

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

In first-world societies, threat is most often felt in social interactions – criticism, verbal attack, and fear of rejection. Seldom is the threat physical, but our threat reactions have roots in the primal response to physical threats (i.e., fight, flight, freeze, appease) very often needed by our cave-dwelling ancestors. When there is real danger, such a reaction is essential to survival but is not nearly as helpful in social conflict.

When another person approaches you with criticism (in word, deed, or even perceived as such; in person, in writing, or by phone), or vice versa, it can **feel like a personal assault**, and even more so if the approach is aggressive (i.e., telling, threatening, yelling).

Under threat, here's what happens to you:

Outside your consciousness, your brain initiates survival mode in response to the perceived threat to your safety, security, belonging, or respect. You can know if this has happened if your pulse rate exceeds 100 beats per minute or 80 beats per minute if you are in excellent physical condition.

All non-vital bodily functions are temporarily but dramatically diminished. Emotions flood you (most often anger or fear). The activity of the frontal lobes (where decisions are made) of your brain is interrupted. Adrenalin is released. Cortisol and testosterone levels increase. The brain prepares you physiologically to protect and defend yourself by fighting, running, hiding, or irrationally yielding and conceding to the perceived attacker.

In this reactive atmosphere, **you lose the ability to solve problems** because:

- Cognitive
 - Concentration is interrupted.
 - Ability to learn is decreased.
 - Thinking is dramatically simplified (black/white).
 - Ability to manage calm, considered thought is shut down temporarily.
- Communication
 - Effective communication is impossible.
 - One cannot hear messages without distortion.
 - One cannot respond/ communicate with clarity.
 - There is a tendency to repeat oneself.
- Perspective.
 - A type of tunnel vision occurs.
 - Peripheral vision is compromised.
 - Perspective is skewed.
 - Oversimplification, minimizing, or neutralizing difficulties.
- Emotions are aroused
 - Fear
 - Anger
 - Helplessness
 - Self-doubt
 - Loss of access to a sense of humor
- Approach becomes Stiff and inflexible
 - Demand for certainty replaces curiosity.
 - Position stiffens over against another's.
 - Imaginative gridlock occurs (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