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online psychological support for families

UNDERSTANDING YOUR THREAT BRAIN - GET READY FOR SOME SCIENCE!

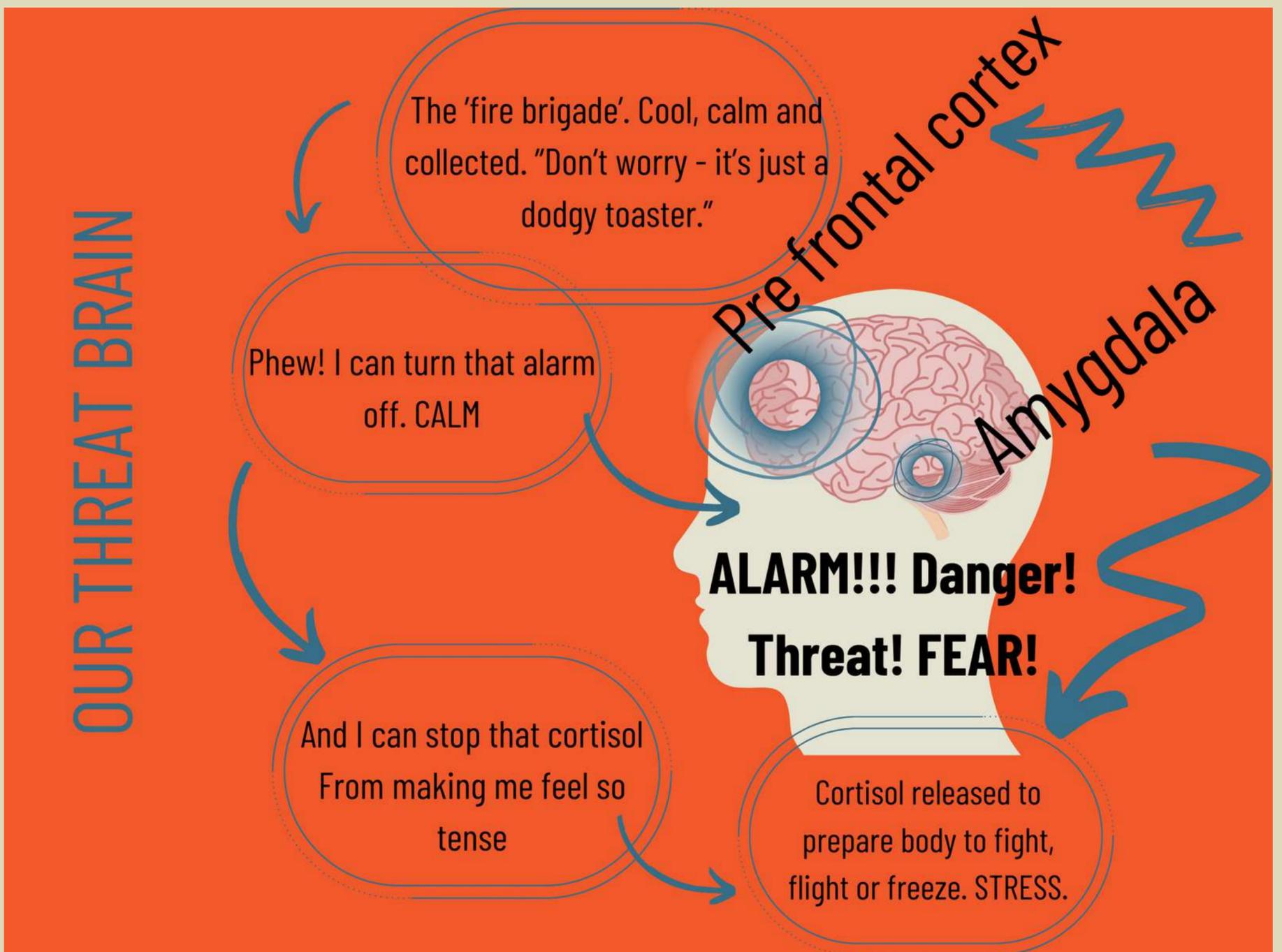
When we encounter a threat, stress or danger an automatic and unconscious process happens in our brains and bodies. It's pretty amazing because this process is designed to keep us safe from harm by automatically preparing us to fight the threat, take flight or freeze. These reactions also trigger automatic emotional responses and lead us to behave differently. When we stay and 'fight' we might feel angry and act with aggression or sarcasm. When we take flight we might feel anxious and act in a way which suppress or deny these feelings. When we freeze we might feel terror and act as though immobilised or shut down.

The Amygdala Hijack or Flipping Your Lid

These responses are known as an "amygdala hijack" or "flipping your lid". The amygdala is the part of our brain which acts like a smoke alarm. It is very good at detecting threats and activating our alarm systems. Our alarm systems send a message to release cortisol, which is the stress hormone responsible for the 'rush' of adrenaline that comes when we feel angry or anxious i.e. when we are preparing to fight or flight. You may have experienced this rush as a racing heart, feeling hot, shaky or tense.

The problem is that the amygdala can only sound the alarm, but it can't tell us what the danger is. This is where another part of our brain, the prefrontal cortex comes in. The prefrontal cortex is like the fire brigade. The amygdala sounds the alarm and the prefrontal cortex can assess if the alarm is alerting us to a dodgy toaster or a house fire. The main job of the prefrontal cortex is to control our emotional responses to stress so that we can think, plan and make decisions even in times of real threat and danger. This is why the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex share a very important connection and usually work well together.

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This picture shows the connection between our amygdala, cortisol response and prefrontal cortex working well. Cover up the "fire brigade" part of the brain. What is left? An alarm which is going crazy, releasing more and more cortisol (stress) into our bodies with no way of switching this off. This is how some of our brains are operating at the moment.

When we are under a lot of stress over a long period of time, the connection between our amygdala and prefrontal cortex can stop working as well - we have "flipped our lid" when the cortex is off line and it becomes hard for us to think clearly, control our responses and be rational. We can feel more anxious, angry or immobilised as our amygdala "hijacks" or disables our frontal lobes, meaning that we are less able to control our emotions.

Getting Our Thinking Brain Back Online

There are things we can do to maintain the connection between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, even in times of stress. We can use conscious control to soothe our amygdala back into a sense of security.

Identify lots of safety cues or anchors that tell your brain and body you are safe - slow, deep belly breathing; get outside and feel the sunshine; eat, drink, smell, listen to or touch something that soothes you; wrap yourself in a blanket for a moment; cuddles and touch; laughter and fun; a familiar routine; hear the voices or see the faces of those you love; do something that you know you are good at and will leave you feeling competent.

Minimise danger cues - media; loud noise; and take action to deal with whatever is causing worry e.g. if you are worried about money speak with the bank, accountant or citizen's advice and find out what kind of help is available rather than feeling terror every time you think of money.

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He's always on his phone
He's always "working"
He's never around
Where's the space for us?
I miss him

ANGER!
FEAR!
THREAT!

She's preoccupied
She worries about the kids
She's always making plans with friends
Where's the space for us?
I miss her

When you go into emotional free fall
drop your anchor

EMOTIONAL FREE FALL

Rational brain goes "offline"
 Can't think straight
 Emotions take over
 Threat mode

TALK

LISTEN

REFLECT

DROP YOUR ANCHOR

Bring rational brain back "online"
 Deep belly breathing
 Take time out to calm down
 Focus on something else

Managing Threat Brain in Families

Also remember that you are your child's anchor so helping to stay anchored as a parent is really important. Younger children especially rely on help from parents in feeling safe, soothed and protected when they feel stressed and anxious, although, it can be hard for parents to give this if they are feeling stressed themselves.

It can also be hard for parents to talk with each other rationally and to problem solve when one, or both of their amygdala have been hijacked! Remember how the fight response tends to make us act more aggressively or be sarcastic? Remember how the flight response makes us avoid conflict, back down before we're ready thus causing resentments to build? And remember how an "amygdala hijack" stops that prefrontal cortex from working, making it hard to think rationally and problem solve? Try to get that front part of your brain back online before talking together.



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