



Controlling the 'threat brain' is of utmost importance in order to work and lead effectively.

◆ NELISHA WICKREMASINGHE, AUTHOR, *BEING WITH OTHERS*

STRATEGY

Brain check

Most of our problems in and beyond the workplace arise because we are overexposed to threats—be it real or imaginary. In the last eighteen months all of us have had plenty of exposure to threat in our experiences of the pandemic. If we want to nurture and sustain healthy, high performance at work, particularly in the continuation and aftermath of Covid-19, we need to notice, understand and regulate our threat response in order to stay centred when experiencing, for example, work-load pressure, performance anxiety, ongoing disruptive global trends, team conflict, and rapid change. Understanding how our emotional brain works can help us appreciate why we react the way we do and how we can regulate our feelings and thoughts to ensure that we lead and manage others effectively.

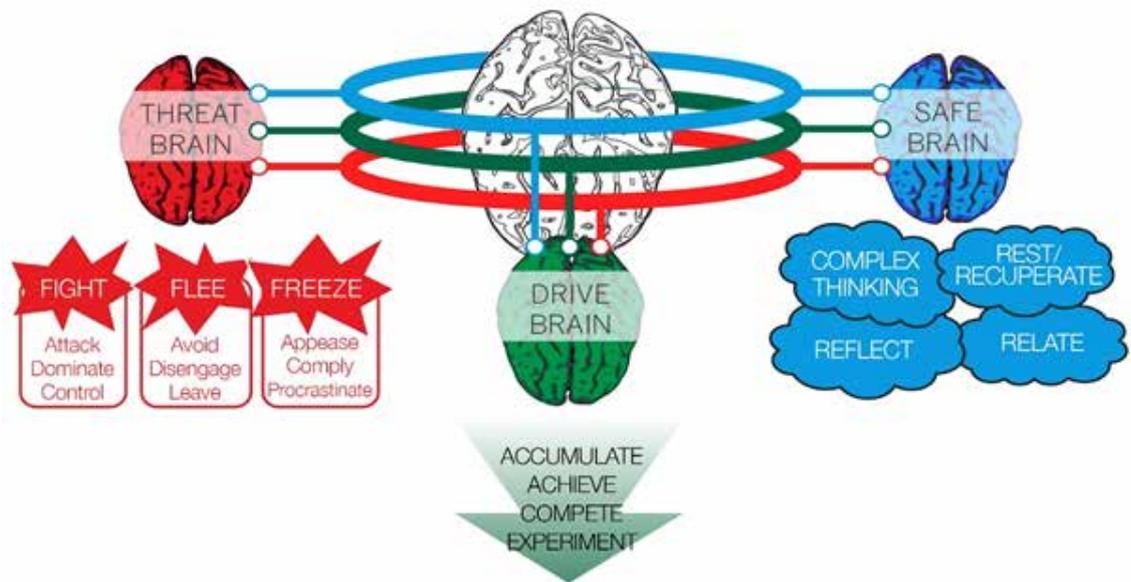
Understanding our emotional brain

The purpose of our emotions (bodily reactions to what is going on around us) is to motivate action so that we can achieve the basic goals of survival, accumulation, and relationship. 'Threat brain', the oldest part of our emotional brain,

enables us to recognise and respond to danger. 'Drive brain' motivates us to seek out pleasurable and rewarding experiences, such as accumulating, achieving, and winning. 'Safe brain' motivates us to rest, recover and form relationships. We need all three emotion systems working together to balance and regulate each other. Unfortunately, many of us get caught in unhelpful or destructive habits of feeling, thinking, and behaving because our emotion systems are out of balance, and usually the cause is an overactive threat brain.

Signs of an overactive threat brain

An overactive threat brain can make us physically ill (the links between stress and ill-health are proven) and disrupt our relationships (by triggering and sustaining anger, aggression, conflict, avoidance and over-compliance). It can also lead to distressing problems like addiction, chronic anxiety, shame, loneliness, depression and even suicide. In high-pressure work environments, threat brain is easily activated and can contribute to destructive behaviours and thoughts such as those you see might see in perfectionists, hyper-critics and bullies. If threat brain emotions are left unregulated, they can quickly cause toxic drive (see figure) which leads to the kind of ruthless drive for performance, results, and profit that is often called 'corporate psychosis'.



Our threat brain system is our earliest; our safe and drive brain systems followed, and have continued to evolve

Threat brain system is not bad—it evolved to respond to life-threatening, physical challenges, which might result in us being killed, wounded, or starved. In other animals, threat brain works as intended. It detects and enables the animal to respond quickly to a short-term crisis. An animal’s threat brain is alert but also switches off appropriately. However, our human brain

has evolved in terms of the ability to remember and imagine danger. We are able to re-create danger in our minds (typically, by worrying), which triggers the same biological stress reaction as actual danger. At work we see the effects in recurring illnesses, burnout, hyper-tension and disengagement. When we are constantly imagining that we

might lose our job, that our boss thinks we are incompetent, or that our staff and colleagues are back stabbing us we keep our threat brain

The consequences of our ‘always on’ threat brain are that it shuts off our safe brain, hijacks our drive brain, and causes toxic drive.

permanently ticking over in a way it was never designed to do.

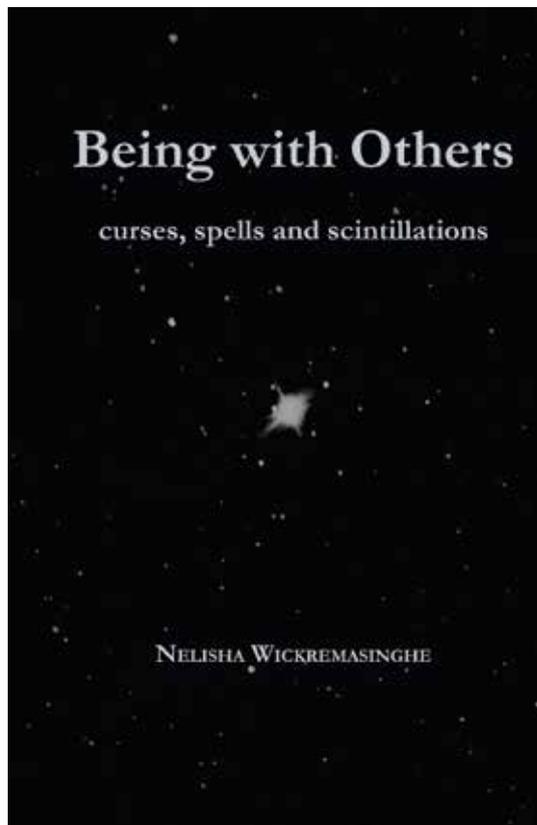
The consequences of our ‘always on’ threat brain are that it shuts off our safe brain, hijacks our drive brain, and causes toxic drive. When this happens, our fear of not having a good enough job or earning enough money or having enough status with our friends takes over our healthy drive and ambition. We can easily get locked into a cycle of overwork and worry, especially in our highly competitive society which rewards competing, winning and accumulating money and power. Too many of us are driven to keep going because we fear being exposed as vulnerable or incompetent. We are usually unaware of these fears and motivations until they disrupt our lives in the form of illness, relationship breakdown, job loss, or accidents.

How to manage an overactive threat brain: what managers need to know

As a manager, a vital part of your role is to support team members as they learn to recognise, understand and regulate their threat brain behaviours. Threat brain activation is

As a manager, a vital part of your role is to support team members as they learn to recognise, understand and regulate their threat brain behaviours.

infectious—so that when one member of an animal group feels fear, all the others feel it immediately too. This was one evolutionary advantage of living in herds. Later, when we evolved to become horde animals with a leader, it became the leader's responsibility to guide group behaviour. If you, the leader, have an activated threat brain, your employees will feel this and take it as sign that there is a problem. If you do not regulate that response in you and in others, then individuals and teams will start to act out their survival strategies of fighting, fleeing, or freezing. These behaviours are appropriate for an animal facing a predator, but not so helpful in dealing with the psychological and social threats that occur in the workplace.



To overcome these problems, managers need to first notice and regulate their own threat brain response. Because threat brain emotions are a physical response (measurable in the heart rate, blood pressure, neurochemicals, and gut), the most effective action you can take is also physical. First and foremost, use your breath to control the physiological symptoms of an activated threat brain. If you pay attention to your breathing when you are anxious, you will probably notice that it is shallow (high up in the chest) and that you often hold your breath. This short, sharp breathing is appropriate when we are in danger as it helps us stay hyper-alert. By contrast, rhythmic breathing is based on the natural flow of your breath. This kind of breathing helps you to reduce stress by ensuring regular and continuous air flow at a steady pace. It helps you avoid breathing too fast or holding your breath. Start by taking a few regular breaths in your normal way. Then alter your in-and-out rhythm so you begin breathing in for the same number of counts as you breathe out. Find a number that works for you—for many people the optimum rhythm is to count



slowly to five whilst breathing in, hold for two, and then count slowly to five whilst breathing out.

Breath work brings noticeable benefits: your muscles relax, you experience fewer back and neck aches and oxygen delivery improves, which increases your mental concentration and physical stamina. Your blood pressure also falls because your muscles are letting go of tension, and endorphins are released which provide natural pain relief and a sense of well-being. You will also benefit from improved digestion as deep breathing stimulates the lymphatic system to detoxify and cleanse your body.

Once you are able to notice and control your threat response you are in a good position to support other people.

Five ways to support your staff to manage an overactive threat brain

- Explain to your staff how the threat brain system works. Help them to understand when threat brain is useful (in life threatening situations) and when it is not (dealing with day-to-day work place challenges).

- Start team meetings or one-on-ones with a ‘threat brain check-in’. Make it acceptable for people to share moments in the week or month when they have felt threat and encourage them to discuss how they cope with feelings of threat at work. Remember the more we deny or hide our threat brain experiences, the worse they get.
- Learn simple breathing techniques and practice together with your team—start and end meetings with a moment of mindful breathing. Remember a good manager goes first by role modelling effective behaviour, especially the ability to be vulnerable and open to learning. After initial scepticism, your team may quickly become proud of its knowledge and mindful practices.
- Review your ways of working. Are you using fear as a motivator to achieve and succeed? If you are, you could be at risk of creating toxic drive in your organisation. Consider how else you can motivate people to be at their best. Ensuring people experience autonomy, creativity, and purpose in their work is crucial to stimulating safe and healthy drive behaviours at work. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nelisha Wickremasinghe is a Psychologist, Associate Fellow, Oxford University. She is author, *Being with Others: Curses, spells and scintillation*.