

How to Make Friends with Your Reptilian Brain

By [Edwina Shaw](#) on Tuesday January 31st, 2017



Are You Being Controlled by Your Reptilian Brain?

In the 1960's American physician and neuroscientist, Dr. Paul MacLean, formulated his model of the 'triune brain', a simplified explanation of the workings of the human brain and how it developed over millennia. He divided the brain into three main sections – the first and most ancient of these is commonly referred to as the reptilian brain.

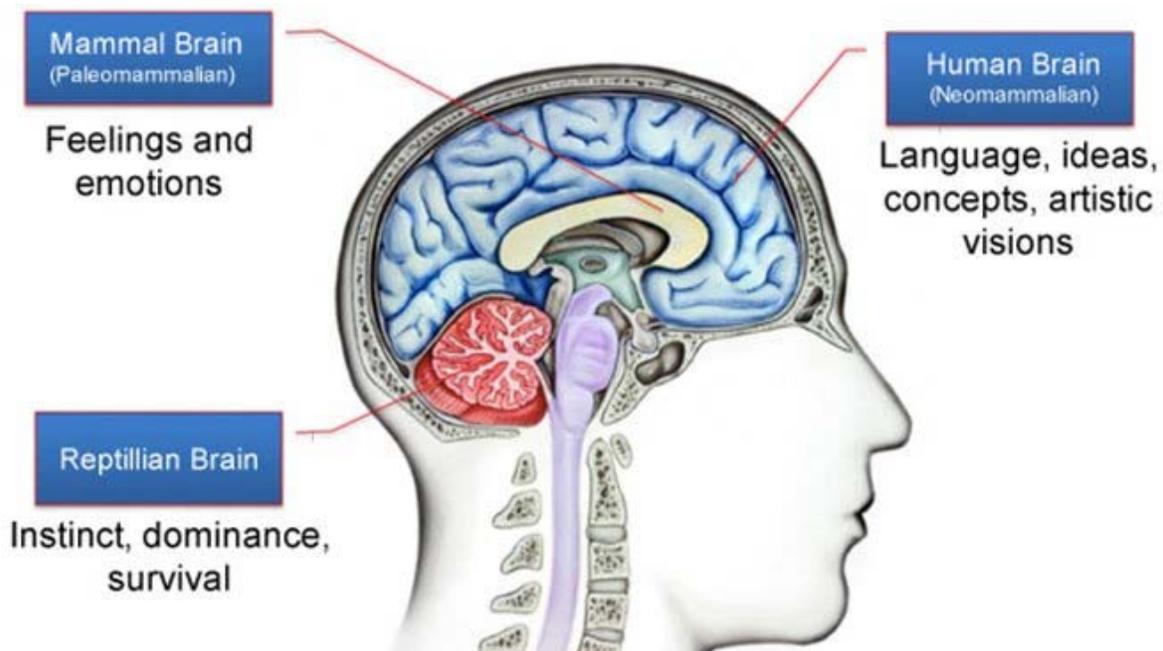
The Reptilian Brain

The reptilian brain developed over 100 million years ago and is responsible for our survival. It is made up of the basal ganglia and it controls our involuntary functions: the beating of our hearts, the working of our organs, and our

breathing. It's in charge of our survival; for our flight, fight or freeze responses, for sexual behaviours, anger in response to danger, and most of all – [fear](#). The actions and emotions that spring from the reptilian brain do so automatically, without us having to think about it.

The Limbic Brain

The limbic brain wraps around the reptilian brain and is thought to have developed in the first mammals. Its main components are the hippocampus, the [amygdala](#), and the hypothalamus. It records memories of behaviours that produced agreeable and disagreeable experiences and is responsible for most of our emotions. It is also responsible for our compare and contrast mechanisms, which lead to value judgements. It controls a lot of our behaviour, if still somewhat unconsciously.



The Neo-Cortex

The third section of the brain that MacLean identified was the last to develop – about 40,000 years ago. It's called the neo-cortex and is only found in higher-order mammals such as monkeys, dolphins and humans. This section of the brain houses our reasoning capabilities, imagination, creativity, and problem-

solving skills. It's where the higher-self lives. It is the overseer of the rest of the brain and can observe and temper the responses of the reptilian and limbic brains. It is the seat of compassion. The trouble is, the neo-cortex brain needs to be consciously activated.

When we are living in a permanent state of fear or anger, or even just in a constant state of high stress – as many of us endure in this day and age – we are in a struggle for survival. And what controls the minds when we need to survive? The reptilian brain.



Our stressful lives keep us in 'fight or flight' mode, even when actual danger is not present.

Don't get me wrong, we need our reptilian brains – it's the part of the brain that activates to make us swerve out of the way if a truck suddenly crosses into our lane on a busy highway. It activates without us having to think about it; handy when we're being chased by a bear or about to topple from a

mountain top. It protects our lives much faster than it would take us to activate our reasoning capabilities to turn the wheel or reason with the bear.

The Reptilian Brain in Everyday Life

However, as necessary as it is, we don't want it controlling our actions on a day to day basis. It's behaviour patterns aren't pretty. It gets **angry**, *fast*. It's territorial and aggressive; it would do anything for sex, and it cares way too much what other people think. It's obsessive and compulsive and thinks in pictures, symbols and shapes rather than words. It gets scared very easily and stops us from doing what we want to; from trying new hobbies to achieving our dreams. Worst of all, when it is constantly in control and fighting for our survival, the neo-cortex isn't even able to activate.



Our reptilian brain is reactive and makes us angry, aggressive and hypersensitive.

How Our Reptilian Brain Can Be Used to Manipulate Us

Marketers and politicians know the power of the reptilian brain in preventing us from thinking. Websites are devoted to teaching marketers how to trigger the reptilian responses of their intended customers, so they don't think twice before they buy. Why are sexy bodies draped over cars? Because the reptilian brain sees a sexual symbol with the car and, in its caveman way, thinks that having the car will mean it will get to have sex. Why are we told to be on constant alert for terrorist attacks? Because if we're afraid, our higher order thinking isn't working well enough to figure out a strategy to share the [world's](#) wealth. Calls to nationalistic veneration appeal to the reptilian brain's territorial nature. Sex sells. Fear paralyzes. Both shut off the capacity to reason.



Marketers and politicians use our reptilian brains to intercept our ability to reason.

Stress Triggers Our Reptilian Brain

Psychologists have learnt that in order to treat patients with post-traumatic stress disorder, they must first establish safety and a sense of security. The reptilian brain is often still in control long after traumatic events, and when it's in control, the thinking brain shuts down. It's impossible to reason and process emotions when your reptilian brain is still screaming "RUN!".

Educators know that children who are neglected, or living in abusive situations, often present with learning disorders. These children are living in a state of high stress; their reptilian brains have taken over so that they can survive. Their focus is on getting through each day; finding enough to eat, not getting beaten or yelled at. When the focus is on survival, the thinking brain doesn't matter therefore reading, writing and arithmetic don't even get a look in. The reptilian brain enables their survival, but by curtailing the functioning of the neo-cortex it stops them from thriving.

This applies to all of us. When we are living in a constant state of fear and stress we'll keep working at a job we hate; we'll do things we're not proud of to get the sex we need, we'll forget our childhood dreams, and the urges of our higher selves, because it's all way too scary.



Stress inhibits our ability to thrive by keeping our focus on simply surviving.

Seth Godin in his book, *Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?* puts it this way:

The lizard brain is hungry, scared, angry, and horny. The lizard brain only wants to eat and be safe. The lizard brain will fight (to the death) if it has to, but would rather run away. It likes a vendetta and has no trouble getting angry. The lizard brain cares what everyone else thinks, because status in the tribe is essential to its survival...The lizard brain is not merely a concept. It's real, and it's living on the top of your spine, fighting for your survival. But, of course, survival and success are not the same thing. The lizard brain is the reason you're afraid, the reason you don't do all the art you can, the reason you don't ship when you can. The lizard brain is the source of the resistance.

How to Tame Our Reptilian Brain

The reptilian brain *can* be tamed though. We need it around – it's a good friend in a crisis, but not one we want in charge all the time. Luckily, as rational beings, we have the capacity to observe our behaviours, thoughts and

emotions with the mighty neo-cortex; the true captain of our ship. Mountain climbers, racing car drivers, aid workers in dangerous places – all of these people face their fears; the shouts of their body to climb down off that ledge, put on the brakes, or stay safe at home.

Anyone who opts out of the system chooses to ignore their reptilian brains and the fear-mongering and manipulative ways of the government, media and marketers. It takes courage, but not that much, if we use one simple tool...Breathing.



Banksy uses his art to rebel against the system by evoking thought.

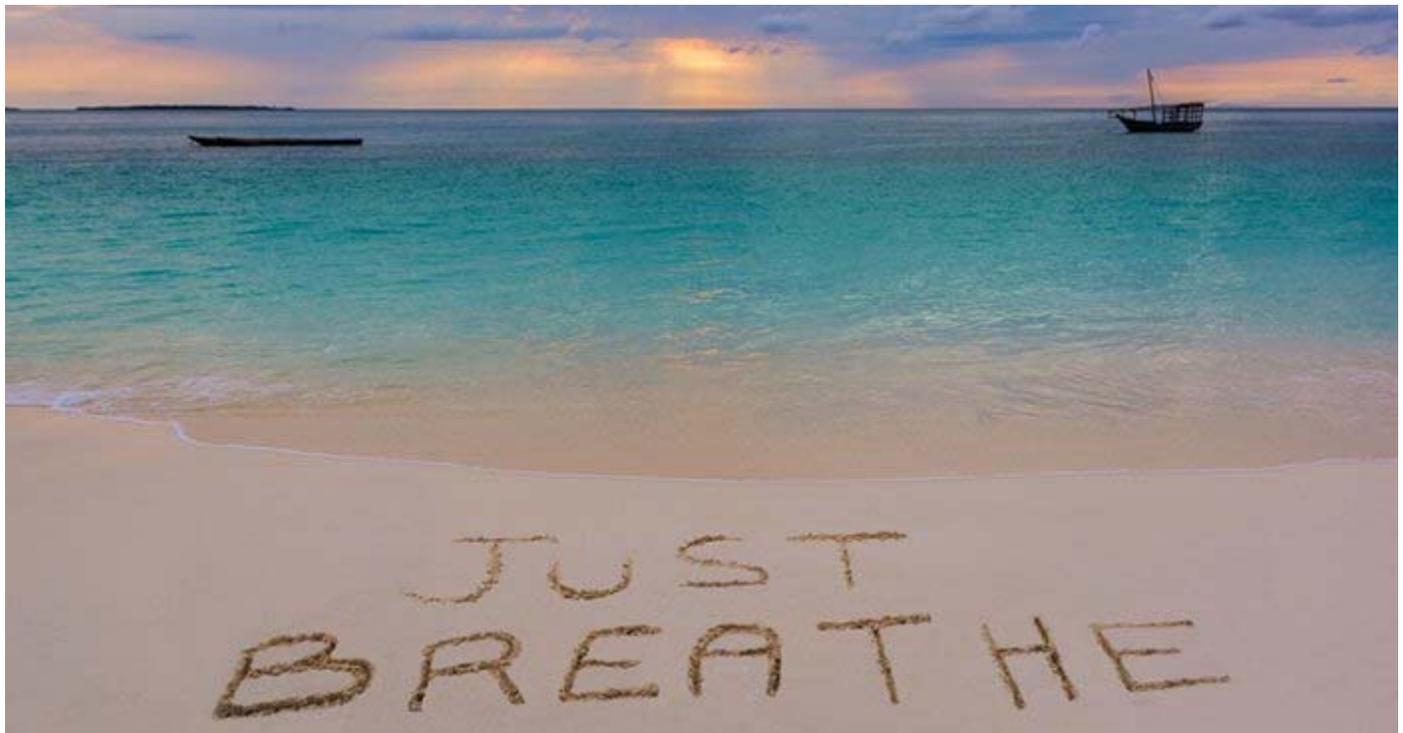
The Power of Breath

Breathing is usually taken care of without conscious effort by the reptilian brain, but it's a function of the reptilian brain that we can also control. In a moment of crisis – stop and breathe. Breathe in and out, deeply and slowly, right down and into your belly. This calms your flight or fight response immediately and is the first skill taught to those who suffer anxiety.

When the breath is calm, the mind follows and you will be able to detach from the impulses of the reptilian brain and bring reasoning to the situation. You can consciously shift your focus to the neo-cortex. Making this shift, you take your power back. As Albert Einstein said:

You cannot solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it. You must learn to see the world anew.

Deliberately activating your consciousness is the only way to be free from the effects of the reptilian brain.



Practising conscious breathing will help you to disconnect from the reptilian brain.

Stay Mindful

Mindfulness is key. You don't necessarily need to meditate; just bring your attention to your breath, slow it down, notice any accompanying sensations in your body, any emotions tied to the thoughts, and consciously let them go.

Redirect your thoughts to something that makes you feel good and lifts your heart – thoughts that empower you. The reptilian brain responds to thoughts as if they are really happening so if you consciously think a thought of peace and joy, your reptilian brain will let go and relax. As Susan Jeffers famously said,

Feel the fear and do it anyway.

With repetition this process becomes easier; the reptilian brain won't put up such a fight. It will still be triggered, and it'll still be there to slam on the brakes when we need it, but we'll be able to stand up for what we believe in when it is telling us to do otherwise. We'll be able to achieve our goals and live our dreams.

<http://upliftconnect.com/make-friends-reptilian-brain/>