

Retrain Your Brain to Learn from an Amygdala Hijack

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"I can't believe you said that to me! How dare you interrupt my conversation! I hope you get fired!" Sound like an irate client or employee? Sound a little bit like yourself on a bad day? Sometimes you just want to explode on someone when they "push your buttons," but you don't even realize the subconscious threat of the amygdala hijack currently taking place in your brain.

What's an Amygdala Hijack?

Intense emotional circumstances like the ones outlined above can trigger a "fight-or-flight" response in the human brain. When this happens, rather than thinking through a problem and acting on it using reason, the emotions that occur can take over and cause us to act too quickly or irrationally. If you've ever said or done something in the "heat of the moment" that you later regretted you were probably the victim of an amygdala hijack.

The amygdala is the emotional center of your brain. When you perceive something through any of your five senses, the cortex, or "thinking" area of the brain, tells you how to react. Then the hormones in the amygdala make that action occur. However, when something particularly stressful or intense is perceived, the thalamus, or "trafficking" part of the brain, bypasses the cortex and sends that perception directly to the amygdala. The thalamus will do this with anything perceived as a potential threat.

If threatened, the automatic response from the brain does not allow for other solutions to penetrate due to the hormones and adrenaline physically bombarding the body. At this point, the brain is not able to think logically and make decisions using sound judgment. Then the problem truly begins.

For example, John is working with Sue at his veterinary clinic on Friday after a long and exhausting week. When John asks Sue why she handled a patient situation the way she did, she gets insulted and feels like he is questioning her ability to do her job. They do not disagree often, but Sue is tired and eager for a relaxing weekend. She takes what she hears from John and turns it into something bigger. Sue can either begin an argument with John over what she feels is an accusatory and insulting comment or she can think for a moment, explain her reasoning, and they can come to a conclusion while working as a team.

Before the amygdala hijacking (a term first used by internationally known psychologist Daniel Goleman), can force you to say or do something you will regret later, you need to consider the other options available. If an irritated employee is set off by a coworker, there is an option to either: a) completely lose control or b) take a moment and rationalize the situation. Did that person really mean to interrupt me? Is there something else bothering me? Do I appreciate having this person as a team member and how would I feel about damaging that relationship?

By forcing the brain to logically reevaluate the situation, the cortex is able to give the amygdala suggestions as to how to react. This isn't a simple concept and many people do, in fact, act or speak before they think, but with some practice, it is possible for someone to learn to defuse the situation.

Strategies for Beating an Amygdala Hijack

1. Use humor or empathy to neutralize the discussion. If someone rudely interrupts you at work, think, "Haven't I interrupted someone before?" If you get along with this person in general, joke a bit and understand that everyone makes mistakes.

2. Use the 6-second rule. It takes amygdala hijacking chemicals in the brain approximately 6 seconds to dissipate. Use those 6 seconds to take 6 deep breaths, think about 6 fun things you want to do over the weekend or anything that will help you focus on something else until the initial reaction to lose control subsides.

3. Identifying the stimulus that caused the amygdala hijack can help the person to think it through and keep the cortex involved in the process rather than allowing the amygdala to completely take over.

4. After the situation occurs, think about it more. The amygdala operates on past information if the cortex is not involved. If you can identify the triggers, you can learn to prevent those same triggers from emitting the same response by storing that information for future use.

Resources

1. *Emotional Intelligence - Stop Amygdala Hijackings* by Shel Horowitz
2. *Hijacking of the Amygdala* by Joshua Freedman
3. *Amygdala Hijacking: Don't Let it Happen to You* by Web Marketing Watch
4. Daniel Goleman, danielgoleman.info

<http://myevt.com/news/retrain-your-brain-learn-amygdala-hijack>