



Management Briefing

Prepared Exclusively for Roundtable Members

Taming Your Amygdala –

Getting Control Over The Drives Which Undermine Your Best Intentions and Decisions

By Willing Phillips

You often hear people say, “Just do it!” or “Use Your Willpower” or “Don’t Give up!”. Although this advice is on target, its impact is often zero, or even negative, because the listener has a sense that it’s right, but has no idea how to put the advice to work. Think of telling someone to Stop Smoking.

There are also events that we find difficult to understand or explain about our behavior. When we get upset or angry at another person often to such an extent that a good friend say you’re really bent out of shape that. Meaning that your anger is over-the-top for what the other person is actually doing. Another example is when someone’s behavior becomes particularly annoying to us well is not annoying other people. Sometimes we just say were overly sensitive. Other times we say we have such strong ethics and values that the slightest deviation gets us extremely angry.

You can go through your whole life without being curious about the examples cited above. If you are curious you will begin to see that there are parts of yourself that you are totally unaware of. And often when you get near these parts that are uncomfortable or scary so we back away. By embracing these hidden and unknown parts of ourselves we can begin to tame them.

This brings you face-to-face with your amygdalae. These two almond sized structures are buried deep inside your brain. We commonly refer to them as one, the amygd’s ala. Our entire nervous system is deigned to notice and protect us from danger. The amygdala plays a critical role in keeping you safe as it mediates the fear response(as brain structures are, it is also complex and likely mediates positive information as well) . It is this part of your brain that interprets stimuli and selectively triggers massive defensive responses, especially that adrenaline rush you experience when you are afraid or angry. This fight or flight response says, “all hands-on deck, do exactly as I say”. This results in blood flow reduction to your prefrontal cortex which is the seat of your logical thinking, your judgment and your resources to distinguish right and wrong and what’s good for you and what’s bad for you in the long run. When the amygdala takes over, it uses the the prefrontal cortex briefly to decide whether to freeze, run or fight, and then sends it out to pasture. Now that you’ve lost your ability to think logically, use your good judgment about taking care of yourself and lose all sense of the future consequences of what you might do, it makes it very easy to rush into battle regardless of the outcome, or to run away from the battle regardless of the outcome. Just remember when you were someone else is in this state do not expect any good thinking to occur.



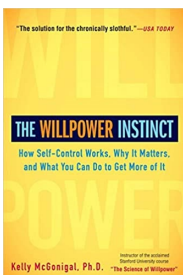
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If you're walking down a dark street in a strange city at night and hear a loud noise the nerves conduct that signal to your amygdala in a few thousandths of a second. The signal is also conducted to your prefrontal cortex, but that takes a whole second of time. Thus, the amygdala gets an amazing head start in taking over your body your brain and your reactions. When you hear that sudden noise, your amygdala sends signals to give you a rush of adrenaline – fear – uncertainty – danger. Then seconds later your prefrontal cortex figures out “oh, that was just a car door slamming, not a gunshot.” But the complex physiological changes initiated by amygdala take over in such a grand and powerful fashion that it is hard to get your thinking, judging, logical analytical brain back from pasture until a few seconds, a few minutes or even several days later. That's when you fully realize that your amygdala hijacking may have led to a response that was inappropriate, ineffective or even downright destructive.

At times this amygdala hijacking is more subtle. We know we should exercise, but we don't. We know we should not eat the doughnuts, certainly not the third one, but we do. We prepared ourselves not to get upset when we talked to a certain person, but we do. In each case your rational brain was hijacked by your amygdala.

Simply planning or desiring not to get hijacked: to eat better, exercise more, or not get angry at people doesn't fully work because all this planning and thinking is in your prefrontal cortex. We've got to work with the amygdala. You'll never get full control over it; but you can learn how to tame it. Here's how:



Kelly McGonigal, PhD and author of [*The Willpower Instinct*](#): How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It. She says: The willpower response is a reaction to an internal conflict. You want to do one thing, such as smoke a cigarette or supersize your lunch, but know you shouldn't. Or you know you should do something, like file your taxes or go to the gym, but you'd rather do nothing.

First of all, keep your prefrontal cortex in the best possible shape. That means feeding it with good-quality food, so it has enough energy to do its job. It means getting enough sleep. It means that working 10 or even 8-hour days will tire it down. This is why airplane pilots and train engineers have time restrictions on their workday. A fair amount of research is demonstrated that executives make much poorer decisions in the second half of their day than in the first half. Just like lactose builds up in your muscles, and you feel fatigue, when you're over exercising, the lack of oxygen and glucose to feed your brain cells tires it. It doesn't give us a direct pain. It shows up because the brain doesn't want to take time thinking so it makes quick, short, fast, unconsidered decisions. That the thing that we were talking about was pausing

Now it's time to focus on training the amygdala. Here are two ways.



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How to Increase Your Willpower Through Breathing

Slowing down your breathing rate is beneficial in situations where you must keep your cool. On the other hand, if a situation demands a more energized out-of-your-mind state, like during passionate sex or right before a final deadlift set, you might rather want to *increase* your breathing frequency to provoke your berserker instincts and animalistic power mediated by your amygdala.

Try one of these two breathing exercises is

- Slow: 4 seconds inhalation, 4 seconds pause, 8 second exhalation — repeat 6 times
- Fast: 2 seconds inhalation, 2 seconds exhalation — repeat 24 times

Try these under various circumstances (whichever you find more appropriate to the situation). Adjust them according to your own experience. Be creative with it! The more you experiment, the more you'll learn to control the powers of your mind, will, and raw nature. There are several apps available for your phone that will time each stage of your breathing. Kelly McGonigal's research shows that when you start to take less than 5 breaths a minute, your willpower in terms of such things as not over eating, going to the gym, stopping smoking increases significantly. She trains people at the Stanford health clinic and how to improve their health through this approach.

[How to Increase Willpower Through Breathing](#)

When something's about to go to in the wrong direction —in the face of temptation, compulsion, [anxiety](#), fear or stress—or you simply want to gain even greater power in an already awesome situation, mindfully modulate your breathing rate. Conscious Breathing is like taking a plane off auto pilot. The amygdala is a central part of a system designed over millions of years to detect danger and keep you safe. For this reason it's always ready to go into action. And it acts fast without any delays of thinking or consideration or judging or evaluating. It did protect this well from approaching tigers or people not in our tribe.

Parents and coaches know that when a child has been hurt on the playing field, that it's possible for their anxiety and fear of the hurt to takeover and lead to them losing control over their emotions or their body. The single most effective and immediate way of not letting the fear signals from the amygdala take over in this situation, is to encourage the child to take deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Research does show that breathing through the nose is more effective than breathing through the mouth in calming the fear response. Breathing in through the nose actually changes the biochemistry in your body calling fear, anxiety and stress.



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Another way of gaining control over your amygdala is to participate in fear inducing fun activities. These would include rock climbing, scuba diving, parachuting, bungee jumping, skiing for example.. As a rock climber I can report that every other climber I've talked to experiences fear of heights.. The best climbers learn not to let the fear pouring out of their amygdala hijack their climbing and keep them on the ground. A serious climb might take all day or even longer, and during that time you must manage the fear continuously, brushing it aside when it shows up, remembering to breathe, remembering to relax the muscles you're not using, and a dozen other techniques that climbers develop. A beginner can burn up twice as much energy with muscle tension that accomplishes nothing. To have a wonderful experience of what this is like watch Alex Honnold in the Oscar winning documentary *Free Solo*. See amazing climbing completely unprotected. Look at his brain scans that he shows in the movie and see how he has gained control over his amygdala.

Embracing The Unknown

Robert Johnson, a renowned Jungian, psychoanalyst was born in 1924. In his 20s as he was beginning his professional career he decided to guide his behavior towards other people as a gentleman would. At that time this meant that he was polite, courteous and respectful of all people and never unkindly. Over time he realized he was not always a gentleman. He would have outbursts often towards a colleague which would be overly critical, biting or angry and in sarcastic tone. He tried all kinds of ways to get control over this and made little progress. He said it felt like living in a house where there was a wild beast locked up in the basement that would break out every once in a while and bite someone.

And then he decided to move on and try a different approach, because the one he was using was not working. Following his analogy of the wild beast in the basement, he went over to the double locked door, and invited the beast up from the basement to sit with him in his living room. He said it was a little scary. He adopted an attitude of respecting the beast instead of trying to hide it and suppress it.

He claimed that over time this strategy was productive. With the beast so close to him he could tell when it was getting restless which gave him opportunities to better manage the biting behavior. He also said that by respecting this wild beast part of himself and keeping it close is energy for work and life doubled.

Sidebar on Emotions

All of the above is not intended to turn you into a robot who thinks logically and has no feelings. I would hope for the exact opposite for each of you. That you fully experience the range of all of your emotions. What we're talking about here is letting your emotions be signals or data to weigh, rather



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than directives

to act.

Being angry is

fully

acceptable, but physical, verbal or emotional violence and disrespect towards yourself or others is not.

Sidebar on Polyvagal Theory

As mentioned above, the amygdalae are part of a complex system of individual internal and external communications about danger and safety. The results of new neurological research and theories (particularly the Polyvagal Theory by Stephen W. Porges) have powerful implications and applications for enhancing productivity and teamwork which will be explored in future briefings. There are several books that you can easily find on Amazon to go deeper into Polyvagal Theory.

Sidebar on your shadow

This discussion on the amygdala does not cover all of the amazing parts of our SELF which shape our behavior in addition to our prefrontal cortex-the part of our mind about which we are most conscious. James Hollis in his book *The Eden Project* says: one can achieve no higher or better relationship with the another person, than one has achieved with oneself. What we do not know about ourselves or will not face in ourselves (the shadow), will be projected onto the other person. Thus our reactions and feelings towards the other person may be strongly mediated by what we have projected of our self on the other person, and vice versa. Becoming aware of the various parts of yourself is essential for any consultant coach or counselor, and it is what gives every leader there most powerful presence or ability to influence others. But this is another story for another time.

MDMA

MDMA is a psychoactive and pathogen. This means it it affects your psychology;you become dramatically more empathic and understanding of those around you that as well as yourself. When using the substance under proper supervision, there are no hallucinations and you are fully conscious throughout the whole experience. To a large extent it seems like the mechanism is the suppression of your fight and flight response in the amygdala. Your anxiety and fear drains away. This experience enables you to see all of the positive attributes and experience extraordinary connectivity/empathy especially with those close to you. It often creates such an extraordinary experience that the next day you find that all the petty aggravations and frustrations that once separated you from a loved one become so insignificant in comparison to the connection, affection, appreciation and love, that they become irrelevant. For some this experience lasts for 12 to 18 months.



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Post traumatic
syndrome or

stress
PTSD is

widely recognized as a syndrome affecting 20 to 30% of our military veterans. Even those who were not in direct combat have similar levels of PTSD. This syndrome is not just caused by war but the potential effect of any violent or traumatic experience

such as: serious accidents, physical or sexual assault, abuse as a child or adult intensive care, losing a baby and childbirth, war and conflict, torture, losing a parent or abandonment.

MDMA has been found to be most effective treatments for PTSD. The use of MDMA is now in phase III FDA approval trials. Its success appears to be at the 60% level. About twice the effectiveness of any other approach.

RELATIONSHIP RENEWAL AND REPAIR

Many couples and families have engaged in a variety of therapeutic experiences in order to repair or renew the relationships. The complex traps of our amygdala, our ability to project, and our desire to be safe, lead us to situations where the interaction between those we love begins to outweigh the love we have. In my estimate MDMA therapy with skilled therapists can be a thousand times more effective in repairing, renewing and relaunching relationships based on love. And in some cases it may only take a weekend.

ADDENDUM ON ANGER

Anger is one of the most common emotions. Men often confuse anger with being strong, or use anger to gain control. Experienced boxers will tell you one of the best ways to win a fight is to get your opponent angry. When anger takes over, even quiet anger, it undermines your ability to think logically and rationally. A flash of anger can undermine a significant relationship or drive a disastrous business decision.

Anger fertilizes the growth of resentment in your close relationships as well as in your work relationships. It may be one of the more significant reasons that an employee chooses to move on to another job. Anger may also produce significant reduction in the other person's ability to contribute, to care, to be motivated, and to have energy.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF ANGER

Righteous anger is often triggered by the experience of injustice to oneself or others. Among all the kinds of anger this is the most lasting motivator for taking action.



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Frustration that things are not going the way you expected or that you're not able to control the way things are unfolding is a significant source of anger especially in work settings.

Resentment that people or the world are unfair.

MANAGING YOUR ANGER

It may take considerable self-development for you to manage and possibly eliminate your angry, unproductive reactions. There are a number of things you can do to lessen the damage as well as the guilt you may feel afterwards.

1-Recognize and avoid situations that trigger your angry reaction. Keep a record every time you are angry about the situation that led up to it. Learn how to avoid these situations. My wife and I have discovered that getting into an argument late in the evening when our brains are already tired is one of the best ways for an argument to accelerate into anger and ruin a whole day. So we established a ground rule of no difficult or hot conversations after 6 PM.

2-Breathing deeply in through the nose and out through pursed lips has been shown to stimulate a variety of hormones that will calm your anger reaction. At least one deep breath, ideally three. And when you fully inhaled hold your chest expanded for the same amount of time that you did the inhalation, now exhale on the same count, and stay with a collapsed chest for the same count. That is called square breathing. Each side of the square takes a different approach to your breath. Most athletic coaches use this technique when a player is on the verge of losing emotional control.

3-Drain the frustration with physical activity such as intense exercise. For some boxing training is even more of a relief. Others find target shooting equally beneficial. The idea is that small frustrations and resentments can accumulate. Being the strong person we say, "I'm fine, that didn't bother me." All the while that frustration is building up. Then only one additional small frustration can tip the balance, and the outburst flows.

4-Change your vocabulary to change your thinking. Avoid these words which are often driven by anger, and are invariably inaccurate, and hence create resentment in the people around you.

-Always as in "you always..."

-Never as in "you never...."



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Be particularly
with blame.

careful
Whether

you tend to blame others when things don't go your way, or whether you blame yourself, both destructive and inaccurate.

-Ultimatums as in "if this isn't done by the end of the day, you will all be here on Saturday."

Demands as in "I demand that you...", Try changing the word to "request".

My expectation as in "my expectation was that this would be finished today", try using the word "desire."

5-Enlist help from those you get angry at whether it's your spouse, your kids your peers or subordinates at work. This can only be done by brave people who don't have tender egos.

-Gather your team together and tell them you're aware that you have angry outbursts. Or that you just had an angry outburst.

-Apologize

-Ask them to tell you how it makes them feel when you get angry. After you've asked that question you make no responses; no defenses; no explanations.

-This step is for those who who think they are good listeners. Repeat back what you think everyone has said. Now ask them how accurate you were. Be quiet and listen. You may have to summarize again.

-Once the other(s) agree you have accurately summarized what they said, try this. I have been listening to you and you make sense to me, and I imagine it must make you fee ...(fill in the blank)."Is that accurate?"

-An even deeper apology may be warranted after you fully understand the impact of your anger.

-Now ask the others, "do you have any ideas of how we can better manage my anger considering the fact that I'm not very good at controlling my outbursts?"

-Here is one answer that came from a CEO whose nickname was "flamethrower". At an important meeting he passed out a bag of Halloween crickets or clickers. He said anyone can click me if it looks like I'm starting to light up my flamethrower to help me be aware of my impending anger. I really need your help in doing this because I know that if I turn on the flamethrower and get really angry it shuts down some of you and probably reduces the participation and creativity and motivation of



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many of you. The meeting went fine until about 11 AM one day. One person clicked, then a few more, then the whole room was clicking as if the 17 year locusts were rising right in that room. It was funny enough that it deescalated the situation, calmed the flamethrower and triggered an automatic break.

-The CEO flamethrower had the courage to share his shortfall with his team who helped him overcome it so it did not become a problem.