

# Professional Mediation Institute

Volume XXVII, September 2014

PMI Educational Conference 2015  
August 26, 2015



## Bringing Oxytocin into the Room

By: Kenneth Cloke \*

"We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are."

~ Anais Nin ~

While people in conflict commonly make reference to the facts, behaviors, feelings, personalities, or events surrounding their conflicts, for the most part they ignore the deeper reality that these experiences are all processed and regulated by their nervous systems, and are therefore initiated, resolved, transformed, and transcended by their brains. Yet only recently have mediators begun to consider how our brains influence our conflict behaviors.

It is clear that all conflicts are perceived by the senses, manifested through body language and kinesthetic sensations, embodied and given meaning by thoughts and ideas, steeped in intense emotions, made conscious through awareness, and then resolved by conversations and experiences and developed into character, expanding our capacity for openness and trust, and contributing to our learning and ability to change, and that all of these transpire or are processed inside the brain.

To explain the etiology of conflict, therefore, requires us to gain a deeper understanding of how the brain responds to conflict. This should include the ways distrusting personalities are formed, even among primates; the sources of aggressive character traits and the "fight or flight" reflex and how it dissipates; the wellsprings of emotional or spiritual malaise and hostile "gut" reactions; and the neurological foundations of collaboration, trust, forgiveness, open-heartedness, empathy, insight, intuition, learning, wisdom, and the willingness to change.

While conflict and resolution have yet to be reduced to a simple set of deterministic biochemical events taking place exclusively within the brain, research demonstrates that basic neurological processes provide all of us with alternative sets of instructions that can lead us either toward impasse or resolution, stasis or transformation, isolation or collaboration. For these reasons, it will serve us well as mediators to understand more about the neurophysiology of conflict.

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We have yet to examine communication and conflict resolution very deeply from the perspective of neurophysiology, though we know that the presence of an empathetic listener, particularly one who is skilled in mediation, can by itself create a significant shift in conflict dynamics and alter, at a subtle level of awareness, the attitudes of parties in conflict. But why is this so, how does it work, and what does it imply for conflict resolution?

For millennia, our greatest sages—particularly those from the East, including Lao Tse, Confucius, and Buddha—have sought to convince us that the universe consists of opposites that, at the deepest level, merge into a single, unified whole. Yet it has taken until the 20th century and the discovery of quantum mechanics—initially by Planck and Einstein, then by Bohr and Heisenberg and others—to establish scientifically that observers and the things they observe are part of a single interconnected system, and reveal how and why the act of observation, at a subtle level, directly influences the object or process that is being observed.

I am not a trained neurophysiologist, but an avid lay reader, and have learned an immense amount of useful information regarding conflict resolution from reading scientific studies of the brain and how it functions. What follows is a brief synopsis of some of the more interesting and important ideas and news items I have read describing research and experiments in neurophysiology as they pertain to conflict and the mediation process. Much has been added and changed since I wrote it, and every day brings remarkable new research to light that is contributing to a revolution in our understanding of the brain.

### **What is the Brain?**

Most conflicts are triggered by external events or experiences, and information regarding them is conveyed to us by sensory inputs that we have gathered from our environment. Our conflicts therefore seem to us to take place externally, yet everything we understand about the meaning of what happened, and all of our responses to the actions of others are initiated and coordinated internally within our sensory nervous system and our brains, which are not neutral, but directly influence the information we receive and how it is interpreted.

What, then, is the brain, how is it structured, and how does it typically respond to conflict? First, the brain is often analogized to a massively powerful parallel processing computer, more powerful than anything we have been able to design or create. As inadequate as this analogy is, we know that about one hundred billion nerve cells make up the brain, each of which can create up to ten thousand synaptic connections, and form a massive number of neuronal connections every second.

An average desktop computer is capable of sending 25 billion instructions per second, while a human brain can send over 100 trillion. An adult human brain, by some accounts, can make as many as 500 trillion synaptic connections per second, only a fraction of which emerge in conscious awareness. This, by itself, might explain what we commonly refer to as intuition, which can be defined merely as what we know that we don't know that we know.

Second, the brain is divided into two halves or hemispheres that are largely separate, but connected at the base in the center by a corpus callosum (in most people). Each hemisphere processes information regarding conflict somewhat differently: one side generally functions more linearly and considers problems individually and in detail, while the other side works more holistically and considers problems collectively and as a whole. One side favors logical reasoning while the other side favors pattern perception; one works by linear and rational thinking while the other practices emotional responsiveness.

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The right hemisphere, for example, has been shown to be more adept at discriminating between emotional expressions and processing negative emotions, while the left is demonstrably less so, and more involved in processing positive emotions. Language, mathematics, spatial relations and other elements of thought are also organized differently in each hemisphere.

Third, the brain is organized into regions, each of which processes different aspects of the information it receives related to conflict in specialized ways. For example, the ventral tegmental area reinforces the reward circuit; the prefrontal cortex allows for objectivity and logic; the nucleus accumbens, directly beneath the frontal cortex, is involved in the release of oxytocin, described in greater detail below; the hypothalamus produces testosterone; and, most importantly, the amygdala, an almond-shaped region near the brain stem, regulates immediate responses to conflict and change, especially anger and fear.

The three primary areas of the brain are the brainstem, responsible for our states of arousal and other physical functions; the limbic system that controls our basic drives and emotions, including relations and attachment, anger and fear, and via the pituitary gland, sends hormones throughout our body; and the cortex and prefrontal cortex that control higher order thinking.

### Neurotransmitters and Conflict

The brain is awash in chemicals, including hormones and neurotransmitters that accentuate or dampen its responses and influence its organization and operations. Neurotransmitters are chemicals that relay, amplify, or modulate signals that are sent between neurons and other cells. There are many different hormones and neurotransmitters, of which the most important are glutamate and GABA, which excite and modify synapses. With regard to conflict, the following compounds seem to be most active:

- \* Adrenalin, which triggers the fight or flight response;
- \* Testosterone, which stimulates aggression;
- \* Oxytocin which instills trust, increases loyalty, and promotes the “tend and befriend” response;
- \* Estrogen, which triggers the release of oxytocin;
- \* Endorphins, which reinforce collaborative experiences with pleasure;
- \* Dopamine, which generates a reward response and fortifies addiction;
- \* Serotonin, which regulates moods;
- \* Phenylethylamine, which induces excitement and anticipation;
- \* Vasopressin, which encourages bonding in males in a variety of species.

Many vertebrate brain structures involved in the control of aggression are richly supplied with receptors that bind with hormones produced by the endocrine system, in particular with steroidal hormones produced in the gonads. In a wide range of vertebrate species, there is a strong relationship between male aggressiveness and circulating levels of androgens such as testosterone, a hormone produced in the testes.

These aggressive behavioral patterns and the modulation of an animal's tendency to fight or flee are controlled by a hierarchical system of countervailing neural structures. Many of these are found in the limbic system—a part of the forebrain that is involved in emotionally based behavior and motivation. These neural structures interact with biochemicals that are produced inside and outside the nervous system. For example, it has been shown that serotonin injections cause lobsters and other animals to take a dominant or aggressive posture, while octopamine injections induce submissive postures, which favor cooperation.



When serotonin levels are increased in subordinate animals, their willingness to fight also increases, and declines as they are reduced.

From fish to mammals, aggression levels have been shown to rise and fall with natural fluctuations in testosterone levels. Castration has been found to reduce aggression dramatically, while the experimental reinstatement of testosterone by injection restores aggression. Circulating testosterone also influences the responses and signals that are used during mating and fighting in many species. In stags, the neck muscles needed for roaring enlarge under the influence of testosterone, while in male mice, the scent of another male's urine, which contains the breakdown products of testosterone, elicits intense aggressive responses.

In pregnant female mice, the scent of urine from a male that is ill can even induce the formation of antibodies in their embryos, and the presence of stress chemicals that are increased by fighting or mild electrical shocks can be detected by females who are able to detect the smell of male urine, producing personality and behavioral changes in their unborn offspring. It is thought that stress chemicals like cortisone and epigenetic changes in methyl groups that turn gene expression on or off are responsible for personality changes into the second and third generation.

The experience of fighting has been shown to have a significant impact on brain biochemistry and therefore on brain structure, especially in the limbic system which is strongly associated with conflict. For example, among rainbow trout and lizards, dominant animals show significant transient activation of their brains' serotonin systems, whereas subordinate animals display a longer-term elevation of these systems.

Researchers have shown in several vertebrate species that electrical stimulation of the midbrain and hindbrain elicits stereotyped, yet undirected aggressive behaviors, while stimulation of the hypothalamus and a nearby pre-optic region in the forebrain elicits well-coordinated attacks on other members of the same species. Lesions in these areas have also been shown to reduce aggression.

The hypothalamus and pre-optic area of the forebrain are also involved in the generation of coordinated aggressive behaviors that are produced in lower brain regions. This activity is modulated by the brain's higher centers, including areas of the limbic system—in particular the septum, which lies above the hypothalamus and has an inhibitory effect on aggression, while the amygdala located deep in the temporal lobes has the opposite effect.

In a series of experiments, dogs and monkeys have been shown to respond negatively to favoritism and unfairness in experiments where certain animals have been given rewards without having performed, causing others to punish them, or refuse to cooperate with researchers.

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The lateral habenula has been shown to react strongly when expected rewards are denied or replaced by mild punishments. Dopamine neurons are inhibited by the habenula, and since dopamine contributes to learning by producing positive sensations in response to success, many researchers now think the habenula may also contribute to learning by shutting off dopamine in response to disappointment, representing an internal form of “the carrot and the stick.” Some research suggests that the habenula is implicated in depression. It has also been shown that the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), located at the front of the brain behind the eyes, is implicated in various aspects of decision-making and choice evaluation. The anterior cingulate gyrus then reacts to mistakes and internal conflicts between intentions and outcomes and helps alter behaviors in response.

Researchers have established that the negative emotions we routinely encounter in conflict are triggered in more or less the following sequence:

- Sensory information from primary receptors in the eye, nose, ear, and other organs travels along neural pathways to the limbic forebrain.
- These stimuli are evaluated for emotional significance. Research by Joseph E. LeDoux has demonstrated that auditory fear conditioning involves the transmission of sound signals through an auditory pathway to the thalamus, which relays this information to the dorsal amygdala.
- The amygdala coordinates a “relevance detection” process that is rapid, minimal, automatic, and evaluative.
- Emotions are then activated in the subcortical thalamo-amygdala pathway and relayed from the thalamus to the neocortex for cognitive appraisal and evaluation.
- In some cases, the same information is simultaneously sent to the neocortex for slower processing, creating a dual, two-circuit pathway that permits reason to override an emotional response, or the amygdala to hijack the cortex and coordinate a response.

### **Perception, Mirror Neurons, and Suggestibility**

The brain notices changes in its immediate environment predominantly by contrast or comparison against a relatively static backdrop of unwavering familiarity, giving rise to expectation, desire, fear, and habit. Observing the contrast between what is moving and what is not is the principle way our minds attempt to simplify and predict what is likely to happen next. At a primitive level, there is an immense evolutionary advantage in being able to notice a potential threat by, for example, contrasting the mirror symmetry of a predator’s face and eyes or a sudden movement against an asymmetrical, slower moving background. In a similar way, we are biased by evolution to credit threatening behaviors more than non-threatening ones.

A number of recent brain studies have revealed how perceptions and memories are profoundly distorted by emotions and by focused concentration, and how they can be reshaped by suggestion and subsequent events. Thus, areas of the brain that are linked with negative emotions and judging others are switched off, for example, when mothers look at photographs of their babies, and when even strangers view photographs of babies. Instead, the right prefrontal cortex lights up, not only in parents watching their children, but also in lovers and Buddhist monks who have been asked to meditate on loving-kindness and compassion. In other research, memory and awareness have been shown to decline dramatically in the presence of stress chemicals that are released during periods of intense emotion.

It has also been shown, in reverse, that the free expression through outward behavior of an emotion can intensify it, while repressing or not expressing it, as far as is possible, can soften it. Thus, experiments have shown that if people are able to control their facial expressions during moments of pain, there is less arousal of the autonomic nervous system and an actual diminution of the pain experience. The same result appears to obtain for anger and fear.

In one delightful experiment, a significant percentage of people were assigned to focus their attention on a single task, such as counting the number of individuals in a colored tee shirt to whom a basketball was passed. When they did so, the participants completely ignored and even vigorously denied afterwards that an unusual or bizarre occurrence had occurred, in this case, the entry onto the basketball court of someone dressed in a gorilla outfit, who walked and pranced across their line of vision.

Scientists have begun to trace the development of empathy in primates, including human beings, leading to the discovery of “mirror neurons,” which fire in the brains of observers watching a given action, and replicate to some extent the experience of the one who is being observed. Similar neurons fire when we observe someone else suffering or frightened, reproducing those experiences in the form of empathy. Indeed, physical and emotional pains seem to trigger the same mirror neurons.

In one surprising recent experiment, “phantom limb syndrome,” in which a lost limb can experience itching or pain, has been shown to dramatically disappear when a subject is allowed to observe a false image of the lost limb by means of a mirror, thereby tricking the brain’s mirror neurons into thinking that the lost arm or leg had reappeared. Similarly, “out-of-body” experiences can be induced using video cameras and virtual reality equipment that gives the impression that the apparently different person viewed by video, is in fact themselves.

### Priming

Several studies have shown that the brain is highly responsive to suggestion. In a series of remarkable experiments it has been shown that the performance of simple, seemingly unrelated tasks can be increased or decreased merely by placing a briefcase or sports equipment nearby, triggering unconscious associations with work or play.

In an interesting study, subjects were made happy or angry, then shown happy and angry faces and friendly and hostile interpersonal scenes in a stereoscope. Happy subjects perceived more happy faces and friendly interpersonal scenes while angry subjects perceived more angry faces and hostile interpersonal scenes.

In addition, it has been shown that relatively small favors or bits of good luck (like finding money in a coin telephone or getting an unexpected gift) induced positive emotion in people, and that these emotions increased the subjects' inclination to sympathize or provide help.

At the same subtle level, a number of experiments have shown that behaviors can be modified simply by introducing background scents such as lavender or the lemony odor of detergent, and that consumers of different products will purchase different products more or less readily in the presence of discrete scents.

Equally dramatically, test results can be predictably raised or lowered merely by asking people of color, or those who have been discriminated against in their country, to identify themselves by their race or discriminatory categorization beforehand, or by giving indirect racial or emotional cues, or by priming teachers falsely in advance of a test regarding the innate intelligence or stupidity of their students, producing conformity with expectations and a well-established “Pygmalion effect.”

# Some Thoughts

“Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.”

Winston Churchill

“In order to succeed, your desire for success should be greater than your fear of failure.”

Bill Cosby

“Always be yourself, express yourself, have faith in yourself, do not go out and look for a successful personality and duplicate it.”

Bruce Lee

“Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value.”

Albert Einstein

“A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him.”

David Brinkley

“I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody.”

Bill Cosby

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”

Winston Churchill

“I don't measure a man's success by how high he climbs but how high he bounces when he hits bottom.”

George S. Patton

In one remarkable study, when 12- and 13-year-old African-American students were asked to spend 15 minutes indicating which values, such as friendship or family, they upheld, the achievement gap between them and white students decreased by 40 percent. Similarly, when female college students read passages before a test arguing against gender differences in mathematical ability, their scores increased by 50 percent.

At a very subtle level, Yale University psychologist John Bargh found that when volunteers were “primed” with words associated with the elderly, like “wrinkle,” they took significantly longer to walk down a hall than those who had not been primed. And interestingly, for conflict resolvers, Alex Pentland of the MIT Media Lab found that even without priming, watching body language and tone of voice for only a few minutes allowed researchers to predict with 87 percent accuracy the outcome of subsequent negotiations between strangers. Here are the results from some fascinating priming studies:

- \* Integrating words such as “cooperation” and “fairness” into sentences can result in a higher occurrence of these behaviors.
- \* When subjects were asked to think about the lowest and highest fair prices for a car before negotiating, they made conciliatory moves more quickly, were happier with the results, reached agreement in half the time, and were willing to negotiate again.
- \* Students primed with the word “rudeness” interrupted more quickly than others.
- \* People using a public bathroom were more willing to pay a fee on the honor system if the word “honesty” was posted, or to pay for coffee if a picture of a face or an eye was posted nearby.
- \* Seeing a briefcase or sitting in a hard chair caused negotiators to offer less than if they saw a backpack or sat in a soft chair.
- \* Scores in Trivial Pursuit were increased by thinking of a professor and decreased by thinking of a soccer hooligan.
- \* People who were primed with the names of their friends were more willing to help others, including strangers.

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- \* Researchers at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya in Israel conducted a study involving 76 Israel-born Jews, 59 Israeli Arabs and 53 Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian territories. Each individual was randomly assigned a reading – one portraying groups as having a fixed nature and the other describing them as flexible and open to change. Those primed to believe their adversaries were changeable were significantly more optimistic about their ability to reach a negotiated peace, suggesting they would be more willing to compromise to reach agreement.
- \* Group members primed with the words dependable, helpful, share and support were more cooperative within their group than others, even to their individual economic detriment.
- \* U.S. participants who listened to and mouthed the words of the “O Canada” anthem together showed increased feelings of being “part of the group,” and made consistently cooperative decisions in an economic game.
- \* William Cox has shown that, when presented with a depressed patient who "self-stereotypes herself as incompetent, a therapist can find ways to prime her with specific situations in which she had been competent in the past... Making memories of her competence more salient reduce[s] her self-stereotype of incompetence."

Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman cites a number of interesting studies of priming in his excellent book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, among which are these:

- \* Exposure to a word makes it easier for people to recall it later. If you have recently seen or heard the word EAT, you are temporarily more likely to complete the word fragment SO\_P as SOUP than as SOAP. The opposite occurs if you just saw the word WASH.
- \* The same is true if the word is presented in a whisper or a blurry font.
- \* Subjects asked to complete the word fragments W\_ \_H and S\_ \_P were more likely to complete them as WASH and SOAP if they had been primed to think about an action of which they were ashamed, and as WISH and SOUP if they were primed to think of food.
- \* Merely thinking about stabbing a coworker in the back leaves people more inclined to buy soap, disinfectant or detergent than batteries, juice or candy.
- \* This also connects to body parts. People asked to lie to an imaginary person over the phone preferred mouthwash over soap, while those who lied in email preferred soap.
- \* An entirely different set of associations and memories occur to us if we are asked “Is James friendly?” than if we are asked “Is James unfriendly?” In each case we easily slip into “confirmation bias” that leads us to memories and associations that confirm what the question primed us to think. The same is true for other negative and positive priming associations.
- \* Students were asked to walk around a room for five minutes at a rate of 30 steps per minute, about 1/3rd their normal pace. Afterwards, they were much quicker to recognize words associated with old age, like “forgetful, old and lonely.” Acting old reinforces ideas and thoughts about old age.
- \* Similar reciprocal links include: being happy makes you smile and smiling makes you happy—even if only holding a pencil sideways in your teeth.
- \* People asked to squeeze their eyebrows together showed enhanced emotional responses to upsetting pictures.
- \* Nodding (yes) increases acceptance of editorials while shaking one’s head (no) reduces it.
- \* A study of voting patterns in Arizona in 2000 showed that support for school funding propositions was greater if the polling station was in a school than in a different location.
- \* A different experiment showed that people exposed to images of classrooms and school lockers also increased their tendency to vote for school funding initiatives. This difference was greater than that between voters who were parents and voters who were not.
- \* On the other hand, words and images of money caused people to become more selfish, sit farther apart, and be less willing to help someone who pretended to be confused about a task, or to help pick up pencils a researcher dropped on the floor.
- \* Reminding people of their mortality increases the appeal of authoritarian ideas.

These studies suggest that the brain can be re-programmed by consciously selected practices. It has been shown, for example, that the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (which is responsible for empathy, compassion, shame, and intuitive emotional responses to moral dilemmas) can be significantly strengthened by the practice of meditation, or merely thinking compassionately for a few moments about the well being of others.

Other experiments have demonstrated that men become more loving toward their female partners as their ovulation approaches, that women prefer different forms of male attractiveness at different stages in their menstrual cycle, and that women make decisions about male attractiveness based on chemical indicators in their sweat indicating that they have immunities the women do not, as measured by genes for their major histocompatibility complex or MHC. Other studies have found that men also prefer women with dissimilar MHC genes, specifically with human leukocyte antigen, or HLA genes.

An important study from Stockholm suggests that lesbian women have more asymmetric brains, like heterosexual men, and that gay men have more symmetric brains, like heterosexual women. Moreover, in heterosexual women and gay men the amygdala connects mainly to areas of the brain that manifest fear as anxiety, whereas in heterosexual men and lesbian women it connects more strongly to areas that trigger the fight or flight (or freeze) reflex.

It has also been shown that sweat from women who watched violent movies was accurately rated by others as stronger, less pleasant, and smelling more “like aggression” than sweat from women who had watched a neutral movie. In an interesting study, researchers from Stony Brook University in New York taped absorbent pads to the underarms of 40 volunteers who went on their first skydive. In a double-blind experiment, a group of testers smelled sample pads from skydivers and non-skydivers while in an fMRI scanner. The testers showed increased activity in their amygdala and hypothalamus while breathing sweat produced by skydivers under frightening conditions, indicating that humans may in fact be able to smell fear in others, even if they have not experienced it themselves.

It has even be shown that liberals and conservatives use different parts of their brains when they make risky decisions, and these regions can be used to predict which political party a person prefers with over 89.2 percent accuracy. Specifically, when given a gambling task, Democrats showed significantly greater activity in the left insula, a region associated with social and self-awareness, while Republicans showed significantly greater activity in the right amygdala, a region associated with fear and the fight or flight response. Here is a summary of a number of other interesting studies revealing unexpected connections and associations:

- \* Israeli researchers, writing in the journal *Fertility and Sterility*, found that women undergoing in-vitro fertilization were almost twice as likely to conceive if they had been made to laugh by a hospital “clown” who entertained them as soon as their embryos were implanted.

# Mediator Resources

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[www.pmi360.com](http://www.pmi360.com)

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[http://www.niacr.org/pages/mediation\\_resources.htm](http://www.niacr.org/pages/mediation_resources.htm)

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“It is not in the stars to  
hold our destiny but in  
ourselves.”

William Shakespeare

- \* Using data from MRI scans, researchers at University College London found that self-described liberals have a larger anterior Cingulate Cortex associated with understanding complexity, while self-described conservatives were more likely to have a larger Amygdala, associated with fear and anxiety.
- \* A team at MIT ran tests to see if objects could influence judgments and decision-making. Passers-by were asked to judge a job candidate by looking at their resume. Half were given the resume on a heavy clipboard and half on a light one. Those with the heavy clipboard rated the same candidates more serious than those with the light one.
- \* Volunteers who sat on a hard seat were less willing to change their price in a hypothetical car purchase than those sitting on a soft seat. Textures associated with tactile metaphors may trigger linguistic links to behaviors.
- \* University of Southern California researchers asked male and female volunteers to put their hands in ice water, raising their levels of the stress hormone cortisol. They then looked at angry or neutral faces in a brain scanner. Men showed less activity in key face-processing regions of the brain and their ability to evaluate facial expressions declined. In women, this region became more active, as did an area of the brain linked to empathy and the ability to recognize others' emotions.
- \* A University of British Columbia researcher in Canada found that "the mere thought of having money makes people less likely to help acquaintances, to donate to charity, or to choose to spend time with others – precisely the kind of behaviors that are strongly associated with happiness." Spending as little as five dollars on someone else promoted greater happiness than spending money on oneself.
- \* When people have just seen an organic fruit salad, they think a cheeseburger has 1,041 calories, but only 780 calories after seeing a "decadent cheesecake."
- \* In offices with an honor system for coffee, people are more likely to pay on days when a photograph of human eyes is discretely posted above the coffee machine.
- \* People tip waiters an average of 140 percent more if the waiter repeats the order verbatim, as opposed to paraphrasing it.
- \* Sociologists at Tilburg University in the Netherlands interviewed travelers at a train station during and after a strike by janitors, and found that people in messy environments were more likely to accept negative stereotypes of Muslims and homosexuals. Travelers were asked to sit while filling out the survey, and those in messy environments chose to sit farther away from a black man than a white man.
- \* The Swiss Journal of Psychology reported a study in which women asked male passersby for directions to Valentine Street or Martin Street (neither exists). A moment later, they encountered a different woman struggling to retrieve her cell phone from a group of threatening guys. Those asked about Valentine Street were more likely to offer help than those asked about Martin Street.
- \* Yale University psychologists met volunteers and casually asked them to hold a hot or iced coffee while writing down their names. They later read a description of a fictitious person and answered questions about their character. Those who held an iced coffee rated the person as less warm and friendly.
- \* In a similar experiment, just thinking about being socially excluded can make a room feel about 3° C cooler.
- \* People who watched an upsetting film or a disturbing smell as opposed to a neutral one were more judgmental and severe about unethical acts, and those who read about an unethical act expressed a greater preference for cleaning products. Offering them an antiseptic wipe afterwards reduced their willingness to volunteer to help out a desperate student.
- \* Harvard University researchers created a public goods game in which players choose whether or not to contribute money to a common pool that is redistributed equally. They divided participants into three groups, one that could punish freeloaders, one that could reward contributors, and one that could do either. Rewarding people always gave the largest return, and when those who could chose opted to reward they received larger payoffs.

### **Oxytocin and Dual Pathways in Conflict**

The physical basis for collaboration, altruism, trust, forgiveness, and interest-based conflict resolution techniques, has been clearly identified with the "tend and befriend" hormone Oxytocin.

# Interesting Mediation Blogs

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Oxytocin was discovered early in the 20th century and first synthesized by Vincent du Vigneaud in 1953, for which he received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1955. It is secreted by the posterior lobe of the pituitary gland and can be made synthetically. Physiologically, it promotes the secretion of breast milk and stimulates the contraction of the uterus during labor. It cannot be reliably ingested orally, but can be administered intravenously, sublingually, or by nasal spray, although its strongest effects last only for a few minutes.

Oxytocin is widely believed to be responsible for prompting empathy, compassion, trust, generosity, altruism, parent-child bonding, and monogamy in many species, including human beings. Oxytocin has been dubbed the “bonding” hormone, primarily as a result of research involving voles. Prairie voles in the U.S. are largely monogamous and the males provide care for the young. Montane voles, on the other hand, are polygamous and the males are less caring of their young. Experiments that have deprived prairie voles of oxytocin and provided it to Montane voles cause a dramatic reversal in these behaviors.

In a number of duplicated extraordinary studies, participants are given a small amount of pretend money and encouraged to invest it with a stranger. On average, they initially invest only a quarter to a third of the money they possess. But after four sniffs of the neurotransmitter oxytocin, their trust levels skyrocket, and without hesitation they become willing to invest up to 80 percent or more. Here is a summary from the original study:

Human beings routinely help strangers at costs to themselves. Sometimes the help offered is generous—offering more than the other expects. The proximate mechanisms supporting generosity are not well understood, but several lines of research suggest a role for empathy. In this study, participants were infused with 40 IU oxytocin (OT) or placebo and engaged in a blinded, one-shot decision on how to split a sum of money with a stranger that could be rejected. Those on OT were 80 percent more generous than those given a placebo. OT had no effect on a unilateral monetary transfer task dissociating generosity from altruism. OT and altruism together predicted almost half the interpersonal variation in generosity. Notably, OT had twofold larger impact on generosity compared to altruism. This indicates that generosity is associated with both altruism as well as an emotional identification with another person.

Duke neuroscientist, Michael Platt found that when monkeys helped themselves, neurons in the anterior cingulate gyrus fired, but when they helped others, neurons in the orbitofrontal cortex that are known to be involved in reward processing fired, stimulating feelings of pleasure in altruism and helping others.

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Michael S. Orfinger on  
his election to the  
bench, August 2014.



The Professional Mediation Institute  
Newsletter is published bi-monthly by  
The Professional Mediation Institute  
P.O. Box 200  
Tallahassee, FL 32302  
Phone (850) 425-8156  
Fax (850) 521-0222  
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He suggests that the orbitofrontal cortex encodes vicarious experiences that account for happiness and sadness and are “what actually drives giving behavior and perhaps drives charity in people.”

Several experiments have shown that positive emotions facilitate creative problem solving. One study, for example, showed that positive emotions enabled subjects to name more uses for common objects. Another showed that positive emotions enhanced creative problem solving by enabling subjects to see relations among objects that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. A number of studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of positive emotions on thinking, memory, and action in preschool and older children.

A recent study by a group in Zurich, Switzerland showed that oxytocin improves recognition and memory of previously presented faces, which were more correctly assessed as being “known,” but the ability to recollect faces that had not been seen before was unchanged and there was no difference when recalling images of houses, landscapes, or sculptures. The researchers argued, “this pattern speaks for an immediate and selective effect of the peptide [oxytocin in] strengthening neuronal systems of social memory.”

There is a considerable body of research that has linked oxytocin with collaboration and creative problem solving, and these with the release of endorphins, the brain’s version of morphine. Creative problem solving has also been shown to increase with diversity, and a mathematical proof has been published demonstrating that more diverse groups predictably experience greater creativity, success in problem solving, and satisfaction as a result.

Thus, the brain possesses not one, but two systems for responding to conflict, and is capable both of adrenalin-based “fight or flight” responses, and of

oxytocin-based “tend and befriend” ones. Just as, in biology, there are evolutionary advantages to aggression and “selfish genes,” and there are also advantages to collaboration and altruistic efforts that aid others.

These opposing capacities are reflected elsewhere in the body and the brain. There are two bundles of nerves, for example, that connect the eye and other sensory organs with the brain. One travels directly to the amygdala where fight or flight responses are initiated, while the other proceeds to the neocortex where logical explanations can be discovered, allowing us to override costly adrenalin-based responses.

As we learn, develop language, mature, and accumulate long-term memories and experiences, these dual pathways to the amygdala and the neocortex become more developed and integrated, and we become able to process events in either or both pathways at the same time, and increasingly learn to shift from aggressive to collaborative responses.

This duality allows the amygdala pathway to specialize in processing information that may require a rapid response, while the neocortex pathway specializes in evaluating information that may be important in forming cognitive judgments or developing complex coping strategies.

Duality allows us to learn how to choose either to by-pass the amygdala's initiation of the fight or flight response, or the less aggressive option of tend and befriend.

Moreover, the brain not only dictates how we respond to changes in our environment, it is actually shaped and molded by those changes. The brain requires sensory stimulation in order to develop, and repeated stimulation creates physical connections between neurons that strengthen the pathways and networks responsible for thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

These stimulations have been shown to produce significant attitudinal changes. Indeed, several experiments have demonstrated that countless previous experiments on laboratory mice and rats over the course of decades have been deeply influenced by whether the animals were raised in rich or impoverished environments.

The environment in which a young animal is raised also has a significant effect on whether and how it fights as an adult. These environmental factors are not always directly related to social experience. For example, mice that are deprived of food during their early development become particularly aggressive as adults. On the other hand, environmental effects on the development of aggression may depend on social interactions in contexts other than fighting; for instance, mouse pups that have been roughly handled by their mothers are more aggressive as adults.

Similar results have been found in a range of species that have been reared in social isolation. More surprisingly, physical tests have revealed that babies are able to rewire their mothers' brains in utero, and that some of the genetic material and cells of each remain in the other throughout their lives and may influence a variety of behaviors, including a tendency to aggression or collaboration in conflict.

### **Is Aggression Inevitable?**

Clearly, aggression and violence are "hard-wired" into the brain, but so are empathy and collaboration. Recent research has emphasized the cooperative aspects of warlike behavior, which forms a core element not only in gangs, but sports teams, organizations and nation states, which use internal cooperation as an aid to external competition. Indeed, modern warfare can be seen as requiring a high level of internal collaborative activity.

Yet it has been shown, for example by researchers at the University of Edinburgh, that men in war simulations tend to overestimate their chances of winning, making them more likely to attack and behave aggressively, leading to unnecessary losses that a more sober calculation might predict.

It has also been argued by evolutionary biologists at the University of New Mexico, based on data from 125 civil wars, that cultures become more insular and xenophobic when diseases and parasites are common, perhaps in an effort to drive away strangers who may carry new diseases. By contrast, cultures with a low risk of disease are more open to outsiders. They argue that when the risk of infectious diseases fell in Western nations following World War II due to antibiotics and sanitation, these societies became less hostile and xenophobic.

In one interesting experiment, cricket players on the Caribbean island of Dominica experienced a surge in testosterone and aggressive behavior after winning against another village, but did not experience the same surge when winning against a team from their own village. Similarly, it has been shown that an increase in testosterone typically experienced by men in the presence of a potential mate is muted if she is in a relationship with a relative or friend.

*Continued, Page 14*

# The 2015 PMI Education Program

August 26, 2015

World Center Marriott - Orlando, Florida

This suggests that building empathy and “identification with the enemy” may prove useful as techniques for countering aggressive behavior in mediation. There is also research suggesting that while women may be better at brokering harmony within groups, men may be better at making peace between groups. These techniques suggest that it may be possible to identify more precisely which approach will work best in a given setting to reduce warfare and aggression.

Biologist Robert Sapolsky is a leading challenger of what he refers to as the “urban myth of inevitable aggression.” In studies of baboons in Kenya, when several aggressive males who fought others for food died as a result of food poisoning, the females chose to mate with less aggressive males who began to collaborate and groom each other, leading him to conclude that “there is a great potential for dramatically decreasing the frequency of war and getting a lot better at intervention, termination, and reconciliation.”

### Implications for Conflict Resolution

These are just a few of the more dramatic conclusions that have emerged from countless studies and experiments, from which I have culled only a few that seem most significant based on my experience as a mediator. What, then, does all this research suggest for conflict resolution?

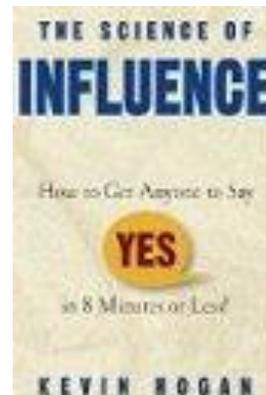
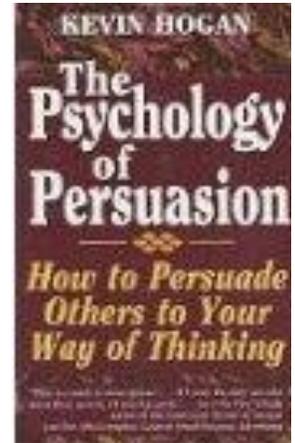
In the first place, it reinforces the idea of brain “plasticity,” which holds that the brain is not fixed but evolving, learning, and producing new synapses all the time, even among those who were previously considered elderly and incapable of doing so. Among other things, this gives us hope, and explains why it is possible for people to switch suddenly from aggression to collaboration. Recent research shows, for example, that it is possible to increase our capacity for empathy and compassion through meditative practices.

Second, it suggests that a variety of techniques might be useful in reducing adrenalin, increasing oxytocin, and stimulating collaboration and trust. One clear example is research that involves what we call “mirroring,” and in scientific literature is called mimicry, but is sometimes included under the heading of persuasion. It has been demonstrated, for example, in human subjects, that mirroring body language after a two second delay (so it is not recognized as mimicry by the subject) improves the outcome of negotiations and encourages collaborative behavior.

*Continued, Page 15.*

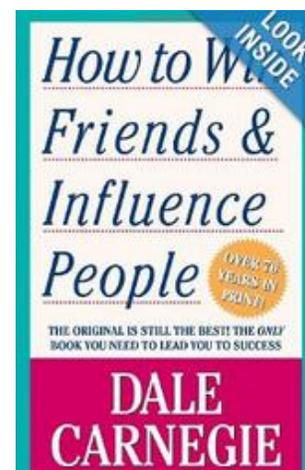
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In reading each of these studies and experiments, we can imagine a number of subtle ways we might go about encouraging a shift in the attitudes of disputants toward problem solving and collaboration. For example, it is clear by hindsight that a number of very common simple techniques, such as welcoming, introductions, reaching agreement on ground rules, caucusing, summarizing, and securing small agreements, can predictably reduce the release of adrenalin and stimulate the release of oxytocin. This may cause us to wonder: what deeper results might we achieve by better understanding how the brain processes and overcomes the fight or flight response?

Even basic information about neurophysiology can lead us to new techniques, for example, by allowing mediators to work directly with different hemispheres of the brains of conflicted parties, not only by presenting information in ways that are more accessible to one hemisphere or the other, but by focusing attention, for example, on the eye that feeds information to a particular hemisphere that may be more receptive to it.

Other quite subtle techniques might also have an impact on the brain chemistry of conflict, including the introduction of scents that remind people less of fear than of social connection, serving chocolate to stimulate the production of dopamine, placing objects that encourage positive emotions inside the mediation room, asking questions about values to orient people to their highest standards, using body language to trigger mirror neurons, or offering positive acknowledgments regarding something each party did or said. Here are some simple additional things mediators might do, based on brain research, to encourage parties to reach an agreement:

- \* Create an environment with objects that “prime” or encourage collaboration and dialogue. Use soft chairs, serve hot drinks or food, and create a welcoming atmosphere.
- \* Slow, soften and relax your tone of voice, and create a context of acknowledgement and appreciation. Thank them for coming.
- \* Listen closely to the words they use and search for ways of reframing them from negative to positive. Ask them, for example, what words they would use to describe the kind of conversation they want to have, or what they most want to say to each other, or hear the other person say in response.
- \* Use words repeatedly that emphasize the outcomes you want to achieve, like “fair” or “satisfying” or “creative.” Try to avoid words like “tough” or “win” or “dissatisfied” or “hard.”
- \* Speak to both hemispheres of the brain, and help translate between them. When a “left brain” point is made, see if you can translate it into “right brain” language.
- \* Look directly into the eye that can access information located in a particular hemisphere of the brain.
- \* Meditate regularly to build empathy and emotional balance.
- \* Avoid pictures or objects that denote fighting, imbalance, hardness, roughness, coldness. Favor items that connote balance, cooperation, unison of movement or rhythm, warmth, softness. Keep the temperature on the warm side.
- \* Bring emotional processing directly into the conversation by asking “How does that feel to you?” “Why is that important to you?” or “What does that mean to you?”
- \* Make unilateral, unexpected concessions yourself and ask the parties to do the same, for example by asking, “What would you be willing to offer, in a spirit of collaboration, without any expectation of return?”
- \* Be “environmentally” generous, in attitude and demeanor.
- \* Seek ways of unifying both sides against the problem and its causes. Remind them of what they have in common.
- \* Find ways of encouraging them to act jointly, as in solving a common problem. Help them to act in synchrony.

None of this is meant to suggest that oxytocin should be administered in large and continuous doses to parties in mediation, or that we should slip into clever, yet inevitably crass forms of neuro-manipulation. Rather, it is to say that we have been working with brain chemicals unconsciously for many years, and it is now possible for us to begin thinking about conflict resolution more scientifically and proactively, using the information we gather to encourage more positive responses, and being careful to build transparency, empowerment, and authenticity into the process. Deep ethical issues need to be addressed to make sure we are not undermining mediation by adopting a cunning or unscrupulous approach to the use of brain science.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the human brain is its capacity to understand and alter the world, including itself. We have begun a period of rapid, perhaps exponential increase in understanding how the brain operates, and a growing ability to translate that knowledge into practical techniques. But without an equally rapid, equally exponential increase in our ability to use that knowledge openly, ethically, and constructively, and turn it into successful conflict resolution experiences, our species may not be able to collaborate in solving its most urgent problems, or indeed, survive them.

All of the most significant problems we face, from war and nuclear proliferation to terrorism, greed, and environmental devastation, can arguably be traced to our brain's automatic responses to conflict. Out of the last few years of neurophysiological research has emerged a new hope that solutions may indeed be found to the chemical and biological sources of aggression. These solutions require not only a profound understanding of how the brain works, but a global shift in our attitude toward conflict, an expanding set of scientifically and artistically informed techniques, a humanistic and democratic prioritization of ethics and values, and a willingness to begin with ourselves.

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Kenneth Cloke is Director of the Center for Dispute Resolution and a mediator, arbitrator, consultant and trainer, specializing in resolving complex multi-party conflicts, including community, grievance and workplace disputes, organizational and school conflicts, sexual harassment and discrimination lawsuits, and public policy disputes, and in designing conflict resolution systems for organizations. He is a nationally recognized speaker and leader in the field of conflict resolution, and a published author of many journal articles and several books, including *Mediation: Revenge and the Magic of Forgiveness* and *Mediating Dangerously: The Frontiers of Conflict Resolution*. He is a co-author with Joan Goldsmith of *Thank God It's Monday! 14 Values We Need to Humanize The Way We Work*, *Resolving Conflicts at Work: A Complete Guide for Everyone on the Job*, *Resolving Personal and Organizational Conflict: Stories of Transformation and Forgiveness*; *The End of Management and the Rise of Organizational Democracy*, *The Art of Waking People Up: Cultivating Awareness and Authenticity at Work*, and, *Journeys into the Heart of Conflict* will be published in 2005.

He received a B.A. from the University of California; a J.D. from U.C.'s Boalt Law School; a Ph.D. from UCLA; an LL.M. from UCLA Law School; and has done post-doctoral work at Yale Law School. His teaching includes law, mediation, history and other social sciences at universities including Southwestern University School of Law, Pepperdine University School of Law, Antioch University, Occidental College, USC and UCLA.



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# 5 Steps to Conflict Resolution

By: Joyce Weiss



In any company or group situation, conflicts are bound to happen. When two or more people with varying personalities work together, communication differences, work style preferences, and conflicting opinions are inevitable. The key is to be able to overcome any differences so everyone stays productive and the organization excels.

Whenever interpersonal conflict arises in your day-to-day dealings with others, put these 5 steps to conflict resolution to work. They'll save you both time and headaches, and enable everyone involved to work together harmoniously.

## 1. Identify the situation.

While this step may seem obvious, you need to remember to think in specifics. Simply saying, "The marketing department drives me crazy with their 'pie in the sky' thinking," will not help you resolve the issue. You need to precisely pinpoint who is causing the conflict as well as what he or she is doing to upset you.

## 2. Make an appointment to discuss the conflict.

Once you've figured out the specifics, you need to meet with the person. Go to his or her office and say, "I need to talk to you about our working relationship. Would you be willing to meet me for lunch on Thursday?" Whatever you do, don't barge into the person's office and start accusing him or her of things. You want to meet the person on neutral ground in a public area so the conversation stays civil.

## 3. Craft your "I" message.

The first few words you say to the person will set the tone for the rest of the meeting. Therefore, make sure you don't accuse the person or put him or her on the defensive by using "you" statements, as in, "You are always late for work and you're making my job very hard." Instead, follow this formula:

I am \_\_\_\_\_ when I \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_  
(your responsibility)      (non-judgmental)      (how it affects you)

For example, "I am frustrated when I have to lead the morning meetings every day because everyone agreed to be here on time for the meetings but not everyone is." This approach takes the attention away from the person and focuses it on the behavior that is causing conflict."

## 4. Set your goal.

Plan ahead of time what you think the other person will say and what you will say in response. Additionally, plan the desired changes you would like to see the other person implement. And don't forget that no conflict is one-sided. You have to look at the other person's side of things and find out what you can do to make work easier for him or her too.

## 5. Get closure.

Before leaving the meeting, detail the specific agreements both parties have made. Shake hands, and then choose a date and time that you'll meet again to evaluate overall progress.

Conflicts don't have to be ugly situations that cause grief and pain. Anyone can resolve conflicts by being Direct with Respect® and by keeping an open mind. The more you work toward conflict resolution, the more successful you'll be in business and in life.

Joyce Weiss is the speaker more than 300 companies and 30,000 individuals have turned to when they wanted bold solutions to boost morale and the bottom line. A renowned author and speaker who has been featured in USA Today, The Chicago Tribune, The Detroit Free Press, Selling Power, and over 100 other publications, Joyce combines practical advice and enthusiasm to produce results in your team.



The foregoing was originally published on The Small Business Advocate, [www.smallbusinessadvocate.com](http://www.smallbusinessadvocate.com) and is reprinted here with permission.

Her website is <http://www.joyceweiss.com>.

## Some Thoughts

Whenever you're in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude.

William James

Peace is not absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means.

Ronald Reagan

Happiness is a byproduct of function, purpose, and conflict; those who seek happiness for itself seek victory without war.

William S. Burroughs

People like to say that the conflict is between good and evil. The real conflict is between truth and lies.

Miguel Angel Ruiz

Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict.

William Ellery Channing

# Ten Tips for Dealing with Unreasonable People

1. Keep your Cool  
Avoid escalation of the problem
2. Fly Like an Eagle  
“You can't fly like an eagle if you hang out with turkeys”
3. Shift from Being Reactive to Proactive  
Concentrate energy on problem-solving
4. Pick your Battles  
Avoid confronting the unnecessary complications
5. Separate the Person from the Issue  
Establish Yourself as the Problem-Solver
6. Put the Spotlight on Them  
Apply Appropriate Pressure to Reduce Difficult Behavior
7. Use Appropriate Humor  
Disarm difficult Behavior with Humor
8. Change from Following to Leading  
Leverage Direction and Flow of Communication
9. Confront Bullies (safely)  
Increase confidence and bring peace of mind
10. Set Consequence  
Gives Pause to the Difficult Person

From *Ten Keys to Handling Unreasonable and Difficult People*, by Preston Preston Ni, in *Psychology Today*, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/communication-success/201309/ten-keys-handling-unreasonable-difficult-people>

# Tips for Writing Agreements

1. Ask about required forms or elements.
2. Include the necessary details, who, what, where, and how much.
3. List the individual party's obligations – all parties have obligations.
4. Keep it clear and simple.
5. Try to avoid nonneutral wording.
6. Write down every detail. Lack of detail interferes with implementation.
7. If at all possible, type the agreement for clarity.
8. Make note of any contingencies clearly and thoroughly.
9. Make any references to third parties specifically.
10. Include time deadlines regarding implementation or closure.
11. Get the agreement signed.

Adapted from the Center for Mediation, Key Bridge Foundation,  
<http://keybridge.org/tips-on-agreement-writing/>

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