

STOP: How to Recognize Emotional Hijacking

Emotional hijacking is the condition when a person's emotions overtake his or her cognitive reasoning. Scientifically, it is where the reward center of the brain overrides the executive portion of the brain. Put simply, it is when emotions take the wheel.

I think about the times I have opened my mouth and inserted my foot because of heightened emotions and stressful situations. I remember the moments when I made decisions out of wounded feelings, offenses or disappointments rather than taking the time to process my thoughts and emotions. It was a revolutionary time for me when I learned the science behind the process of thought and how often emotions "take over" wisdom and lead to these unbeneficial and sometimes harmful decisions.

How does an emotional hijack happen? Information first enters through our five senses. In a hijack, that information will reach the amygdala—the feeling part of the brain—before the cerebral cortex—the thinking, reasoning and conscious part of our brains. It is a subconscious response to protect us from danger rather than waiting for the conscious brain to react.

Have you ever reacted quickly, putting on the brakes as your arm subconsciously swings out to protect the passenger? This is emotional hijacking and is a necessary neurological function to protect us from physical danger. The problem, however, is when we react in fear to emotional threats. My feelings get hurt and I explode! We see it on the news with road rage or crimes of passion. It might be as simple as a child, or adult, throwing a temper tantrum. When we are dealing with emotional threats, our brains want to respond in the same way as with physical threats. This is dangerous

because these hijacking moments can and will be destructive to our leadership and sabotaging to our influence.

What do we do? How should we respond when our emotions want to commandeer our reasoning? Science acknowledges when a person is able to immediately recognize he or she is emotionally hijacking, the person is more able to submit it to wisdom. Ever hear someone say, “just breathe”? That is sound advice worth taking because when you breathe calmly, you are engaging your frontal cortex—the judgment and reasoning portion of your brain. When you sense these moments happening or about to happen, tell yourself to think rationally—keep the thinking part of your brain “turned on” when the emotions will want to ignore it completely. Choose to have an attitude of thankfulness! It is very difficult to have two emotional responses at the same time. Will it be fear-based or wisdom-filled? Give your emotions time to recover before you make an important decision or confront a situation.

It’s important to know that the choices you make, the responses you have and the attitude you portray determine the results you obtain. Think about what you want to accomplish, how you want to lead and the influence you want to have. Your thoughts and corresponding actions will prophesy your future!

Remember, think about what you’re thinking about!

For a full conversation on emotional hijacking, listen to this episode of the Life Exchange podcast. {[eoa](#)}

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