

Me, Myself, and My Amygdala

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A Mindfulness Based Approach to Understanding and Freeing Ourselves from the Mental Afflictions with which We *ALL* Struggle.

Mindfulness teaches us that it is essential that we learn how to observe our minds, and recognize that we are intrinsically double natured and that the part of us that can self-observe (witness, observe without judgment, objectively like a scientist looking through a microscope) is our completely healthy Higher Self. What the Higher Self learns to observe is the Lower Self (the mind, the ordinary mind, the neurotic self, the ego, the full spectrum of our negative thoughts and feelings, impulsivity, self-sabotaging and self-justifying behavior, the psychological analog of the part of our brain called the Amygdala). One of the first key observations the Higher Self needs to make about the Lower Self is how identified we have become with the Lower Self. It becomes essential to understand that our mental affliction and mental suffering is derived primarily from this 1 - 2 punch of both the existence of the Lower Self, built-in, factory equipped and our unwitting identification with it. To become freer, if not free from our mental afflictions we must actively learn to dis-identify with this lower level of our psychological functioning. Learning to become the driver, holding and using the reins of the horse drawn wagon is an apt metaphor, as the horse represents our Amygdala with its vulnerability to getting spooked and running away, and the driver representing the requirement of the Higher Self to establish a connection with the horse; to rein it in.

Cultivating this awareness of our double nature, our double psychology, helps us to create a greater awareness that we are divided and that there is more than one 'I' in us, hence the title: Me, Myself, and my Amygdala.

Now let's think for a moment about the Amygdala. The functioning of our brains and the psychological analogs of areas of our brains can be divided into 3 levels (See Figure Below).

Level III: Higher Cortex: Higher Level Thought and Feeling: the Home of our capacity for Love, Compassion, Gratitude, Kindness, Thoughtfulness, Self and Other Care, Humor, Creativity, Spontaneity, Vitality, Inspiration, Soulfulness and Spirit. This is the Home of our Self and Other-Care and Self and Other Protection. This is home to our wisdom, our ethics, our integrity, or humility, and to our intelligence, and our genuine sense of our true identity.

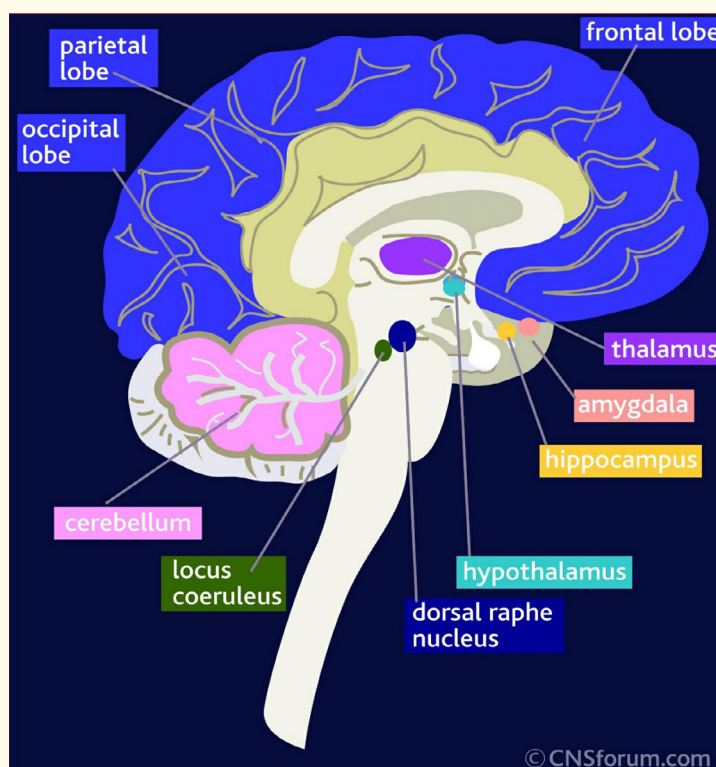
Level II: Amygdala: Source of Primitive Thought and Primitive Feeling—Suspiciousness, Negative Anticipation, Anger, Rage, Bitterness, Resentment, Fear and Anxiety. The Home to our Self and Other Neglect and Abuse. The Home of our Impulsivity and Self-Sabotage. This is the home to our neurotic ordinary mind, our false, pretentious self, our ego, our vanity, our lower-self, our self-centeredness. This is our 'Monkey Brain' and the home to our over-reactivity.

Level 1: Brain Stem: Functions Automatically: Machine Like, Regulates Heart Rate, Breathing and Body Temperature etc. Of note here, is that there are no thoughts or feelings at this level.

It is useful to think of level 2- the Amygdala area of the brain and its psychological analog component as the area of our psychology that gives *ALL* Human Beings un-ending amounts of grief and aggravation. It is the home of all of our over-reactivity. It is important to recognize that the Amygdala is built in and cannot be surgically removed, but also to recognize that we have this other fabulous area of our brain above it, our Higher Cortex, and its psychological analog the Higher Self, which can learn to connect the reins to the Amygdala and deal more effectively with its manifestations both in one's self and in others. All evolution can be thought of as an experiment in the process of giving each living entity an edge in its fight for survival. For human beings, the evolution of the higher cortex, with its attendant capacity for a rather unique conscious awareness and its ability to both observe and understand itself, are what gives us our edge. The Amygdala can be seen as a segue in the evolution of our higher cortex, and only the most primitive feelings and thoughts come from its sphere. Because it operates with such intensity, we unfortunately become over-identified with this part. But, as you can see from the diagram, the last thing we want to do is let some rather small part of our brain buried deep inside it to dictate our sense of who we truly are.

Mindfulness can be thought of as one of the ways we bring into our awareness our 3 levels of functioning, and learn to identify moment to moment which level we are on. When wake up, and it is a rude, but essential awakening to realize just how often we and others are on level 2. But once we do, we can begin to take the necessary steps to free ourselves from this lower level, and actively seek the stairs, the escalator, or elevator to move to level 3. Level 3 is thankfully also built-in, but we are called upon, in our lives, to build an access door to it, and cultivate the means to get to, nurture, and operate as often as we can, from our higher level. Mindfulness helps to create this moment by moment awareness to these 2 ongoing and competing psychological cross-currents; the gravitational pull of our lower self, tugging against the uplifting inspirational pull of our Higher Self. Clearly this is a vital tug of war that is going on in every human being every moment and helps us understand how contradictory we can be, as we are literally of two 'minds' about everything. But mindfulness is designed to give the better, healthier, higher side of our double psychology a means by which it can more effectively constrain its impulsive, volatile, emotionally fragile lower self.

Higher Cortex (Higher Self) Level 3



Brainstem Level 1 (No thoughts, No Feelings)

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