

Working WITH Trauma Brain Pt III

And no longer fighting a neuro-battle you'll always lose

Fall 2021

Implications of Neuro-Hierarchy

So I use this brain processing hierarchy in a number of sanity-instilling ways when my brain is otherwise having a lot of unsettling, invertebrate behaviors.

Let's talk about the implications of this little scheme and all the ways to reframe yourself and others' selves with this knowledge.

One, you can rest assured, your emotions and survival responses are always going to take precedence.

I mean, duh. Anyone who's been triggered or in a bad fight with a loved one knows that. Bring on the dissociation, reactiveness that you instantly regret, and activation of trauma-born personalities.

But on a more "human performance" directed front, it means that if you can't deal with your feelings, experiential memories, and survival pangs, they're going to corrupt the rest of your attempted brain activities by drawing power from your available energy allocation for logical prefrontal processing... if not eventually just overrunning it.

This is why we always talk about the necessity of "going through it" when it comes to unresolved, emotionally-driven memories. Because they'll distract and drain you from the inside, at a minimum... and completely kidnap and disable your higher level brain, if you've been ignoring them for too long or you're spinning in a higher level of upset.

This emotional and survival prioritization is also why we have to learn grounding techniques for our stay-alive-sensitive central nervous systems before we can get any work done in therapy. Why we have implicit memories and unsettled sensory recollections still rattling our ribcages years after events have taken place.

Because all of these brain activities serve as the most fundamental basis for existing - staying alive and using our bodies as intermediaries to experience and navigate the physical world - so we're going to give them energy, first and foremost.

Meaning... You can't ignore your physical experiences. If you don't engage your lower level, survival and sensory systems to clear out that backlog of data or recent triggering, first thing... you have less power and control for everything else going on in your head, body, and life.

And that's assuming you CAN ACCESS those other areas at all. Which, depending on the degree of upset... questionable. I don't think any of us are particularly proud of the decisions or performances we've made under extreme duress - that's because our freaked out feelings areas were actively stunting our capacity to be incredibly wise, measured, patient, and comprehensively informed.

If you've lost a job, failed a class, lost some relationships, made bad financial decisions, found it impossible to complete an important task, or even made some blatantly terrible decisions that have plagued your shame-full head for years in the aftermath... well, just let yourself off the hook a bit, because you were running on your lizard brain, sensing and then immediately reacting, processes.

And you didn't particularly have a choice in the matter, except to go *through* the experience before you could reach any calm, collected, big-picture wisdom on the other side.

SECONDLY, as if that's not enough information to make sense of our chaotic-feeling brains already...

This hierarchy means that decision making, thought-direction (such as focusing and refocusing your attention), and achieving meaningful, purposeful, high level and long-term learning aren't the easiest branches for us emotionally-reactive humans to grasp. Period.

Those tasks actually pretty high up the tree of prioritized brain activities, although we consider them to be basic actions we "SHOULD" complete without much toil or turmoil in this "put on a tie and sit in this cubicle" world we live in.

With our overactive, backlogged emotional and panicky systems... this means holding attention, making purposeful memories, and engaging central executive processes may become incrementally accessible as we move through various stages of recovery or just continue to live in a world that seems dead-set on fucking us up on repeat.

As in, somedays you might find your head feels free and clear of old memory data or new emotional information that needs to be placed... and somedays that shit is ON FIRE, leaving you with the sensation of “half a brain” again.

The back and forth between having high level processing power and lacking that human-centered control, you know, is better than having ZERO days of total clarity... but also makes it pretty hard to predict or plan or have any confidence in your mental capacity. WHEN is it a good time for me to study, to take on this big work project, to have that meeting, to deal with that family member, to start this diet... well, pretty fucking hard to say, because sometimes my head is swimming in ancient artifacts again, and I become a reactive ball of emotions without any logical skills.

And that's something I think we probably all need to remember.

Not only are we going to be a bit “human brain dead” during times of extreme upset, when we've recently been triggered 15 years into the past, when we're in the midst of uncontrollable tragedy, when our social ties are making us feel insecure and unsafe... But this is a state that we'll probably slip back into on repeat, thanks to our dialed-up survival and sensory systems. Plus, all them triggers.

Problem being, once we're there... We have a lot of work to do to get back to the level of “normal person performing.” And we probably don't have the “normal person self-awareness” to realize that this is what's happening or accurately assess the situation without shitting on our own valuations of Self.

If you're like me, anyways, you're more likely to call your brain a pussy and try to “power your way through the emotional and survival-obsessed fog.” Trying to FORCE your head to behave like you want it to.

I mean, we were just working fine on Tuesday, how is Thursday such a solid regression into “old trauma brain” territory? Don't accept it. Let's push forward.

And the result will be... nothing. No progress. Not in your higher level logical brain OR your lower level feeling brain. A stalemate. And therefore, the battle will just start back up tomorrow, when you're still floating somewhere in between, trying to activate a system that isn't reachable and pretending the other one isn't fucking SCREAMING at you the entire time.

My experience is? This approach may work for a single day or seven, if you need to get through a “human task” by numbing your feelings. But it'll very quickly just make everything worse. You'll

end up in a disgruntled, frustrated, agitated, and blanked out state as you rapidly run out of mental energy to pretend you're fine.

And it will likely persist until you can go back to "Start" and take another full lap around the mental hierarchy gameboard, beginning with convincing your brain and body that you're safe and no longer having those past emotional events, and working your way all the way through to the prefrontal cortex full access to give any of it meaning.

This is why, say, taking a motherfucking break from work and life demands is necessary. Going out on your own. Doing a lot of nothing. "Unwinding." Taking a vacation. Whatever allows you to let your brain engage those semi-settled thoughts, so you can give them meaning and stop hanging on to them in the "problems for tomorrow's Motherfucker" pile.

Not getting anywhere in your work or other logical, human-directed activities?

Stop what you're doing. Call your therapist. Or get outside, away from the stressors. Get in a comfortable place and do nothing. Keep grounded. Let the feelings and experiential flashbacks unravel. And then stitch those sensations together with words, so you can work on sticking them into the "long term learned information" stack.

Don't fight your brain. Respect biology. And work *with* it.

THIRDLY, this is important information to have because... well, besides the ways it affects our practical performance each day on the planet... it also clearly describes the entire process of persistent trauma-healing, like we mentioned.

Step One: Believe you're okay. Turn down the nervous system by convincing it that you're not in danger right now.

Step Two: Handle those emotions and experiential memories. WHAT do you feel on a sensory basis and why? What have you seen? What experiments are your brain still trying to turn into known, accepted, information and events?

Step Three: Learn how to NAME and INTERPRET your emotions. Take these senses and experiential inputs and make language around them, so you aren't just floating in feelings.

Step Four: Combine the language and the experiential memories together to organize the clusterfuck of previously unlabeled information.

Step Five: Gather outside data to give more context to the events. To see broader trends. To notice the circumstances that surrounded the experience. To pull in objective observations untethered to the perceptions of the person, themself.

Step Six: Understand the limitations of that poor organism enduring this mess, and I mean at the moment of impact, not at THIS moment down the line with more available data.

Step Seven: Decide how you REALLY feel about the whole story, with all of this insight available. Discard unnecessary information. Reframe initial judgments. Make a single story out of the event, rather than a cloud of snippets that span feelings, senses, and words.

Step Eight: Put that story into the context of the much larger story. See the individual as a single, complete, complicated and complex, living thing with a large collection of personal experiments that have been conducted. And derive long-term lessons from that cultivated collection of experiences. Ultimately, braiding them all together to create that lofty “Sense of Self” or “Persistent Identity” or “Autobiographical Representation” that we all need to reinstate so badly.

This allows you to identify and make the concerted changes necessary to become “who you want to be,” rather than being trapped in trauma. The purposeful “rewiring for a better, less reactive, more stable, meaningful, and balanced life,” we all enviously scoff about.

And from there... your brain is yours. The world is yours. Life is yours. You have the most realistic view possible - given, reality is completely relative, depending on what your brain has learned. And you can *direct* your thoughts, attention, and intentions easily, with confident decision making and very little external interference.

You also become more bullshit-resistant, because you aren't already half-triggered, carrying around those semi-salient survival ticks, horrible experiences, and dark emotions.

You become more proficient at learning, because you can focus on ONE THING AT A TIME, instead of doing that thing where you read one line 100 times while actively considering something from 1998.

You become less sensitive to your external environment, because you have alllll the supervisory power possible to manage and filter out unnecessary data.

And you have amazing decision making power, because you already know what you've seen so far and how your world works, destroying the need to second- and third- and infinitely- reassess

what you first thought. Not to mention, a consistent view of the past, present, and future, that allows you to stay “on course” day by day.

And all of this... makes you re-traumatizing resistant, to a much greater extent, at least.

People can't throw you off your course with their shitty comments and dismissals. Random events won't ping old, unfinished recollections of events. Chaos and a loss of sensing control won't be so freaky... because you have calm waters on the inside with which to HANDLE THAT SHIT, instead of feeling like you're already a fucking hurricane on the inside, with ever-more entropic energy being tossed into the storm system.

Overall, the whole machine becomes a library of past information to draw on and a very powerful processor with which to assess any new events.

But first, you've got to work through all the old ones from the bottom up.

Lastly, for now at least, an important application of this information is not just comprehending your own baffling experience, but... understanding other people. Especially those with trauma backgrounds.

So, let's say you need to talk to someone about something that's bothering you. You know what you should never, ever, do? Engage their survival system.

As soon as someone is feeling defensive or offensive in reaction to a perceived slight or danger? Game over. There goes their brain. It's active at the bottom, inaccessible at the top. And you will never get your point across.

They now lack access to the integrative, logical, and comprehensive areas necessary to understand your perspective or respond with a “vision of who they are, longterm,” in mind. They will first go through the fight, flight, freeze, fawn, front, and feign responses... land in emotional territory that's probably largely driven by old experiential memories of a similar feather... and you'll probably never get them out of that space in a reasonable time course, unless you're very skilled at de-escalation, emotional validation, and experiential reframing. Which, you know, they also have to have half a mind available to be open to any of those things.

So don't do that. Don't start big talks with insults or accusations. Maybe aim for higher level intelligence-sharing that takes the whole, logical, organism, on a lifelong scale, into consideration. Engage who they are, at their most enduring version of “self.” Work backwards

from there, starting with reason and moving downwards through the emotional and experiential areas.

But do not start with attacks, reactivity, or upset and then wonder why the conversation doesn't go as planned and you can't seem to get your honey on the same page as you. I'm sure you can think of this happening in the other direction, with folks attacking and THEN trying to reason with YOU... and you know how that doesn't work, to the frustration and bafflement of the other party. Sound familiar?

This is also important to remember if you happen to interact with someone shortly after they've been triggered or exposed to a frightening stimulus unrelated to you, realize that they're not in a place to have full, reasonable conversations or make plans or logical decisions. They might not even be able to access their emotions in order to connect with you on that level.

So... all of us who have family members with lifetimes of unprocessed trauma whom we continually try to reason with, work things out with, and relate to?

Eh, maybe not even possible.

They could be so entrenched in those bottom-level brain activations from trying to ignore their misunderstood survival responses, upsetting experiences and buried feelings that you'll never be able to get through. Or, not for long. You never know what's going to be a hot-button issue in the course of a logical, lifelong conversation... and suddenly you're back at ground zero, watching someone go through the survival F's while they lash out in every direction and blame their buried emotions on you.

Just saying. If your arguments with loved ones feel like battles for survival and rehashes of events from a lifetime ago, rather than attempts to resolve current disagreements... Those folks might be "trapped" in these animalistic brain areas and generally incapable of meeting you in the human sphere, thanks to their perpetually activity-depressed brains.

On a less bleak note, remembering this brain activity prioritization scheme can help you find people with healthy mental spaces, too. Those people who juggle diverse activities, day after day? The ones who can manage their emotions and stunt their reactions in a way that impresses you? The persons who show up consistently, openly, and reasonably... with amazing emotional intelligence and compassion for others, no matter what?

They might be operating on that highest level of mental capacity - keeping the highly informationally integrative and supremely supervisory prefrontal cortex "human" brain at the wheel day after day. Which means they've probably settled their past emotions and experiences. And they've learned to manage their survival reactions.

And, overall... Thanks to the top, front, human brain, they know who they are. Which makes it a lot easier for YOU to know who you are, via avoiding enmeshment, codependency, and learned helplessness patterns with them. Autonomy and healthy relations, they call it.

Pretty fancy, huh?

Let's wrap this.

I want to finish by saying, I know those folks who have high functionality and stable personalities intimidate us a lot of the time... we often repel each other, when our impulsive and reactive brains don't understand what's going on with them and vice versa... but theoretically we can achieve that level of secure, consistent, balanced brain operation that leads to healthy and fulfilled lives, too.

It's all a skill.

We just have to learn to work from the bottom of the brain, up.

Dealing with our physical experience inputs and automatic outputs. Then collecting our unresolved data bits that need to become connected verbal and experiential memories. Then adding in outside, objective information to change the context of the recollections to make broader, more universal sense.

Then, applying all of that work to our larger memory bank of "where I've been and who I've become so far," so we can direct the whole show from the top-front of the brain, downward.

In this way we enable:

Human thinking first, and shape our animal-experiencing reactions into that logical, continuous, purposeful framework.

NOT animal-reacting first, and later human-shaming ourselves for acting like a beast we don't recognize, among men.

Makes sense?

It also enables accomplishing your motherfucking work each day:

Making plans.

Making decisions.

Working towards goals.

Maintaining attention and focus.

Learning and honing skills.

Keeping a cohesive sense of self you don't hate or continually undermine.

All through managing your emotions and memories, top down starting from the PFC... instead of letting them take over the ship, bottom-up, starting from the hindbrain.

And overall, though... I just hope this conversation helps you find some self-acceptance and peace on days when you're feeling "emotionally dense and scatterbrained" out of the blue.

When you can't learn another single thing.

When you have no attention to give.

When you can't push your feelings away, but this is a REALLY bad time for thinking about tragedy on repeat.

Or...

When you're stressed out and just trying to survive in our human soup kitchen for long periods of time, and ultimately get that whole "living in the weeds, unable to see what's becoming of the whole garden," effect.

You know, when you're just tumbling through "gitting it done," bouncing from chaotic to chaotic task, trying to stay afloat and barely able to breathe. Then, someday, when you suddenly come out of that emotional, experientially-flailing fog, look around, and realize you don't know who you've been or what's become of you this entire time... and THEN get to go through the shameful and depressed, or ignited and manic phase of trying to make up for lost time BEING YOU again.

Hey, there's an explanation for waking up one day, suddenly aware of who you are and what you really care about.

That whole experience of surviving instead of being your best self? You're just running lower brain processes that have to be "passed through" to open the higher level bosses.

And you can totally kick it back the other direction, putting the fancy human cortex in control. It's just going to take a lot of work getting through the more basic bitches in your brain, first.

So. Take breaks. Give yourself time to feel. Get rid of distractions that keep you from settling and contextualizing old memories. Spend time alone. Write. Express your emotions in words. Find what works for you to safely process all your old, unsettled information. And use it like a tool whenever you're feeling out of control. Hit up the exercise episode that accompanies this series if you want ideas for how to get started.

Just don't battle your biology.

Do what you can do to help your brain spend its energy most effectively, working through the experiential stages of hell. Help your Self rise to power, ultimately managing all the lower level systems that detract from the larger picture of who you want to be on this earth. And making it a lot less likely that you'll fall down and need to start over at the very bottom of the brain again.

Everyone deserves a clean, controllable brain.

Which leads to a clean, controllable life.

It just takes some faith in the brain activity hierarchy to get there.

Hail you, your self, and your evolutionarily derived brain.

Hail Archie.

Hail the end of my neuroscience class. Knocked out that final exam while my professor had to proctor it this morning. Still fuckin' aced it, Baby. That 4.0 holds strong.

Which is only possible thanks to understanding and working with this emotionally-driven brain. Can't wait to tell you how I did it. Bonus episode hack, coming in hot for subscribers.

Until then, take care of your neurosystem. And talk to you soon.