

What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?

There is a perfectly good neurological explanation for why we invest more in fear than hope—our lizard brain. Early humans were constantly threatened by wild animals or other tribes. Our lizard brain is an automatic response to physical danger that allows us to react quickly without thinking to avoid being skinned alive. In moments of fear, our prehistoric lizard brain puts emotion before reason.

The lizard brain is also known by its less interesting neurological term—the amygdala. This is the part of the brain that processes strong emotions like fear. The trouble is that our lizard brain does a lousy job of distinguishing between a meeting when our ego took a beating in front of our peers and real life-and-death situations. Hurt feelings generate the same emotion as physical danger, even though the threat is very different.

An activated amygdala can lead to loads of regret—such as the time we said our boss was a moron in a public meeting. When the amygdala disables our ability to reason, irrational overreaction follows. Two hormones give an activated amygdala its power—cortisol and adrenaline. These powerful hormones do things that you may not notice, such as:

- Relax your airways to take in more oxygen
- Increase blood flow to your muscles to increase speed and strength
- Increase blood sugar for more energy
- Dilate pupils to improve vision

The executive function is the newer, more rational and advanced brain system. The brain developed the executive function after our time on the Serengeti, but it never did jettison the amygdala. Unlike the amygdala, you control your executive function to think, reason, decide, and plan. The executive function can override the amygdala when a threat is moderate, but when a threat is



strong, the amygdala can hijack our brain and overpower our executive function. While you cannot eliminate an activated amygdala, you can learn to beat it by kicking your pre-frontal cortex into overdrive.

Defeat the Lizard Brain

You can prevent or stop your amygdala from hijacking your brain and triggering your fight-or-flight response by applying some simple tools. Just remember that simple doesn't necessarily mean easy. These tools take practice to master:

1) The first step to thwart an amygdala hijacking is to “figure your trigger.” This starts by recognizing when you feel threatened or stressed. You might notice involuntary responses such as rapid heartbeat and sweaty palms. After feeling threatened, ask yourself what happened, why did it happen, and how can you do better?

2) Ask for help

- a. Start with people you know, like, and trust to help calm you down.
- b. Think of the word “encourage.” When you share your story, embarrassment dissipates because shame thrives on secrecy.
- c. People who you know, like, and trust accept you, warts and all. These are the people who give you courage. It is easier to be a bulldog when you are surrounded by friends.

3) Pause, breathe, think, act

- a. Pause:
 - Assess rather than assume
 - Is the threat you are feeling real?
 - An unchecked assumption is a potential risk to you or your team.
 - b. Breathe to help deactivate the amygdala
- This can mean inhaling and exhaling deeply for 60 seconds.

- Or this can mean block breathing, endorsed by none other than the Navy Seals:
 - Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down
 - Inhale for four seconds
 - Hold air in your lungs for four seconds
 - Exhale for four seconds, emptying all of the air in your lungs
 - Hold your lungs empty for four seconds
 - Repeat for five minutes or as long as it takes for you to refocus

Once you have deactivated the amygdala, you are ready to do the hard right rather than the easy wrong. You are ready to create something new or do something different. Hope replaces fear to help you have the courage to experiment and grow.

