

# TAMING THE BRAIN

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THE KEY TO SOCIAL  
AND EMOTIONAL  
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THE KEY TO SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

BY LATA CHAWLA AND KRIS KILE

Taming the brain enables us to get off autopilot (the ingrained behaviors and habitual responses we have to things) and moves you towards being more intentional and focused. The ability to understand your mind and sense your inner world, as well as the inner world of others, is the fundamental skill which underlies both social and emotional intelligence.

It builds your capacity to create balance and harmony in the midst of chaos and rigidity (internally and externally) such that you are able to achieve optimal results—as you experience life to the fullest and flourish in your relationships with others.

There are very few disciplines and practices in life that will pay richer dividends than those that address how to “tame the brain.” What we mean by “tame the brain” is to work with your brain and nervous system and all their connected parts to have them work for you rather than against you.

## THE BRAIN IS A SURVIVAL MACHINE

At its core, the brain is a survival “machine.” Its primary focus is to help us to survive physically. This includes its ability to trigger an automatic, “fight, flight or freeze” response when we are

faced with a situation that puts us in harm’s way. This is a good thing. For example, imagine you are walking across a road in the dark, and, half way across the road, you suddenly realize that a car is speeding toward you and the driver apparently does not see you. What happens to you internally?

Your system floods your body with powerful hormones and neurotransmitters designed to generate almost super-human speed and quickness. The part of your limbic system—the emotional side of the brain—that is constantly (unconsciously) assessing for threats in your environment kicks in far faster than the speed of thought and spurs you into immediate action as you leap from your current spot and run across the road to avoid being hit and narrowly make it, as the car speeds on by, never even seeing you.

All of this occurs before you even had time to think about it. In fact, your thinking brain shuts down during this event to accommodate all focus being driven by your limbic system to contribute to your survival.

## THREAT ASSESSMENT

As you can see, our brain is designed beautifully when it comes to our physical survival. However, the brain can apply the

same threat assessments and conclusions to other events that happen in our lives, real or imagined, which are not life threatening. For example, let's say you have a teen aged son who is three hours late for dinner and with each hour that passes, you become progressively worried and afraid that something terrible has happened to him. To your brain, this is a perceived threat, and the same powerful physical responses that happened in the situation with the speeding car can kick into action. We call this "flooding", meaning you are overwhelmed by your emotional response to an incident.

So, let's say in this situation, your automatic response is panic. You call all of your son's friends to find out where he might be and you have no luck. Then you jump in the car and go to the baseball field where he was supposed to be and drive around looking for him with no luck. Now you become more worried and start thinking about all of the places he might go that are within walking distance. You check in the school, you check McDonald's and then you go into the local pizza place. And, lo and behold, there's your son at the corner table laughing and carrying on with his friends.

Now you are fuming! You go over to the table and scold him in front of his friends for worrying you. You demand he leave with you right then and there. And, as you are walking to the car, you are scolding him even more for his thoughtless behavior. As you enter the driveway, you now demand an explanation from him by asking, "What do you have to say for yourself, young man! Just wait till your father gets home and hears about this!!"

The son then replies, "But Mom, I left you a note on the table that said it was Billy's birthday today and we were taking him out

for pizza and that I would be home by 7:30."

At this point, they enter the house, and the mother feels foolish because there is the note, just as her son said...right there on the table in plain sight. "I don't know how I missed that" she says in a bewildered and muffled tone. The son looks at her, shakes his head, looks at her in disbelief and walks off to his room and shuts the door.

So, what happened in this scenario? The mother became emotionally flooded when she concluded that something bad had happened to her son. When emotional flooding occurs, you are often not able to think straight, because your thinking brain is basically shut down and taken "off-line" by your emotional brain. When this occurs, your response can often be out of proportion to the actual "danger" present and cause all sorts of relational breakdowns and upset if not kept in balance.

## THE SURVIVAL MACHINE

So, as we said, the brain is a survival machine. While survival beats the heck out of not surviving, life is much more than a survival game, it's about thriving.

Thriving is about being in balance and harmony and experiencing peace and calm which all require the brain to function beyond its survival tendencies. The good news is that you can do specific practices and disciplines that will contribute towards "taming your brain" such that it behaves when it should. And that is good news indeed!

It is possible to enhance healthy linkage between the emotional parts of your brain

and the thinking parts of your brain. The emotional brain and thinking brain can collaborate with each other, with both parts behaving—neither part trying to dominate, but rather communicating together in a civil manner. When you “tame your brain” to do that, it can result in balance and harmony and healthy interactions in relationships.

## THE EPIC BATTLE

There is always an “Epic Battle” going on in the brain which takes place between the emotional side of brain and the thinking side of the brain. Often, many people try to resolve this battle by completely repressing one at the expense of the other. But, this battle can only be won through INTEGRATION and LINKAGE. And, this only happens when the emotional brain and the thinking brain are cooperating and collaborating together to bring balance and harmony.

When the emotional brain and the thinking brain are at odds, it brings a level of chaos and rigidity to life and the results we experience often are stress, overwhelmedness, anxiety, worry, fear, burnout, and fatigue. The way to counteract these symptoms is through a variety of mindfulness and mindsight practices that build awareness as well as balance and integration. Let’s look at these a little further.

### Tame the Brain — The Epic Battle vs. The Triangle of Well-Being

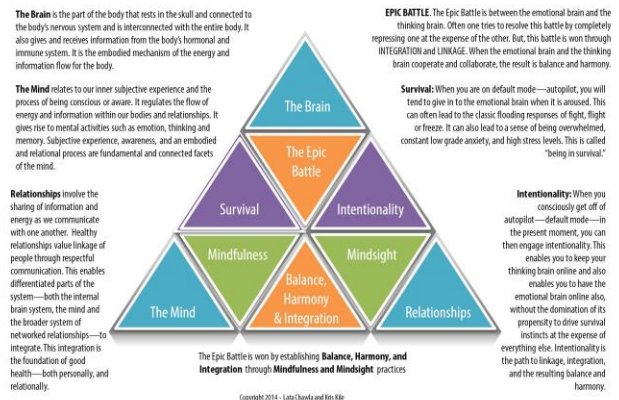


FIGURE 1 - TAME THE BRAIN -  
THE TRIANGLE OF WELL-BEING

## THE NEED FOR BALANCE AND INTEGRATION

The stress and speed of Life can quickly throw us out of balance if we don’t manage it properly. And it’s usually not until there is a breakdown that we realize just how off-balance we are.

Meet Carl and Linda. They live in a life of constant activity and hurriedness—they have places to go, people to see, and a calendar filled with deadlines and work priorities. This leaves them with little to no ‘quality time’ to relax, enjoy each other’s company or be with their children.

Both are emotionally stressed and overwhelmed due to work and have become oversensitive and reactive to the obstacles that show up in life day-to-day. The impact of one obstacle can throw off their relationship for days. For example, it was Carl’s turn to pick up their daughter after ballet lessons. Linda was at work when Carl informed her that he was not able to make it because of a last minute sales presentation that he had to do for a

client. Linda got very upset that she had to leave work, yet again, to pick up their daughter. This was not going to score any points with her boss.

Carl was working super hard because he was feeling threatened by a new colleague that was hired six months ago and was outshining him in the sales arena. He was feeling pressured as the senior sales representative to keep his sales at a higher rate than the new person. He was working longer hours, and pushing himself harder than ever to beat his quarterly goals. And because of this, he was abdicating his responsibilities at home.

Both Linda and Carl are emotionally hijacked by the pressures and stresses of life but don't know how to get back in balance, both internally and relationally. The reality is that chronic stress, anxiety and overwhelmedness leave your brain and nervous system in an ongoing, elevated, threat assessment state. It raises your "reactivity set point." This makes it much more difficult to maintain calm and balance in your interactions. It predisposes you to irritation, defensiveness, and fight, flight or freeze responses.

Victor Frankl, the author, psychiatrist and neurologist, and Nazi death camp survivor, in his book, stated:

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In the space there is the power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Carl and Linda's "space" between daily interactive stimuli and responses is

currently greatly diminished. Their 'job' is to expand that space, to embody balance and harmony in their interactions. This will require enhanced linkage and integration of their brain. This is literally what is needed. Mindfulness practices will enable them to develop new neuron pathways that support this possibility.

But, their issues are not simple to fix. They have a holistic crisis at hand. Essentially their lives are out of control to a certain degree. To genuinely create a new trajectory for their relationship, personal well-being, and family life with their children will require a significant leap in intentionality. They will need to embrace changes that will support that, rather than being run by the 'tyranny of the urgent' and the endless treadmill of survival and scarcity.

## TAMING THE BRAIN

The endgame for "Taming the Brain" is Integration and Balance in several areas:

**First** is integrating the brain itself, by keeping the thinking brain online and preventing the emotional brain from hijacking the entire brain. It teaches the thinking brain and emotional brain to get along—to "play nice" and work with each other rather than at cross-purposes to each other.

**Second** is integrating the brain's influence on the mind. The brain is the part of the body that rests in the skull and is connected to the body's nervous system and is interconnected with the entire body. The mind is an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information within our bodies and

relationships. This involves applying the mind to increase the level of intentionality in regulating the flow of energy and information in the individual. It is using the mind's ability to regulate to prioritize balance and integration in emotional and rational energy and information flow such that one is predisposed to value balance over allowing either their thinking brain or emotional brain dominate their interactions internally and with others.

**Third** is integrating one's interaction in relationships. This involves empowering the mind to maintain focus on taming the brain such that one's interactions with others can be balanced and integrated rather than hijacked by emotional outbursts or diminished by sparse emotional presence. Consistently applying practices in the first two areas helps enable one to maintain balance even when confronted with another who has their brain hijacked by their emotional brain.

Let's take a look at what we can do in order to counteract the impacts of a hectic and hurried life.

## OVERCOMING FLOODING

Flooding refers to when the emotional brain generates a fight/flight/freeze mindset as a threat response. This includes powerful hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol being dumped in your system to create hyper alertness. The problem created by flooding is that it shuts down your thinking brain, thus, basically, leaving you without the resource of rational thought in the moment, unless you work to bring your thinking brain back online. In the back of the book there is an exercise to help you overcome emotional flooding.

## OVERWHELMEDNESS

There are many, many things you can do to counteract the debilitating effects of consistently being in a chaotic, stressful situation. It is easy to simply get caught up in the flow of a chaotic, stressful workplace or environment and not practice intentionality when possible. Do not succumb to the perceived inevitability of a difficult work or home environment. Be proactive and take responsibility for your internal state of being regardless what external factors may be impacting it. They are specific mindfulness and mindsight practices that help you 'rewire' your brain through enhanced integration and linkage.

## INTEGRATING YOUR BRAIN "ON THE FLY"--TAKE TWO

We have found that many people simply do not believe they can rearrange their daily schedule to accommodate chunks of time for "Taming the Brain" rejuvenating practices. If you fall into this category and cannot see a way to block out time to do this, there is a tremendous amount of "in the moment" practices that you can do to create balance, integration and harmony throughout the day.

We call this "integrating your brain—on the fly." You can capture moments to promote calmness, peace, balance, and integration if you make it a priority and practice intentionality in doing it. Taking as little two minutes to practice "taming the brain" can make a huge difference in the course of your day. We call this practice "Take Two." There are some exercises in the back of the book that will show you how to do this.

## IN SUMMARY

Taming the brain is an essential part of living a focused, balanced and integrated lifestyle. Mindfulness and mindsight practices can help maintain these states and will also increase your level of efficiency and effectiveness.

It is absolutely possible to chart a new path that will rejuvenate and revitalize our lives—both individually and collectively. Practicing just a few of the disciplines can get you on the path of expanding the space between stimulus and response in your life. This is the road to balance and integration.