

Emotions in the Mind!

Emotions are an integral part of our response to the environment. They can be beneficial, or they can be detrimental – especially during decision-making. First, let's explore the function of the limbic system of the brain.

One can consider the brain as comprised of a “thinking brain” (the cerebral hemispheres) and an “emotional brain” (the limbic system). The limbic system protects us, and allows us to remember events and situations that caused strong emotions. It is the “primitive” brain, concerned not with rational thought but response to environment.

- The amygdala creates the “fight or flight or freeze” response and filters important sensory information from the unimportant.
- The hippocampus converts objective versions of events from short term to long term memory
- Together, the amygdala and hippocampus combine to create memories with a focus on memories regarding events that caused an emotional response.
- The thalamus observes external stimuli and relays that information to the amygdala, which can trigger an immediate emotional response.
- The thalamus also releases specific hormones – cortisol (in response to stress); endorphins (in response to positive experiences) and adrenaline (in response to arousal).

When we make decisions, the limbic system can help or hinder the process, depending on the level of emotion involved.

How do we make decisions?

Contrary to what we may think, our decisions are fully conscious (that is, the brain has taken in data, and processes it while we're fully aware). But most decision-making is so automatic, we're not even aware of how we make our decisions. In fact, approximately 98% percent of brain activity is at a subconscious level!

Our brains enable us to make decisions based on sensory input, memories and emotions. The process goes like this: we receive sensory input and combine that data with memories and emotions to create a response.

But why do we sometimes make seemingly irrational decisions – and why are some of our decisions impulsive or confused? Why do we sometimes ask ourselves, “now what in the world made me do that?” Since much of our decision-making process takes place largely in the subconscious, we have to look at emotions as catalysts for some of the decisions we make.

- In some instances, we “act before we think” – an immediate, automatic response to a threatening event. We do not always take time to weigh consequences.
- In other situations, we “think before we act” – immediate action is not required, and we have time to consider consequences and options. Decisions are based on our belief system and emotional triggers stored as memories.

Let's look at emotions and how they impact the way we receive and process new information (in other words, how we learn). Emotion is defined in several ways: as a neural impulse that moves an organism to action; a state of mental agitation or disturbance.

When we experience a negative emotion while we are learning (or assimilating new information), the body produces cortisol, which inhibits learning and our ability to think-outside-of-the reaction. When we experience positive emotions during learning, the body releases endorphins and/or adrenaline, both of which enhance learning and our ability to think in multiple dimensions. Endorphins and adrenaline are hormones we associate with a heightened state of awareness and enhanced performance.

When our emotional state is 'charged' it reduces our sensory capabilities. When our emotional state is in overdrive, the body's endocrine system is busy flooding the system with hormones. When a person is feeling fear, stress, or other negative emotions, the surge of cortisol through the body not only inhibits sensory input, but increases blood pressure and blood sugar and the brain focuses on getting you out of that situation in any way it can (fight, flight, or freeze; this includes avoidance behaviors such as inability to concentrate and lack of attention).

How emotions influence decision-making:

- Logical decision-making seeks to exclude emotions and rely strictly on data. Each option's merits are analyzed before a decision is made.
- An emotionally-driven decision is very fast, almost spontaneous, reactive and largely subconscious. Emotion tends to override logic or uses rationalization (pseudo-logic) to support an emotionally-driven choice. Many decisions start off as perfectly logical, but emotions dictate the final choice.
- Arguably, the final decision is always emotional to some degree (the person's motivation for desiring a certain outcome). Even seemingly logical decisions "feel" right or wrong. Since emotions are based in the subconscious mind, then it stands to reason that the subconscious is the place where most decision-making takes place.

How coaching can help reduce the influence of emotions for better thinking and responses to reality

So how do we control our emotions so that we may make better decisions – instead of allowing our emotions to run the show?

There are two concepts that must be understood.

One is Emotional Intelligence, and the other is Emotional Mastery.

- Emotional Intelligence (EI) is the process by which a person can identify, assess, and manage one's emotions; a sub-theme of EI is Emotional Mastery, or the ability to control those emotions.

For example, let's say someone says something really nasty and horrible about you. Emotional Intelligence allows you to identify your emotional response - in this case, sadness, hurt, anger, bitterness, resentment, etc. Emotional Mastery allows you to control those emotions. That is not to say that you "stuff them down" – rather you acknowledge the emotions and you identify *why* that person's remarks upset you; and you make a decision to react – or not react – in a certain way that is beneficial to you rather than destructive (such as violence).

A good Coach will help you learn to master your emotions. Controlling emotions is the key to avoiding anxiety, addiction, anger, panic attacks and other self-destructive behaviors. Through coaching, you will learn:

- How to perceive and correctly assess not only your own emotions but those of other people
- How to understand your emotions and how they impact all of your decisions
- How to use emotions to enhance problem solving and adapting to new situations
- How to control and manage emotions in other people as well as in yourself (to inspire and influence others, for better conflict resolution, and better relationships)

Now that you have an understanding of how the brain works, you will benefit from the services of a Coach to help you manage emotions, enhance learning, and maximize your potential through growth as a human being. If you are interested in learning more and/or trying out coaching for yourself... take advantage of a free coaching session by contacting Baraka Institute at 503-241-2200 or via email: info@barakainstitute.com