



Hijacking The Amygdala

Dr. Harvey loathed the new electronic medical record system. After 25 years of keeping perfectly good written records, his new partners had convinced the practice manager of the efficiency and clarity of this paperless system. He'd fought the change, dreaded the change, and now it was here.

Learning the new system was a nightmare. His unfamiliarity with the computer and his inability to type interfered with his connection and concentration with clients. Twice today, he became so distracted he had to ask clients to go back over information they just covered. He felt like a novice doctor; an imposter.

Dr. Harvey attempted to reign in his runaway thoughts and focus on the patient on his table. This was Bindy's third visit in a month with severe pruritus, and his owner was obviously frustrated. They had discussed doing some in-depth allergy screens, but Dr. Harvey knew Mrs. Hernandez would need more information to feel comfortable with the decision. He hit "print" on the new computer to run off a handout and excused himself to go retrieve it.

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Client handouts *used* to be kept in each room, but the new “efficient” system stored everything online. Grumbling to himself, he crossed the hallway, narrowly missing two techs carrying a patient to the back. He glanced towards the reception area and saw that every chair in the room was full. No lunch again today!

When he reached the common printer, a quick glance through the papers told him his handout was not among them. He banged the “start” button on the printer. Nothing happened. Dr. Harvey was seething, his hands shaking. He grabbed the printer off of the work station, pulled the plug from its socket, and dropped the printer to the floor.

The bustling office suddenly went quiet. Every eye in the clinic turned towards the shattering clatter.

What just happened to make this mild, competent doctor explode?

Such occurrences are common enough to have earned their own verbal shorthand—we say, “He saw red.” “She lost it.” “He flipped out.” “He exploded.” If the event is frightening enough, we might even say, “She lost her mind!”

Actually, Dr. Harvey was overtaken by powerful emotions that suppressed his logical side. He had just experienced a moment when his heightened emotion signaled his thalamus, the brain’s “air traffic controller,” that he’d encountered a major threat to his survival. The trusty thalamus, ever on guard, immediately sent a jolt straight to his amygdala, where the brain’s “fear network” is centered.

According to Daniel Goleman, Dr. Harvey just suffered an “amygdala hijack.”¹ This surprising, hair-trigger emotional response has caught us all off guard at one time or another. The very architecture of the brain that originated as a system of “fight or flight” to propel us out of harm’s way can cause a misfire in emotional moments that leave a grave impact on our peers and our reputations.

Have You Been Hijacked?

Goleman states that there are three distinct steps during an amygdala hijack:

1. The onset of the sudden emotional reaction
2. A sense of being “taken over” by that emotion
3. Regret: “Why did I do that?”

Most of us can identify with experiencing all three stages. Although understandable given the frustration and pressure Dr. Harvey was experiencing—a new computer system, a frustrating client interaction, and a full waiting room—his outburst will have ramifications far beyond the replacement of the errant printer. The intensity of Dr. Harvey’s unchecked emotional reaction will live on in the minds of his colleagues and his clients for a very long time.

Josh Freedman suggests that we can minimize the destruction caused by the amygdala hijack by learning ways to circumvent the

runaway response, so that we can deescalate our reactions before we have reason for regret.² Although difficult to control, we are not prisoners of our limbic system.

To ensure that such incidents are rare occurrences, we need to keep strong emotions in check by running them through the “cooling function” of the prefrontal cortex. Freedman suggests we do this with a 6-second pause in which we force ourselves to put emotion on hold while we quickly take action to engage our thinking brain.

We can accomplish this in many ways, but the key is to do it simply and quickly. Try this:

- Count to six in a foreign language
- Remember the names of the seven dwarves, in alphabetical order
- Think of six foreign capital cities
- Visualize six details of a beautiful place

These seemingly simple exercises create a “pause” in the limbic excitement, allowing us to move to a higher order of thinking and regain control of our actions. Freedman assures us that research indicates such a step only needs to take 6 seconds to be effective. Practicing these simple steps each time an overwhelming emotional response seems likely can prevent an outburst that can destroy a career and permanently damage relationships. ■

References

1. **Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ.** Goleman D. Bantam Books, 1995.
2. **At the Heart of Leadership: How to Get Results with Emotional Intelligence.** Freedman J, eleadership.com.

Skillset addressed in this article: self-management