

Guess What, You Aren't Thinking Well:

What Stress Does to You

Divorce is stressful. This is a fact. Probably not news to you at this point.

It is also a fact that stress has a physiological response in your body, and especially your brain. Stress shut downs the complex thinking parts of the brain so that energy flows to the FIGHT or FLIGHT part of the brain. This is good when we are stressed because we need to run from bears or fight off bad guys. But our response to most problems needs to be more complicated than that. Running does not accomplish anything, and fighting creates more problems.

We need to figure out how to get energy to the thinking part of our brain, not the FIGHT or FLIGHT part. How can we do that?

Acknowledge the reptile in all of us: We are animals. We have animal brains. When we get scared, the 'reptile' part of our brain takes over. It is called reptile part since even reptiles have it. It is what provides that core survival mode of 'fight or flight'. Our reaction might save our lives. This served our ancestors well. It is so ingrained that we can't even control our response. The brain takes over so fast we can't think.

Acknowledge the human in all of us: The neocortex is a part of the brain which we consider the "human". It is where we process our experiences and learn from them.

The neocortex isn't functioning well when we are stressed. The reptilian brain is taking all the energy. To compensate, our brain creates shortcuts. These shortcuts have been under construction since birth. They help us process information when we don't have the full energy to think.

So this is good news right? That we have a way of using the thinking part of our brain even though we are stressed? Kind of, but now always good.

When we are stressed, we will try to put all new information into these old shortcuts. So we absorb the information in ways we have trained ourselves

in past times when we have been under stress. This leads us to re-enforce beliefs we already have. It does not allow us to create new visions.

Our brain does this because it is too hard to create new pathways when we are under stress. Better than reptile, but not quite the higher human we all would like to be. This is biological. Logic will not help us.

Finally, the higher human: That is why we need a safe environment when under stress. One where there are no threats or perceived threats. Our brain relaxes and this lets us move to a higher level of thinking.

Our brain naturally tells us to pull back from things that are perceived as dangerous. But when danger is not present, our human brain is attracted to growth. We are naturally curious and problem solvers.

Once threats have passed, the brain can start not only processing the information, but it actually will start growing. We re-write neuron pathways. Awareness is broadened. We can think of things we haven't thought of before.

That is why collaborative professionals work so hard to provide a safe environment to work in. Fear and anger inhibits rational thinking. It even causes a perception that there is more risk than actually exists.

When you are feeling stressed, acknowledge to yourself that your little reptile may come out. Learn ways that make you feel safe. Tell us, so that we can do our job better.