

ends tension

Sometimes all it takes to dispel crankiness and stress is asking the right question at the right time

When rudeness aggravates you

ASK IS THIS FUNNY YET?

Women are hardwired to intuitively pick up on and internalize others' emotions. But that means someone else's insensitivity—a friend standing you up for lunch or a salesperson giving you a snarky response—can put you in a bad mood all day. The secret to keeping yourself from ruminating on what you did to deserve poor treatment is asking yourself, *Is this funny yet?* says Amy Spencer, author of *Bright Side Up: 100 Ways to Be Happier Right Now*. Then imagine how you can respin the anecdote to your friends later to make them laugh.

Why it works: According to recent Canadian research, negative emotions and experiences cause people to develop tunnel vision and fixate on a problem. But thinking creatively breaks down that filter, encouraging one to put the frustration in perspective and instantly boosting mood.

When an intrusion makes you angry

ASK HOW MUCH OF MY DAY IS THIS AFFECTING?

There's a reason a telemarketer calling during dinner or a barrage of chain emails from Aunt Sally can leave you fuming long after you've hung up or pressed delete: These unwanted intrusions threaten personal boundaries and the sense of security. But asking yourself, *How much of my day is this affecting?* can quickly diffuse your anger, promises Lissa Marie Coffey, Ph.D., author of *Getting There With Grace: Simple Exercises for Experiencing Joy*.

Thinking about the annoyance in quantifiable terms forces the brain to use the areas that govern logic and rational thinking, which distracts from the emotional reaction. And by looking at the big picture, says Coffey, you're able to put the frustration into perspective and refocus on enjoying what you were doing before the disruption.

When a nervous habit irritates you

ASK HAVE I BEEN GOOD TO MYSELF TODAY?

Nail biting, gum snapping, pen clicking... these bad habits are so grating because others' expressions of anxiety trigger our own feelings of unease lying just under the surface of awareness. An easy way to inoculate yourself against the edginess: Ask, *Have I been good to myself today?* "One of the best remedies in stressful moments is to take a self-compassion break," says psychologist Kristin Neff, Ph.D., author of *Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind*. She suggests giving yourself the same comforting pep talk you would to a stressed-out friend or visualizing hugging a loved one or beloved pet to help buffer negative emotions.

"When you give yourself a kindness, it actually reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol and releases the soothing hormone oxytocin, which provides a sense of security and calms your whole system down," asserts Neff. And voilà—you'll be armored against even the most determined finger drummer!

When a delay makes you anxious

ASK WHAT'S INTERESTING AROUND ME?

When you're trying to fit a week's worth of to-do's into a few hours, a traffic jam or long line can feel like a disaster. To transform your mind-set and dial down tension, ask, *What's interesting around me?* "In our hurry-up society, we often don't take the time to stop and experience what's around us," notes licensed psychologist David Solly, a professor and dean emeritus

of psychology at the University of the Rockies in Colorado Springs. But this question helps transform aggravations into *opportunities* to find peace and joy in your surroundings.

If you're stuck in traffic in a familiar area, try spotting new-to-you details, like a tucked-away bakery that your mom would love or a small copse of young oak trees that reminds

you of summers as a child. If you're in a line, observe the people around you—maybe the man in front of you is wearing the kind of loafers your husband always chuckles over, or a nearby teen has the same magenta hair that your niece has been coveting. Before you know it, you'll be chuckling at your own inside jokes and feeling closer to the ones you love.