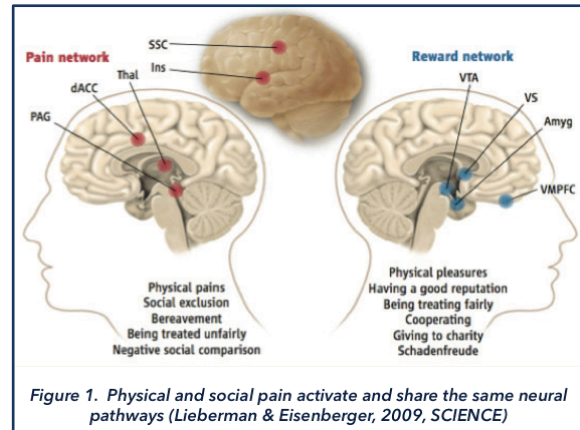




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*“An understanding of the psychology of human behaviour is an invaluable tool for managing conflict: for nurturing harmony and sustainability in the human family” - Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

### **Conflict: The role of self-esteem, reputation and social status protection**

In my last post (Understanding the Science of Human Relations: Your Most Lucrative Investment?), I discussed the importance of a safe workplace environment and that includes one that is free from conflict, both physically and psychologically. Individual differences of opinion or approaches to a task or problem encourage diversity of ideas, high quality thinking, problem solving and creativity thereby allowing organisations to fully harness the combined higher brain-power of its workforce. Conflict however, triggers the stress response and the release of stress hormones that actually disable the very same higher-order brain functions organisations intend to benefit from.

Human conflict arises when one or more of our most basic physical or psychological needs are unheard, unmet, violated or perceived to be violated in some way (1). The brain is wired to ensure safety first and foremost; healthy brains want to survive and safety equals survival therefore reaction to stimuli perceived to be negative, for example, a facial expression, body language, tone of voice or words heard, overrides the considered analysis of that stimuli. Analysis takes time and for the primitive protective brain, time may compromise a quick survival response. As Joseph Goewey states in his book, *The End of Stress*, our

unconscious, protective brain is programmed to “shoot first and ask questions later” (2). The result is a re-direction of energy (cortical blood flow) away from analytical areas of the brain and into those needed to start the fight, flight or freeze response.

Our protective response is fast, unconscious, incredibly powerful and often counter-productive when triggered by today’s first world stressors that are primarily psychological in nature. Its impact on interpersonal relations is a shut down in constructive communication, the cessation of factual information flow that is replaced by often erroneous assumptions, an increase in protective and avoidance behaviours and a decrease in collaborative skills and creating problem-solving (2). Resolving a conflict situation at this stage is much more difficult with the brain regions needed to do so, now effectively offline.

In his book, *The Psychology of Conflict*, leading British mediator Paul Randolph states that it is protection of our values, particularly those that impact our own and others’ perception of our value, that is the most powerfully motivating factor in all conflict in human existence” (3). Similarly, renowned lawyer and trauma mediation expert, Elizabeth Bader notes that, “most people take conflict personally and the outcome of it as a reflection of who they are...we experience conflict as implicating the value and even the existence of the self” (4).

Defending our values drives our behavioural strategies in a very primal and unconscious way, inhibiting our willingness to find resolution or admit fault, for ‘fear of the disapproval that such an admission creates in its wake”(1). This defence against disapproval, experienced both publicly by way of our anticipated loss of reputation and privately by way of potential loss of self-worth, is so strong that it can persist even when doing so results in significant damage to ourselves and those close to us, financially or otherwise.

Neurobiological research (5) has helped to explain why threats to self-esteem and social status are felt so painfully and fought so vehemently. Utilising medical imaging techniques to record brain activity researchers were surprised to find that experiencing social pain such as exclusion, unfair treatment and negative social comparison activated the same neural networks as did experiencing physical pain. Likewise, they found that the brain uses the same neural networks to process social pleasure as it does physical pleasures (refer Figure 1. at the beginning of this post).

To understand why the brain has evolved to treat physical and social pain as motivationally similar, the researchers looked to sociological findings for an explanation. Sociological research suggests that as human infants experience a

protracted dependence on others to facilitate survival then acceptance from and inclusion by primary care-givers and a broader social group, is paramount in ensuring access to physical survival needs such as food, water and shelter (6). Adult humans continue to be relational beings and as such the brain, operating in its primitive survival mode, interprets disapproval as a sign of rejection and ostracism from the group and in turn, a threat to our very existence (5).

The way we view our world as adults is very much shaped by our childhood experiences. Psychological research (6) demonstrates that our individual life experiences can moderate or exacerbate our innate, primal sensitivity to perceived threat. For example, if we have positive experiences, such as strong care-giver attachment in childhood, successful friendships and social relations then these personal experiences can help to moderate the impact of and potentially the number of conflictual situations that we find ourselves in.

Conversely, if our personal attachment history and social experiences are less positive with disruptions, threatened or real, to acceptance and connection with important others then these experiences may exacerbate our sensitivity to potential signs of threat and we may find ourselves in painful and protracted conflict situations more often. With awareness, however, we are able to change the impact of early life experiences thereby our interpretation and response to new experiences (7).

The research therefore appears to provide a rational explanation to seemingly irrational behaviour helping us to understand why the experience of exclusion or allegations of negligence, poor performance or poor decision-making, so often the cause of interpersonal conflict, are typically experienced as intense personal attacks signifying loss of value, respect and as such a threat to reputation and self-esteem and subconsciously, a threat to survival. Attempting to restore lost control and power, perceived or real, as a means of restoring lost self-esteem or reputation, is therefore at the core of much conflict (3).

Applying the research to current day conflict situations, it would seem that if we are able to reframe conflict from the perspective of self-esteem, reputation and social status protection we uncover more quickly the core drivers fuelling it, often hidden in the unconscious from those in conflict themselves. The more quickly we can identify and access these drivers, the better chance we have of avoiding the activation of the stress response and keeping the higher-order brain functions that are so important for effective resolution of conflict, online.

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