

What's the Brain Up to When a Person Feels Threatened?

When a supervisor approaches an employee with aggression that is telling, threatening, or yelling (in word, deed, or even perceived as such; in person, in writing, or by phone) or in an emotional conversation between colleagues, here's what happens:

Outside of their consciousness, survival mode is initiated in the employee in response to the perceived threat to safety, security, belonging, or respect. The activity of the frontal lobes (where decisions are made) of the brain is interrupted. Adrenalin is released. Cortisol and testosterone levels increase. The brain prompts them to protect and defend themselves by fighting, running, hiding, or irrationally yielding and conceding to the perceived attacker.

Accompanying this reactive mode are the following.

- Cognitive
 - Concentration is interrupted
 - Ability to learn is decreased
 - Thinking is dramatically simplified (black/white)
- Communication
 - One cannot hear messages without distortion
 - One cannot respond/communicate with clarity
- Perspective
 - Perspective is skewed
 - Oversimplification, minimizing, or neutralizing difficulties
- Feelings aroused
 - Fear
 - Anger
 - Helplessness
 - Self-doubt
- Approach becomes Stiff and inflexible
 - Demand for certainty replaces curiosity
 - Position Stiffens over against another's
 - Imaginative gridlock (unable to think of alternatives, options, or gain new perspectives)
 - Diminished flexibility in response to life's challenges
- An array of defensive behaviors
 - A desire for a quick fix
 - Refusal to see problems, just reacts
 - Scapegoating due to anger, anguish, and grief
 - Blaming