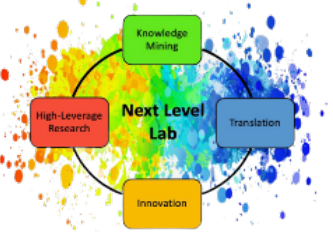


# How the Amygdala Hijack Hurts Vulnerable Workers: What Can We do to Support Them?

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, the stories of three individuals are shared and a set of guiding questions invite us to think about how amygdala hijack may be interacting with their ability to engage in workforce development opportunities and what can be done to support them.

**Next Level Lab**  
**Harvard Graduate School of Education**



# 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:

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- 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.

# What is the difference between “emotional memories” and “memories of emotion”?

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.

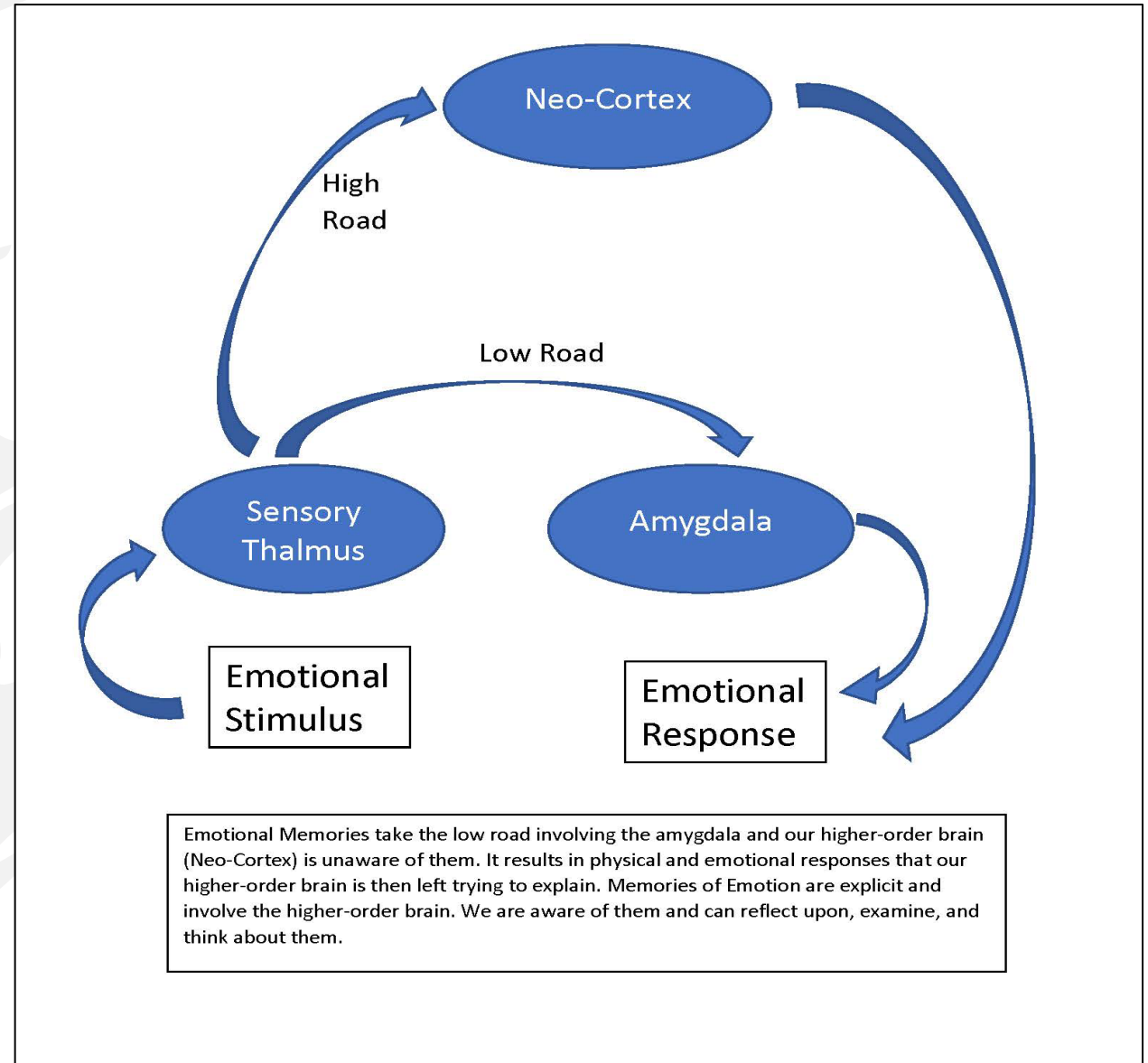
Having an explicit *memory of an emotion* means that it is being processed by the higher-order portions of your brain; the part that is called your neo-cortex. You can often tell a story of what happened and remember how you felt.

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.

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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.


Stop here and read the stories of the three individuals who are trying to take advantage of societal supports and workforce development. Consider the following questions as you read:

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- 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 strategies or pieces of advice that you might suggest to them?
- What questions would you add to this list of discussion questions?

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 happens.
- 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?



Consider the possible strategies. Many of them 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 fellow students, 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 or school 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?

Recall the stories of the three individuals who are trying to take advantage of societal supports in workforce development. Consider the following questions:

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- What are some possible “fast fish” type moves that they be able to make to modify the physical, social/emotional, or cognitive environment around them to lessen the likelihood that they 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 them to help them find malleability or deal with non-malleability in seemingly firm environments?
- What broader life advice would you offer them?
- What questions would you add to this list of discussion questions?

# In Summary:

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- 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.
- Workforce Development Providers need to be aware of how people respond due 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.