

# City of Milwaukee Employee Assistance Program

## The Amygdala Hijack

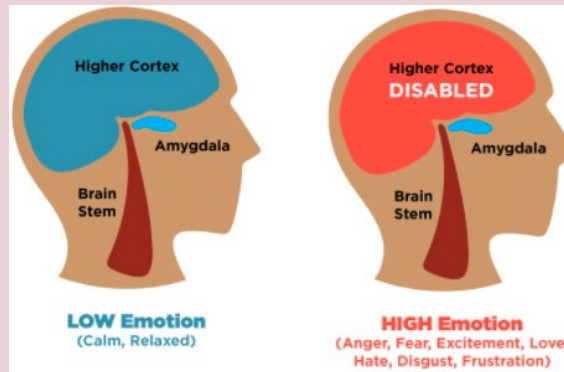
Have you ever been so upset, angry or frustrated that you said or did something out of character; something you immediately regret or were embarrassed by? If so, you likely experienced an *Amygdala Hijack*.

Normally, we process information through our neocortex. This outer part of our brain is responsible for thinking, reason, logic and problem solving.

The neocortex then routes the information to the amygdala, which is a walnut sized area deep in the center of the emotional part of our brain. The Amygdala is responsible for our “fight or flight” alarm system and is constantly on the look out for perceived threats. These threats may be physical, emotional or an injury to our ego.

Sometimes there is a “short circuit” and our “thinking brain” (neocortex) is bypassed and signals are sent straight to the “emotional brain.” The amygdala disables the “thinking” part of our brain and turns on our *fight-or-flight* response. Without the neocortex, you can't think clearly, make rational decisions, or control your responses. Subsequently, our reactions are emotional and without sound reason, logic or critical thought. This is what is referred to as an *Amygdala Hijack*

When does this hijack likely to occur? It occurs when we experience intense emotions. Intense feelings of fear, anger, frustration, hate, disgust, and even love can trigger an *Amygdala Hijack*.



How can you take back control from the Amygdala?

- **Slow down and control your breathing.** Avoid short, quick breaths. Don't hold your breath.
- **Pay attention to your vocal projection** (loudness). Keep an even tone and pitch. Avoid talking over someone else.
- **Pay attention to your body posture.** In the animal world, animals show dominance by making themselves large to appear to take up more space. Make it a point to “go tight” and not “big” by keeping your arms close along your body. Take up less space and don't move too much.
- **Name emotions as you experience them.** This helps to engage the thinking part of your brain. “Okay, I'm feeling very frustrated and angry...let me take a breath.”
- **Avoid making Ad Hominem attacks** (personal attacks). This is when we criticize someone personally instead of their argument. We may use labels like stupid or dumb to discredit someone personally.

Employee Assistance Program



City of Milwaukee EAP

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#### EAP Contact Information

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## Sharpen Your Active Listening Skills

We listen to gain information, learn and understand. We also listen to build and maintain relationships. For this latter reason, active listening is a learnable skill set that can be used at work and home because it builds rapport, improves relationships and teamwork. How is it done?

- **Tune in.** Give the speaker your full attention. Avoid checking your smart phone, the clock or email. Stay with the conversation and bring your mind back if it starts to wander. Don't interrupt and avoid taking the conversation back to yourself. Instead, let the speaker speak.
- **Be mindful of your non-verbal expressions.** Face the speaker and lean in slightly. Relax your body, uncrossing your arms and legs to show an attitude of openness. Keep appro-

priate eye contact.

- **Paraphrase and reflect.** Don't simply parrot exactly what the speaker said. Instead, put in your own words what you understood and heard. Reflect back what they might be feeling, experiencing or needing by taking a guess or stating the obvious. *"I wonder if you are feeling..."* *"Look, I can see you are angry."* Reflecting helps the speaker feel listened to AND understood.
- **Avoid passing judgement or offering advice too quickly.** Instead, help the speaker arrive at their own solution(s). Guide them but don't answer for them. *"I wonder if apologizing might be a good place to start?"* *"What do you think about..."* *"What ideas do you have that can help..."*

## EAP Mission Statement

It is the mission of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to assist employees who develop behavioral/emotional problems that may directly affect their work performance, and to provide Key Personnel with policy and procedural guidelines for the management of these problems.

## City of Milwaukee Wellness Resources

- For information about current Wellness programs and services, visit: [www.milwaukee.gov/WYCM](http://www.milwaukee.gov/WYCM)
- Virtual EAP Support Groups Support groups are a safe and confidential place for participants to discuss personal issues, experiences, struggles and thoughts and an opportunity to share experiences. Three different support groups are offered: Parenting, Working Remotely, and Eldercare. Participants receive 5 Healthy Rewards points for each session attended. Contact Cris Zamora to join a support group: 414-286-3145 [czamora@milwaukee.gov](mailto:czamora@milwaukee.gov)
- The City's Workplace Clinic provides free, convenient, onsite and virtual health care services for employees and spouses regardless of enrollment in the City's health insurance and dependents (18 mos and older) on the City's health insurance. Call 414-777-3413 to schedule an in-person or virtual visit.

## Natural Happiness

### Chemicals

Our brains and body naturally produce chemicals that trigger contentment and happiness. Regularly engaging in activities that promote the release of these chemicals may greatly improve your wellness and overall quality of life.

- **Dopamine.** Often referred to as the "reward" chemical. Our brains release this chemical when we achieve a desired goal, eat our favorite food, and get healthy sleep.
- **Endorphin.** Sometimes called our "natural pain killer." We release this chemical when we exercise, laugh, and listen to enjoyable music.
- **Oxytocin.** It is also called the "love hormone" because it is produced when we socialize with loved ones, experience a pleasant touch (e.g. hugs), petting animals, and when helping others in need.
- **Serotonin.** It is a mood stabilizing chemical. We benefit from this chemical when receiving natural sun light, engage in meditation/mindfulness and are enjoying nature.