

# TTMAPESTRY

COUNSELING FAMILIES. BUILDING INTEGRITY.

## The Effect of Fear on The Brain

**T**hree days hike into Wyoming's Bridger-Teton Wilderness, I found myself in one of the most beautiful alpine meadows I have ever seen. With sheer rock faces to my right and a large pond to my left, I fired up my tiny cook stove to prepare dinner. The mood of the moment abruptly changed when I discovered that I had inadvertently lit the small canister of stove fuel I was holding in my hand on fire. Instantly overcome by fear, a single thought screamed inside my mind "Its going to blow!" And a simple action plan followed, "Throw it as far as you can!" As I watched the canister fly through the area – spraying flames and fuel across the golden meadow – I realized that my instinct may have been wrong. Darting after the canister that was now spilling flaming fuel into the meadow, I snatched it up off the ground. Finding myself again holding a flaming canister, I was again overcome by fear and a single thought: "Its going to blow! Throw it as far as you can!" And so I did... again... before my more level-headed hiking companion intervened and snuffed out the flaming bottle.



**T**he effects of fear on the brain are remarkable. In an instant, the middle region of the brain becomes activated, while the cortex – the portion of the mind where logical thinking and executive functioning occurs – begins to shut down. This shift prepares us to act quickly and boldly, narrowing our focus of attention to the immediate

threat and compelling us to behave in a single specific manner. In my situation, that meant that the only thought in my mind was, "It's going to blow!" And the only response available to me mentally was, "Throw it as far as you can!" Once my sense of safety had been taken from me, a flood of emotional momentum compelled toward a behavior that was, in the end, destructive.

**I**n a marriage relationship, the effect of fear is similar and the presence of safety is no less critical to success. Blaming, name-calling, non-verbal expressions of anger, criticism, defensiveness and even silence can quickly threaten a relationship and evoke subtle, but significant, levels of fear. Without relational safety, establishing meaningful communication, agreement and intimacy is practically impossible. As the top part of the brain shuts down and the range of responses narrows, you are often compelled to respond in a fight (criticize, accuse, blame) or flight (defend, withdraw, avoid, disengage) manner. Corroborating research suggests that once a spouse feels unsafe they are no longer capable of accurately interpreting – or remembering - what their spouse is saying to them. Rather, if they "hear" anything, it is not an accurate reflection of what is being said, but what their past experiences have prepared them to hear. This mental shift happens within seconds and once it has occurred, conflict quickly escalates as each spouse reacts out of

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base – and often destructive - impulses intended to protect them from the pain and rejection they fear. Without safety, even simple conversations quickly deteriorate into the types of painful interactions that frustrate intimacy and destroy a relationship.

The good news is that there are a defined set of relational interactions that have been demonstrated to provoke this type of fear reaction in your spouse. In like manner, a handful of key strategies can quickly disrupt escalating conflict and provide safety in a relationship. Further, once safety is established those very moments that previously created conflict can be transformed into moments of connection and intimacy.

### Fear-Evoking Relational Interactions\*

1. Criticism
2. Contempt
3. Defensiveness
4. Stonewalling
5. Allusions to Divorce

\*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, John Gottman

### Safety-Building Strategies

1. Constructive Complaint
2. Reflective listening
3. Validation
4. Empathy
5. Affirmation of Commitment

## Markers That Its Time to Seek Professional Help

1. Daily interactions are marked by criticism, contempt, defensiveness or stonewalling
2. You share fewer than 5:1 positive:negative w/ your spouse
3. You are consistently unable to resolve conflicts and disagreements
4. Your sex if is consistently dis-satisfying
5. The frequency of your love-making has decreased by more than 50% or you are having sex less than once each month.
6. You consistently keep secrets from your spouse or lie to them regularly
7. Your affection for your spouse has diminished significantly
8. You find yourself consistently avoiding vulnerable communications with your spouse
9. You have breached the exclusivity of your relationship through infidelity (emotional or physical) or consistent use of pornography



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