

MODULE 4

Understanding the Tricky Brain

A fundamental idea in CFT is that *human beings inherit brains and bodies that were shaped by evolution to operate in ways that we didn't choose or design, and which aren't our fault*. This realization is core to CFT—that many of the experiences that cause the most distress for us and for our clients are nobody's fault. Rather, they are a result of the ways that our brains and bodies—and through them, our experience of emotions—were shaped by evolution (Gilbert, 2009, 2010, 2014). This module and the next explore this theme further by focusing on “old-brain” processes and “new-brain” processes and how these can interact.

Old-Brain Emotions and Motives

Different parts of our brains—and the functions for which they are responsible—evolved at different times. We have ancient structures in our brains that trigger many of the same powerful emotions, motives, and behaviors in us as were experienced by our reptilian and mammalian ancestors (Panksepp & Biven, 2012). For example, like these ancestors, humans experience powerful emotional states such as fear, anger, and lust, coupled with equally powerful motives focused on aggression, avoiding pain, and mating.

In considering these emotions, it can be useful to also notice the experiences that tend to trigger their arising. Emotional reactions can be triggered by external events and situations as well as by internal experiences such as thoughts, memories, and even physical sensations. Let's take a few moments to consider an old-brain emotion and how it can play out.

Exploring Old-Brain Threat Responses



EXAMPLE: Fatima's Reflection

Choose an example of an old-brain threat emotion with which you sometimes struggle:

Fear, definitely fear. And anxiety, but that's related to the fear.

What situations tend to trigger this emotion?

When my client ridicules my attempts to be helpful. She seems to delight in letting me know that nothing I do is helping her, and it seems like she's right. It's gotten so that even thinking about her makes me fearful.

What is it like as the emotion arises? For example, is your experience one of *choosing* to feel this emotion, or does it just arise within you—and what is that like?

It just comes up in me, and once it's there, it's completely stifling—almost like being choked. I feel like I'm filled with fear, just frozen with it.

What motivations come along with this emotion? What do you find yourself wanting to do?

Avoid. I've found myself hoping that she'll cancel sessions, and I've put off writing progress notes. I even called in sick once when I wasn't really ill, because I just wasn't up to dealing with her on that day.

What behaviors do you engage in as you experience this emotion? What do you find yourself doing?

Like I wrote above, it's more what I find myself not doing. I delay writing progress notes and even though she's one of my more challenging clients, I don't do as much work outside of the session to prepare for our interaction as I would normally do. It's hard to bring myself to focus on her for any length of time.

Now consider a threat emotion you've experienced lately. Try to notice the different aspects of this feeling—when and how it comes up in you, and how it shapes your attention. Observe the motivation the emotion carries with it: What do you find yourself wanting to do when this experience arises in you? Finally, what do you find yourself doing—how does your motivation translate into behavior?

 **EXERCISE.** Exploring My Old-Brain Threat Responses

Choose an example of an old-brain threat emotion with which you sometimes struggle:

What situations tend to trigger this emotion?

What is it like as the emotion arises? For example, is your experience one of *choosing* to feel this emotion, or does it just arise within you—and what is that like?

What motivations come along with this emotion? What do you find yourself wanting to do?

What behaviors do you engage in as you experience this motivation? What do you find yourself doing?

New-Brain Thinking, Imagery, and Meaning Making

Although we humans share many powerful old-brain emotions, motives, and behaviors with our nonhuman ancestors, unlike these ancestors, we also have fancy “new-brain” capacities as well: We can engage in symbolic thought, create detailed fantasies and mental imagery, assign meaning to our experiences, and engage in mental time travel that allows us to plan and reminisce. This capacity for higher-order thought brings with it a host of unique problems: We can ruminate on our struggles; reflect on what our experiences, motives, and behaviors *mean about us*; and interpret and experience almost any thought or perception we have in an almost infinite number of ways, depending upon the physical and mental contexts in which these experiences are framed (Villatte, Villatte, & Hayes, 2016).

CFT emphasizes the importance of recognizing these brain capacities as part of the fundamental challenge of being human. Using a simplified language designed for ease of understanding, we can recognize that old-brain emotions can act very powerfully to shape both the content (what we focus on, think about, and imagine) and process (whether our thinking and attention are narrow or broad, reflective or filled with urgency) of our new-brain capacities for thought, imagery, and meaning making. Let’s take a look at how this process can play out.

Reflecting on New-Brain Thoughts, Imagery, and Meaning Making

In this brief exercise, we continue with the threat emotion you identified in the previous exercise and explore what is going on in the new brain when this threat emotion comes up. First, let’s consider Fatima’s reflection.



EXAMPLE: Fatima’s Reflection

Using the threat emotion you identified above, consider the thoughts and mental images that tend to arise when you are feeling like that.

What thoughts come up? *I just keep ruminating on my fears of not being able to help her, and about the idea that I might not be cut out to be a therapist. Thoughts like “I can’t do this.” “I just don’t have what it takes.” “She sees through me.” “I’m a fraud.”*

Are there any mental images or fantasies that accompany the emotion? What are they like?

I keep playing the situation in my mind over and over again—my client telling me that I’m not helping her, watching her struggle, and not being able to do anything about it. I also picture my supervisor in my mind, telling me that maybe I’m not cut out to be a therapist after all, although she’s never actually said anything like that.

Considering the emotion and the situation that prompted it, what meaning do you assign to it? What does it mean about you or your life that you had this experience? *I guess I feel like it means I don't have what it takes. Therapists are supposed to know what they're doing, and I obviously don't. I should be confident, and I'm clearly not. It's like I'm worried that I'm this child playing at something that she has no business at, and that I need to wake up and face the real world.*

Considering Fatima's example, take a few minutes to reflect on what it's like for you when that old-brain threat emotion comes up, and the thoughts and imagery that arise along with them. Consider both the content and the quality with which these experiences play out (e.g., ruminatively thinking the same thought or playing out the same scene again and again in your mind).



EXERCISE. Exploring My New-Brain Thoughts, Imagery, and Meaning Making

Using the threat emotion you identified above, consider the thoughts and mental images that tend to arise when you are feeling like that.

What thoughts come up?

Are there any mental images or fantasies that accompany the emotion? What are they like?

