

Your brain, emotions & how they affect behaviour

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Whilst the workings of the brain and the complexities of the mind cannot possibly be summarised in a few pages, there are some broad principles that help us to understand behaviour (both our own and others') and to adapt our approaches or responses to achieve a better outcome.

Evolution of the brain

The human brain has evolved over millions of years. The three main sections of the brain are the reptilian brain, the mammalian brain (limbic system) and the cortex: collectively known as the Triune Brain.

There are millions of neurons and electrical pulses connecting these areas of the brain, plus all parts of the body and the skin so no part works in isolation. That said, certain activities "reside" in specific areas of the brain.

The brainstem, the oldest part of the brain, runs the body. We are not normally conscious of our heart beating, of our breathing: all that is managed by the reptilian brain. Our basic survival instincts of reproduction, finding food and escaping from predators are there.

The limbic system developed in response to the mammal's need to raise its young. No animal or person can care for something unless they are in relationship. A snake does not develop a relationship with you, however much you love it and stroke it.

The limbic system is involved in processing and regulating emotions and memory; it is an important element in the body's response to stress.

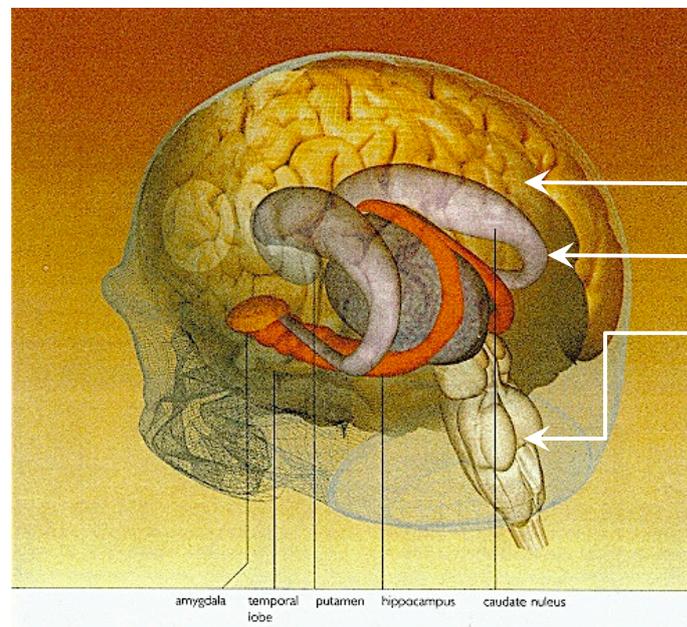
The most recently developed part of the brain is the cortex. The prefrontal cortex plays an important role in "higher" brain functions such as planning, reasoning, judgement, and language. It also contributes to the assessment and control of appropriate social behaviours.

The amygdala are part of the limbic system consisting of two almond-shaped structures, one each side of the head at about ear-level. These can be thought of as radars that scan the environment constantly to assess the emotional tone and potential threat level of every sensation that reaches the body. They are involved in processing emotions and fear learning. They are particularly attuned to the escape/avoidance emotions, which are often but wrongly labelled as negative emotions. The amygdala check all stimuli, those coming from the senses as well as those generated internally by thought. Having assessed the emotional loading of the signal, be they escape/avoidance or the attachment emotions, the amygdala send signals to the cortex and assigns them to the neural pathways of previous experience from which we make meaning of events. The physiological response to the signals will include the relevant

hormonal mix, such as the stress hormones cortisol and adrenalin or the oxytocin, serotonin and endorphins that are the gift of the attachment emotions.

Importantly, the amygdala assess and respond to visual image and tone of voice long before any words are heard and understood. Hence, if you catch sight of the boss your system will go into alert, you will then interpret the expression on her face and the tone of voice. Your system's response to those collective stimuli will be the context in which you understand the words she says.

We make meaning of events by relating an emotional response to a similar event in our memories. Hence, two people in the same meeting will have a different experience simply because they will attach a different meaning to what happens there. Another example is how, when previous experience tells you that someone will behave in a particular way, you are likely to respond to the expected behaviour even if the other person does something different.



THE TRIUNE BRAIN

Cortex: Cognitive brain

Limbic system: Mammalian brain

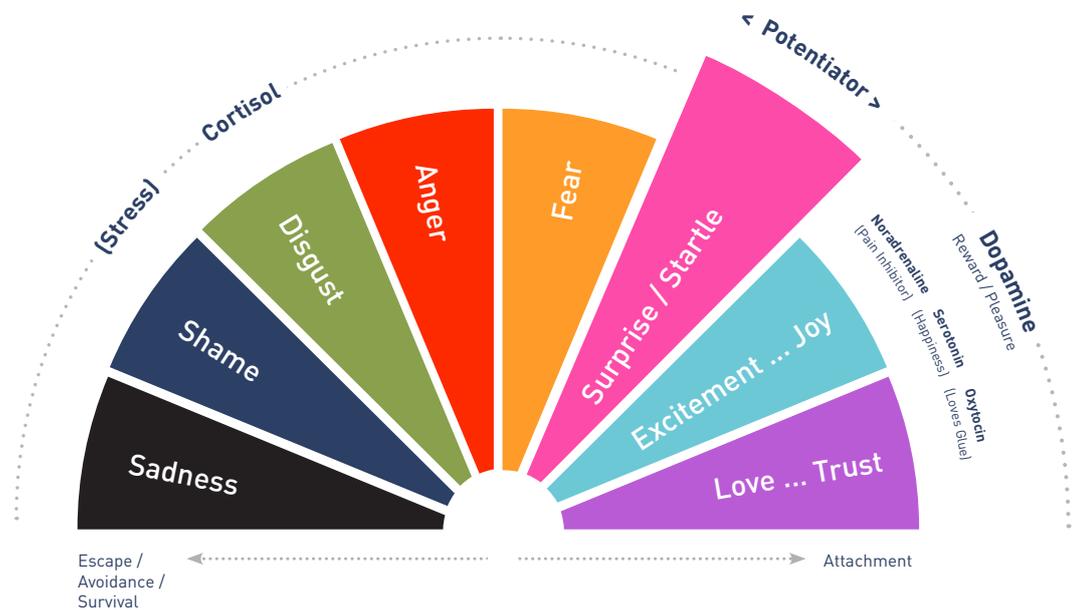
Brainstem: Snake brain

8 Basic Emotions

There is no consistent use of the terms “emotions” and “feelings” within the current body of literature. For the purposes of this document I am using the terms as defined by Professor Paul Brown.

Think of the emotions as the primary colours on an artist's pallet. He mixes these together to produce a vast range of tones and hues: some subtle, some striking. So it is with the emotions: these strong “primary colours” are mixed

together to produce the many feelings that we experience. Being able to identify and acknowledge the actual level of intensity without resorting to the most dramatic emotional label is a key element of emotional regulation



The 5 Escape / Avoidance emotions were the first to develop and, as their names suggest, they are essential for our survival. They are, therefore, the emotions that are most easily engaged.

Fear

Our ability to sense danger is essential for survival. Originally such danger was in the form of large animals or warring tribal neighbours. Hence the instinctive responses to fear are fight, flight or freeze: there are times when each of these is most appropriate. Whilst we are rarely in danger of being attacked by a lion there are many situations that provoke fear and most people have a preferred response.

In organisational life the fear response can be provoked by the potential loss of a job, a difficult meeting, loss of status and so on. The fight response shows as a willingness to stand up and argue, defend a position or “take someone on”. The flight response is often experienced as avoidance, keeping heads down, communicating by email rather than having the conversation (though beware, the latter may be just the preference of an introverted thinker). The freeze response is literally that and is evident when someone simply doesn’t know what to say, flusters their words then only afterwards thinks of the response they should have made.

What happens physiologically is that once the fear response is triggered the body prepares itself for the worst. Stress hormones are produced that send the transfers to the back of the brain, which is where the automatic responses are that difficult meeting, just when you need to be able to think clearly you physically cannot.

Within organisations it is important to understand how easy it is to create an environment of fear, both with individuals and collectively. The belief that fear

increases performance is erroneous: it shuts people down, promotes compliance over creativity and harms health.

It is important for everyone to be aware of how, even unintentionally, their behaviour can trigger a fear response (just by being a boss will raise anxiety levels). Also, awareness of automatic responses can help people develop emotional resilience by finding strategies to minimise the impact of them.

Anger

The survival purpose of anger is to enable us to defend ourselves. Some situations need that intensity of emotion in order to prevent others from overstepping boundaries or taking advantage of us.

Anger is sometimes the expression of fear.

Disgust

Originally limited to our sense of smell, disgust made us recoil from rotten food and so avoid being poisoned; it was that physical pulling away, stepping back that we associate with a bad smell. Over time this reaction evolved into a response to behaviour, a disgust at what someone does or a situation that a group has created. It has become an emotional recoil.

It is noticeable in facial expressions and a physical pulling away, distancing from someone or something.

Disgust is a survival emotion because it keeps us safe both physically and emotionally, the latter being a behaviour modifier. What those behavioural boundaries are will depend, of course, on individual values and cultural context.

Shame

We feel shame when we have done something that we know to be wrong and when, whatever the motivations for doing it in the first place, we have some sense of regret and not wishing to be found out.

Historically humans needed to belong to a tribe in order to survive, they needed the protection of others and the support of the community. Shame was a way of moderating behaviour to keep within the tribal norms. Expulsion from the tribe meant almost certain death.

Shame plays a similar role in modern society. When someone goes against the behavioural rules of their group, be that a community or company, a sense of shame may cause them to adapt their behaviour.

Sadness

Sadness is often associated with bereavement or loss of someone close. At such times people often withdraw into themselves. Whilst it is important for everyone to work through their sadness and come out the other side, that period allows the brain to reorganise and adapt to the gap in the person's life.

The need of the brain to reorganise is necessary for our survival.

The potentiator – surprise & startle

The value of the potentiator is its ability to make someone shift between the emotions. Whilst the shift may not be to the attachment emotions it may be

from, say, fear to sadness or from anger to disgust. Equally it may simply reduce the intensity of the emotion from rage to frustration.

Potentiators come in many forms: Walt Disney films are a good source of them. Remember those moments when for a fraction of a second you don't know whether you will laugh, cry or hide behind the sofa! That moment of suspense is a potentiator.

An unexpected question that makes you pause and change your thinking: that is a potentiator.

Well-timed and well-judged humour that breaks the tension in a difficult meeting: that is a potentiator.

King Solomon was petitioned by two women both claiming a baby to be theirs. When he suggested that he divide the living child in two with his sword, one woman said she would rather give up the child than see it killed. King Solomon declared her to be the true mother. His suggestion was a potentiator because it shifted the mother from anger to love/trust.

The 2 attachment emotions are what make life worth living though our survival does not depend on them. In fact, we can live perfectly well without them. They are expressed as a continuum rather than a single word.

When we feel attachment emotions we move towards whatever produces that feeling.

Excitement & joy

This generates the enthusiasm for projects or activities that breaks boundaries and gets things done. When we feel excitement & joy we release our minds to be creative and experimental. It is a major contributor to the engagement that companies seek from their staff.

There are some companies that go to great lengths to create environments that are likely to generate excitement & joy. Whilst that is more generally likely to produce improved performance it is essential for those organisations whose business depends on developing new concepts. Companies such as Google and Facebook are often used as examples.

Love & trust

Love and trust are included together because without trust it is rare to find real love. In organisations the trust element is more likely to apply. Without trust, organisations will find it difficult to generate engagement or loyalty.

The management practices of the last few decades have severely dented the levels of trust within businesses and the impact of that is only just beginning to be understood.

What this means for you at work

There are two aspects to think about: your impact on others and how you respond to events. Remember that instinctively we all move away from whatever is producing one of the survival emotions and we move towards

anything that produces the attachment emotions.

Some people claim that they are not affected by emotions at work. This is simply untrue. However many rational arguments are provided to us, ultimately our decisions are emotional. “The cortex makes the lists, the limbic system makes the decisions”. Just think about buying a car: how many people really buy the car that gets them from A to B? The carmakers all know that is not the case.

So, simply being right is not enough. A well argued, factual presentation will not necessarily get you the support you need for your idea – you need to induce the emotional response that will get agreement.

Much of your impact will be caused by behaviours of which you are unconscious: facial expressions that attract or repel, a tone of voice that has an unintended edge. If you are someone who concentrates hard, when you are interrupted you may look blank or cross. Some people blush when they start to get upset. The more you become aware of how people react to you the easier it is to adapt.

Be particularly careful about generating fear, which is so easy to do and generally unproductive. If you are a boss then your very existence will produce a certain level of fear! There are times when fear is both useful and necessary but they are few and should be short lived.

As you become more conscious of your own responses, find strategies for to move yourself out of unhelpful emotional states into something more positive. The survival emotions may be an appropriate response, but holding onto them for longer than necessary is damaging.

Emotional resilience is an important contributor to successful leadership. It is the ability to recover quickly from setbacks and re-establish emotional equilibrium. It combines self-awareness with self-confidence and an ability to help oneself in difficult times, understanding that these are part of life.

Summary

This short paper only scratches the surface of the complex world of the brain and our emotions. Being conscious of how our behaviour is interpreted by others people and how we respond to events around us can help us to make the changes necessary to produce a more useful outcome. Far from working in a sterile, rational world our emotions guide every decision and all our relationships.