

The Co-Survivors Guide to Meltdowns

Ed leans forward and grips the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles are white. He ignores Damien's pleas to slow down. When Ed zooms around a sharp curve, Damien braces himself against the door and shouts, "Slow down! You're gonna wreck the car." Ed slams on the brakes, skids to a stop and growls, "If you don't like the way I'm driving, drive yourself." When Damien asks Ed to at least pull over to the shoulder, Ed clenches slams his fists on the dashboard and roars, "Shut the f up!"

Carrie is in customer service hell trying to correct a mistake on the mortgage statement. After waiting for an eternity, a customer service representative finally answers and transfers her to the wrong department. Three wrong departments later, a surly representative hangs up on her. Frustrated, Carrie reaches out to Maria for support and to vent. Rather than giving Carrie empathy, Maria shuts her down. When Carrie persists, Maria accuses Carrie of blaming her for the mistake on the mortgage statement and storms off.

While Brad and Trey are watching a disturbing sex scene in "Edge of Seventeen," Brad's body goes limp. Even when Trey tries to hold Brad's hand to comfort him, it's as if Brad is no longer there.

These examples illustrate the impact that past trauma can have on the present. If you recognize these reactions in your partner, it's likely that a traumatic experience (or series of traumatic experiences) has led to a meltdown of his or her fight, flight or freeze response system. This system is hardwired into all of us and works to ensure our survival. It's designed to work like the Red Light, Green Light game we played as children. When the brain perceives that everything is fine, it shouts "Green Light" and we get on with whatever we're doing. When the brain picks up danger signals, it shouts, "Yellow Light" and sends us in to a state of vigilance. If the danger seems imminent, it shouts, "Red Light!" and our bodies go into the fight, flight or freeze response.

It's a simple system and for frogs, reptiles and other species that live each moment on its own terms, it works well. The catch is that as our species evolved, we added layers to our brains so that we have what scientist call a triune brain consisting of the brain stem (reptilian brain), the limbic brain and the neocortex. The limbic system is in charge of survival and functions like an internal smoke detector. The right prefrontal neocortex (or right brain) processes emotions, nonverbal messages like eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice, smell, image, gestures, and the timing and intensity of response. The left prefrontal neocortex (or left brain) is the place where we make sense out of the data that's coming in. It's the logical, rational, thinking part of the brain that deals with language, time and sequence, and problem solving. When all goes well, the limbic system sends its message to the right brain which processes emotions and nonverbal messages and sends these through the corpus callosum to the left brain. The left brain processes the information through time and space and tells the body how to respond.

For example, when you hear Boy George singing, "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?" on the radio, the limbic system might send all the components of the song up to the right brain. The right brain might automatically take you back to the first time you heard the song playing on the radio, laughing

with friends, cruising Sonic and dreaming of living anywhere but your home town. At least for an instant, you feel as if you've traveled back in time. When the left brain gets this data, it reorients you back to today, points out that the data streaming in is a memory, and reminds you that you still need to pick up tomatoes on the way home. The left brain also functions to make logical sense of the information processed by the right brain. So when the right brain says, "Whoa! There's a bear! Yellow Light!" The left brain might process this data and say, "Oh, that's just a poster of Smokey telling us not to start forest fires. Green Light! No need to worry." Or, if you're hiking on the Appalachian Trail, it might say, "Oh Shit! Red Light! Red Light!" and send a message down the neural system to fight, flight, or freeze.

Traumatic experiences throw a wrench in this system because these memories don't always get processed completely. The result is that we experience traumatic memories as if they are happening now. It's just like reliving all the sensory and emotional experiences that get cued up by a song on the radio, but instead of the left brain coming in and saying, "Yo! Dude! That's a memory," you stay in the experience and it feels like it's happening now. Your left brain literally goes off line. The limbic brain takes over, screams "Red Light! Red Light!" and signals the body to fight, flight or freeze.

In the examples above, Ed is going into fight mode because something in Damien's tone of voice, body language, or emotional energy has cued up Ed's traumatic memories from an abusive past relationship. Ed's left brain doesn't get the chance to tell Ed that the data he's clued into is from the past rather than from the present. His body is experiencing the terrifying memories of being humiliated and beaten as if this is going on in the present moment. As a result, his blood is, metaphorically speaking, boiling, his heart is racing, and his stomach is churning.

Maria is responding to a similar dynamic. Her limbic brain is saying, "Stop Carrie's anger. It's not safe." When that doesn't work, her limbic brain screams, "Get away from Carrie's anger ASAP!" Brad is also responding to traumatic memories as if they are happening now, but instead of flight or flight, his brain is prompting him to freeze. His brain has told him that it's hopeless to fight back or run away. His pain threshold has increased and he is immobilized. He has gone into a dissociative state.

It's important to understand that your partner has no choice about whether or not he or she will go into fight, flight or freeze mode once the limbic system has wrested control from his or her left brain. At the same time, the fact that your partner is reacting, at least in part, to a past experience does not absolve you of responsibility for your words and actions in the present. When your partner has a meltdown, the best thing you can do is stay calm. If you yell at your partner to get them to stop fighting or try to keep them from leaving (physically or emotionally) they will get more triggered, like Ed and Maria.

Instead of focusing your energy on "fixing" them, focus on taking care of yourself. One way to stay calm is to tune into your body. Feel your feet on the floor. Notice whether your thighs feel comfortable or if they feel tired, uncomfortable or tight. Check in with your belly. Is it relaxed and soft, or are you crunching it in? Bring your awareness to your shoulders. Are your shoulders loose and relaxed or are you scrunching them up towards your ears? Watch your breathing. Are you taking in nice deep breaths or are you barely breathing? Once you have scanned your entire body, take a few moments to breathe deeply, releasing tension as you exhale.

Unless there's an emergency, it's best to let them come back on their own, at least until you've processed with them about how you can support them if something like this happens again. Once you have had a conversation about safety and boundaries, you can, after grounding yourself, check in with them about what would make them feel safe and loved. Some people find it helpful to be held while they shake out their fear. Other people don't want to be touched at all but are comfortable holding a beloved cat or dog.

It's also important to understand that the fact that your partner's emergency response system has gone offline does not give him or her a free pass to hurt or abuse you. Even if they can't control the fact that they are reacting in the short run, working through their issues with a counselor, and practicing meditation, yoga, and/or tai chi can help them rewire their brains. This will make it less likely that they get lost in the past, or if they do, will help them come back to center more quickly*.

In the long run, it's probably a good idea for you to see a counselor yourself. You probably need to process through the anguish you feel around your partner's pain as well as to your responses to his or her reactions. It would also probably be helpful to see a couples' counselor to work through your relationship dynamics so that both of you are working for the relationship instead of against each other.

*Peter Levine describes an alternative recovery process in *Waking the Tiger*.

*Regina Sewell is a mental health counselor. To ask a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com. Her most recent publication, "Sliding Away" can be found in **Knowing Pains: Women on Love, Sex and Work in Our 40s**, edited by Molly Rosen.*

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