

The Spectrum of Attitudes and Defensive Maneuvers

Development of a Defensive Maneuver

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During infancy and childhood, neglect and abuse trigger anxiety. This is an unbearable sensation and the infant and child uses every means at his or her disposal to get away from or reduce this terrible feeling.

The action that triggers anxiety sets in motion in the brain a cascade of electrical/chemical connections to various parts of the brain to produce the emotional reaction and whatever physical action that accompanies it. For example, an infant who fears abandonment (separation loss) will go into a fit of wriggling, screaming and demanding attention. If anxiety persists, she will 'wear out' and go numb. If neglect is repeated enough, going numb will become a defensive maneuver -a substitution for anxiety- and when she sees abandonment coming, she will attempt to skip the anxiety by going numb immediately.

When the neglect or abuse is repeated, over time the synaptic network that produces this reaction becomes 'hard wired'. This means that as soon as the foresight function sees one of the stimuli that signals abuse or neglect, the child goes numb.

This is an extreme example of the way a defensive maneuver becomes automatic. "Cells that fire together, wire together." (LeDoux) Depending on the severity of the abuse or neglect, the child will develop maneuvers that feel like they are helping. This procedure and selection of the precise maneuver is out of awareness.

This series of actions is not really in the infant and child's awareness. "The brain in other words, learns and stores many things in networks that function outside the conscious awareness. These learned tendencies affect all aspects of the mind and behavior, and are at least as important for day-to-day functioning as what we know about ourselves consciously." (LeDoux)

This capacity for foreseeing anxiety by learning to read the field (be aware of all the actions and atmosphere) that signals threat is called foresight function and is an early warning system that forewarns that trouble is coming. It initiates the substitution procedure described above.

"...inputs to the amygdale, the center-piece of the defense system. These detection and reaction processes take place automatically, independent of conscious awareness of the stimulus and feelings about it." (LeDoux)

The significance of this for us is that at the slightest indication in the field that resonates with old anxiety triggers, we 'automatically' slip into habitual defensive maneuvers without being aware of why.

"Habits are learned not just through encounters with reinforcers, but also in common social situations in which we observe successes and failures of others...more and more research on

social behavior is beginning to emphasize implicit or unconscious aspects of human motivation.” (LeDoux)

The good news is that if we learn to become aware of the self-destructiveness of these habitual actions, we may learn to intervene—interrupt the electrical cascade leading to the behavior and substitute a more constructive action.

“The bad news is that if we don’t know what it is we are learning about, these stimuli might on later occasion trigger fear responses that will be difficult to understand and control...” (LeDoux)

“In modern life, we sometimes suffer from the exquisite operation of this system, since it is difficult to get rid of this kind of conditioning once it is no longer applicable to our lives, and we sometime become conditioned to fear things that are in fact harmless.” (LeDoux)

Below is an outline of possible consequences:

- Any perception (conscious or unconscious) that I am being treated or might be treated as less than meaningful
- Any perceived possibility of making a mistake
- Triggers Anxiety: **Acute** **Moderate** **Mild**
- Which activates foresight function
- Which selects without consulting me a defensive maneuver that will nearly always be destructive.

Anxiety Driven				Consciousness Driven		
Aggressive	Antagonistic	Passive Aggressive	Neutral	Positive/Courageous		
Disobedient	Adversarial	Distracted	Undermines	Attentive	Receptive	Supports confusions/uncertainty
Quarrelsome	Opposes	Listless	Neglectful	Supportive	Responsive	Temporarily suspends disbelief
Combative	Controlling	Bored	Mistake-prone	Listens	Hospitable	Builds
Dominating	Contrary	Unresponsive	Misunderstands	Approves	Non-restrictive	Deals as equal
Hostile	Squabbly	Ignores	Careless	Credits	Open-minded	
Angry	Competitive	Oblivious	Disinterested	Connects	Optimistic	
Litigious	Cynical	Unconscious	Pessimistic	Jumps to favorable conclusions	Shares risks	
Contemptuous		Doesn't get it			Listens approximately	
Critical					Protects vulnerable beginnings	
Non-Recruitable		Recruitable		Recruiter		

Bibliography

Joseph LeDoux, **Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are** Penguin USA; ISBN: 0142001783; (February 2003)

Joseph LeDoux, **The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life** Touchstone Books; ISBN: 0684836599; Reprint edition (March 1998)