3.3: Fight or Flight?

All of your information from your senses goes first to a part of the brain called the Thalamus. We call the thalamus the “flight control center” of the brain. It takes in all of your senses, your hearing, sight, touch and decides how to route the messages it is receiving. One route takes the messages to the cerebral cortex, where our skill in decision-making allows us to contemplate alternatives and make a decision. But if the thalamus is triggered by more intense perceptions, the message goes straight to the Amygdala for action.

3.3.1: “Amygdala” (Public Domain; Sgerstenberg via Wikimedia Commons)

We all have an emotional brain that resides in the limbic system, located on top of the brain stem and buried under the...
cortex. When faced with the stress of an argument, your first reaction is a physical one that begins in an almond sized organ towards the bottom of your brain, called the amygdala. This organ actually keeps a record of your past dangerous experiences and strives to protect you from future harm. As soon as this organ perceives danger, it sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus.

You are taking a nice stroll outdoors when suddenly a snake slithers up on the path in front of you. Emotions are triggered. Oh no, this snake might strike and kill me. Do I stay and defend myself, or flee? You are experiencing, Fight or Flight.

This just doesn’t happen out in the wilderness. It can also happen at work. Your boss is looking for you to assign you a major project. Emotions are triggered, “Oh no I can’t do this,” or “My boss is trying to kill me.” Immediately you think, “I am going to stay and tell him that I can’t do this.” Or “Where can I hide?” This is Fight or Flight.

When the thalamus becomes aware of an emotionally charged perception, the amygdala is sent that perception. Snake! Or Project! Your amygdala has access to your memory and quickly relates the current situation to one of those past memories so it can immediately act. Only later will it look to the logical part of the brain for alternative reactions.

The amygdala swings into action. Immediately:

- Past memories of similar situations are examined
- Adrenaline is pumped into the body which prompts quicker physical reaction
- A surge of energy is experienced
- Stress hormones are activated
- Your pain threshold gets higher

These processes are so intense it may take you 20 minutes before you can get these emotions under control and allow the more logical part of the brain to take over and help with the decisions. This, by the way, explains read rage and why we should wait until the next day to respond to an email that has angered us.

While in this condition, you lose the ability for in depth thinking. The amygdala does not want you to look curiously at the snake and wonder, “What type is it?” No, it recognizes potential danger and is preparing you for survival. If you have ever had a stressful situation and then asked yourself afterwards, “What was I thinking?” The answer is, you weren’t. The brain was preparing you for your “fight or flight” mode and not allowing you to really think. There is no time to think. This is also an explanation for why we often think of something very witty to say to someone, after they have left.

If the situation is so emotionally charged, like a snake or project, then the emotions may totally take over your thoughts and reactions, creating a condition called “emotional hijack.” A way of expressing emotional hijacking is road rage. The impact of the perception is so strong that the emotions take over. Logic does not enter into it. Think about the time your partner did something that finally was the proverbial “last straw” or someone you may be supervising made the same mistake for the tenth time. Did you make an outburst that you now wish had been handled in a different way? All of this happens, before the rational part of our brain, the cerebrum, is asked for guidance.

Now, if we can get the amygdala under a bit of control, our cerebrum is notified of the danger and we now have a chance to think of alternative actions. Instead of just responding with the first reaction that occurs from our memory, we now have the opportunity for more in depth thinking.
A very useful formula to remember is $E + R = O$.

- "E" stands for Event and refers to some action that has happened to you.
- "R" stands for either Reaction or Response. Reaction is our quick, unthinking answer to an action while a Response is more of a thought our answer where we look at alternatives and select the best one for us in that situation.
- "O" stands for Outcome.

We can't always control the Event that happen to us, but we can create more desirable Outcomes if we Respond to a situation instead of just Reacting to it.

I find it very interesting that your brain gets you ready to either fight a perceived danger or flee from a perceived danger. Even before you are totally aware of the threat, you are in that state of fight or flight. Do you flee or stay and fight? I am hoping that this text will give you the skills to stay and fight in arguments and not flee from them. There are certainly a variety of ways to disagree with someone.