

Relationship Conflict and the Brain

How is it that in our marriages we have so much trouble resolving conflict? Why do so many marriages end in divorce? Shouldn't reasonable adults always be able to find some kind of solution to a relationship problem?

You would think so. But it turns out that, in times of interpersonal conflict, we have the tendency to react in certain pre-programmed ways. In fact, many of our natural ways of responding correspond closely to what we see in the animal kingdom. So in some respects, we're not as sophisticated as we'd like to think!

These programmed responses are caused by structures and processes in our brains. We can think of our central nervous system, loosely, as being composed of two different, but interrelated components, the "old brain" and "new brain." (The terms old and new here refer to the evolutionary development of the brain in animals and humans.)

- A. The "New Brain" refers to the cerebral cortex, which makes up the largest portion of the brain. Its large size is what sets us apart from lower animals. The cerebral cortex is what enables us to think, use logic and language, solve problems, plan, and create. It is the most advanced part of the brain.
- B. The "Old Brain" consists of:
 1. The brainstem and cerebellum, sometimes called the "reptilian" brain. These structures govern automatic processes such as respiration, heartbeat, and reproduction. The primary function of the "old brain" is *survival*. The "fight or flight" response is also controlled here.
 2. The limbic system, or "mammalian" brain. This area is the emotional center and the repository for emotional memory. A small structure in the limbic system, the *amygdala*, serves as a screening device for pain and danger. So when we perceive something that we consider dangerous – whether this perception is accurate or not – our amygdala initiates an alarm system of sorts, which prepares us to take action.

So what does all of this have to do with relationship conflict? Well, it seems that whenever we're locked into unproductive conflict (or avoidance of same), it's because our "old brains" are in charge. As an example, when our partner is unhappy with us, or when we perceive that we're being criticized, our primitive brain signals **danger**, and our primal responses to threat are instantaneously activated:

- Fight (e.g., becoming angry, counter-attacking)
- Flight (leaving the room, not talking, shutting down)
- Freeze (being at a loss for words, paralyzed by fear of saying the wrong thing)
- Submit ("Okay, okay -- you're right, I'm sorry")

Which of the above responses will be employed depends on the person's temperament, learning history, and situational factors. For example, a person might react with anger in one situation but be avoidant or submissive in another.

What is important to understand is that we have a hard-wired predisposition to behave in these ways. While fight/flight/freeze/submit responses helped us to survive prehistoric dangers, they have little utility for assisting us in our modern couple relationships. It's not hard to see how open communication and understanding are hindered by these primitive tendencies.

So what can we do about this? Basically, what we need to do is to put our "new brain" back in charge. Some of us have already learned to do this, whether we were taught in childhood or learned it later in life. When we use relationship skills such as patience, humor, concern, empathy, self-soothing, and listening, we're essentially employing our cerebral cortex to over-ride the alarms which have been triggered by our limbic system. The more we are able to do this, the more safety and trust we are able to build into our relationships. And once we feel safe in our relationships, we are able to resolve just about any concern our problem that comes up.

The good news: It's never too late to learn these important skills. Researchers have found that the brain is capable of changing throughout life. Even when we're predisposed to react in certain ways, we can form new neural pathways in the brain as we learn and practice new responses.

.