

# Managing the elephant in the room



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15% of encounters are labeled as  
difficult by clinicians

Jackson JL, Kroenke K. Difficult patient encounters in the ambulatory clinic: clinical predictors and outcomes. *Arch Intern Med.* 1999;159:1069–1075.



# Common Approaches

- Refusal: 'I won't see difficult patients'
- Resignation: 'nothing I can do'
- Acceptance: 'just give her what she wants'
- Passion: 'missionary-like zeal'
- Ignorance: 'what problem?'



Let's take a step back

# Your Nervous system



The brain is 2% of your bodyweight but consumes 20% of your energy output.



# Competitive Advantage

Neurons are 600 million years old

Language approximately 100,000 years old

Journal of Human Evolution, 36(1999), pp 591-612, p. 591

Therefore primal emotional processes have had much longer to develop and refine, whereas consciousness is a work in progress. Also it's important to consider why we have language.



# The primal brain is efficient, so don't knock it

- Parallel processing
- Vs
- Single item focus of the conscious brain

Classic example is deciding when you need to get up to be on time for rounds: this is a conscious decision that takes into account traffic, distance, parking, what needs to be done, errands, breakfast; vs. the process of driving in to the hospital which is essentially rote with minimal cognitive input into features such as pressure on the gas pedal, steering to avoid crashes, slowing down for red lights.

The cheapest computer is a more efficient device than most cognitive brains at linear tasks like chess, calculating Pi, learning and anticipating patterns. However the most sophisticated robot cannot walk through a wooded valley as well as a 4 y/o.



# Consciousness

Consciousness (with language as a marker)

Only developed to serve the emotional brain.

Therefore the rational mind is not a ruler of the brain, but an advisor module to the primal lizard-like neural control center

- Remember that nature, like genmed, has little or no tolerance for awkwardness. Intermediate forms must be able to not only survive on their own, but also confer some sort of an advantage.
- The advantage of consciousness is that it allows organisms to think behind pure stimulus control and plan ahead. That is the main difference between you and a lizard.



# Self Control

- 1970 Four y/o child –
- Do you like marshmallows?

Choice of a plate with:

1 marshmallow

Or

2 marshmallows

The man tells you he has to leave, but if you wait till he returns, you can have the plate with two. If not, push a button and he will give you the plate with one. Most kids hold out 3-4 minutes

# Jump to 1985

- He tracks down almost 85% of the participants and measures
  - SAT scores
  - questionnaires for parents and teachers
  - criminal justice experience

Lyken, DT, Tellegen, A. Psychological Science. Vol 7.1996. pp186-9

Children that waited 1 SD ( 1.5 minutes) longer were more likely to go to college. Children that waited 2SD longer were more likely to attend a “top tier” college or university. Children 1SD below the average were more likely to have been arrested or incarcerated.



# You can't overwhelm the emotional mind

- But you can distract it using the cognitive mind (wise mind)



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What was interesting is that they interviewed the kids and found the ones more successful at resisting used distraction techniques to do so: most commonly, they looked away or they thought about another pleasurable activity

The point is that the conscious mind cannot “beat” the emotional mind by willpower alone. The conscious mind can be strong, but it is essentially analogous to skeletal muscle and it will eventually tire out. The emotional brain however is analogous to smooth muscle and can run automatically, tirelessly and effortlessly in most cases.



# Emotional Intelligence

- automatic processing of stimuli
  - good/bad
  - attention/inattention
  - THREATS

Emotional intelligence is therefore about stimulus control. And since it is an evolutionary system driven by evolutionary pressure, it has been selected by survival to avoid death. Therefore the primal emotional brain is designed above all to keep you alive in the here and now.



# Approach vs. Avoidance

All stimuli result in one of these two responses.



# Negativity Bias

- Most of us are avoidant, because:  
BAD e.g. being eaten

is a stronger evolutionary force than  
GOOD e.g. eating  
(over time)

Being eaten means the game is over. Missing a chance to eat may suck, but at least you can continue to play for a while. Outside of the television show House, most physicians do not take the view of “lets put a needle in and just see what happens.” We are an inherently avoidant profession. While there are cowboys among us, in general those of us with approach oriented attitudes get into trouble and are weeded out. In nature, trouble usually means getting eaten, so most of us had avoidant ancestors – which is why we have ancestors.

# Effective change

- Establish relationships – even in the moment - Reciprocity
- Give patients a sense of control
- Shame
- Use family/community/religion



# Reciprocity in Daily Life

- Hare Krishna's
- Drug reps
- Reciprocity is a primal drive
- Concession begets concession
- Mimicry

Cialdini RB Influence: Science and Practice. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston. Allyn and Bacon. 2001  
Benton et al. Journal of Personality and Psychology. Vol 24. 2002 v 24 pp73-83.

Reciprocity like all Jedi powers can be used for good or evil;

In the early days of the Hare Krishnas who were principally at O' hare airport, they refined the technique of pressing poorly mimeographed copies of the Bhagavad Gita or cheap flowers into bystanders hands. People interviewed said they didn' t want them but they felt compelled to make a donation. This effect was not diluted by increasing education or any other factor.

This is an enormously powerful reflex and it' s the basis for drug rep giving samples and dinners and free food samples at supermarkets. A Five dollar “gift check” sent with a survey increases people' s willingness to fill it out more than promising \$50 for completing it. Part of you is so pleased at getting something for nothing that you bizarrely feel compelled to give something back.

Other sales tactics are to stagger an offer. In one study college students were asked to chaperone a group of juvenile delinquents to the zoo for a day and only 17% agreed. In a second phase, students wre first asked if they would volunteer to work for 2 hours a week for a year with the delinquents. All said no, but when they were asked about the day trip to the zoo, 50% said yes.

Car salespeople are taught to begin at an extreme position and then bargain down, which is more effective than taking a reasonable middle ground and holding fast. Not only do they get higher sales prices, but the group who started higher and bargained down also have happier customers on average than the “reasonable middle” group.

Mimicry is a form of reciprocity. Drug reps are often taught three specific techniques: use the doctor' s name as much as possible (affective priming), use the drugs name (recall formation) and mimic your customer' s body language. There is a slight natural tendency to copy people we like by mimicking actions such as if she touches her face, I touch my face. If she taps her shoe, I may find I have started tapping mine. Mimicry is a social glue that like reciprocity connects us with others.

# Mimicry in Action



Picture of me with one of my mentors, Xavier Preud' homme in our cafeteria. The woman by the way didn't agree with him in this conversation and you can tell by her body language.

Mimicry is subtle but pervasive in everyday life

# Control

- Bursts of random noise
- SNF residents

Glass DC, Somger JE. Urban stress: experiments on noise and social stressors. Academic Press. 1972

Langer EJ, Rodin J. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology v34. 1976 pp191-198.

Glass had two groups listen to bursts of annoying random noise. The first group had a button that could terminate it, but were asked not to push it. The second group did not. None of the first group pushed it, but they all rated the experience as more positive than the second group.

Langer in a famous experiment showed that in a SNF with two floors, gave both floors privileges (plants, a movie night) but on one floor allowed the participants to choose which plants and gave them the responsibility of watering them as well as choosing the time and genre of the movie. The residents were rated as happier by themselves, the nurses, their families and at 18 months had a mortality rate of  $\frac{1}{2}$  (15% vs. 30%).



# Reduce Shame

Lyubomirsky et al. *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 2006. pp111-131  
Lawn DE. *International Journal of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease*, 2000 -  
Page 1. *INT J TUBERC LUNG DIS* 4(12):1190–1192

- Stigma has a multitude of effects on health care; people who report higher sense of stigma are more likely to miss doctor's appointments
- Surprisingly plastic surgery is effective in reducing shame. It can have a robust impact on indices of happiness and self-report of health status and they last >1 year. It appears to be equally true for breast reduction and breast enlargement. I'm obviously not recommending it, but I thought it was surprising, that what appears to many to be a superficial intervention can have a dramatic impact on health.



# Family and Religion and Community

- Improves response to adversity
- Generally associated with improved health and engagement in health
- Children/neighbors/religious elders



# Summation

- Emotional vs.. Cognitive thought
- Negativity bias
- Reciprocity
- Effective change means meeting people where they are; not where they “should be”



# Survival Tips

- Recognize your own emotions - Respecting your own experience/feelings first will help in understanding and respecting the patient's experience.
- Validate the patient's experience/feelings
- Structure and boundaries – for safety



# Cases



# Locating the “Source” of the Problem

- The Patient?
- The Physician?
- The Physician-Patient Relationship?



# Case #1

- Patient is a 35 year old man with 6 month history of increasing problems at work and divorce imminent
- Denies depression but very focused on somatic problems
- You leave the room feeling depressed!



# Depression is about dysfunction, not sadness

- Anxiety
- Anger Attacks
- Somatization
- Alexithymia: No words for feelings

# Case #2

- 31 year old woman with asthma
- Multiple medical complaints spanning different systems: “Organ recital”

History of several psych admissions

- Repeated sexual abuse during childhood
- Patient appears simultaneously angry, dismissive, rejecting and needy
- You are left feeling used, angry, and agitated



# Borderline Personality Traits/disorder

- Unstable affect
- Unstable thoughts: black&white
- Unstable identity
- Unstable interpersonal relationships
- Unstable impulse control
- Unstable suicidality