

Thinking vs emotional brain: Staying grounded during Covid-19

WomanUp co-founder Clodagh Hughes on staying grounded when your emotional brain wants to turn you upside down.

We don't often recognise that the smallest organ in our body, our brain, has enormous power over how we lead ourselves, our direct reports and our teams. With the onset of Covid-19, never before have we been tested to use this organ so responsibly.

Brain science 101 tells us that our brain is made up of two key parts. The thinking brain helps us keep perspective, make future-orientated decisions and lead effectively. The emotional brain, on the other hand, wants to keep us safe and is 5 times more powerful than the thinking brain.

In times of stress and pressure the emotional brain, causes us to react in super quick, patterned ways. That's helpful if you're trying to escape a hungry tiger or deal with a critical emergency, but not so helpful when those we lead are looking to us for calm and considered guidance and support while Covid-19 persists.

Responding to challenges

Psychologists have told us that our emotional brain causes us to respond very often *unconsciously* to challenging times in one of four ways – **fight, flight, freeze or fawn**.

Which one we choose as our “go to” strategy in times of severe stress can overtake our logical thinking brain clouding our better judgment and what may be the right strategy or action for a staff member, colleague, team or indeed the future of our business.

If you find you are lashing out more than usual at the moment due to Covid19 and all its uncertainties, then your default style could be **fight**. If, on the other hand, you notice that you are quieter and more withdrawn then your default style might be **flight**.

If you feel overwhelmed, then your default style could be **freeze**. Finally, if you find that your reaction to this crisis is to put the needs of others way ahead of your own, your default reaction could be **fawn**.

Whichever style you recognise as being most like yours, as leaders none are particularly helpful especially when your staff are looking to you to be the lighthouse in the eye of a **very powerful storm**.

‘Cocoon’ your emotional brain

Simply put during these testing times, we need to ensure that our emotional brain is, using Covid-19 terminology, “cocooned”. So, what are the strategies that we as leaders can employ to keep our emotional brains in check?

First and foremost, it’s important to take time out, despite the huge pressures Covid-19 is placing on us. It’s critical to quietening our reactive and ruminating emotional brain and minding our mental wellbeing. It’s also important to get plenty of exercise. Research shows that routine and continued exercise releases chemicals that reduces the reactive nature of the emotional brain.

And finally, mindfulness. Much has been said about the power of just 10 minutes of this “brain exercise” a day. As a sceptic for many years, I now practise it religiously. Without doubt it has had the biggest and most positive impact on curtailing my triggered and unhelpful reactions to stress.

Another simple and practical way to stay grounded when our emotional brain wants to turn us upside down, is to use what the academic researcher Katie Hendricks calls “physical pattern interrupts.” Put simply, when triggered, use physical movement to “put a break on “or interrupt our default flight, fight, freeze or fawn reactions.

For example, if your automatic reaction is to **fight**, get your thinking brain engaged by taking a

deep breath and moving yourself away from the situation. If it's to *flee*, stop that automatic response by planting your feet firmly on the ground and staying in that spot firmly for five seconds. If it's **freeze**, move every limb in your body so that you wake yourself up physically. Finally, if it's **fawn**, hug yourself with both arms to demonstrate "*I am taking care of myself first*" in order to take care of others appropriately.

Great leaders, as we know, are judged not by how they show up when things are going well but how they show up when things are really tough.

Covid-19 will test us all. Not allowing our emotional "fear" based brain to be in driving seat while dealing with all it throws at us will be a crucial first step to help us rise to that challenge.

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