

Understanding Your Emotions.

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

Sometimes we are 'our own worst enemy', and it's important to know what's happening in the brain then.

It is our primitive brain that generates emotions, and it does so very forcibly. So forcibly, in fact, that our rational brain – what we usually regard as 'me' – sometimes has a lot of trouble coping with it. Our rational brain therefore needs every help it can get, hence this study-sheet.

The primitive brain feels things are true, whether they are true or not. For example, it may feel that it is dangerous to take a ride in a taxi. It may even feel this very strongly, so as to produce acute anxiety in us, even to the extent of avoiding taking such a ride, or even getting out of a taxi once started. And yet the fact is that it is not dangerous to ride in a taxi; at least, no more dangerous than any other aspect of our lives.

What else might the primitive brain say?

You probably know this best for yourself, but the following are examples from other people:

- 1 Life just isn't worth living.
- 2 Without Anne, life just isn't worth living.
- 3 I can't stand to be away from home and on my own.
- 4 It's a spider! Do something somebody!
- 5 Something awful is going to happen – I just know it.
- 6 He's bang out of order – I'm going to sort him out.
- 7 I've just got to get out of here – I don't know why, I've just got to.
- 8 He's got a nice iPod, why shouldn't I have it – I'm taking it off him.
- 9 I know I'm married, but this lady is really attractive – why shouldn't I!

In each case you can see the harmful effects that will result. But the primitive brain says these things so strongly sometimes – shouts them almost – that the rational brain may find it very difficult to resist. So what can we do about it?

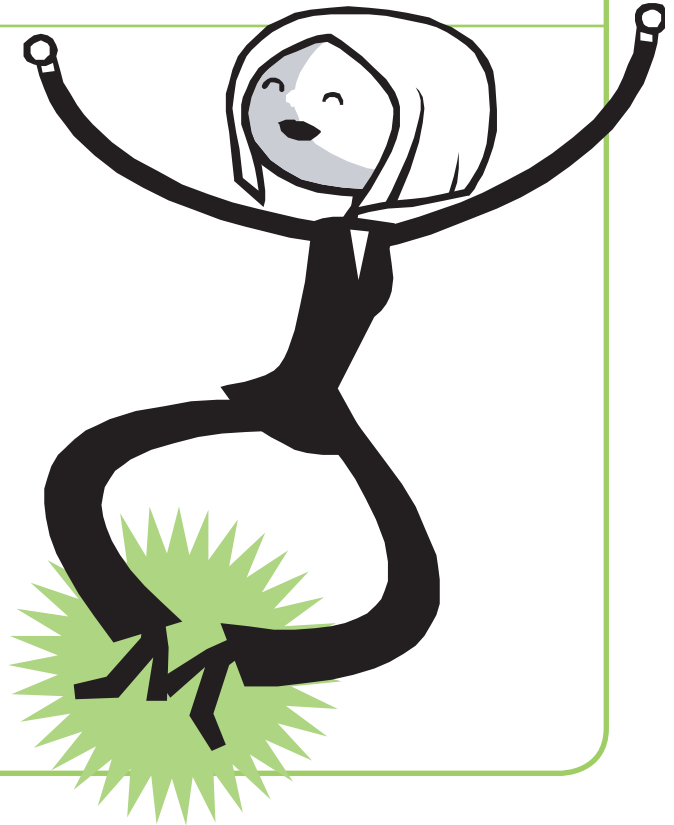


Putting the primitive brain in its place.

The rational brain has a lot in its armoury – it's rational after all. Some of its best weapons to look after us are:

- A To work out when the primitive brain is most likely to say these things, and plan what to do. (The rational brain is good at planning.)
- B To argue back. (e.g. Sort him out? What do you mean sort him out – start a fight with him? Do you want to end up in prison?)
- C To 'not listen' to the primitive brain, i.e. to concentrate on something else. What's happening around you, your breathing, etc.
- D To deliberately calm down the primitive brain by feeding it things it likes, like certain music, nice food, a cup of tea, exercise etc.

Can you think of any others?



Is there really a primitive brain and rational brain?

Yes. The primitive brain comprises mainly the limbic system and the cerebellum – most animals have these components. The rational brain is virtually unique to humans, and is termed the cerebrum (confusingly similar to the cerebellum which is totally different) or sometimes called the cerebral cortex. The link between the primitive and the rational varies from person to person; some people find it very easy to control their primitive brains, some find it very difficult.

In session

There is a list of 9 things the primitive brain might say, overleaf. See if you can add a tenth. Consider each of the 10 in turn. Which of the four strategies (A-D) listed above do you think would best suit each of the nine 'problems'. Would you ever use two or more strategies on one problem?

Discuss with your neighbours or in the large group if you want.

Think of yourself. What does your primitive brain say to you that you find troublesome?
How can you answer it back, and no longer be 'your own worst enemy'?

Project

Take action. Do what you decided in the last of the in-session tasks.

Make notes on how you get on, and tell the group next time if you want to.