other people's choices and behaviors. It doesn't mean there won't be pain in those relationships, but you'll have the resources to deal with those situations without simply ignoring them or glossing over the injury. You'll

build stronger relationships, find more joy in every area of your life, and not be a victim of the weaknesses of others. You'll be responsive instead of reactive. It will impact both your physical and mental health.

You'll be *free*.

# 2

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## The Problem with Believing We're Right

“I can't believe we trusted him!”

He had our money, as well as the project we had given him to do. And he had simply disappeared. No one else knew where he was either—even the people who had worked in nearby booths at the swap meet for years.

Since he always rented the same space for his work, he had been easy to find. He had done top quality work for us in the past, and we had been thrilled with the results. We could pick up an inexpensive scenic print at one of the art dealers at the event and take it to him. A week later the print was mounted and coated with a unique, heat-applied finish that made it look like a piece of art costing a small fortune. It was waterproof, damage-proof, and protected from just about anything that could happen.

Except theft.

Other than that, he seemed like a genuinely nice guy.

We had gone to the huge swap meet about thirty miles from our house one Saturday morning, specifically looking for a picture to hang in the guest bedroom we were decorating. We sipped the coffee we had stopped to purchase as we wandered through the outdoor gallery. Our choice was obvious and perfect, and we immediately took it to the seller for his finishing touches. We agreed on the price, paid for the work, and arranged to meet him the following weekend.

*Emotion: Deep satisfaction. We made a good choice. The coffee tasted great as we enjoyed the morning's casual activities.*

The following Saturday, we stopped for coffee and strolled through the parking lot. But when we got to his space, it was vacant. We walked up and down several neighboring aisles to make sure we had the right one, but he was gone.

We assumed he was sick and couldn't make the event. We understood, but it would have been nice for him to have called and saved us the trip.

*Emotion: Somewhat annoyed, but understanding. At least we had good coffee.*

We managed to mentally put it aside during the next week and planned for another trip to pick it up the following Saturday. Again, we stopped for coffee, almost to convince ourselves that we were OK and that we would have a nice morning. As we walked through the parking lot, we said, "Wouldn't it be a bummer if he was gone again this week?"

That turned out to be prophetic. The space was once again empty, and no one had seen him. We tried to stay calm, reassuring ourselves that something must have happened since he had been so trustworthy in the past. But at the price of gas, these trips were becoming more than just inconvenient. They were cutting into the money we had saved by shopping at this swap meet.

*Emotion: Bummed. Bordering on angry, but trying to give him the benefit of the doubt. Too much drama—we don't like drama. The coffee seemed to get cold quickly, and we tossed the half-empty cups.*

Another week passed. We didn't talk about it, but the unfolding drama was always in the background. We planned to go back on

Saturday, when we would determine if our fears had any foundation. “Sure, he’ll be there this time . . . and he’ll let us know what went wrong.”

We had his phone number on the back of the receipt. Just to make sure, I called and left a cordial message: “Hi, we were in a few weeks ago and left a picture for you to mount for us. You mentioned that it would be done the next Saturday, but we couldn’t find you that day—or the next Saturday as well. So we’re planning to drop by tomorrow and just wanted to make sure everything’s OK and that we can get our picture. It is kind of a long drive, so we’re just checking before we come. See you tomorrow morning.”

The phone didn’t ring. We drove the thirty miles to the swap meet. We didn’t get coffee. Coffee is something you get when you’re happy and having a relaxing morning. We figured we’d get coffee after we picked up our picture and everything was good.

He wasn’t there.

*Emotion: Anger at him for not getting in touch with us. Anger because we had been duped. Anger because he had our picture and our money, and obviously had skipped town with our stuff and probably stuff from a bunch of other people as well. Anger at ourselves because we had trusted him. Anger at the fact that we had driven 240 miles over four Saturdays. Anger at the drama. Too much drama, involving raw emotions and trust issues. Anger at the fact that we were going to have to figure out what to do about it. Plus, we hadn’t had any coffee, which made us even grumpier.*

By the time we got home, I had calmed down enough to make the phone call. I decided to be polite but firm in my voicemail message: “I’m calling again about the picture. You haven’t returned our calls, and it’s hard to keep from thinking the worst. We need to hear from you and find out when and where we can pick up the picture. Goodbye.”

We were gone the rest of the day, but his return message on our machine told us that he had called within an hour of receiving our message. “Uh, this is the guy from the swap meet.” His voice was shaky. “I’m really sorry about everything, and I’ll arrange for you to

pick up your picture.” The shakiness turned to sobs. “We found our infant son dead in his crib a couple of weeks ago. They said it was sudden infant death syndrome, I think. He was our only son . . . I just don’t know what to do . . . I’m really sorry . . . somebody is taking all my pictures to his warehouse, and you can pick it up there.” His voice trailed off before he disconnected: “. . . I’m sorry. . . .”

*Emotion: Deep, deep hurt for his tragic loss. Shame for the assumptions we had made. An insatiable desire to reach out to him.*

I called back and left a message of connection and compassion. The picture wasn’t important anymore. We saw him differently—a man who had been devastated and needed arms of healing around him.

We were drained from the emotional roller coaster. It had been a month filled with drama. But as unpleasant as the drama was, it couldn’t compare to the drama he had experienced.

## The Problem with Perspective

As much as we say we dislike dramatic relationships, we’re drawn to them on reality television. When the “villain” emerges, the show gets interesting and we can’t tear ourselves away. The drama builds ratings, and we talk about the episodes with friends the next day. We love to watch crazy people—as long as we don’t have to interact with them personally.

We all have drama in our lives, but many people are controlled by that drama. Their lives and emotions seem to be at the mercy of everything that happens around them. Without realizing it, they have become victims of the weaknesses of others and their lives are controlled by those people.

Thinking back over the swap meet events, I’ve often thought about the drama surrounding it. Where did my emotions come from in that process? Since I didn’t have all the facts, did the real drama come from the situation or from my interpretation of the situation? Could I have

handled it differently? What about the next time something like that happens? Is there a way to respond differently?

I realized that my problem was threefold:

1. I didn't have all the facts, so I made assumptions.
2. I decided those assumptions were accurate.
3. My emotions were based on assumptions that were untrue (but I didn't know they were untrue).

Notice that the whole process took place inside my head. In this case, I was upset that another person was messing up my life. But if I had known the truth, I could have made better assumptions and experienced different emotions. In fact, that's exactly what happened when I finally discovered the truth.

That's the problem with our perspective; we always assume we're right based on the information we have.

In most of this book we'll be talking about how to respond when people make crazy choices that mess up our lives. But the place to begin is with *our* perspective. No matter what the other person does, it's our perspective that determines how we feel and respond.

Our perspective is the lens through which we interpret everything we see in the world around us. It's like wearing glasses. Unless they're really dirty, we don't notice the lenses; we see *through* those lenses. If the lenses have the wrong prescription, things look distorted. When that happens, we don't question the lens; we just assume that the object we're seeing is really distorted.

People don't start out crazy at birth. In their first few years, they decide if the world is a safe place or not. That's where their lenses are shaped that they use the rest of their lives to learn to function in society. If they have positive and secure experiences early on, they can feel safe and build positive relationships. If they have negative experiences, they see the world as unsafe and develop skills to negotiate the land mines of life. When that happens, their ways of coping might appear crazy to others.

For example, rich people often assume that poor people would be happier if they became wealthy, and that wealthy people would become unhappy if they became poor. Yet some of the wealthiest people in society are the most unfulfilled because they haven't found true happiness. Some of the poorest people experience true joy in close relationships and simple lifestyles.

A story made the rounds on the internet several years ago that described this scenario:

An American businessman was on the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman in it docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellowfin tuna. The American complimented the Mexican on the quality of the fish and asked how long it took him to catch them. The Mexican replied, "Only a little while." The American then asked why he didn't stay out longer and catch more fish. The Mexican replied that he had enough to meet his family's needs. The American then asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your day?" The Mexican fisherman said, "I sleep late, I fish a little, I play with my children, I take a siesta with my wife, I stroll into the village each evening where I sip some wine and play guitar with my amigos—so I have a full and busy life, Señor."

The American laughed and scoffed at him. He said, "You know, I have an MBA from Stanford, and I can help you. You should spend more time fishing, and with the proceeds you could buy a bigger boat, and with the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, and eventually you'd have a fleet of fishing boats, and then instead of selling your catch to that middleman over there, you could sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You could control the product; you could control the market. You could control all the processing and distribution. And then, of course, you'd need to leave this little fishing village and move to Mexico City. Then you'd move to LA and eventually New York City, where you would run an expanding enterprise."

The Mexican fisherman said, "But, Señor, how long will this take?"

The American replied, "Maybe fifteen to twenty years."

"But what then, Señor? What after the fifteen to twenty years?"

The American laughed and said, "Ah, that's the best part. Because after that, when the time is right, you'd sell your company stock to the public, you'd become filthy rich, and you'd make millions."

"Millions, Señor—then what would I do?"

"Ah," the American said, "then you could retire, move to a small coastal fishing village where you could just sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take a siesta with your wife, stroll into the village in the evening where you could sip wine and play guitar with your amigos."  
(Author unknown)

The Bible says that any argument makes sense until we hear the other side (Prov. 18:17). That doesn't mean we're wrong and the other person is right. But it means that our perspective may be incomplete. The only hope we have for dealing with crazy people is to base our assumptions, actions, and responses on *truth*.

It takes humility to question our perspectives. Until we look through the other person's eyes, we don't have the complete picture.

## The Chances for Change

Some people have been impacted by the craziness of others for so long, they can't imagine living any differently—or even believing it's possible. Can it be different? Is it possible to live in freedom from the tyranny of other people's actions?

The answer is "Yes." The chances of changing someone else's behavior might be as realistic as getting your teenagers to clean their rooms: possible, but not likely (and not without a fight). But we can always choose how *we* respond to others. It might be unfamiliar territory, and it's a different way of thinking that needs to be learned and practiced. But it's possible.

This is a book about hope. We won't be able to eliminate the drama in our lives or escape all the crazies. But we can actually learn to live responsively instead of reactively, being positive when others are negative.

- We'll learn the keys to living in community with the crazy people we can't escape, being victors instead of victims.
- We'll learn how to discover and accept our unique temperaments, operating from a position of strength exactly the way we were created.
- We'll explore the impact that others have on our lives and learn what to do with the reactions we have around them.
- We'll talk about what we can do to impact those relationships and how to handle it when they won't change.
- We'll learn how to harness the power of emotions in relationships instead of being threatened by them.
- We'll study the life characteristics that equip us to handle the drama in an honest, realistic way.

Living in hope comes from seeing things the way they really are. It starts with checking our own perspectives before trying to influence the perspectives of others.

It's about changing from the inside out.