

Catching up...

I have had a good summer - improving our landscaping and planting three new trees, two pear trees that don't require spraying and a Golden Glory Dogwood. Due to the abundance of rain, I haven't had to water as much as usual; however, I find hand watering with a wand meditative and relaxing. My tomato crop looks to be slim yet we have more apples than ever. We share the apples with the worms.

I am looking forward to fall. It's one of my favorite seasons. Actually, the only one that I am not fond of is winter. I have two weekends for couples, one in October and one in November. See announcement later in this newsletter. I am, also, giving an Introduction to Imago therapy in Windsor in September, plus several free workshops at Crazy Wisdom Bookstore. See *announcements later in this newsletter.*

The Amygdala - Our Alarm System

For a couple of years I have been wanting to write an article about a part of the brain that shows up frequently in my office when couples are talking about their hurts and frustrations with each other. Of course, I'm not exempt from an *amygdala response* myself when I get 'triggered' in my own life. When we react with interruptions, contradictions, rolling our eyes, yelling, leaving the room, shutting down, or a myriad of possible reactive responses, the *amygdala* (pronounced uh-mig-duh-la) has taken over. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, explains this phenomenon by saying that the amygdala has hijacked the thinking brain or the pre-frontal cortex.

Understanding the role and function of the amygdala has helped me personally as well as the many client couples that I introduce to the amygdala and ways to pre-empt the full-blown reaction of the amygdala. When we can become aware of the first bodily signals that our amygdala sends us, we can learn how to self-soothe and prevent reacting in a way that is harmful to ourselves and to our relationships. With the amygdala in 'check', we can hear and react with curiosity, patience, calmness, and love.

This newsletter is dedicated to the *amygdala*. You may never have heard about the amygdala, but I guarantee that it's in your best interest to get acquainted with your amygdala and learn to manage it. Therapy works best when the therapist helps you and your partner discover why you have the reactions you do and what lies beneath the surface. So, the amygdala sounds off alarm messages that, if translated, can be very important in your healing and growth and that of your relationship.

In this newsletter, below the announcements, you'll find interesting articles about the amygdala and a few links to check out.

I would appreciate your feedback or questions.

Take this little quiz ...

FIGHT - Have you ever said something hurtful, demeaning that you can't believe came out of your mouth and regretted it later?

FLEE - Have you ever felt upset or angry and not understood why and then blamed the other person for causing you to just check out and leave?

FREEZE - Have you ever become 'frozen' (shut down, non-communicative) when your partner said something that you experienced as hurtful, disrespectful, shaming, or demeaning?

If you answered yes to any one or more of the above, then you have a normal functioning amygdala. We all have this brain structure and thank goodness we do as it is a protective mechanism that we 'inherited' from our long, long ago ancestors.

The amygdala worked with the body's alarm circuits to help primitive people survive the perilous journey of evolution. While in the 21st century, most things are not a matter of survival, life or death; nevertheless, our amygdala can easily misperceive something said or done as a threat to one's own being or survival and, then within a matter of a few milliseconds or less, react as if what was said or done was life threatening.

The Amygdala & Its Allies

The amygdala is an almond shaped mass of nuclei located deep within the temporal lobe of the brain. It is a limbic system structure that is involved in many of our emotions and motivations particularly those that are related to survival. The amygdala is involved in the processing of emotions such as fear, anger, and pleasure.

The amygdala is a brain structure that is essential for decoding emotions, and in particular stimuli that are threatening to the organism. As a result of evolution, many of our body's alarm circuits are grouped together in the amygdala. Consequently, many sensory inputs converge in the amygdala to inform it of potential dangers in its environment.

When a primitive person saw something that looked like a stick, they reacted first as if it were a snake and were relieved later to discover that it was a stick. The brain has been programmed with a negative bias, in order to ensure our survival. Our job is to understand our propensity to see threats, exam their validity or our skewed perception, and then learn to calm and manage the alarm signals that our amygdala sends out. To do this, you must call upon the pre-frontal cortex (the thinking part of the brain) to help you stop any reactive behavior as a protective mechanism by calming and reconsidering if there is indeed any serious threat. This takes awareness, intention, and practice in order to prevent your amygdala from hijacking your ability to notice early warning signals and then be able to control your typical reactive response.

The amygdala is here to stay! We can learn to appreciate its power for protection while at the same time learn to keep it in check by questioning the validity of its interpretation of any given act or statement.

Here are some metaphoric ways to manage your amygdala:

- Come to know & respect the early signals that your body sends in order to prevent the hijacking of your thinking brain.
- Preempt your amygdala by getting yourself in a safe state of mind before having an important dialogue or conversation.
- Be kind to your partner's amygdala with 'softened start up' [John Gottman]
- Tame you own amygdala, if it gets activated.
- Be thoughtful in how you share your thoughts & feelings with any significant person so as to avoid triggering their amygdala.
- If you do indeed become triggered, imagine that you can 'pet' your amygdala and settle it down.

Amygdala Hijack

Amygdala hijack is a term coined by Daniel Goleman in his 1996 book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Drawing on the work of Joseph E. LeDoux, Goleman uses the term to describe emotional responses from people which are immediate and overwhelming, and out of measure with the actual stimulus because it has triggered a much more significant emotional threat.

Concept

From the thalamus, a part of the stimulus goes directly to the amygdala while another part is sent to the neocortex (the "thinking brain"). If the amygdala perceives a match to the stimulus, i.e., if the record of experiences in the hippocampus tells the amygdala that it is a fight, flight or freeze situation, then the Amygdala triggers the HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) axis and hijacks the rational brain. This emotional brain activity processes information milliseconds earlier than the rational brain, so in case of a match, the amygdala acts before any possible direction from the neocortex can be received. If, however, the amygdala does not find any match to the stimulus received with its recorded threatening situations, then it acts according to the directions received from the neo-cortex. When the amygdala perceives a threat, it can lead that person to react irrationally and destructively.

Goleman states that "Emotions make us pay attention right now - this is urgent - and gives us an immediate action plan without having to think twice. The emotional component evolved very early: Do I eat it, or does it eat me?" The emotional response "can take over the rest of the brain in a millisecond if threatened." An amygdala hijack exhibits three signs: strong emotional reaction, sudden onset, and post-episode realization if the reaction was inappropriate.

Goleman later emphasized that "self-control is crucial ...when facing someone who is in the throes of an amygdala hijack" so as to avoid a complementary hijacking - whether in work situations, or in private life. Thus for example 'one key marital competence is for partners to learn to soothe their own distressed feelings...nothing gets resolved positively when husband or wife is in the midst of an emotional hijacking.' The danger is that 'when our partner becomes, in effect, our enemy, we are in the grip of an "amygdala hijack" in which our emotional memory, lodged in the limbic center of our brain, rules our reactions without the benefit of logic or reason...which causes our bodies to go into a "fight or flight" response'.

Positive Hijackings

Goleman points out that 'not all limbic hijackings are distressing. When a joke strikes someone as so uproarious that their laughter is almost explosive, that, too, is a limbic response. It is at work also in moments of intense joy'.

Emotional Relearning

LeDoux was positive about the possibility of learning to control 'the amygdala's hair-trigger role in emotional outbursts: "Once your emotional system learns something, it seems you never let it go. What therapy does is teach you how to control it - it teaches your neocortex how to inhibit your amygdala. The propensity to act is suppressed, while your basic emotion about it remains in a subdued form".

Source: Wikipedia

What Can I Do When I Am Feeling "Triggered"

When you are "triggered" by something your partner said or did, it is incumbent upon you to find a way to forego what seems like a natural response - being aggressive in some way -- by being sarcastic, blowing up, attacking verbally or making physical signals like rolling your eyes or by withdrawing in some way -- by turning away, closing down while still being in proximity of your partner, withdrawing emotionally by leaving or just walking away and not indicating when or if you will return to the subject at hand.

If you aren't able to calm yourself enough to proceed with the dialogue and need to take a break from a dialogue, it is imperative that you indicate when you will come back to the discussion - five minutes, half an hour, later in the day, or at least within 24 hours at the latest. Giving your partner some indication when you think you will be ready to proceed is a respectful thing to do. If you still aren't ready at the time you indicated, suggest another time, but never sweep your feelings or theirs 'under the rug'. Things just pile up and collect more hurt, more energy and now you have the original trigger and the additional hard feelings from the unfinished business.

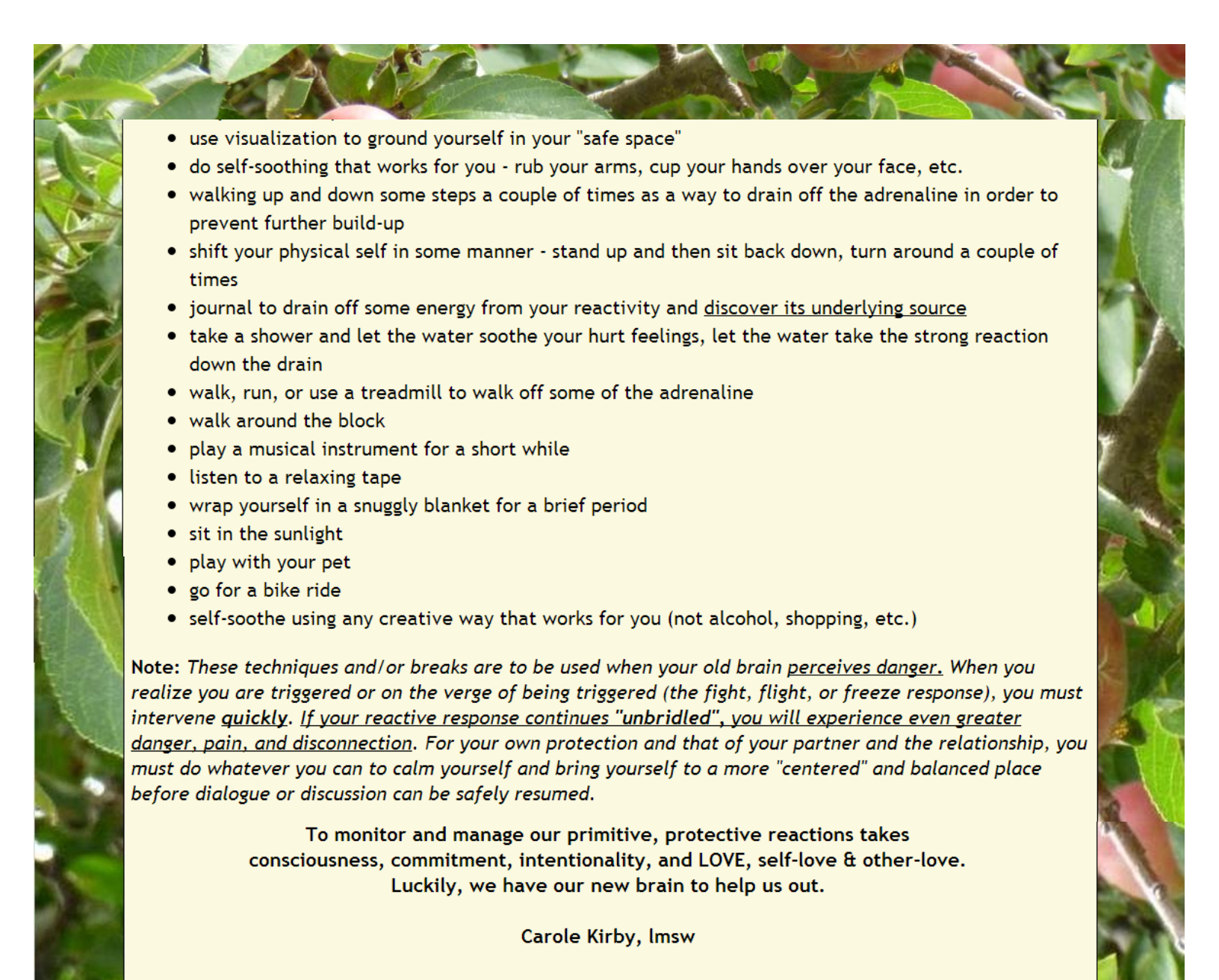
So, if you are triggered in the therapist's office or in your home or wherever it might happen, you can intervene in your adrenaline response by doing one or more of the following things. Below is a list of a few things you can do in order to stay contained and regain a sense of being grounded.

Suggestions for Calming Your Reactivity

1. Immediately say, "I'm feeling triggered." This prevents you from blaming your partner for your feeling triggered. Your partner did or said whatever they did or said, but your reaction is yours.
2. STOP, breathe, self-soothe in a way that generally works for you. That might take some discovery to find something that works for you when you are triggered. Just pausing and using the breath for calming your reactive response can usually slow things down in order to avoid escalation.
3. Say to your partner: I am feeling very upset right now, so what I need to do for our *relationship is (ie. go for a bike ride) to calm myself and create more safety for me and for you. If you need to take a time-out from your conversation or dialogue, tell your partner when you plan to return - 5-10 minutes, half an hour, until tonight when I get home, but within 24 hours at most.*
4. You can do one or more of the things listed below to help you calm yourself in order to make it safer for sharing your feelings or hearing your partner's feelings. I suggest that you add to the list some of the ways you now use or ways you intend to use to manage your reactivity.
5. Tell yourself or share with your partner... *My triggering is about my "stuff", my "baggage", not what you did or said. I will share whatever my hunches are about why I got so triggered when I am in a space to do that without blaming you.*
6. Then, if you are so inclined, say to your partner, "*What you might do to make things a little safer for me, you, and our relationship is*" Make a couple of specific suggestions to your partner and ask if he/she will commit to at least one of your suggestions or say what they will do to make things safer for the dialogue to continue.

Ways to Calm Your Reactive Response

- take 2-3 deep cleansing breaths, in through your nose and exhale through your mouth. *It can help to count to 4 as you inhale, then hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, hold lungs empty for 4 counts. If you can't remember to do the counting, just be sure to inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Practice doing this special breathing when you are not feeling reactive. It's relaxing.*
- count to 10 or count backwards from 20 to 1, and do it again and again until your heart rate is back in the normal range
- get a drink of water
- put your hands over your chest in the area of your heart center
- go to the bathroom
- splash your face with water
- walk around a bit
- fix yourself a cup of tea
- use visualization to ground yourself in your "safe space"

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 - do self-soothing that works for you - rub your arms, cup your hands over your face, etc.
 - walking up and down some steps a couple of times as a way to drain off the adrenaline in order to prevent further build-up
 - shift your physical self in some manner - stand up and then sit back down, turn around a couple of times
 - journal to drain off some energy from your reactivity and discover its underlying source
 - take a shower and let the water soothe your hurt feelings, let the water take the strong reaction down the drain
 - walk, run, or use a treadmill to walk off some of the adrenaline
 - walk around the block
 - play a musical instrument for a short while
 - listen to a relaxing tape
 - wrap yourself in a snuggly blanket for a brief period
 - sit in the sunlight
 - play with your pet
 - go for a bike ride
 - self-soothe using any creative way that works for you (not alcohol, shopping, etc.)

Note: These techniques and/or breaks are to be used when your old brain perceives danger. When you realize you are triggered or on the verge of being triggered (the fight, flight, or freeze response), you must intervene quickly. If your reactive response continues "unbridled", you will experience even greater danger, pain, and disconnection. For your own protection and that of your partner and the relationship, you must do whatever you can to calm yourself and bring yourself to a more "centered" and balanced place before dialogue or discussion can be safely resumed.

To monitor and manage our primitive, protective reactions takes
consciousness, commitment, intentionality, and LOVE, self-love & other-love.
Luckily, we have our new brain to help us out.

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