

Leadership Bites: Recovering from Threat

LEADERSHIP LEARNING IN 20 MINUTES

NHS

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The Brain under Threat

Our brains are wired to spend every waking moment scanning the environment for potential danger or reward. Since its primary function is to keep us alive, noticing threat affects us much more intensely than perceiving a possible reward.

When we detect a threat - real or imagined – the brain enters a state of heightened alertness to prepare us to react. What we often don't realise is that social threats (such as feeling ignored, vulnerable, disrespected, offended) are processed by the brain in the same way as it would process a threat of real physical danger. When the threat becomes too strong, it becomes nearly impossible for us to keep our emotions in check and make thoughtful decisions. The problem here is that 'too strong a threat' might simply be a question from our boss that requires a quick but complex answer, it might be having to give a presentation to a group of people, it might be asking someone out on a first date. It is truly amazing the things that can send our brains into lockdown!

The Lion Model by Clare Edwards

This is a simple yet powerful model to help our brain and body recover from a threat and self-regulate in the moment. It can be very useful to have a small routine handy which you can pull out when you feel you are 'flipping your lid'. Here are the steps:



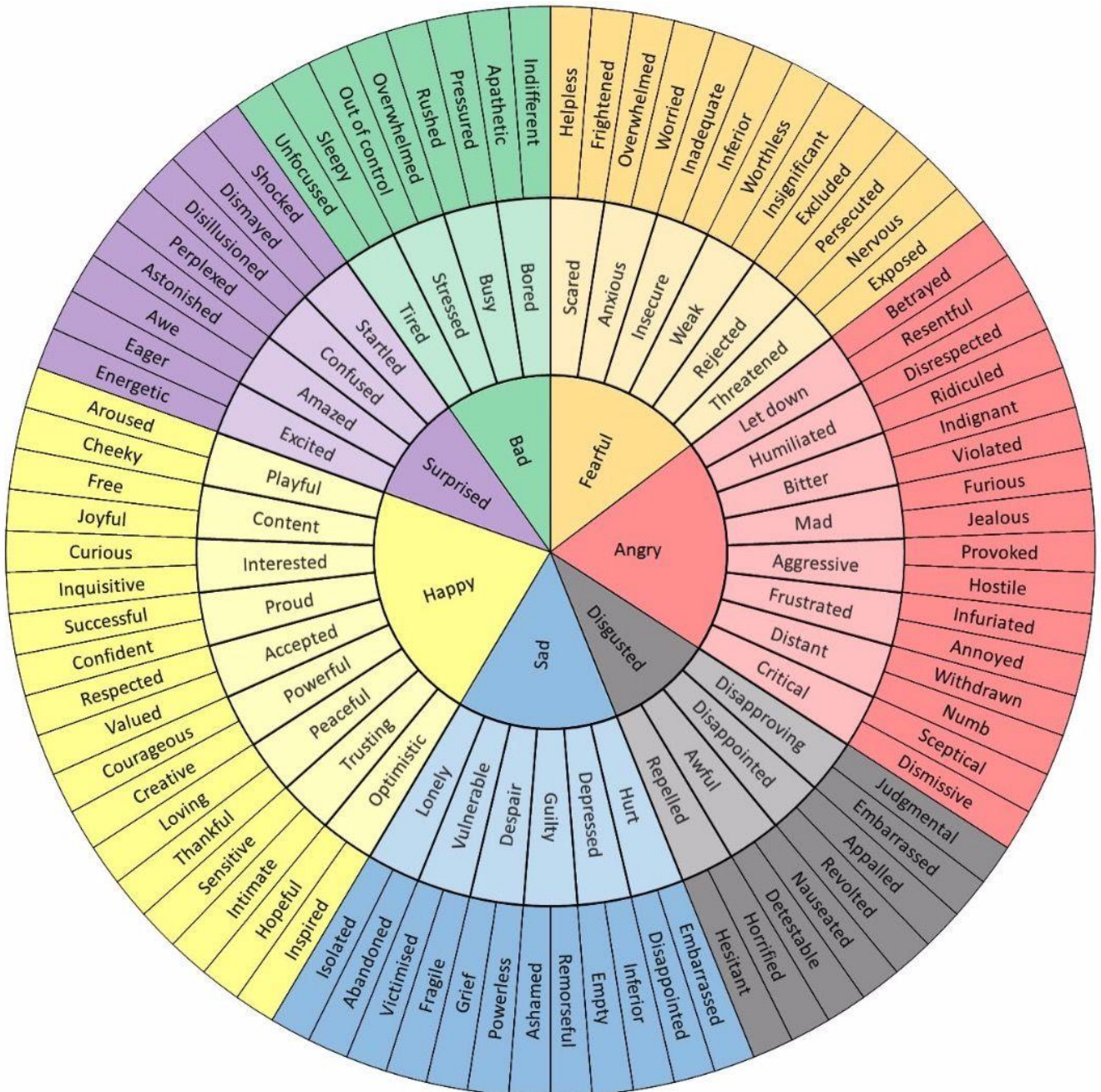
Breathe Take a calming breath.

- L Label.** We know that labelling dampens down activity in regions of the brain that activate the fight or flight response. Give the emotion you're feeling a name. What is it? How is it making you feel. Say it to yourself "I am feeling ... " or "this is anger" without letting yourself sink into the emotion. You're noticing the feeling, not bathing in it. Remember to make this part short and snappy, you're NOT going in to a deep dialogue with yourself – you're just finding a word.
- I Interesting.** The brain loves novelty. Get curious. "That's interesting ... I wonder what this is about? I wonder why I'm feeling a powerful response here" Remember, it's harder to stay stuck when you're instructing your brain to be curious and intrigued (as opposed to frozen or in fight or flight mode)
- O Origin.** Think about the situation and try to identify where the threat is located. Where is this feeling coming from? Is it linked to one of the SCARF domains (Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness or Fairness)? Maybe it's coming from earlier memories or past experiences.
- N New Meaning.** Is there a different, a better way of viewing this? One simple way to do this is to simply let go of the feeling or emotional response and aim towards a more positive or productive one. Simply making this decision gives your brain a new and better direction than the course it was originally on. If you noticed you were frustrated, you could ask yourself "what would be a better use of my attention and focus right now?" You might decide that loving kindness might work a little better. What's lovely, is that even if some frustration is left whilst trying this, it is less powerful than it was when it was exerting too strong an influence on you.

Get to know Emotions.

Have you ever felt an intense emotion but struggled to come up with a way to put your feelings into words? Psychologist Lisa Feldman-Barrett coined the term Emotional Granularity to describe how much and how well we describe emotions in broad categories (I'm Mad, Sad etc.) versus making fine-grained distinctions between different emotions. People with high emotional granularity can take a broad concept like "Stressed" and identify their more nuanced feelings of being rushed, overwhelmed, disappointed, and unfocused. Like a diagnosis at a doctor's surgery, when you can identify what is wrong, you can begin to take targeted action to address the challenge.

The Emotion Wheel below, developed by Dr Robert Plutchik can be used to improve our granularity. It takes broad emotional concepts at the centre with finer and finer distinctions as it radiates outwards.



Suggested Reading List

Your Brain at Work by David Rock
The Chimp Paradox by Dr Steve Peters

Further learning ...

For further information and learning, as well as suggested activities, feel free to visit the People.NHS.uk website or our [South East Leadership Academy site](#).



Time to reflect...

Take some time to note down your thoughts on what you've learned.

What resonated?

What has made you curious?

What small changes could you make to start having an impact differently and quickly?

What might you need to share with your team, and commit to 'testing and learning' together?



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