

Becoming Brain Smart

Within the limbic system, the amygdala constantly scans our surroundings for potential danger, serves as the gatekeeper for the flow of energy in the brain, and tags and stores negative emotional events in our memory for future reference. As the gatekeeper, the amygdala can send the flow of energy and information up to the executive state, organizing the child. The amygdala can also send the flow of energy and information down to the survival state, creating a more disorganized, misbehaving child. The quality of our relationships will either help calm the amygdala, resulting in healthy threat perception and a sense of safety, or exacerbate it, sensitizing us to fear, threat and distrust.

Healthy relationships release oxytocin in the brain to calm the amygdala, allowing greater access to our executive state and the Power of Love (love as a conscious choice to see the best, not as a romantic feeling). It allows us to trust others and ensures we feel safe in their presence. It can only be accessed in the present moment or as Eckhart Tolle calls it, "the now moment" (Tolle, 2004). Love requires our presence; presence requires us to suspend our judgments and forecasts of other's intentions.

Oxytocin is a hormone in the brain involved in bonding. It affects generosity, increases empathy and develops trust between people (Kosfeld, Heinrichs, Zak, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2005 and Zak, Stanton, & Ahmadi, 2007)

Unhealthy relationships, on the other hand, cause cortisol in the brain to hype up the amygdala and distrusting others becomes the preferred stance. Unhealthy relationships create strong, distorted CD-Rom filters that skew our views of others. Without access to the Power of Love, we are constantly looking for what is wrong and believing others are disrespecting us or being hurtful. We take others' behavior personally, overlooking the fact that we are making this meaning up and can change our perception at any time. With an overactive amygdala and CD-Rom filter, we remain guarded and ready to defend, attack, manipulate and coerce. This leaves our body in a constant state of stress and our brain in the lower centers. We erroneously believe if we can predict the next moment, we can control it, make the world go our way and keep ourselves safe. There can be no safety in a mind preoccupied with the past and projecting into the future. Safety can only be found in the present moment.

Attachment with caregivers during the first three years of life and the quality of our significant relationships as we grow determine whether the amygdala is hyped up or on healthy alert. Our relationship history helps determine how we see others' intentions. When we look through a lens of distrust, we see conniving, manipulative people who will take advantage of us if we let our guard down. When we look through the lens of love and trust, we are willing to offer positive intent, see others as doing the best they can with the skills they have and perceive the call for help behind every difficult behavior. Our relationship history shapes the set points on our CD-Rom but does not define them. Each of us is free to utilize the Power of Love to see differently at any time; some of us simply require more diligence and practice than others. Check in with yourself: Are you resistant to seeing the best in colleagues and the children in your care? Check to see if your early relationship history could be a factor.

We stress ourselves when we see the world in negative, judgmental terms. As our negative emotions become involved, the brain launches a biochemical response that prepares the body