

Letter: Remaining Calm in an Angry World: How Some Cope

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After a year of pandemic isolation, Tampa, Florida, resident Gary Bagwell emerged to finally enjoy a “luxury” he longed for — a haircut. Sitting in the chair for the first time in 18 months, he relaxed and settled in for a little pampering.

When his barber asked a fellow stylist to make change for a \$20 bill Bagwell was paying with, the burly co-worker reacted with a barrage of stinging expletives and repeatedly punched the barber, once in the face then ten blows to his head.

In an instant, the peace that Bagwell hoped for turned to panic.

“I’ve never seen such bizarre behavior in my life, said Bagwell. “I think people today are much more on edge.” In fact, a Gallup poll found higher levels of stress, sadness, anger, and worry in 2020 than ever before at any point in the organization’s global tracking.

Whether victim or observer, an encounter with aggressive or angry behavior can catch anyone off guard. Experts say remaining calm is key to ensuring that a precarious situation doesn’t escalate. Anger management expert Ryan Martin’s advice in *Psychology Today* was, “Stay calm, stay safe, and don’t make it worse.”

Bagwell agrees. “Inserting myself into a volatile situation like this would only make matters worse,” he said, citing practical advice he was grateful to have recalled from his congregation meetings of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Frontline workers, airline personnel, educators and others can attest to a trend of increased aggression, even becoming targets.

While working at a grocery store in Palmdale, California, Isaac Virgil said he’s watched shoppers becoming increasingly aggressive, especially when items have quantity limits in place. “I think people have just gotten more anxious and less patient,” said Virgil. “They seem to only care about themselves and what they need.”

He recalls customers grabbing at packages of toilet paper and attempting to yank them out of the arms of fellow shoppers.

Virgil defuses such situations by remembering the Bible principles his parents have instilled in him. “I’m always polite,” said Virgil. “I try and remember that sometimes the customer can just be having a bad day.”

For fire inspector Roy La Grone of Grand Rapids, Michigan, such volatile situations have posed a particular challenge. “I’ve had a hard time controlling my anger since I was a kid,” he acknowledged.

After a four-month medical leave that ended in early 2021, he was anxious to return to work. On his first day back, he made a simple suggestion to the owner of the factory he was inspecting. In a split second, the man erupted into a verbal rant riddled with profanities.

To La Grone, the walk of 150 feet to reach the exit door felt like an eternity. The business owner followed him, yelling the entire way, while the office staff stared in stunned disbelief.

“I did everything that I could to try to calm him down,” said La Grone. “I didn’t overreact because I’ve learned that that type of behavior does not help the situation.”

Over the years, La Grone said he has worked hard to minimize his temper. He said that resources from jw.org, the official website of Jehovah’s Witnesses, were particularly useful in dealing with stress, controlling his anger and remaining calm rather than becoming provoked.

“Imitating the good examples of others and applying Bible principles has helped me to remain calm when under pressure,” he said.

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Mr. Ross is the public information officer of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Smith River.

