

# REACTIONS

# Self-Coaching Guide

## *How can I control my reactions better?*

A simple model of our brain helps us understand how we think and react. Imagine it comprises two brains: **Primitive** brain and **Advanced** brain. Although these two brains try to work together, they often conflict and struggle for control because they make their own decisions that can differ from each other.

The Primitive brain is highly emotional. It has an evolutionary purpose: our survival and perpetuation of the species. In response to our emotions it activates the fight, flight or freeze behaviours. It's emotional thoughts and feelings are neither good nor bad, they are just what they are. The Primitive brain's thinking is totally independent and not under our control. In contrast, the Advanced brain is responsible for higher cognitive functions, including impulse control, problem solving, and social interaction. Its key role is to manage the Primitive brain so it doesn't hijack control from the Advanced brain, preventing us becoming highly emotional and somewhat irrational. This role is under our control. To be happy and successful we need to learn how to live with these two brains. The Advanced brain is who we want to be most of the time, i.e. a 'rational thinker'. The Primitive brain is who we don't want to be some of the time, i.e. an 'emotional thinker'.

The Primitive and Advanced brains work differently when interpreting information from the world around us. The Primitive brain works with feelings and impressions, and uses them as its basis for thinking and acting. If any information is missing, it makes assumptions based on hunches, paranoia, defensive thoughts or catastrophising. This can lead to it interpreting situations wrongly, though sometimes its 'gut feelings' are right. The Advanced brain works with facts and truth, and uses ethics and morals as its basis for thinking and acting. If both brains agree then there's no problem. If they don't agree, the Primitive brain takes control because it's much quicker and stronger than the Advanced brain. If we understand this, we can regain control and react more rationally. We can treat our feelings and emotions in particular situations merely as 'suggestions' about how we could react and not orders.

A strategy for managing the Primitive brain so it doesn't take over control is to:

- 1) **Recognise** what's happening when we experience strong feelings, emotions, and undesirable actions
- 2) **Realise** we can't change what is happening, but we can manage this by having a response plan
- 3) **Create** a plan to respond to each specific situation. Many different plans exist that you could adopt

A plan based on a short-term solution could be to give yourself:

- **Time** – Do some mindful breathing to slow down your thinking and wait for the emotions to die down
- **Space** – Take yourself out of the situation and remove yourself from what is triggering the reaction
- **Release** – Let your emotions out in a controlled way; in the right place, in front of the right people

A longer-term solution could be to explore the underlying issues so as to weaken the reaction. This involves accepting your thoughts and feelings, and investigating what could be done to replace an undesirable reaction with a more valued action. Talking with a close friend, or working with a coach or therapist may be needed to help you gain an awareness of the issue and encourage you to take action.

*"You have the ability to choose your reactions." Steve Maraboli*

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### More Information

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