



The Effects of Fear

Excerpt by Dr. Bruce Perry

At any age when people are faced with a frightening situation their brains begin to shut down their highest cortical regions first. We lose the capacity to plan, or to feel hunger, because neither is of any use to our immediate survival. Often, we lose the ability to “think” or even speak during an acute threat. We just react. And with prolonged fear there can be chronic or near-permanent changes in the brain. The brain alterations that result from lingering terror, especially early in life, may cause an enduring shift to a more impulsive, more aggressive, less thoughtful, and less compassionate way of responding to the world.

This is because systems in the brain change in a “use-dependent” way, as we noted earlier. Just like a muscle, the more a brain system like the stress response network gets “exercised,” the more it changes and the more risk there is of altered functioning. At the same time, the less the cortical regions, which usually control and modulate stress, are used, the smaller and weaker they get. Exposing a person to chronic fear and stress is like weakening the braking power of a car while adding a more powerful engine: you’re altering the safety mechanisms that keep the “machine” from going dangerously out of control.

Perry, Bruce D.. *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook--What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing* (pp. 69-70). Basic Books. Kindle Edition.