Reference: Internal Distractions, Part 2

INTRODUCTION

For the first time in history, scientists can see deep inside the brain. Research is unveiling new and exciting truths about why human beings behave the way they do and the role emotions play in day-to-day decision-making and personal performance.

When referencing emotions or emotional states, the stress response system and the limbic system are in the center of new findings on human performance.

FIGHT-FLIGHT-FREEZE

The "fight-flight-freeze" response is a common human behavior that refers to the body's stress response system. The stress response is the body's automatic system designed to protect humans from threat or danger. For example, yelling at a partner for pushing one into speaking at a conference before feeling ready (fight), or having a loss for words when randomly picked in a large group setting (freeze).

Stress is the body's response to situations that create taxing demands. These demands can create positive stress, like a hunter preparing for a hunt, or a low dose of negative stress from spilling coffee on a new pair of pants. Stress is an inevitable part of life and good in small doses but, if an individual is frequently in a stressed state, distress becomes the threat and critical decision-making is compromised.

Distress refers to negative stress, various degrees of anxiety, sorrow, and even pain. Both stress and distress can hinder human performance by creating internal distractions that affect judgment and effective decision-making.

Additional effects of poorly managed stress include:

- Compromised competence
- Narrowed focus or attention
- Abnormal behavior in difficult situations

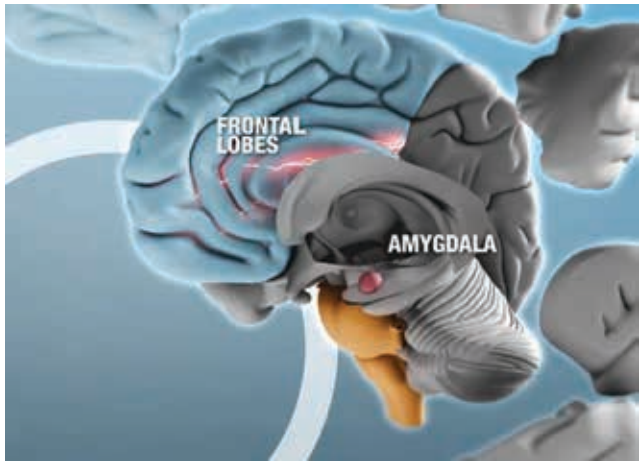
Top performers learn how to deactivate the stress response system by developing new mental and emotional skill sets.

THE LIMBIC SYSTEM

Humans are emotional creatures first and thinking creatures second; science now validates that the emotional centers of the brain receive information before the thinking centers of the brain. Emerging technologies now allow scientists to learn more about the emotional centers and the active role emotions play in the decision-making process.

The limbic system is a complex system of nerves and networks in the brain concerned with instinct and mood that controls an individual's emotional responses in everyday life.

In the center of the limbic system deep within the brain is the amygdala. The amygdala has been shown to perform a primary role in the processing of memory, decision making, and emotional responses—specifically fear, anxiety, and aggression. These three emotions are primal emotions every human being experiences. Humans must learn to identify and regulate these primal emotions for personal best. In the field of human performance, these three emotions hinder critical decision making.



The amygdala is located deep within the brain and is part of the limbic system, a primary component in the human brain's emotional responses.

The limbic system, and specifically the amygdala, control an individual's emotional responses, which directly impact the human decision-making process. Human decision-making is defined as the process of identifying and choosing alternatives based on the values, preferences, and beliefs of the decision maker. The amygdala can distract from this process and ultimately hinder decision-making and performance regardless of the task—simple or complex.

The amygdala is one of two almond-shaped clusters of tissue deep within the brain approximately the size of a fingernail. The amygdala is now visible to the human eye thanks to new medical technology in neurology and neuroscience.

AMYGDALA HIGHJACK

Amygdala highjack is a term coined by Dr. Daniel Goleman in his 1996 book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. An amygdala highjack, commonly referred to as an emotional highjack, refers to emotional responses that are out of line with the current situation.

Emotional highjacks are prevalent in high-performance occupations. Many job roles and activities create high levels of stress, which are directly connected to emotional highjacks. The term *emotional highjack* refers to the stress response system and the stress hormones that are released into the body. This originates from the amygdala, which initiates the highjack and triggers a chemical response inside the body.

The amygdala sends a signal to the adrenal glands, releasing chemical stress hormones into the body's blood stream.

Drawing on earlier research, Dr. Goleman uses the term to describe emotional responses that are immediate and overwhelming, and out of measure with the current situation. This automated internal response of the nervous system can become an internal distraction because a much more significant emotional response has been triggered, impairing judgment and human performance.

An amygdala highjack is inherent with human beings and part of daily experiences, no matter the setting. Every human being has emotional highjacks—intensity will vary based on the individual's attitudes, beliefs, and current emotional states. As it pertains to human performance, emotional highjacks can create small to large distractions that can hinder one's ability to perform in routine or complex situations.

Although an emotional highjack cannot be prevented, it can be regulated using psychological and emotional skills. Emotional Intelligence skills and psychological skills present development strategies to learn self-awareness and self-regulation skills to control emotional highjacks throughout the day.

LOW EMOTIONAL QUOTIENT

Given human nature and the role of the limbic system, humans will naturally experience emotional highs and lows throughout the day. In the world of human performance, this roller-coaster-like effect can create distractions, building a strong business case for the need for emotional skill development.

Top performers learn to recognize early stressors or triggers that create emotional highjacks. The skills or personal tools one uses to develop these abilities are found through one's mental and emotional skill sets.

Regardless of an individual's age, gender, education, or experience, any human being that wants to get better can learn to develop these three Emotional Intelligence competencies.

Emotionally unintelligent responders, who are not aware of their emotions or lack skills to regulate disruptive emotions, will frequently find themselves with a(n):

- Decrease in peripheral vision (tunnel vision)
- Difficulty in cognitive processing (lack of clarity)
- Inability to handle complex tasks (fight-flight-freeze)
- Difficulty to think about new or possible alternatives to a situation (limited creativity)

CORRECTIVE ACTIONS

Top performers learn and practice active thought processes throughout the day, directly impacting the habit loop. Learning self-awareness and self-regulation activities and practicing throughout the day develops the mental and emotional skills necessary to mitigate distracting thoughts and disruptive emotions.

The key to human performance improvement is to take an active interest in what is going on inside the mind, especially in high-stress or emotional situations. Learn to practice awareness and regulation strategies before, during, and after emotional situations by asking two simple questions:

- What am I thinking right now and what do I need to be thinking right now for this task?
- What am I feeling right now and what do I need to be feeling right now for this task?

When learning how to recognize and recover from internal distractions of an amygdala highjack, consider these new triggers or quick-tip recovery techniques:

- **Volume Knob** – Consider an individual's amygdala as the volume control that must be manually (with skill) turned up or down based on the current situation. Realize the amygdala is already adjusting

the volume too much or too little for the task at hand automatically by the brain's unique design.

- **Thermostat** – When the room gets too warm, the thermostat cools the room down; when too cool, the thermostat heats the room up. Top performers learn to "cool" and "heat" their own internal states using self-awareness and self-regulation skills for the task at hand. If the task requires calm, relaxed emotional states, the internal thermostat is adjusted (with skill); if the task requires assertive, aggressive, or vigorous emotional states, the internal thermostat adjusts accordingly (with skill).
- **Accelerator Pedal** – When pressure is applied to the pedal, fuel flow is increased into the fuel line; an individual's amygdala is pressing and releasing the internal pedal known as the stress response system all day throughout the day, automatically. This automatic internal pedal can un-intentionally flood the body with stress hormones—too much or too little for the moment. This illustration demonstrates personal responsibility or self-awareness and self-regulation skills to keep the pedal flowing at the proper pace for the task at hand.

CONCLUSION

Learning "self" is the key to regulating internal distractions. An individual must learn to understand one's own internal states and how to regulate these states using mental and emotional skill sets. These mental and emotional skills are used as mental self-checking tools that mitigate distracting thoughts and disruptive emotions throughout the day.

The science of emotional intelligence outlines a development track for any individual to follow featuring a clear framework of "self" skills and abilities. "Self" is the primary focus when learning to regulate internal distractions. A top-performing individual actively learns to develop and use new skills or tools such as self-respect, self-motivation, self-knowledge, and integrity along with impulse control, stress tolerance, and emotional stability; all of which are associated with specific activities or thought processes an individual can learn and use in daily routines throughout the day.