

Amygdala Hijack

The amygdala is the “fight or flight” and emotional memory part of the brain. Its job is to protect by comparing incoming data with emotional memories. An amygdala hijack occurs when we respond out of measure with the actual threat because it has triggered a much more significant emotional threat. For instance, the amygdala will react similarly to the threat of being eaten by a tiger (physical threat) and the threat of an ego attack (emotional threat) by bringing on the fight or flight reaction.

When one experiences an amygdala hijack, the amygdala overtakes the neocortex (the thinking part of the brain) and there’s little or no ability to rely on intelligence or reasoning. The immediate result of a hijack is a decrease in working memory; adrenaline is released and will be present and effective for 18 minutes; hormones are released into the bloodstream and will take 3-4 hours to clear.

During hijack, the number of perspectives accessible decreases; instead of 4 possible solutions, the observer will see 3 (excluding half of his original perspective), then 2 (creates an either/or choice), then only 1.

When only 1 choice remains, the hijack is complete and the observer returns to a default, habitual behavior.

SOSS: A Model to Interrupt Amygdala Hijack

Stop –Physically withdraw. If impossible, name the trigger or emotion (keeps the neocortex engaged and active and helps to prevent the amygdala from taking over).

Oxygenate – Taking deep breaths with intention and purpose. Pay attention to breath. Keeps neocortex engaged.

Observer

1 2

3 4

Strengthen appreciation – It’s difficult to get hijacked while focusing on appreciation, particularly if you can appreciate the source of the hijack (i.e. the person who said whatever caused the hijack).

Survey the landscape – Take the time to revisit the hijack experience after it’s completed to learn more about what happens and why. Work to identify the trigger to better manage emotion and interrupt the hijack early.

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