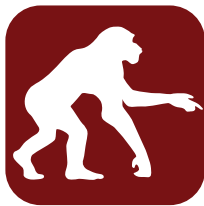




## WHY WE'RE HARDWIRED FOR CONFLICT

# The Enemy Within



Imagine that you are in a conversation with a co-worker about strategy or with your siblings about the care of an aging parent. Suddenly you become defensive. It didn't start as a threatening conversation.

Your interlocutor wasn't rude or aggressive. But somehow, the conversation became fraught and tense and you now find yourself unable to think.

## FLIGHT- FIGHT- FREEZE



Afterwards, you wonder why your reaction was so out of proportion. Is something wrong with you? Has it been a long week?

According to neuroscience, your response was a predictable hard-wired response to perceived threat.

Or as Public Conversations Project Senior Associate Corky Becker puts it, "A part of our brain is watching for danger, and may prevent us from being capable of having a constructive conversation when we most need it."

Dr. Becker explains: "When there's a lot at stake and we feel under attack, the brain and central nervous system release hormones designed to keep us hyper-vigilant, with physiological (a racing heart rate, cold, sweaty palms) and psychological effects. Our capacity to think and reflect shuts down as we prepare for fight, flight or freeze."

Why do we attack, withdraw, or freeze during times when clearly we would be better served by remaining calm and thoughtful? We have a triune brain. The brainstem, limbic system, and prefrontal cortex play important and very divergent roles in how we react. Which of the three is in charge depends on the level of perceived threat.

- The brainstem, which is sometimes referred to as the reptilian brain, prompts a flight-fight-freeze response to danger. It's the most primitive area of the brain, focused on basic survival needs such as food, shelter, reproduction, and safety.
- The limbic system, or mammalian brain, is associated with emotions and attachments. It gives meaning to our feelings and evaluates whether a situation feels safe. In certain situations it may trigger fearful memories. Because it sometimes cannot differentiate between a past danger and a safe present, it can "replay" its response to a previous dangerous event during a harmless moment.
- The prefrontal cortex, unique to primates, is the most evolved part of the brain. It is here that we create a sense of self, develop insight and empathy, and form moral judgements. This area enables us to pause before we act, reflect, and focus our attention.



## The Brain in Charge: How the Public Conversations Project’s Methodology Keeps Our “Lizard Brain” In Check.

**Establish listening and understanding as clear goals for the conversation. Delay decision making until after people fully understand the perspectives of others.** This permits people not to be preoccupied with signs that they are winning or losing ground. When people are neither compelled to convince, argue and persuade nor afraid of losing ground, they are more capable of reflecting on their experiences, values, and hopes for the future. Decision making follows understanding rather than interfering with listening.

**Pause between speaking.** This allows people to pay attention, be attuned to others, and listen carefully to what the other person has said.

As we practice mindful attention, we strengthen the neural pathways from the prefrontal cortex to the limbic system, and that allows the prefrontal cortex, with its capacities for thinking,

intentional focus, and delay, to mediate the experience of threat triggered in the limbic system. The neuroplasticity of the brain allows the adult brain to continue to develop and strengthen new neural pathways. New practices develop new brain capacities. Or as it is sometimes put, cells that fire together wire together.

**Answer a posed question; don’t respond to how another participant has answered the question.** This allows people to stay focused on their own experiences, beliefs, hopes, and values rather than reacting with fear and anger to what others say. When we reflect rather than react we are using an entirely different part of the brain. “Paying attention to our own experience not only keeps us calm and reduces our level of reactivity, it also affects the way the other person responds. How we listen affects how others speak. When we speak in a critical or accusatory way, others often respond in kind,” says Becker.

**Carefully choose questions**

that invite people to talk about their own experiences rather than their positions. When people share their own experiences and stories it creates connections across differences. When people are calm they have the neurophysiological capacity for greater empathy or compassion. Mirror neurons allow us to resonate physiologically and psychologically with

others. “We actually can feel what they are feeling in our own bodies—our heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration rise and fall with someone

else’s. We experience a connection and an understanding of the motivations, experiences, and feelings of others, even when people have different positions,” Becker explains.

### EMOTIONS AND ATTACHMENTS



**Make agreements ahead of time**

(such as not interrupting and sharing air time). This requires people to use their prefrontal cortex to act intentionally instead of reacting to what they hear. The threat of being interrupted, silenced, or marginalized may lead to interruption, withdrawal, or explosion; but as people abide by these agreements,

a sense of safety is created by the group, which is amplified over time by the continuation of these speaking and listening patterns. This sense of safety reduces the likelihood of threatening defensive behavior and creates conditions for constructive exchange about differences. As these agreements develop into norms for how people conduct themselves in a dialogue, it is possible for a freer exchange of views to occur even while maintaining the sense of safety that comes from knowing one’s voice is valued in the conversation. ■



### ► The Enemy Within (continued)

The thoughtful behavior typical of our day-to-day life requires connection (vertical integration) between all three parts of the brain as well as communication between the emotional left and rational right hemispheres.

Ideally, the prefrontal cortex assimilates all the information it receives and responds by sending neuronal messages to the other parts of the brain and the body. When the limbic system senses danger, it will override the prefrontal cortex, and send alarms to the entire system. These alarms influence how we feel, think, and act.

When our prefrontal cortex is active and in charge, the brain is at its most effective—it is able to reflect, organize, be creative, think, and listen. Yet, when we become flooded and feel extreme threat (i.e., when we most need to be able to think) our reptilian brain—the one that’s wired to fight, flight, or freeze—hijacks our thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

In that state, we cannot access our thinking brain; we’re unable to listen and learn. Our higher brain shuts down and we are not receptive to new information. This affects our capacity for a constructive exchange!

According to Dr. Becker, the Public Conversations Project’s approach to dialogue, informed by family therapy principles and practices, creates conditions in which it is more possible for participants to stay calm and curious—even when they disagree.

“Modern life is complex. We need to be able to hold contradictory views in mind and understand from multiple perspectives. We develop new distinctions and new connections by allowing ourselves to be influenced by the views of others,” explains Becker. “Instead of attacking, withdrawing, or going silent, when we hear the perspective of those with very different values and beliefs we need to be able to manage the complexity of diverse views in order to have new ideas and solve complex problems.” ■