



WHY WE REACT THE WAY WE DO --- AND HOW TO AVOID “GOING REPTILIAN”

Catherine McHugh, Ph.D.

April 25, 2013



‘SOMETIMES WHEN I GET UP IN THE MORNING, I FEEL VERY PECULIAR. I FEEL LIKE I’VE JUST GOT TO BITE A CAT! I FEEL LIKE IF I DON’T BITE A CAT BEFORE SUNDOWN, I’LL GO CRAZY!’

**'BUT THEN I JUST TAKE A
DEEP BREATH AND FORGET
ABOUT IT. THAT'S WHAT IS
KNOWN AS REAL
MATURITY.'**

- SNOOPY



The Triune Brain

Reptilian Brain

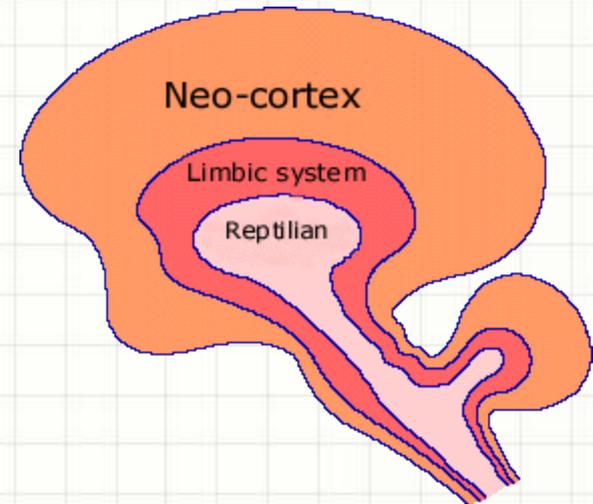
- 1st to evolve – Survival Brain
- Share with reptiles
- Formed by age 3
- About physical reaction

Limbic System

- 2nd to evolve – Emotional Brain
- Center of emotional scripts & memory

Cerebral Cortex – Thinking Brain

- 3rd to evolve
- 2/3 of our brain
- Rational thought and language



- ❖ Three brains in one
- ❖ Each layer has separate & unique functions
- ❖ All 3 layers interact with one another
- ❖ Paul MacLean, 1975

Reptilian or Survival Brain

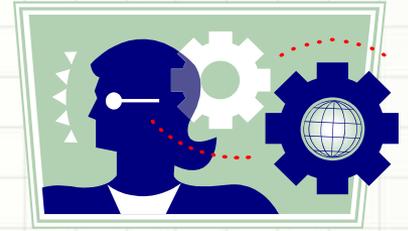
- Physical survival – protect from harm
- Maintenance of the body
 - ✓ Movement
 - ✓ Digestion
 - ✓ Circulation
 - ✓ Breathing
 - ✓ Fight, Flight, Freeze response
 - ✓ Reproduction
- Produces stress hormones
- Can be rigid, obsessive, compulsive, ritualistic, & paranoid



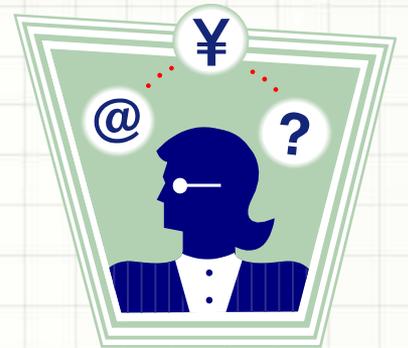
**WHEN WE'RE IN
SURVIVAL MODE, WE'RE
THE LAST TO KNOW . . .
BUT WE'RE SURE WE'RE
RIGHT!**



Thinking Brain. . .



- Language, speech, and writing
- Logical thinking
- Planning
- Creativity
- Emotional self-awareness
- Impulse control



*“... the father of invention
and the mother of abstract thought.”*

Emotional Brain. . .

- Makes us human
- Helps us get to the “Heart of the Matter”
- Linkage between Survival & Thinking Brains



“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Maya Angelou

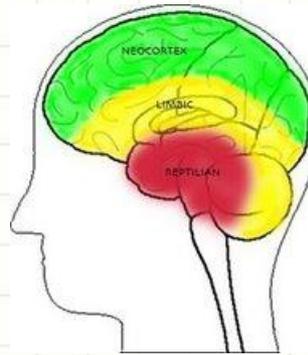
Survival Brain Reactivity

- Saying mean or hurtful things to people we care about
- Being critical – shaming and blaming
- Not concerned about others' needs
- Withholding information
- Accusing
- Complaining
- Sulking, shutting down
- Mean-spirited jokes
- Snide remarks
- Stomping off
- Impatience
- Gossiping



Survival or Thinking Brain?

- Negative mood
- Overwhelmed
- Ineffective
- Argumentative
- Blaming
- Rigid/controlling
- Recycles stories
- Insists “I’m right!”
- Personalizes
- Reactive



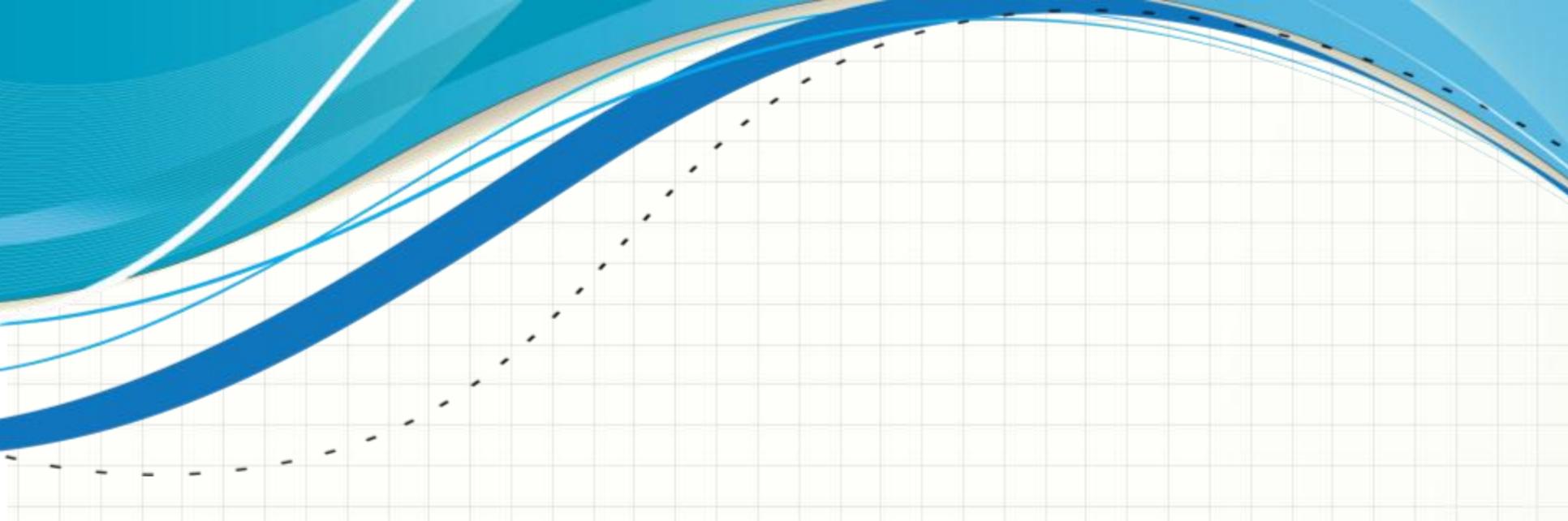
- Compassionate
- Focused on solutions
- Can find the humor
- Collaborative
- Lets the past go
- Creative/adaptive
- Looks toward the future
- Able to listen
- Proactive

The Big Question

- When we're interacting with others,

“Which part of the brain is in the driver's seat?”





SELF-MANAGEMENT 101

Self-Management Scenario “A”

When a customer argues with George about the cause of a late delivery, George feels the blood rushing to his face; when he responds, he has difficulty controlling the sarcastic tone and loud volume of his own voice.

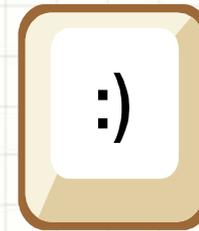


Self-Management Scenario “B”

After an upsetting argument with his teenager, Jacob drives to work thinking about how to shift his focus from the emotional argument at home to a decision that he and his staff will be considering today. When he walks into work, he smiles and greets everyone he encounters.

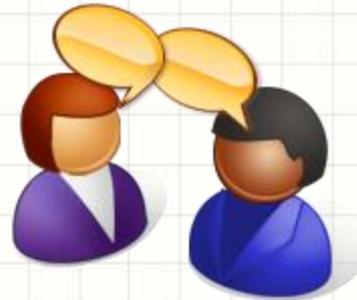
Self-Management Defined

- Ability to manage your own emotions & impulses and maintain your equilibrium, especially in the midst of strong “negative” affect in yourself and / or others
 - Angry attack
 - Blame/shame
 - Dismissal
 - Complaining/whining
- Requires:
 - Awareness of emotions & triggers (situations, specific people, issues)
 - Noticing physical warning signs
 - Avoiding emotional hijacking
 - Filtered response versus unfiltered response

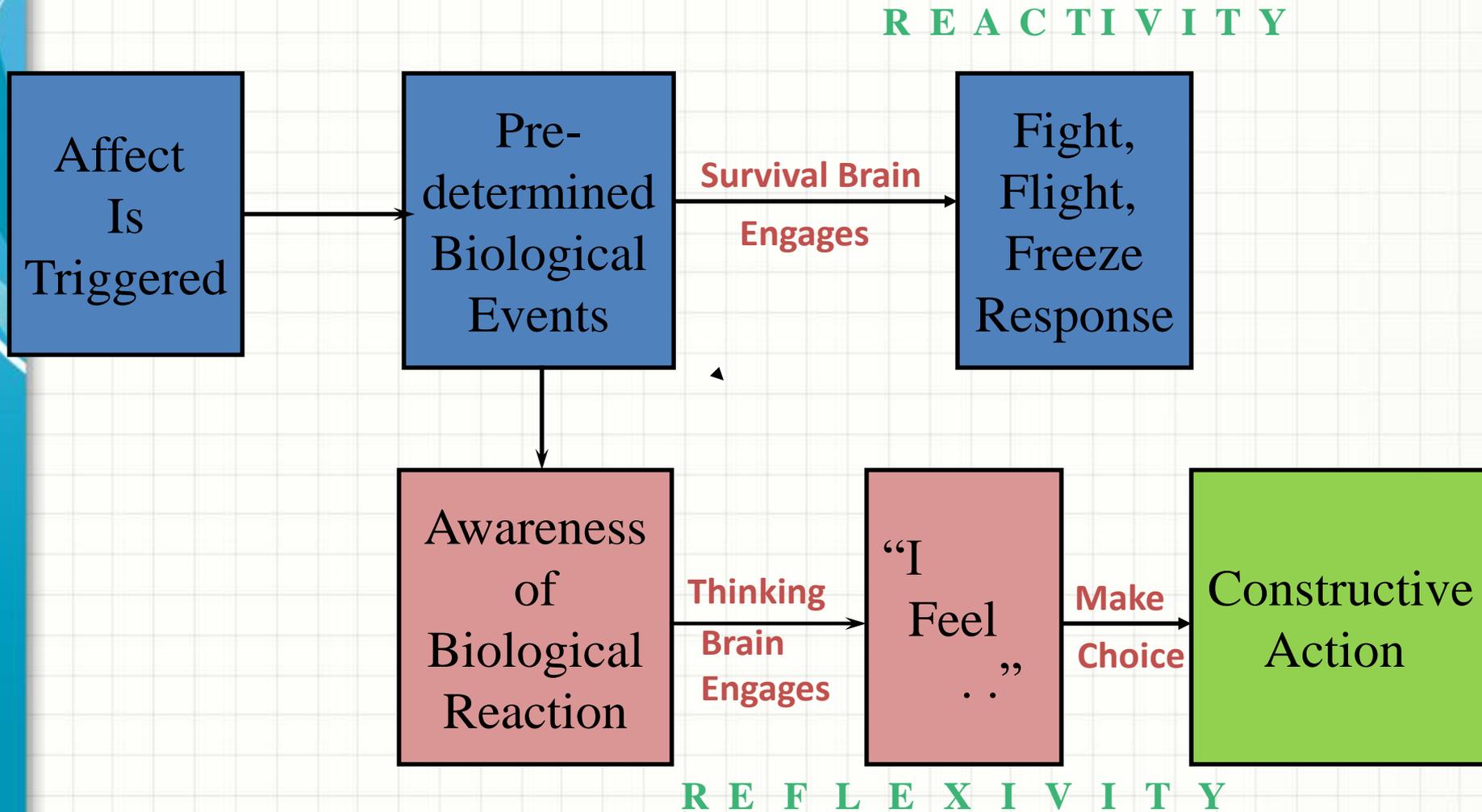


Self-Management 101 Activity

- Describe a situation in which you were triggered and had a strong emotional reaction.
 - What was the trigger?
 - What happened physically (in your body) & emotionally?
 - How did you react or want to react?
 - How did your reaction impact others and the situation?
 - If you could rewrite and replay the situation, how would you respond?



The Self-Management Process



Self-Management 101 Process

1. Notice My Reaction

- Note biological responses in my body

2. Reflect

- Identify trigger(s)
- Name disruptive emotion(s)
- Engage thinking brain

3. Respond

- Choose self-control option(s)
- Choose constructive response



1. Notice my Reaction . . . In My Body

- Blood pressure
- Heart rate
- Change in breathing
- Posture
- Muscle tension
- Body temperature
- Sweating
- Blushing / flushing / pallor
- Tears
- Raised voice
- Knot in stomach



2. Reflect . . . *What am I Feeling?*

- Surprised? (confused)
- Mad? (irritated)
- Ashamed? (embarrassed)
- Distressed? (sad)
- Afraid? (nervous)
- Disgusted? (dislike)



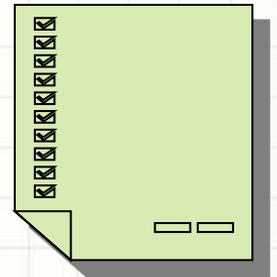
2. Reflect . . . *Why* do I Feel this Way?

- Clarify my experience
 - What **values, concerns, or needs** of mine feel threatened?
- Become aware of my projections
 - Why do I **deserve** to feel this way?
 - Why am I **taking this personally**?
 - What **judgments** do I have about this person?
 - What was my **intent** going into this situation?



3. Respond . . . Take Constructive Action

- What do I need to do to **channel / shift** my affective response?
 - If creating Negative Emotional Wake, interrupt your reaction
 - Use a “cooling technique” (breathe, pause, take a break, self-talk, express experience, physical exercise, journal / write, etc.)
- Make a **positive choice**
 - Name what’s happening for me (to self, to others)
 - Engage thinking brain & take action
 - What makes sense for me / us to do?
 - What does the situation call for?
 - What concrete constructive action can I take to move situation forward?
 - Make a request
 - Apologize, if appropriate



Cooling Strategies – to allow for constructive action

- **Take a “time out” before reacting**
 - Count to 10
- **Find ways to calm and soothe yourself**
 - Breathe deeply
 - Productive self-talk
- **Express your anger safely**
 - Trusted colleague or friend
- **Try a physical activity**
 - Walk, run, shoot hoops
- **Know when to leave the situation.**
- **Think / write before you speak**



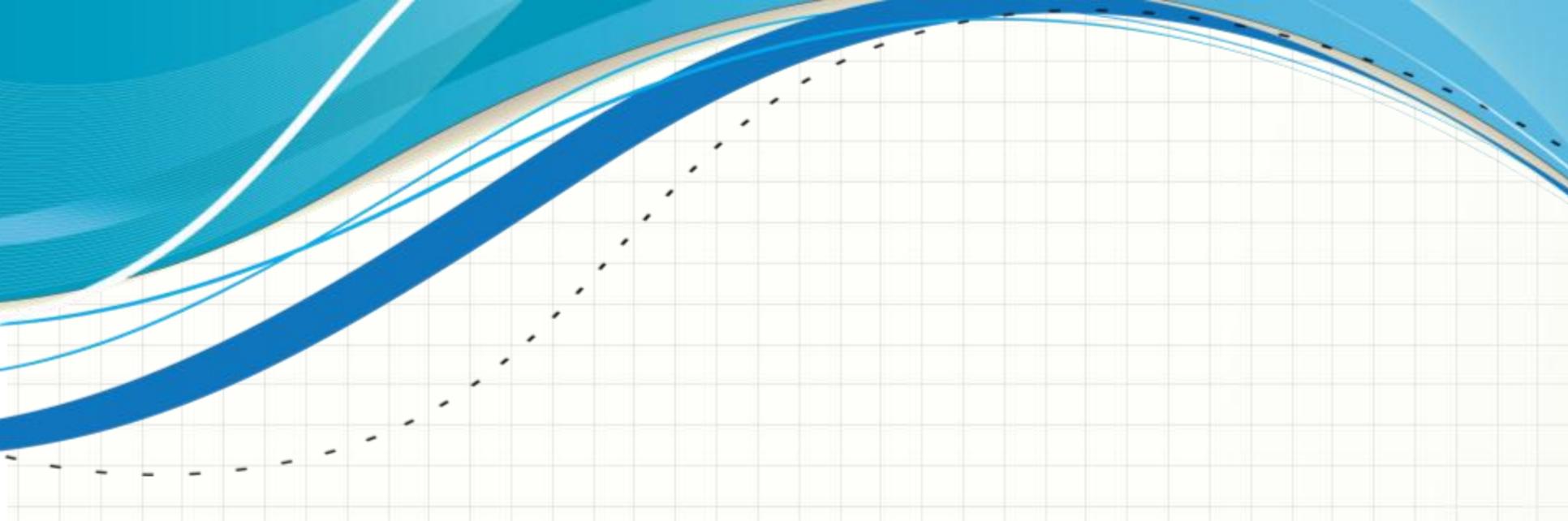
- Our emotions can **hijack** the Thinking Brain
- *Awareness* of our emotional state is what allows us to **engage** the Thinking Brain
- The biological reactions we have (survival brain) are clues to our emotional state





**NO ONE ELSE IS
RESPONSIBLE FOR MY
EMOTIONAL REACTION!**

**I CAN'T PREVENT MY EMOTIONAL
REACTIONS, BUT I CAN
CHOOSE MY INTERPERSONAL
RESPONSE!**



**“THE SECRET OF THE
AMERICAN JUNGLE . . .**

. . . remain Calm
and Share Your Bananas!!”

- Anne Lamott