

Three Brains and a Partner

One of the most important aspects of the human experience that couples are wise to fully understand is how brain physiology impacts intimate, committed relationships. I see this as a core piece of information that will help you make sense out of what is often both distressing and confusing to married people. I also believe that this is one of the most interesting and fascinating pieces of information you will find in relationship literature. Basically, we have three brains and not just one.

The Hindbrain (The Reptilian Brain)

Like it or not, a part of our brain is similar to reptiles. It is located right at the base of our skull in the back. It is the part of our brain that controls our automatic functions (keeps our heart beating, controls breathing, pumps adrenalin when needed, etc.). The hindbrain is constantly alert to possible danger and when danger is perceived, it takes over. For instance, if you were to hear a sudden, loud, noise, you would have what is called a startle response. In an instant, your heart rate would increase, your breathing would become more rapid, your eyes would dilate, your mouth would get a little drier, your adrenal glands would start pumping and you would likely tense your muscles -- getting ready to run or fight or do something. You would not consciously think and choose to do these things; they would all immediately and automatically happen because the hindbrain kicked into activity and went to work to make sure you survive.

The Mid-Brain (The Mammalian Brain)

The second brain, like it or not, is similar to mammals. This is the part of our brain that mediates or controls emotion. We generally do not think of snakes or lizards as having emotion, but mammals (dogs, cats, etc.) experience what we call emotion. They can be afraid, angry, loving, happy, etc. Humans have a wide and rich range of emotion.

The important thing to understand about the Mid-Brain is that our emotions are not controlled by the conscious, intentional part of our brain (that's coming next). The old saying, "Emotions have no brains" is true only in the sense that we cannot consciously choose to feel any given emotion at a certain time. Emotions "happen" while we are engaged in life. While they can be understood intelligently and rationally, they cannot be "turned on" by choice.

Even in the field of psychotherapy where the goal is often to understand

and gain some control in regards to emotion, this is outside our choiceful or volitional control. We can learn to manage and understand and learn from our emotions; we cannot control them directly. Our Mid-Brain (the mammalian brain) is in charge of that.

The Cortex (The Computer Brain)

Finally we all have a cortex, the part of our brain that is conscious, intentional, rational, and choiceful. It is the cortex you are using now as you read this article. It is the part of us that can be self-aware, reflective, and self-observant. It is the part of our brain that allows us to communicate in complex languages and develop science, literature and art. It is the part of our brain that makes us distinctively and uniquely human. Some animals and perhaps porpoises have rudimentary cortexes, but the human cortex is far superior. It would be nice if the cortex controlled our lives and our marriages, but alas and alack, that unfortunately rarely happens in the real world. Most marriages are run on reptilian and mammalian energy.

The Old Brain

For simplicity's sake, in this WEB site, we will lump the Hindbrain and the Midbrain together and refer to them as "The Old Brain." It is "old" not in the sense that it is out of date or not as valuable as the Cortex (The "New Brain"). We actually are wise to learn to deeply respect, value and honor the "Old Brain." But it is "old" in the sense in that it is the more primitive part of our Brain. There are two things every couple should know about the Old Brain.

The Mr. Magoo of the Brain Set

First, the Old Brain is the Mr. Magoo of the Brain Set. It has a dimmed, fuzzy impression of the outside world. Like Mr. Magoo, the Old Brain constantly confuses people and events. Your Old Brain, not your New Brain will tend to confuse your Partner with your Parent. The part of your brain that controls your emotion and your "reactivity" is the Mr. Magoo "act alike." While your New, Rational, Intelligent Brain clearly knows the difference between your Partner and Your Parent, the brain that triggers and mediates your emotions and reactivity and protective impulses constantly mixes them up. So if your partner criticizes you and you had some history with a critical parent or older brother or sister or teacher, your Old Brain may react emotionally and reactively as though you were once again living with and dealing with that old critic. This can happen even when you consciously know that your partner is different than the old

critic and you are now an adult, not a child. This partly explains why suddenly with our life partner, we can feel an intensity of feeling -- powerless, fearful, helpless -- even though we intellectually know we are not powerless and helpless.

The "Timeless" Old Brain

The second thing that is important to know about the Old Brain is that it has no concept of time. It knows nothing about years, decades, and schedules. It lives in the "eternal now." Therefore when something happens "now" that is similar to something that happened years ago as a child, the Old Brain (that controls emotion and reactivity) connects to the prior experience as information about the present event, but does not experience the old experience as "old." The emotion that was present then is brought into the present experience and we experience the combined emotion of then and now.

The 90/10 Principle

This is why we talk about the 90/10 principle of relationships. Ninety percent of the upset, hurt, emotion and reactivity we experience in our marriage is actually related to our history. Only ten percent is related to the present event. Some theorists even argue that 100 percent of "reactivity" is related to the past.

The Bad News

This then is the biological explanation of why there can be so much intense emotion in relationships. The Old Brain treats emotional risk as a survival issue and combines history with the present and confuses people, events and time. Our partner can raise their eyebrow in a certain way and we can feel a knife go through our gut. Our partner can walk out of the room and we can feel a strong fear of rejection or abandonment--even though the intensity makes no sense rationally. We easily interpret our partners through the lenses of past hurts and sensitivities. The biology of the brain, which was designed to keep us alert and alive and safe, also keeps us very sensitive to our Imago Match -- our husbands and wives and life partners.

The Good News

The good news is that brain physiology also explains how and why marriage is the best and most powerful and most effective place for healing to happen. If your partner gives you now what you needed as a child or teenager and did not get, if your partner gives you now what you needed when you were hurt as a child and didn't get enough of, your Old Brain does not say, "Sorry, it's too late. I needed that 30 years ago not now" (The Old Brain does not distinguish between then and now). The Old Brain also does not say, "Sorry, wrong person. I needed that from my parents, not my partner" (The Old Brain constantly confuses parent and partner). When you get now what you needed then, the Old Brain says, "Yes, thank you. I can't tell you how wonderful that feels." This is why wise therapists and this WEB site are showing couples how to be healing agents for each other --because that is the place for the most powerful and effective healing to take place.

The Old Brain and Danger

When the Old Brain perceives risk or danger, pain or frustration, it knows how to do five general strategies.

- 1. The Old Brain knows how to hide.** How do you hide in relationships? Not talking, refusing to share or self-disclose, lying, keeping secrets. When I was in graduate school, one of my professors told of an architect who build a secret room in his home and did not tell his wife about it. Whenever, he was really frustrated, he would just disappear. He really knew how to hide as a way of protecting.
- 2. The Old Brain knows how to fight.** How do you fight? Argue, yell, out reason, withhold affection, refuse to talk, get passive aggressive, blame, accuse, criticize, etc, etc, etc.
- 3. The Old Brain knows how to run.** How do you run in a relationship? Literally leave the house, go for a drive, separate, work later and later at the office.
- 4. The Old Brain knows how to "freeze."** The twig snaps in the forest and the deer freezes. Have you ever come home and sensed that something was amiss and you were in trouble -- and froze. That is, decide to say nothing or do nothing until you can assess the danger.
- 5. Finally, the Old Brain knows how to submit.** Submitting, interestingly, can be a protective strategy. When a wolf challenges the head of the wolf pack for leadership, there is a terrific fight. Eventually, the losing wolf will roll over on his back and expose his neck to the

conquering wolf. The conquering wolf will place his jaws around the submitting wolf's neck, but won't kill it. This act of submission saves the wolf's life and the wolf pack remains intact. We suspect that the reason many people stay in dangerously abusive marriages is this "old brain's" impulse to submit as a way of surviving.

The Old Brain and Safety

When the old brain perceives safety, the parasympathetic system takes over and in safety the old brain knows how to do five things:

- 1. The Old Brain knows how to mate.** The sexual response occurs primarily in a place of safety.
- 2. The Old Brain knows how to play.**
- 3. The Old Brain knows how to nurture and be affectionate.**
- 4. The Old Brain knows how to work and be creative.**
- 5. The Old Brain knows how to sleep and rest and relax.**

Every week hundreds of couples go into a therapist's office and share some version of the following:

Our sex life isn't working any more! We almost never laugh or have fun with each other. Everything seems heavy. There is virtually no warmth, few hugs, no compliments or appreciations. Nothing seems to be working. If you were a marital therapist who understood about brain physiology, what you immediately know about this couple or these couples? **THEY ARE NOT SAFE WITH EACH OTHER.** When you are safe with your partner, warmth, playfulness, affection and sexuality tend to emerge naturally. When you are not safe, there is distance, hiding, criticism, fighting, etc.

Conclusion

Brain physiology is a reality, a given that every couple must deal with. The Old Brain cannot be controlled directly, but it can be understood and "managed." *It is essential that couples learn to create a higher level of emotional and physical safety in their relationship.*