

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

This Holiday, Don't Fight with Reptiles

Buckle your seatbelts everyone. It's stress season! As you know, holidays bring the good stress of trying to make everything lovely for family and friends—decorating, cooking, planning, shopping, waiting, wrapping, and anticipating. And they bring bad stress too—non-idyllic family gatherings, the terror of credit card bills, the indignity of airport pat downs, the anxiety of weather delays.

Even if you are the most “Zen” person who has ever levitated above the planet, your odds of encountering and perhaps butting heads with *other* stressed people are greatly increased between late November and early January. So let's talk for a bit about how to deal with stressed people, especially those in our family who wrote the manual on how to push our particular buttons.

Human vs. Reptile: The Mall Showdown

Some of you will recall from previous newsletters, that we human beings have three parts of our brain that function quite differently. Today, we will care about two of them. One of these parts is solely devoted to handling threats. It tells us to run like crazy; be vewwy, vewwy quiet so we won't get eaten; attack and eliminate the threat; or chill because, hey, nothing's happening. Because this is really the sum total of the brain function that reptiles have, that part of our brain got named the “Reptilian Brain.” Another part of our brain can think about complicated systems and stuff that's not actually happening in the moment. It's the part that can plan for the holidays, think about the one we loved who got away, and learn how to grout tile by watching YouTube. This part, the Neo Cortex, is unique to human beings, with no offense to those smart chimps, dolphins, and police dogs.

So why should you care about brain parts? Well, when you're having a fight with someone significant, say, about whether to shell out \$150 on a faux Tiffany lamp for Aunt Suzie, you want to be fighting with their Neo Cortex. Their Neo Cortex can hear that the credit card bill is already a bit high, that Aunt Suzie hasn't been in contact since Nixon's presidency, and that since she can't see anyway, but weighs about 2 pounds now, chocolate might be the better option. The Neo Cortex can take in lots of options, consider past and present factors, and often arrive at a reasonable or even creative solution.

But say that the person you are fighting with has just found out they lost their job, is secretly worried that you might leave them because you've been fighting so often, feels out of control, and has decided that their dignity and worth as a human being now depend on their ability to assert their will over yours regarding that blasted Tiffany lamp. Why then, their Reptilian Brain will wake up from it's “chill” state, start pumping adrenaline into the body and Cortisol (the stress hormone) into the brain. Your loved one's brain has essentially received the message, “Emergency war procedures. Shut down all extraneous logical functions. Eliminate all imaginative and conciliatory possibilities. Man the battle stations. Now, engage!”

In other words, when someone you love is under enough stress that they have exhausted their anti-stress hormones and defenses and the topic you are discussing is the final straw, their Reptilian Brain declares martial law and the Neo Cortex is closed for business. In that state of mind, people tend to “communicate” only to eliminate the threat the situation presents, either by “fleeing” with lies, denial, excuses, refusing to speak, or actual physical exit strategies; or by attacking in order to wound you until you are not a threat anymore, by bringing up past hurts and shame, saying horrible things their Neo Cortex wouldn’t dream of, screaming, insulting, or worse.

Becoming a Snake Charmer

What is absolutely key to understand this holiday, and at other times as well, is that the only thing that will end the Reptilian Brain’s martial law and restore the democratic order of the Neo Cortex is to somehow restore a sense of safety, either in the person’s physical situation, or through reassurance about the safety of the relationship. Only after safety is restored can reason return.

Unfortunately, this is just about the hardest thing to do. When someone starts screaming at you, most of us want to scream back or run (sound familiar, Reptiles?). We don’t want to slow down and take some deep breaths, get into a relaxed or even small posture that is way non-threatening, slow down and say things like:

- It looks like you got overwhelmed there. The most important thing to me right now is that you feel okay. We can figure out what to do about this later. What do you need to feel okay right now? (And then patiently wait and repeat parts of this until the other person calms.)
- Hey, it looks like for a minute, you forgot how much I love you. You are so important to me. No matter what happens today, I need you to remember that. How can we hold on to that even though things are so tense right now? (And dodge the snide remark, going back to the question.)
- Wow, I could use a break. I’m all tense and I’m pretty sure I’m not thinking clearly. Can we go to a quiet place for a minute so I can think. I really value you and I want to respond well to you, but I think I need a break to do it. (And then let the schedule slide enough to get that needed space.)

Saying and doing *that* kind of thing takes some time and effort! And boy, do we have to swallow some pride and some pretty fabulous sarcastic come-backs to get there. If we can respond in these ways, though, what happens is that *our* relaxed system can actually have the power to restore safety to the other person so *they* regain control of their system and can respond to us, rather than reacting. We see that with moms and toddlers all the time. The kiddo freaks out and mom’s calm restores the kid to okay. By doing this over and over again, mom eventually teaches the kid how to calm him/herself. We can do the same with each other.

This is going to be *especially* important to do with children and adults who have any kind of trauma in their past: adoption (even at birth from a healthy mom), abuse, life-threatening illness, difficult surgeries, combat, accidents, abandonment in key kid or adult relationships, etc. Under long periods of stress or extreme stress, the body can increase the amount of Cortisol it produces on a regular basis so that even minor stresses cause a Cortisol “dump,” which kicks the brain right into Reptilian fight-or-flight mode. Those who live with or love people with a trauma background may want to have conversations with that person *before* a stressful situation

occurs, helping them see the signs that the Reptile has taken over, and learning what helps them, in particular, to feel safe and loved again so that they can think well.

Now, I am not saying that that means the person gets to have their way all the time—that all they have to do is freak out and then we have to let them do what they want. What I'm saying is safety *first*. Help the person establish safety so that the Reptile chills out. Then, once they are calm, you can bring up the issue again and decide what to do.

For more information about creating safety first, especially when dealing with children with difficult behaviors, see my inspiration for this newsletter at <http://beyondconsequences.com/>

If you or someone you know would like help with fights that get out of hand or navigating the stressful holiday season, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com*.

To read past newsletters, go to www.jenniferdiebel.com/Helpful_Resources.html.

Thanks for reading!

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