The Story of Stanislav Petrov
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Thinking
• Analyzing information
• Solving problems
• Exercising sound judgement

Reflection
• Contemplation
• Self-awareness
• Emotional response

Stanislav Petrov passed away May 19, 2017. He should be remembered for one very important reason: he saved the world from mass destruction.

Stanislav Petrov joined the Soviet Union’s Air Defense Forces in 1972. He began his tenure working with an early warning system that would alert the Soviet Union to any imminent ballistic missile attack. He ascended to the rank of lieutenant colonel and eventually it became his responsibility to monitor satellite information to determine if the United States had initiated a nuclear strike against Russia.

Stanislav was put to the test on September 26, 1983 when an alarm sounded, which was followed by a flurry of messages and information reporting that the Soviet Union was under attack. It was a warning that US nuclear missiles were on their way. In a 2013 interview with the BBC News he recalled, “The siren howled, but I just sat there for a few seconds, staring at the big, back-lit red screen with the word ‘launch’ on it.” His responsibility was to report this information to his superiors immediately, being it would take a little more than 20 minutes for the US missiles to reach the Soviet Union, and the anticipated response would be a Soviet counter-strike.

However, Stanislav Petrov did not inform his superiors. Something did not add up. The expectation would be for an all-out US nuclear offensive, but instead, the readings were showing that only five missiles were approaching. He paused. He slowed down the process. In the face of emotional activation, he chose not to be reactive (which was a good thing for all of us!) As it turned out, the information about incoming missiles was the result of a glitch in the early warning system.

As you may have recognized, in thinking about reflective practice, this is a great example of, “Don’t just do something, stand there.” In the face of an emotionally
activating situation, we can choose to tap our reflective skills and stop ourselves from saying or doing something that could have potentially negative consequences. We can choose to pause, or “stand there”, rather than react. When intense feelings are activated in us, our perceptions can become skewed. We then make assumptions or jump to conclusions rather than using inquiry to get more information. This can result in reflexive responses, which lack reflection, and can be counterproductive to developing or maintaining trusting, supportive relationships.

As home visitors and managers, we sometimes find ourselves in situations with families, or the people we supervise, that can make us agitated, anxious, or fearful. Unless there is an immediate emergency, we can choose to pause and inhibit a reflexive response. We can slow down the process by asking clarifying questions to get more information, or offer an empathetic statement to convey understanding. In this way, we maintain connection, rather than causing disruption by responding critically or by missing the mark in our response based on an assumption.

If Stanislav Petrov could inhibit a reflexive response under the circumstances he was dealing with, then we can do the same in our work. Keeping the emphasis on relationships, developing our self-awareness, and using reflective practice can help us avoid our own nuclear catastrophes.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- Think of a time when you said something to someone in the heat of an argument that you wish you could take back. What feelings are associated with this memory?
- Imagine yourself in that situation again, and instead of replying with the reflexive response, think about a clarifying question you could have asked instead, or an empathetic statement you could have made about what the other person might have been feeling.
- How might that interaction have ended differently based on this different response?
- How might this response have affected the relationship differently?

References/Additional Resources [Arial 10 pt.]
