



6 Styles Under Stress: Understanding Your Personal Coping Style

By [J.D. Meier](#)

“Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one.” — Hans Selye
As you begin to feel unsafe in a conversation, you start down one of two unhealthy paths.

You either move to Silence or Violence.

Silence is where you **withhold** meaning from the pool.

Violence is where you try to **force** meaning in the pool.

In [Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High](#), Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler write about six styles we use when we’re under stress, so that you recognize the patterns, step out, restore safety and then return to dialogue – before the damage is too great.

Identity Stress Patterns to Stay Calm, Cool, and Connected

If you know a few of the common forms of Silence and Violence, you can see safety problems when they first start to happen. If you know your stress patterns and the stress patterns of others, you can stay better connected when things get tough.

It’s Almost Unfair

I think it’s ironic that the more it counts, the less likely you are to perform well, by default. This is where practice and a plan are key to success.

Here’s what the Crucial Conversations team writes:

“It’s almost unfair.

*The bigger the deal, **the less likely you are** to bring up your newly acquired skill-set into the conversation.*

Like it or not, if your adrenaline is flowing, you’re almost guaranteed to jump to your Style Under Stress.”

Silence and Violence Patterns

According to the Crucial Conversations team, you can think about Silence and Violence patterns in terms of communication styles:

Silence Patterns – Silence patterns consist of any act to purposefully withhold information from the pool of meaning. It’s almost always done as a means of avoiding potential problems, and it always restricts the flow of meaning.

Methods range from playing verbal games to avoiding a person entirely.

The three most common forms of silence are **masking**, **avoiding**, and **withdrawing**.

Violence Patterns – Violence patterns consist of any verbal strategy that attempts to convince, control, or compel others to your point of view. It violates safety by trying to force meaning into the pool.

Methods range from name-calling and monologuing to making threats.

The three most common forms are **controlling**, **labeling**, and **attacking**.

The Six Styles Under Stress

According to the Crucial Conversations team, there is a range of 6 styles that people show when they are under stress.

1. **Masking** – Consists of understating or selectively showing our true opinions. Sarcasm, sugarcoating, and couching are some of the more popular forms.
2. **Avoiding** – Involves steering completely away from sensitive subjects. We talk, but without addressing the real issues.
3. **Withdrawing** – Means pulling out of a conversation altogether. We either exit the conversation or exit the room.
4. **Controlling** – Consists of coercing others to your way of thinking. It's done through either forcing your views on others or dominating the conversation. Methods include cutting others off, overstating facts, speaking in absolutes, changing subjects, or using directive questions to control the conversation.
5. **Labeling** – Is putting a label on people or ideas so we can dismiss them under a general stereotype or category.
6. **Attacking** – You've moved from winning the argument to making the person suffer. Tactics include belittling and threatening.

Figure Out Which Patterns You Use Under Stress

Here are some questions to check which styles you use under stress.

Via [Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High](#):

Style / Pattern	Checks
Masking	• <i>Rather than tell people exactly what you think, do you sometimes rely on jokes, sarcasm, or snide remarks to let them know you're frustrated?</i> • <i>When you have something tough to bring up, do you sometimes offer weak or insincere compliments to soften the blow?</i>
Avoiding	• <i>Sometimes when people bring up a touchy or awkward issue, do you try to change the subject?</i> • <i>When it comes to dealing with awkward or stressful subjects, do you sometimes hold back rather than give your full and candid opinion?</i>
Withdrawing	• <i>At times, do you avoid situations that might bring you into contact with people you are having problems with?</i> • <i>Have you put off returning phone calls or emails because you simply don't want to deal with the person who sent them?</i>
Controlling	• <i>In order to get your point across, do you sometimes exaggerate your side of the argument?</i>

	<i>If you seem to be losing control of a conversation, do you cut people off or change the subject in order to bring it back to where you think it should be?</i>
Labeling	<i>When others make points that seem stupid to you, do you sometimes let them know it without holding back at all?</i> <i>When you're stunned by a comment, do you sometimes say things that others might take as forceful or attacking – comments such as "Give me a break!" or "That's ridiculous!" ?</i>
Attacking	<i>Sometimes when things get heated, do you move from arguing against other's points to saying things that might hurt them personally?</i> <i>If you get into a heated discussion, are you known to be tough on the other person. In fact, does the person feel a bit insulted or hurt?</i>

Key Takeaways

Here are my key takeaways:

- **Know the patterns.** Knowing the patterns is half the battle. Knowing your styles under stress is a key to improving. Once you recognize your own reactions, you can shape your behavior to be more effective.
- **Identify silence versus violence patterns.** I think extraverts or more assertive or aggressive individuals will lean towards violence patterns, while introverts, or passive individuals will move to silence patterns. While there's exceptions, this is the pattern I've noticed.
- **Use the patterns as a vocabulary.** I think the power of patterns is efficient communication. Whether you're using them for yourself or for others, having a name for a pattern helps build and share knowledge.

The empowering point here is that a little self-awareness goes a long way.

If you can identify your own patterns, you can respond more effectively in any conversation.