

# Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

## *Triggered*

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## **Triggered: The Limbic Security System and You**

By Wendy Copeland, M.A., LPC, ITC

“Triggered!” Ever heard this term? Perhaps you have heard “triggered” used to describe a reaction to a back-stabbing co-worker, an irritable spouse, an intrusive parent, a defiant child, an angry teen, a rigid teacher, an arrogant public servant, or perhaps an incompetent customer service representative . . . you name it! Triggers happen all the time.

The original term, trigger, refers to a specific mechanism on a firearm. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a “trigger” as a mechanical piece involved in “initiating a process or reaction.” An emotional trigger also involves process and reaction. An emotional trigger is a strong, physiological and emotional reaction associated with past experiences and memories and activated by a present stimulus. Emotional triggers are activations of our primal emotions. Primal emotions, such as anger or fear, are *activated* through the limbic system located in our brains.

The brain is very complex, and this may be the part of the article where you might find yourself wanting to speed-read through and move on to more interesting activities in your day or evening. Hang on! The next part is actually very important and crucial to understanding yourself and others when it comes to emotions and behaviors, particularly those of the intense and combustible kind!

### ***Primal Reactions***

So, the limbic system of the brain is the place where primal emotions are activated. The limbic system is the brain center of emotion, social behavior, and attachment (that is, perceived connection with others). The limbic system regulates stress, emotion, memory and motivation and is essential to behavior, thinking, and emotional responses.

When a person feels secure, safe, and calm, logic and reasoning are switched on by the neo-cortex of the brain. The neo-cortex is where abstract thinking, reasoning, and awareness function in the brain. A person who is not threatened and is relaxed can make reasonable decisions, apply their intellect, and connect safely with others. In contrast, if a person feels threatened, emotionally upset, or vulnerable, the neo-cortex does not predominate. Instead, in the face of danger, the neo-cortex can be “hijacked” by the limbic system. This is because the limbic system is in charge of basic self-preservation. In the presence of real or perceived physical or emotional danger, the limbic system will automatically become activated and override the neo-cortex. As the limbic system is alerted, the self-preservation responses of fight, flight, freeze, or submit are activated.

### ***Brain Alcatraz: Knowing Your Limbic Security System***

One way to get a visual image of what is happening here is to imagine that your brain is like an alarm system for a high-security prison. When in the absence of perceived threat, the alarm system is ready and on stand-by, but not activated. The prison is equipped with highly sensitized monitoring devices such as cameras, sensors, and audio equipment that are scaled to pick up any disturbances. This security system continuously monitors the campus and facility, scanning at all times for danger, breeches of security, violence, etc. Prison activities carry on as usual, as long as the security system is not activated by threat or danger.

Now imagine that a camera in Section Eight of the prison picks up unusual activity. Section Eight of the prison monitors the cafeteria. Inmates at a rectangular table in the corner of the cafeteria are beginning to raise their voices in a growling, intensifying, and angry pitch. They make sudden, forceful motions toward each other. A rumble is in the making.

**Red Alert! Red Alert!** The security system is activated and the entire prison goes on lock-down. You reflexively cover your ears, as near-deafening Code Red alarms reverberate in the prison and span across the prison yard. The normal prison lights shut off and emergency generator-lights switch on, shedding exposing light to every corner of the facility. Security guards, with heavy feet and soldier-like precision, swarm to Section Eight as well as all the security points on campus. The exits and passages are sealed instantaneously, with heavy metal doors slamming down like exacting guillotines. Your heart pounds heavy with anxiety as the chaos and danger is contained and inmates

**Treatment for**

Depression  
 Anxiety / Panic Attacks  
 Eating Disorders  
 Bi-polar Disorder  
 Obsessive –  
 Compulsive  
 Disorder  
 Compulsive Behaviors  
 such as sexual  
 addiction  
 Post-traumatic Stress  
 Disorder from past  
 abuse  
 Relational issues  
 Adjustment to life  
 changes

**Ages Served**

Adult  
 Adolescent  
 Children ages 10 & up

are subdued. You hear the echo of an angry warden barking out orders and threats simultaneously. You shake a bit from the experience, knowing that even once order is restored, inmates and prison security alike will be on edge for the next several hours. These kinds of alerts leave a residue of tense distrust ...always.

***The Neo-Cortex Hijack: Your Code Red***

Like the complex prison security system, the limbic system is always on stand-by and ready to come to task in the event of perceived threat or danger. For humans in relationships, cues of danger come in the form of verbal and non-verbal information. A harsh tone of voice, a furrowed brow, a heightened pitch, an icy glare, a subtle insult, a biting comment, clenched fists, sudden angry motions, and a verbal jab...all of these can trigger the limbic security system. Once triggered, our normal functioning with full connection to logic and reasoning in our neo-cortex is temporarily hijacked so that the limbic system can fully secure any threats. To the observer, a fully triggered person on Code Red can appear irrational, reactive, and even “crazy.” Ever seen an irate person? Familiar with the term “going postal”? These are extreme examples of an over stimulated limbic system that has completely hijacked the neo-cortex. It is a basic survival mechanism, which although extremely important in the face of real danger, can backfire when misreading cues, overreacting, or is over stimulated.

So the limbic system, when operating appropriately, serves as a basic mechanism for ensuring our safety. However, it can backfire when inaccurately evaluating potential danger or becoming over stimulated. In this case, the limbic system may misfire. As you might imagine, the average psychiatrist or psychotherapist sees a lot of hijacked neo-cortexes and over stimulated limbic systems. This may include individuals who become wrought with overwhelming anxiety, riddled with panic, heavy with guilt, reeling in grief, paralyzed by depression, frozen in sadness, steeped and seething in anger, cemented in bitterness, or perhaps subdued by hopelessness. This may also present in the form of couples or families, expressing all sorts of limbic reactions. They become fearful, angry, hurt, isolated, wounded...polarized. And they come primed. Primed for reactivity.

Individuals, couples, and families with triggered limbic systems have been exposed to sudden trauma and/or chronic stress and duress. They are primed for reactivity as their limbic systems have been activated and reactivated. Repetitive perceived threats to their emotional and sometimes physical safety have created a protracted sense of danger. Peace and calm is replaced with defensiveness and anxious anticipation. Their neo-cortexes are hijacked. Like a prison security system that has experienced a series of breeches in safety, their minds and hearts remain in high alert. Many who find themselves in this situation will describe feeling powerless or given over to their emotions.

Exasperated parents may feel powerless to affect their children and disconnected from their own intelligence in working with them. Partners may experience themselves as locked in an unending nightmare of swirling negative emotions and excruciating disconnection. Individuals may describe feeling overwhelmed by their feelings and at the mercy of all that comes their way. They may struggle with using ill-fated coping mechanisms that lead to further isolation, deeper emotional pain, or devastating self-destruction. Many may describe also being perpetually hair-triggered – prone to be set off by any number of things, people, situations, or thoughts.

***The Art of Limbic Soothing and Balancing the Brain***

In restoring order to the mind and overall functioning, the limbic system must be soothed. Safety and order must be restored, and persons need to experience security once again. Safety is restored by securing the environment. This includes ensuring physical safety, such as in the living environment, level of structure and care, and physical health. This also includes securing emotional borders by acknowledging and processing the breeches in emotional safety in the shelter of a safe, caring relationship. Securing safety also includes helping relationships if at all possible, where attacks and defendedness may have once prevailed with cancer-like toxicity. Restoring safety may also include specific aid for the brain itself, which may require medical intervention to restore balance as well as de-escalate and regulate functioning. Finally, spiritual care can also help restore limbic balance, bringing nurturance and refreshment to the soul. The limbic system is essential to our survival, and proper care and protection is needed to ensure healthy and balanced functioning.

How’s your limbic system doing? Are you feeling balanced? Hair-triggered and on-edge? Over stimulated? Lacking safety? Perhaps it is time to soothe that limbic system...



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