

Does Your Amygdala Hijack Your Rational Thinking?

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If you are human, the answer is a resounding “Sometimes!” Though you may not be aware of the biology, when you lose control of your emotions, your amygdala has superseded your good judgment.

Your amygdala is the part of your brain that controls your emotional responses to circumstances. For a small entity--the size and shape of an almond--your amygdala wields a lot of power.

When you face a fight, flight, or freeze situation, your amygdala is significantly involved in determining what you actually do. The amygdala processes the information in milliseconds and initiates behaviors before your rational brain can sort out the information, generate options, and make a conscious choice.

Your amygdala is heavily associated with storing and using memory. When faced with a potentially threatening situation, your amygdala quickly accesses your experiences to determine if what you are facing is appropriate for a response of fear or anger. If so, the amygdala proclaims an emergency and recruits the rest of your brain and body to its urgent agenda.

Many of the memories that the amygdala has stored away emanate from infancy, well before we had command of language to describe the emotional impact. Further, the amygdala is NOT the part of the brain that generates the word symbols we use for communicating with others. This explains why it is so difficult for us to articulate our feelings to others, and even to ourselves!

Daniel Goleman brought this awareness to the public in his 1995 book entitled *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. Much of this article comes from information shared in that book.

It is not possible for a healthy leader to make decisions solely based on emotion or solely based on logical, rational thought. The neocortex, the thinking part of your brain, works in concert with the amygdala to generate all of your decisions. Finding the right balance, in the context of what you want to accomplish with and through other people, makes up what is now known as emotional intelligence.

To be an effective leader, you need both your emotional and logical minds. Further, your decisions should consider both your immediate outcomes and your long-term relationships with those you serve.

Most of the situations you and your team members face are not genuine fight or flight emergencies. Rather than react immediately, intentionally pause for your neocortex to consider multiple response options. Imagine (ask those around you for time to think through) the likely short-term and long-term outcomes of your behavioral possibilities, including the impact your actions will have on other people.

If you have a history of temper flare-ups, you can change. However, you won't transform your behaviors if your objective is to placate your boss, customers, or spouse. Their persistent feedback may simply reinforce your ingrained “fight” response, stimulating you to justify tenaciously your habitual behaviors.

Instead, consider accepting their feedback as their accurate description of the negative effects of your behavior on them. Confessing this new insight to yourself and to those who have experienced your anger and impatience can initiate the demise of your old behavior and a beginning to new choices.

Finding right balance is perhaps the most difficult task of leadership. If your amygdala frequently hijacks your rational thinking, you are clearly out of balance! Consider apologizing to your colleagues. Ask them for support and patience as you experiment with changes in your perspective and behavior.

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