

Emotional Hijacking

Remember a time or times when you reacted defensively, despite how committed you were to responding openly. It is as if some automatic part of your personality came forth before you had a moment to think reflectively about how to handle the situation. You simply reacted. Perhaps, in your twenty-twenty hindsight, you were aware of better ways to handle the situation.

We all react automatically at times, despite our best intentions. Why do we react automatically? Is there any adaptive reason for this tendency? Actually, the tendency to react automatically has great survival value. It relates to the very nature of survival—our first task as biological beings. If a predator starts chasing you, your brain is programmed to survive first and think later. If you are walking across the street and a speeding car suddenly approaches, your brain will send a powerful alarm—alerting you to react immediately. There's no time to think about whether the situation is safe or not. You would be dead if you took the time to reflect.

A part of our limbic system called the amygdala is responsible for appraising whether a situation represents danger and, if so, sends an alarm for our entire system to react to this perceived danger—thus activating our fight-flight reaction. (The term “emotional hijacking” was coined by Daniel Goleman to characterize this process.) The amygdala is the place in our brain where the most emotionally charged learning takes place. Through the process of association, the amygdala calculates whether the present situation in any way approximates a past situation where danger was present. The stronger the emotional charge associated with the experience, the greater will the psychological imprint be in the amygdala. Great pleasure or great pain will tend to be remembered far more than ordinary occurrences.

The biggest problem with the amygdala is that its method of association can be quite archaic. It scans every situation to determine if any factors exist in present situations that existed in past painful or pleasurable situations. For example, if a man were abandoned emotionally by an alcoholic mother, he may react disproportionately to his girlfriend having a third drink. He may unconsciously associate her drinking to the pain he experienced to his mother's emotional and physical absence. He may then either withdraw emotionally (flee) or start an argument with her (fight). Usually, the reactor has no conscious awareness about why he or she is reacting.

The emotional threat of being ignored, humiliated, or rejected may be experienced with similar terror to meeting a wild beast. Consequently, we need to become more aware of our trigger points so that we can disengage the automatic tendency to simply react. Awareness, openness, and inner coaching are the venues out of our automatic, defensive reactions absolutely vital for success.