

How Emotions Hijack Our Reason

Most people have heard of the fight or flight response. We see a grizzly in the woods and our instinct is to run screaming. Makes total sense (though it will get you killed, so don't do it).

What many people don't realize is that we often have this same response to intense emotional situations. Feelings of shame and betrayal hijack our limbic system the same way that spying a King Cobra would.

According to Psychologist Brené Brown in her book [*Daring Greatly*](#):

"When shame descends, we almost always are hijacked by the limbic system. In other words, the prefrontal cortex, where we do all our thinking and analyzing and strategizing, gives way to the primitive fight-or-flight part of our brain."

The instinct to run and hide after you've said or done something incredibly stupid is much like the fight or flight response.

In his book [*Icognito*](#), neuroscientist David Eagleman describes the brain as a "team of rivals." In other words, these emotional interactions are literally a battle between the heart (or our emotional selves) and our minds. The disparity between what we know in our heads and what we feel is an actual conflict, and whichever wins is going to determine our behavior.

Eagleman puts it this way:

"There is an ongoing conversation among the different factions in your brain, each competing to control the single

output channel of your behavior...the rational system is the one that cares about analysis of things in the outside world, while the emotional system monitors the internal state and worries whether things are good or bad."

Our response to these emotional confrontations isn't that different from the physical threat of the grizzly.

According to Dr. Linda Hartling's research while at the Stone Center at Wellesley, in these types of situations, we tend to move away by withdrawing, hiding, and keeping secrets. Sometimes we move toward emotional confrontation by attempting to appease or please; other times we try to gain or exert power through aggression, both verbal or physical.

The reality is, we likely do all of these in different situations with different people at different times. The important thing is to recognize it for what it is, our limbic system hijacking our reasoning. We need to learn to spot it, take a step back emotionally, and give reason a chance to come back on line.

The problem? Evidence suggests fewer students today are being equipped with [reason and logic](#).

Could this be the reason [anger is increasingly seeping into debate](#)?

—

Heather L. Graham is an Associate Professor of Psychology at [Collin College](#) in McKinney, Texas. She blogs [here](#).

?