

The Reptilian Brain

When you are born, at the base of your brain is your reptilian brain (triune brain.) It is shaped like a reptile and it is very primitive. It stays primitive your entire life and its job is to manage all functions that preserve and protect you. It is, among other things, your fight or flight center. Since it is focused on basic self-preservation, it prompts you to make decisions at a very basic level. (It responds like an angry two-year old!) Well, it is your fight or flight center.

One other thing - it makes all of your final decisions your whole life. Now this would be a problem if it weren't for your executive function. This executive function, your prefrontal cortex, can reason with your reptilian brain and help it make reasonable decisions rather than just instinctive ones. This is important since our immediate, split-second impulse is to defend and attack – regardless of the source of the “attack!”

If you are driving and someone cuts you off, you may feel road rage. This is your reptilian brain responding. If your reptilian makes the next move, you may make rude gestures, try to pass the offending car, or worse! If you take a breath and stop to consult your executive function, you may consider that the offending driver is experiencing an emergency that requires speed, like taking a person to the hospital. Or your executive function may remind you that just because the other driver is endangering everyone on the road doesn't mean you want to put yourself and others at risk.

You can prove to yourself that your reptilian brain is on the job and actively functioning just by watching yourself as you go through a day. A friend or family member does something that irritates you. Your reptilian brain flares in anger or frustration. Whether you say something angry to that person depends on whether you stop and consult your executive function before you respond. If you think it through before you respond, your executive function will help your reptilian brain calm down and accept reason. Is anger the best response to this situation or would a calming response work better? Sometimes anger is the right response, but you want to make the response knowingly and not instinctively. Usually the best response is a calming one, but your reptilian brain, on its own, will never make that choice. It takes the influence of the executive function to respond maturely.

When a guest is rude, the reptilian brain takes it personally. It prompts you to defend yourself and then attack the guest. This often comes in the form of an aggressive or condescending tone of voice. Your executive brain reminds you that the guest may be having a bad day and their rudeness is not about you. It allows you to think and then respond in a way that makes everyone feel better.