**Effectively Stabilize Your Emotions: Don’t Let Your Amygdala Hijack Your Brain**

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**Much information has been shared in the world of psychology and personal development about how to stabilize your emotions in order to live your life more effectively.  My goal for this article is to introduce how the amygdala (in the emotional center of your brain) plays a role in your emotional life and how to best deal with it.**

**First of all, I’d like to give you a working definition of the amygdala and its functions.  The amygdala is a very small 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, and most significantly, those that are related to survival. The amygdala is involved in the processing of emotions such as fear, anger and pleasure.  In addition to processing emotions, the amygdala is also responsible for determining what memories are stored and where the memories are stored in the brain.   The level of emotional intensity experienced with a stimulus (event) will determine how and where the memories are stored in the brain.**

**It is interesting to note that conditions such as anxiety, autism, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and phobias are suspected of being linked to abnormal functioning of the amygdala, owing to damage, developmental problems, or neurotransmitter imbalance.   Most of us who live in our hectic, high-stress culture will experience anxiety which can make it difficult to live out our lives in the most effective way.**

**It is important to understand  how your amygdala gets “hijacked” so to speak, and wreaks havoc on our ability to tap into our rational brain (neocortex) to make good decisions.  When an event happens that triggers an intense emotional response your amygdala gets activated and starts the whole fight or flight response in your mind/body system.  Your body and mind gets caught up in various neuro-chemical processes that make it extremely difficult to think through the situation with a calm and logical approach.  It can take anywhere from three to four hours for your mind/body system to begin to calm down after the amygdala is hijacked.**

**I think you’ll agree that having to wait a full four hours to reclaim your rational brain is not very convenient and is not terribly effective.  There are some things you can do both in the moment and before the fact to calm your amygdala and reclaim your rational brain so that you can make better decisions and move forward effectively.**

**Here are some tips for handling these triggering/hijacking events in the moment.**

**1. Realize!  Stop yourself and realize (become aware) that your amygdala is being hijacked into a fight or flight response.  Recognize the emotions that are flooding you and name them.
2. Breathe!  Taking 4 or 5 deep, cleansing breaths will oxygenate the brain.  Picture your limbic system (inner emotional structures) of your brain being bathed with cooling, soothing oxygen.
3. Give thanks!  This one will be hard to do, but just DO IT – say to yourself what you are grateful about related to the person, event or situation you are experiencing.  Have faith that even though you may not yet feel grateful, the act of moving toward gratitude is helping shift the neuro-chemical landscape in your brain.
4. Re-think!  Once your emotions have calmed and you can think rationally, re-evaluate the situation and pinpoint the triggers.  Becoming aware of your triggers helps your brain to shift into the neocortex again and activate rational thinking about this event and how your mind/body responded to it.**

**To avoid future amygdala-hijacking, use mindfulness to train your brain ahead of time.  Mindfulness is the act of bringing your attention to the present moment in a way that allows you to act as a compassionate observer about what is happening on a moment-to-moment basis.  You can use your breathing or simply pretend that you are watching the events going on around you in play-by-play mode.**

**One of the easiest ways to incorporate mindfulness is to focus on nature.  Simply find an object in nature (a leaf, a stone, the blue sky, white puffy clouds) and bring all your attention to bear upon that object.  Take note of its color, its shape, its texture.  Does it have a sound, smell or taste?  If you are able, feel the object and pay attention to its texture – is it bumpy, smooth, jagged or rounded?  If you are inside and cannot go outside, simply gaze out a window and take on an artist’s perspective to really look at a part of the landscape.**

**Mindfulness is something that must be practiced every day.  Just like a muscle, your brain must be exercised through mindfulness before the stressor (event) comes.  Try to build mindfulness into 3 or 4 sections of your day.  For example, in the morning as you are showering – allow yourself to really smell the shampoo, feel the water, notice the warmth and the steam all around you.  At lunch time, slow down your eating and really taste your food, look at the colors, shapes and textures of the foods on your plate.  Smell.  See.  Engage all your senses in your lunch-time experience.  Do this at dinner and again before bedtime – pausing to really become present with your experiences.**

**If you build mindfulness into your every-day activities, you will habituate your brain to move through amygdala-hijacking more quickly and effectively allowing you to lead a higher quality life.**