

## Life at the Bar

### Anger: Managing the Amygdala Hijack

One of my clients (“Bob”) has had numerous bad experiences with opposing counsel. Over the last few years, he’s felt more and more worn down by angry phone calls, disingenuous arguments, and general incivility.

(A sidenote: a question we addressed is whether Bob is really surrounded by opposing counsel out to gain some advantage by making him and/or his clients miserable. Viewed with a dispassionate perspective, the answer was no. The lesson? Always step outside your own life and observe. This perspective will let you recognize whether your day-to-day judgments are well-founded or whether they’re being colored by something else.)

One opposing counsel (“Fred”) was particularly nasty. Bob had been litigating against Fred for just over a year, and he had recognized that Fred’s strategy was to make him angry. So, each time he had to interact with Fred, he braced himself and prepared for something outlandish. But there was one particular tactic that really drove Bob over the edge. The tactic itself doesn’t matter — let’s say it was being accused of unprofessional conduct — and each time Fred would use this tactic, Bob would become enraged. To his credit, he was able to manage that anger reasonably well, but enough was revealed that Fred knew he’d found the “right” weapon. All Fred had to do was use a few choice words, and Bob would become ballistic. He described a tingling sensation throughout his body, the awareness that his blood pressure had spiked, and great difficulty with remaining engaged on the topic at hand.

What Bob experienced is an “amygdala hijack.” The amygdala is the “fight or flight” and emotional memory part of the brain. Its job is to protect by comparing incoming data with emotional memories. An amygdala hijack occurs when we respond out of measure with the actual threat because it has triggered a much more significant emotional threat. For instance, the amygdala will react similarly to the threat of being eaten by a tiger (physical threat) and the threat of an ego attack (emotional threat) by bringing on the fight or flight reaction.

When one experiences an amygdala hijack, the amygdala overtakes the neocortex (the thinking part of the brain) and there’s little or no ability to rely on intelligence or reasoning. The effect is that energy is drawn exclusively into the hijack. The immediate result of a hijack is a decrease in working memory. Adrenaline is released and will be present and effective for 18 minutes, and other hormones are released into the bloodstream that will take 3-4 hours to clear.

Randy Chittum, an executive coach on the faculty of Georgetown’s leadership coaching program, has recommended the following steps to deal with an amygdala hijack:

**Stop.** Stop whatever you’re doing. Bob’s strategy was to put the call on hold or to step out of the room for a minute; if that was impossible, he would go silent for a moment and identify for himself what had just happened. (“Ah, Fred just said again that I’m unprofessional.”) This step keeps the neocortex engaged and can prevent the amygdala’s takeover.

**Oxygenate.** Breathe deeply, with intention and purpose. This step also keeps the neocortex engaged.

**Strengthen appreciation.** It's difficult to have two emotional experiences at the same time, and appreciation counters the hijack. While it's especially effective to appreciate the source of the hijack (i.e., for Bob to appreciate Fred as a person, to appreciate his zealous representation of his client, etc.), any appreciation of anything will be helpful. Not surprisingly, Bob found it difficult to appreciate Fred, so he would instead think about his family and bask in his appreciation of his wife and children.

**Survey the landscape.** After the hijack, spend some time exploring what happened and why. Recognizing the trigger will allow you to avoid being triggered in the future. After recognizing that Fred tended to trot out the accusation of unprofessional conduct when he didn't get an extension or some other accommodation, Bob was prepared. He knew that his work had been successful when Fred one day expressed his surprise at Bob's lack of professionalism, and Bob was able to laugh and respond, "Come on, Fred, we both know that isn't true and isn't the point. Feel free to make your motion, but I can't consent to another delay in this case."

Retrieved May 2, 2011 from- <http://lifeatthebar.wordpress.com/2007/05/11/anger-managing-the-amygdala-hijack/>