

5 Stages of Regulating Reactive Brains

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

Fall 2021

Brain reactivity regulation in real life

So we just covered some implications of this brain-science learning. At the Application Tiers we're now talking about tips, tricks, and exercises to make the whole processing process smoother and more efficient, every day, in the name of living more peacefully with your brain.

But something I thought would be helpful in a digestible episode is to run through the order of your brain's activities in a different light.

Let's easily demonstrate something we likely all need a bit more practice with... slowing down, letting our brain react, and taking the time to moderate those reactions before they become physical responses that we don't really want to have.

Also, something we need to better understand about people we often flock with, who are likely to be reactive beings, themselves.

There's an order of system upset that leads back to *eventually* calming the hell down. But there are a lot of points to make a real jackass of yourself first. And that goes for the people around you, as well.

So, it's probably helpful to know the phases of your knee jerk neural reactions to know at what point your reasonable, directable, trustable, human brain is finally back in control.

Leading into the Christmas holiday... seems like something we might all need to keep in our back pocket. Consider this your holiday special for dealing with your fucked up family with less drama and personal rumination.

WHY are they always like that? Well... this is why.

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Following our academic discussion of brain processing prioritizations to now contextualize the frustrating and relationally-troubling experience of being a “reactive person,” let’s see how this plays out often in interpersonal relationships and real life.

As biologically, evolutionarily designed, the order of your cognitive events will be:

Reflex
Reaction
Reckoning
Regaining control
Reconsolidation

SO, first of all, you're going to have your lowest level response. Your survival system's reaction to whatever your threat-detection center just picked up.

1. Reflex

This is your (again) knee jerk reaction. Literally. The doctor hits your kneecap with their mini rubber hammer, your knee jumps, no conscious brain activity involved. Right?

Same for everything else in life that your body sees as an immediate threat. It won't waste time throwing any details to your brain before it responds, it'll circumvent that extra errand by the spinal cord calling the shots, instead.

So, if something startles you or someone threatens you, your head might not even get involved until the aftermath of your reflex. You might jump, scream, cry, cower, get aggressive, run, freeze, fawn... and it'll happen so fast, you won't even know you did it until afterwards.

Survival is the only goal. And this is going to be a very hard response to rewire IN THE MOMENT, because it's so deeply programmed in your lower-level operation system that you can't actually change those synaptic connections.

The way to work with this phase of responding? To reduce your nervous system reactivity, itself. If you're less on-edge, if you're pumping less energy into your autonomic nervous system in the first place, you'll be less likely to cross that energetic threshold into having an immediate survival reflex.

Also, you can run through imaginary scenarios to try to desensitize your nervous system to the real thing. If you can walk yourself through the experience of whatever has upset you in the past, this time with more external insight and objectivity, as well as your grounding practices and alternate narratives in hand... you can actually stunt the survival response preemptively.

So, preventative measures to keep your nervous system regulated are your best friend here.

There's likely not going to be enough time for moderating your survival reflex once the signal has been sent.

Helpful to know, and hopefully enlightening when it comes to some embarrassing memories of reflexive responses that were not at all socially appropriate for the context of the event. Plus, when you're looking at that family of origin explosion that circumvents logic.

Now you know why.

2. Reaction

Next up in the hierarchy of responses your brain will have to stimulation, is the Reaction. By this, we're talking about your PHYSICAL response to the event, created by your actual brain instead of your spinal cord at this point.

So, this would be your emotional reaction to the event. Which should immediately impact your cognitive interpretation of the event. Which will then rapid-fire lead to your behavioral response to the event. All in less than the blink of an eye.

Really, there's a lot going on here, and each one of them is a reaction. Our behaviors, emotions, and thoughts are each separate reactions. And linking them together happens extremely quickly in a cascade that we don't have the time to tease apart to see how they're impacting each other to produce the final, external reaction.

So, your brain detects something with your sensory system, the lower brain has an emotional response to tell you how it's interpreting the information, and that emotional response knocks your automatic decision making into one direction or another as far as then immediately telling your motor center what action to take.

And you externally react to all these internal reactions.

NOW, are you screaming, crying, flailing, gesturing wildly, speaking rapidly and without an end goal, shutting down, hating yourself, or getting trapped in an obsessive spiral?

You might be in a flashback, you might be lost in a cognitive jungle of similar experiences, you might be making defensive or offensive spur of the moment decisions that fail to correspond to reason or logic or larger picture thinking.

Yep, it's the "reactivity" that we all hate. The learned-behaviors-but-survival-system-centric level of brain activity that makes us act like fools. Or, like our parents. Or, those are the same thing.

It's also a very difficult thing to manage, we find, because our reactions are so hard-wired at this point. Your body and brain have been working together to create and enact these programs, unexamined, for the past however many years old you are. Now, to moderate these responses in the moment, you're asking your brain to slow down, look at each component, and make alterations concurrent to having the experience.

Not easy work. Which is why we more often just REACT (potentially like dickheads) and then go through the next horrible stage...

3. Reckoning

Once we get through the super humiliation-likely phases of brain activation, when we're basically responding no better to life than beaten animals locked in cages, we finally get to the first point of logical, human, thinking.

The point of reckoning.

Too bad it fucking sucks, huh? This is when your prefrontal cortex finally gets a little action. You integrate information that first started streaming in with the immediate outcome you're observing and maybe have a flash of big-picture thinking that you can start to lean into.

So now you're looking at the plate you just threw, the reaction of your loved one, and the reality of the situation that lead to ceramic all over the floor as you feel tears streaming down your face, and something in your head says, "uh, was this necessary?"

There are multiple streams of data coming in, possibly now giving you enough information to highlight the fact that there are gaping discrepancies between what your head automatically assumed about the meaning of this event, and what details reality held, which apparently took a little more time to be revealed.

Reckoning; let's call it the "oh, shit" moment that lies between Expected and Actual, with you showing up as the flawed and presumptuous key player in both. It sucks. And it DOES take quite a bit of higher level brain engagement just to get to this point of self-recognition and reanalysis of original cognitive events.

First, your emotions have to be dampened or shut down. Your survival responses have to have run their course. And you need to be at the point of integrating larger picture details without having subjective emotional re-reactions to them.

All of this, as we've covered in the past two points, requires practice and attention to make it happen. And if the brain involved has the opinion "I can't help how I act," or "I'm not wrong for reacting this way," or "this is just how I am, it's YOUR job NOT to react to how I react," that's not going to happen.

So if you've ever wondered "how can they not SEE that they're taking this to level one billion for no reason?" "How can they ACT that way in public?" "Don't they have any self-control?!"

I mean, no, it's very possible that they can't access those fairly-human capacities when they're still upset and wrongly automatically reacting. Or convinced that whatever they do is acceptable, because they "feel that way."

Sorry, tough love moment, it's not acceptable for anyone. And your reactions CAN be inappropriate when compared to realistic larger pictures. But it won't feel that way until you move on to...

4. Regaining control

Finally, we have the stage of brain engagement that I think (at least ideally) we all DO want to reach. You know, acting like what we define as "humans." Self-regulating beings capable of changing our behaviors with reasonable thinking and historical learning.

After we pass through Reckoning, noting that we've really fucked this up... we can start processing ways to knock it off.

Dial it back down. Turn off this reaction - it's not appropriate. Or dampen this emotion - it isn't helping. Change this cognition - the situation is not really what we thought in the first place.

Sit down, take a breath, and try to look at this from a different perspective. See outside data. Integrate information from another viewpoint. Challenge what your initial reflexes and reactions were doing, counter them with alternate thoughts, and bring the energy to a more appropriate place.

This is when we turn down those lower level brain activities, *through* the prefrontal cortex as we also send that newly-available energy up top, back to the CEO of the whole company who's calling the shots.

Those moments when you suddenly calm down, quiet your emotions, or have a conflicting thought that lessens the sting of the situation by 50%? It's your fancy human brain taking the wheel back, Fucker. Thank god. The screaming has ended.

Again, unless you're dealing with people who aren't really on the market for regaining control, because it would require them to acknowledge they lost it and that wasn't ideal, in the first place. People with family members who are NEVER wrong and have no responsibility for their actions... well... they just can't reach this level of brain processing. Too defensive. Too emotional. Very likely... just too worried about protecting their ego to scrutinize any of their actions.

Which means they'll never reach a realistic point of memory...

5. Reconsolidation

Lastly, the most impressive thing our head can do, is taking allllll that data we just accumulated from this one event. The antecedent, behavior, and consequences that were just experienced. And it reassesses, reframes, and rewrites everything that just happened.

Not only as a singular learning event. “Reaction B didn’t work out well to Event A, because it turned into Consequence C of me looking like a fucking jaghole.”

But also as a historically relevant event, “Which is a shame, because I had no reason to think X of this person or assume Z was the next thing coming out of their mouth just because that’s what my mom always said. I’m an idiot. I hope I didn’t ruin this relationship, which has been wonderful leading up to this point.”

AND also as a filter “slash” behavioral instruction for the future. “So now I know, if someone says F, it might trigger a reaction that isn’t appropriate, especially with the discriminating stimulus of so and so being involved. I need to keep my cool, slow down my system, and listen harder before I react.”

In this way, all the details of the event are no longer just floating around in the brain-body system as half-processed memories to be trapped and dizzied by. They now have MEANING and historical placement, which clears the brain cache, enables other processes to be purposefully enacted, and alters the future behaviors of the organism.

The memory has been reconsolidated, as it’s called. This is something we’re doing all the time, whether we realize it or not. Every time you learn something new, you have to reconsolidate prior memories to make everything fit together again. This reframing of declarative memories is a very impressive human feat that keeps your appraisals accurate and congruent, as well as fairly efficient from a brain energy conservation and neural cell utilization standpoint.

It’s the “lifelong learning” function we have, which allows us to evolve as individuals.

But, again... it just took a relatively large amount of energy, time, and wherewithal to get to this place. It requires access TO the human brain, in order to MANAGE everything below it.

And a lot of us just don’t reside here, in this space where we AREN’T bogged down by half-activated emotions, experiences, and survival events from the past that functionally make human-level thinking impossible in the present.

OR, again, too egoically-wrapped up in life to be able to observe our actions as “possibly not the best” with an intention to fix that fact.

Wrap up

Until, that is, we work through all that old, still alive, data by following the same 5 R processes and reach some realistic point of prefrontal cortex self-enlightenment where we don't hate our self, but still aim to improve our self.

So, I think it helps for us all to start regularly running through the R's:

Noticing our reflexes

Naming our reactions

Coming to a place of reckoning

Regaining control of lower processes

And reframing the event with detail integration and memory reconsolidations

You know, for everything we've been carrying around for however many years its been on our backs. And for every new event that might not have been our best shining moment. And, honestly, it helps to do this for basically every interaction in between. Always reanalyzing if our behaviors are in line with who we want to be, and making cognitive notes about the ways to just slow down and handle this point or that one a tiny bit better next time.

Eventually... less reactivity will be your prize. More top-down, Self-awareness, and brain management powers.

So. If you wonder why some people are just illogically reactive. Impossible to have conversations with. Or why you, yourself, respond in ways that make you ashamed from a human standpoint later.

I hope that mystery is stage 6: Resolved.

It might help next time you or someone you love is being less than their ideal version of Self, and seems to have forgotten that person exists at all.

And it might also help to explain this hierarchy to people in your life who've had a hard time understanding some of your actions in the past. It doesn't excuse what's been done. But it might explain it in a way that cuts out some of the confusion and fear.

And, honestly, isn't that the common result of all this learning we do about our stupid fucking brains?

Hail self-understanding for the sake of self-improvement.