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

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'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.
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

Affect Is Triggered → Pre-determined Biological Events → Fight, Flight, Freeze Response

Survival Brain Engages

Awareness of Biological Reaction → “I Feel…” → Make Choice

Thinking Brain Engages

Constructive Action
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!

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

- Anne Lamott