Avoiding Amygdala Hijack: How it Hurts Learning and Work Performance and How We Can Manage It

Some parts of the brain never forget but remember in ways that we don’t have explicit awareness of. The memories have the potential to commandeer our emotions, cognition, and physical reactions. This has been referred to as the “amygdala hijack.” It matters for all of us and even more so for people who have experienced trauma. The following pages invite us to consider the experience of amygdala hijack, what it is, and research on what is known about why it happens.

Next, a case study is shared with a set of guiding questions to invite us to think about how amygdala hijack may be interacting with the individual’s ability to engage in workforce development opportunities and what can be done to support them. It offers questions to keep in mind for managing amygdala hijack and for supporting others in doing so.
Next Level Lab User’s Manual to the Mind

This module is part of a set of self-guided courses designed to help people develop a “user’s manual” for their minds.

There are seven self-guided courses.

1. Attending to Attention
2. Memory Moves
4. Active and Deep Processing
5. Building Learning Paths
6. Facing and Leveraging Feedback
7. Maximizing Transfer
This module is part of the following self-guided Next Level Lab course:

Embodied Minds: Integrating Emotion, Cognition, and Body Knowledge


The course has four modules:
1. Avoiding Amygdala Hijack
2. Benefitting from Background Emotions
3. Engaging Epistemic Emotions
4. Calming for Concentration
Course Level Understanding Goals:

• Early views of cool rationality have been shown to be misguided. While there are certainly times when “setting emotion aside” can be helpful, in general emotion is essential to effective thinking and problem-solving.

• Understanding the ways in which emotion operates and how it impacts our minds and bodies supports our ability to benefit from our emotions and to mitigate the downsides.

• Educating embodied learners is a different process than teaching to “just the brain.” As learners, we can seek out ways to engage our whole selves in learning even when instruction or work contexts don’t focus on integrated selves.

• Engaging in Moves requires sensitivity to the occasion to use them, the ability to deploy them, and the inclination to do so.
These materials include three framing concepts:

**Contextualized Agency: Behaving Like Fast Fish:** Learning and performing effectively is accomplished by modifying our contexts to support our best work just as fish create vortices in water to push off from to swim their fastest.

**Generative Moves: Transfer to One’s Own Situation:** Instead of teaching one approach that loses nuance and applicability as problem levels change, people are invited into a process of generating specific, contextualized strategies that apply to their own circumstances.

**Rationale Revealed: Understanding the Mechanisms Behind the Moves:** When people understand the rationale behind the thinking moves, they are more likely to use the strategies and apply them flexibly as needed.
Think about a time when you felt triggered by something that happened and your emotions seemed to be running away with themselves.

What was going on? How did your body feel? What happened to your ability to focus and think? Were the feelings negative or positive? If negative, did they in any way invite a “fight or flight” response in which you felt that you had to defend yourself or flee from the room? In what ways did you feel in control of your response and in what ways did your body seem to be taking control?

Take a few minutes to reflect upon what happened in the context and inside your body as a response to what happened.
Here is what other people say:

“Suddenly I was so filled with emotion that I couldn’t think straight and I just wanted to climb under the table.”

“I felt like I was being treated like a child, like I wasn’t trusted.”

“I got so mad and I didn’t even realize that I was lashing out. My employer was really surprised.”

“The person asked a question in a way that made me feel like he was questioning my knowledge as a female. I started to feel anxious and then smaller and smaller and more and more incompetent.”

“I knew that everyone was depending upon me to pitch the sale, but the more I focused on how important it was for me to perform well, the less well I could present the pitch.”

If something like this has happened to you, you have experienced the Amygdala Hijack...
Main Ideas:

• The amygdala is a part of our brain involved in emotional processing. It is considered our lower-level brain and one of the oldest parts of the brain from the perspective of evolution. It is known for our fight or flight response and for tagging memories with emotional salience to enable very quick response.

• It acts on “emotional memories.” These are different from “memories of emotion” (which have a reflective component and involve higher-order processes).

• A reaction driven by the amygdala can flood our bodies with adrenaline and trigger anxiety before we have a chance to think about what is going on. This is especially so for anyone who has dealt with trauma.

• Our amygdala can be quickly triggered and does not involve the higher-order portions of the brain, so we have little control over our reaction.

• Emotional shortcuts can be a source of intuition, but they can also reinforce limiting and maladaptive responses.

• We can, however, manage the consequences of our amygdala by a series of moves:
  1) recognizing the potential for amygdala hijack before it happens;
  2) realizing instances when we have been hijacked and having “moves” that enable us to manage it;
  3) adjusting our environments so that we are less likely to be triggered in a way that results in an amygdala hijack.
Think of a memory that you can recall about a time when you had a certain emotion. It can be any type of emotion—happy, sad, bored, etc. Try to recall the feeling, what was going on at the time and how you responded.

Having an explicit *memory of an emotion* means that it is being processed by the higher-order portions of your brain; the part that is called your neo-cortex. You can often tell a story of what happened and remember how you felt.

Then what is an *emotional memory* and how does it differ? Emotional memories are a part of our lower order brain. We don’t have explicit memories of “what happened” but our brain registers our feelings and uses them to guide future responses.

If something frightened us, we may respond with fear or may flee. If something made us happy, we may feel up and not necessarily know why…
How do these different memories influence us?

Notice that when emotions take the “low road” to the amygdala, the higher order parts of the brain don’t know about them. This leaves us confused and trying to figure out why we are feeling the way we do. Sometimes it is a rush of adrenaline, a spark of anger, or profound sense of discomfort.
Even though our higher-order brain doesn’t know the source of the feelings, it seeks to explain them after the fact and contributes to our beliefs.

Think about a time when you realized that you were feeling anxious and then tried to figure out why. What kinds of explanations did you come up with?

What other people say:
“I started to look at the faces of the people around me and noticed that some of them weren’t smiling or looked unfriendly, so I decided it wasn’t safe.”
“I decided that these were just not my people.”
“I decided that math is not my thing.”
“I said to myself, ‘Why am I trying to give a speech? I can’t do this!’”
“I quit my job and decided never to go back.”
The role that the amygdala plays is not necessarily negative. It can offer important emotional shortcuts in the form of intuition that help us to act when we need to.

- Can you think of times when you had an intuition that something just wasn’t right? You just had a feeling but didn’t know why?

- You can thank your amygdala for these feelings. It is important to attend to these intuitions and how they relate to what is going on around you.
“Amygdala Hijack” can be triggered by all sorts of things in our environment.

- A frown
- A smell
- Loud noises
- A long silence
- A feeling of hunger
- An older sibling’s off-handed comment
- A grade on a test
- A rejection letter
- What other triggers can you think of? Reach back into your own experiences and those of students or workers that you have engaged with.
Here are examples of things that people can do to avoid the “Amygdala Hijack”.

- Become familiar with the feelings that are triggered by the amygdala by reflecting afterward upon what happened.
- Try to develop sensitivity to when they are becoming triggered.
- Recognize that they don’t have easy or immediate control over the reaction.
- Create ways to make space and time for the things that trigger them. Feedback is often triggering for those who have had negative experiences with it.
- Be accepting of oneself when one doesn’t perform as one hoped because their amygdala hijacked them. Think about what one might do next time.
- What are others that you can think of?
Many of the examples from the last slide focus on what one can change internally. Are any of them “Fast Fish” moves that change the surrounding environment?

Here’s what “Fast Fish” moves might sound like:

“I realize that, like many people who have experienced trauma at some point in their lives, it works better for me to absorb feedback over time before responding. I asked my manager to give feedback on my work performance that incorporates this delay whenever possible. This helps me to be open-minded towards feedback and to use it well.”

“I knew that I would have a hard time giving the final presentation, so I told the other students that I felt that way and asked them to smile when I was speaking. They did and I gave a much better talk.”
Here are examples of Fast Fish Moves to Avoid the “Amygdala Hijack”:

• Help work colleagues and others to realize that we all have amygdala triggers and that accommodating them make the workplace a more productive, deliberately developmental environment.

• Look for ways to change the workplace to accommodate your personal triggers. For instance, ask for time between the receipt of feedback and your response.

• Look for ways to systematically remove triggers if possible. (Microaggressions can be a form of trigger. Reflection on such triggers in the workplace can support diversity, equity, and inclusion.)

• What are others that you can think of?
The following page offers a condensed case of Patricio who is dealing with Amygdala Hijack to consider as part of this module. This is followed by a link to full cases for those who wish to use them for more extended case study outside of the module. As you think about the situations people are in, consider the following general questions:

- How might prior experiences and possible traumas interact with the way that the person responds in difficult situations?
- Can you detect instances in which they seem to be hijacked by emotion and unable to step back to view the larger picture? How might amygdala hijack derail their goals?
- What are some things that they are doing that hold promise for being able to manage the emotional memories that are implicitly diminishing their chances for positive outcomes?
- What are two or three fast fish strategies or pieces of advice that you might suggest to them?
- What are some changes that would have to happen by those in charge to enable these changes?
- What advice would you offer for finding malleability or dealing with non-malleability in seemingly firm environments?
The Case of Patricio

Patricio liked his job as an electrician’s apprentice. It would lead to an independent solid job. He was serious and disciplined around electricity. He had a deep respect for its power and for his boss, John. In Patricio’s family, you had respect for the man who signed your paycheck. In this case, he was also a teacher and ticket to a better life. Even so, Patricio couldn’t help but notice how his boss treated certain people differently—specifically the white boys whose families had lived in the area for a few generations—like they belonged in a way that he didn’t. They were the ones he invited to get a beer with him after work on a Friday. It was as though they were born into a special club, for “good old boys” as his boss referred to them. It wasn’t that John wasn’t nice to him, he was. But it reminded him of how teachers behaved towards him when he was growing up. They treated him with a bit of distance that was probably not even noticeable to others. Was it just in his head? Was he imagining it? Or was he perceiving something that no one else took note of?
But then the new kid, Conor, came. He had grown up down the street from John and John seemed to feel that he owed it to Conor’s parents to take him on and teach him the skills of the trade. “Okay, but why did he ask me to keep an eye on the kid?”, thought Patricio. Conor was a quick study, not on how to do electrical work, but on how to get along with the guys. He had an easy smile and a slightly goofy manner; the others thought that he was a riot.

Patricio wasn’t sure what he thought of Conor at first. But before long, he questioned whether Conor even wanted to be an electrician. He just didn’t seem that focused and around electricity, that was a problem. There were days when Conor’s choices seemed unwise at best and unsafe at worst. Patricio felt unnerved by the need to have to jump in to stop Conor from doing dangerous things and felt uncomfortable that his boss had put him in this position. John treated Conor like he was special and the other guys like him. Patricio thought, “If I jump in on something that Conor is doing in a way that Conor doesn’t like, where does that leave me?” Patricio thought that perhaps he should talk to John, but he wasn’t really sure where he stood or how John would take it. Challenging his boss was certainly not his intention or something that he thought was acceptable. He really didn’t know what to do, so the days went by. The situation was stressing Patricio out and giving him stomach aches. He wondered if he should just quit and move on.

Note: All cases are fictional and any similarities to persons living or otherwise is coincidental.
Consider Patricio’s story in light of the information on Amygdala Hijack. Reflect upon the questions below:

• Think about Patricio’s past, his values, and his beliefs. What are some sources of trauma that might serve as triggers for him?

• What emotional challenges either exist now for Patricio or exist as ghosts from his past?

• Consider what kinds of communication skills Patricio might need as he learns how to interact with John around the situation. What aspects of those skills might he excel at? What might be really hard for him?

• What challenges and difficulties might arise for Patricio as he tries to deal with the situation?

• If you could have a conversation with Patricio, what might you wish to say to him? What might you want him to understand about Amygdala Hijack?

• If you could help Patricio become a “fast fish learner” what are some of the things that you hope he would do in support of his own learning and work performance? What are some possible “fast fish” type moves that he could make to modify the physical, social/emotional, or cognitive environment around him to lessen the likelihood that he will experience amygdala hijack?

• What are some changes that would have to happen by those in charge to enable these changes?

• What advice would you offer him to help him find malleability or deal with non-malleability in seemingly firm environments?
Case Studies of Patricio, Lillian, and Daniela

You can find three full cases for extended case study to learn more about detecting and supporting those with Amygdala Hijack at this link:
In acknowledging Amygdala Hijack, here are some questions to keep in mind in our work as Workforce Development Providers or People Managers:

• How might prior experiences and possible traumas interact with the way that the person responds in difficult situations?
• Can you detect instances in which they seem to be hijacked by emotion and unable to step back to view the larger picture?
• How might amygdala hijack derail their goals?
• What are some things that they are doing that hold promise for being able to manage the emotional memories that are implicitly diminishing their chances for positive outcomes?
• What are some strategies or pieces of advice that might be suggested to them?
In Summary:

• The amygdala can exert a lot of control over our behavior and because it does not involve the higher-order portions of the brain, we have little control over our reaction.

• Emotional shortcuts can be a source of intuition, but they can also reinforce limiting and maladaptive responses.

• Therefore, dealing with our amygdala can be challenging. As learners, we need to figure out how to manage ourselves and our environments to avoid the worst consequences of an “amygdala hijack” and to make the most of situations in which it guides our intuitions towards important information.

• As Workforce Development Providers and People Managers we need to be aware of how people respond to “amygdala hijack” and to support them in managing their emotional memories, traumas, and reactions. This includes:
  1) recognizing the potential for amygdala hijack before it happens;
  2) realizing instances when people may have been hijacked and supporting them rather than judging them.
  3) helping them to develop moves to manage when it happens and creating malleability in workforce environments to help them to navigate the way that their amygdala interacts with their responses.