

THE EMOTIONAL BRAIN

Helping those who are stuck find their way!

By Dr. Brandy Reid, LMFT

Joseph E. LeDoux

- Joseph E. LeDoux is an American neuroscientist whose research is primarily focused on survival circuits, including their impacts on emotions such as fear and anxiety.
- In *The Emotional Brain* (1996), Joseph LeDoux investigates the origins of human emotions and explains that many exist as part of complex neural systems that evolved to enable us to survive.
- Conscious feelings, says LeDoux, are somewhat irrelevant to the way works.
- He points out that emotional responses are hard-wired into the brain's circuitry, but the things that make us emotional are learned through experience which may be the key to understanding, even changing, our emotional make up.

Emotions and The Brain

- **Emotions**, like fear and love, are carried out by the limbic system, which is located in the temporal lobe. While the limbic system is made up of multiple parts of the brain, the center of emotional processing is the amygdala, which receives input from other brain functions, like memory and attention.
- **The amygdala** is responsible for multiple emotional responses, like love, fear, anger and sexual desire.
- **The hippocampus** is another part of the limbic system that sends information to the amygdala. One of the memory processing centers of the brain, the hippocampus interacts with the amygdala when a person has memories with emotional ties. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research adds that the connection between the hippocampus and amygdala "may be the origin of strong emotions triggered by particular memories," which explains emotional responses to traumatic memories
- **The prefrontal cortex**, located near the front of the head, is involved in decision making in response to emotions. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research states that the prefrontal cortex controls what decision a person makes when faced with an emotional reaction, and also regulates anxiety.

Emotions and The Brain

- **The hypothalamus**, also a part of the limbic system, feeds information into the amygdala. Shippensburg University states that the hypothalamus acts as a regulator of emotion, controlling levels of sexual desire, pleasure, aggression and anger.
- **The cingulate gyrus** acts as a pathway between the thalamus and the hippocampus, and plays a role in remembering emotional charged events. Shippensburg University notes that the cingulate gyrus focuses the attention on the event, alerting the rest of the brain that it is emotionally significant.
- **The ventral tegmental** area is also involved in emotions and love, particularly in how a person perceives pleasure. Dopamine pathways are located in the ventral tegmental area: dopamine is a neurotransmitter involved in mood, and increased levels elevate the person's level of pleasure

What Is Feeling Stuck?

- Have you ever said to yourself or heard someone say “I don’t know what to do.” “I’m in a rut.” “I feel stuck.”
- When nothing exciting happens and you can’t seem to make that step forward and change things, you may get frustrated and even depressed. However, It’s common for clients to feel stuck at this point.



You Might Be Stuck If...

- A sense you are no longer progressing.
- A sense that you are starting to backslide.
- You tend to repeat patterns
- You are contemplating the same questions of yourself or others and feeling blocked from the answer
- You feel constant regret
- Friends and family members no longer want to give you advice on a certain subject
- You are losing objectivity

Underlying feelings that lead to being stuck

- Shame
- Rejection
- Complacency
- Perfectionism
- Sadness
- Dishonesty
- Fear

7 Ways to Get Yourself Unstuck

- Let go of the past. Listen to the stories in your head.
- Change your perspective.
- Start with small changes.
- Explore your purpose.
- Believe in yourself.
- Practice being hopeful.
- Consider talking to a professional.

How a therapist can help you get unstuck

- **Visualize the Desired Response**

The emotional brain learns better through metaphor and imagery than it does through words, another strategy you can use is to have your client visualize her desired response. Visualize yourself successfully navigating a social situation and imagine feeling curious, secure, and calm. Then imagine something in nature that could represent your mind working this way, i.e. Muir Woods with the redwood trees. In visualizing the peacefulness of the tall trees in this forest helped you can feel calmer and sense of belonging.

How a therapist can help you get unstuck

- **Reverse Traumatic Memories**
- Just having cognitive insight into the cause of her social anxiety didn't change it. In fact, recent neuroscience discoveries have shown us that in order for the emotional brain to change a response that was once adaptive, we have to recall the old memory while eliciting a *new experience* that invalidates the beliefs that got attached to the disturbing memory.

<https://www.pesi.com/blog/details/873/10-ways-to-help-stuck-clients-move-forward>

How a therapist can help you get unstuck

- **Create a corrective emotional experience**

Neuroscience suggests that in order to change recurring emotional and behavioral patterns, one can't just talk about change at the cognitive level, but instead evoke an emotional experience that changes patterns in the emotional regions of the brain. Creating these emotional experiences not only triggers profound transformation, but it can also be fun and uplifting for you.

How a therapist can help you get unstuck

- **Align, Lift, and Lead**

A therapist can help validate your feelings. However, this can't go on forever because the therapist can in turn amplify negative feelings in the emotional brain. Thus the therapist can align with the client by reflecting their understanding of the problem, and then *lift* the client by affirming their strengths and *lead* them by suggesting their *desired* response to the situation.

How a therapist can help you get unstuck

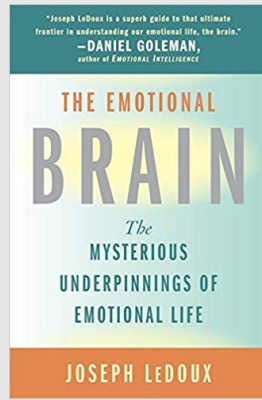
- **Use of Sound and Music**

Music can influence mood and neurochemistry, and it can entrain the brain to calmer states. One activity many clients enjoy is creating a playlist of tunes that evoke desired responses. Creating a playlist to elicit the desired emotion and moods to help clients discover what is holding them back or pushing them forward

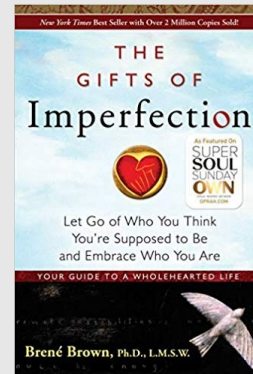
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Resources

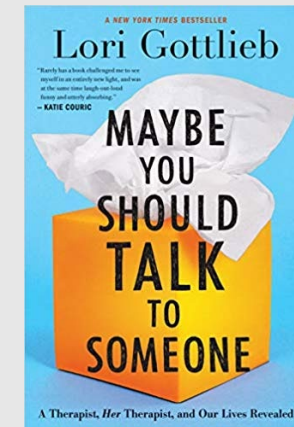
- Books



- <https://www.amazon.com/Emotional-Brain-Mysterious-Underpinnings-Life/dp/0684836599>



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