

Managing Amygdalae

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Consider the following experiences and whether they elicit fear or excitement in you:

Riding a rollercoaster. Reading a thriller. Skydiving. Visiting a haunted house. First kiss. Watching a horror movie. Getting news. Falling in love. Public speaking.

- *What are the physiological sensations for each experience?*
- *What leads us as individuals to interpret whether this is scary and dangerous or exciting and fun?*
- *Can this be simultaneously terrifying for one person and great fun for another?*
- *What does this mean for the way we conduct ourselves/show up in the world?*
- *Is there room for interpretation with all experiences or just some?*
- *How can we use this to manage ourselves better?*

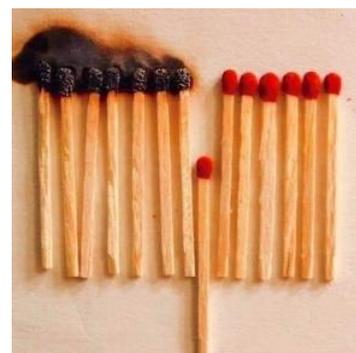
Many people claim that excitement and fear can present the same physiological responses in the body; the heart pounds, palms sweat, breathing changes, etc. Although some of the above scenarios may seem clearly in the realm of either fear or excitement, can you find exceptions? For example, falling in love may seem like pure pleasure, but aren't there a great many who find it utterly intimidating? Could it be that excitement is nervousness with positive internal narratives and that fear is excitement when we have negative thoughts or interpretations? What tips us one way or the other?

The amygdalae are bi-lateral, with one in the left hemisphere and one in the right hemisphere. The amygdalae function in the brain as threat detectors that help to avoid pain, as well as gratification seekers that help to secure pleasure. They serve to assure survival and drive us to get our needs met. Sensory data intakes converge in the amygdala and output is sent to systems involved in emotional reactivity. It can be complicated to understand our reactions. Like in the classical conditioning of Pavlov's dogs, the amygdala makes associations and these perceived associations may consciously or unconsciously influence our reactions. In each moment, our reactions are influenced by our past, by social and environmental factors, as well as by any number of changing variables in our physical, emotional, and psychological conditions. Reactions that appear disproportionate or inappropriate may be telling of previous traumas or joys, or indicate conditions that reduce our ability to temper ourselves. Whatever the case, reactions range and vary based on conditions and perceptions. Our perceptions are subjective, not necessarily reflective of an objective reality. We can change our perceptions.

When the amygdalae switch on, higher brain functions switch off. Whether it feels negative or positive, it is important to recognize that high amygdalae states override some of our awareness and abilities, leaving us ill-equipped to make good decisions, recognize

consequences, or act in ways that are helpful. As care partners, family members, advocates, or simply as individuals, we may want to check ourselves if we are getting worked up. In the heat of the moment, or in over-identifying with pain or excitement, coming in too hot can move us further from outcomes we desire.

Allow space and give grace. Rather than getting swept up in emotions, old patterns, or reacting impulsively, if we can catch ourselves and time ourselves out, then we can manage our amygdalae. If we can breathe and step back, allowing space, and maybe giving time, then we can mediate our actions, thoughts, and emotions. When we examine our thoughts and notice the story that we are telling ourselves, then we can make the decision to reframe our narrative. We can choose to be generous with ourselves and with others, tipping perceptions towards better interpretations and outcomes.



What opportunities do you have to practice consciously managing your amygdalae?

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