



kort's korner

Old Brain versus New Brain

GAY BOYS AND LESBIAN GIRLS LEARN that being out and open isn't safe. They learn to be hypervigilant for anyone who can sense that they're "different."

If there's even an inkling that they're gay, their safety will be jeopardized and replaced with ridicule, negative judgments and/or verbally and physical abuse. However, being a Turtle or a Hailstorm are only two behavioral modes of self-defense. Understanding how we use our brains can also help you protect yourself.

The fact is, our brain has three parts, with wholly different functions. Unless you understand this, you can't use all three effectively.

The "Old" Brain

The so-called reptilian brain, the brain stem at the top of the spinal column that we share with all other vertebrates, including alligators and lizards, is interested only in survival. This is the part of the brain that people in Twelve-Step programs call "my addict." Some forms of therapy call it your "Inner Child". Freud called the part of the mind controlled by this portion of the brain the "Id"—the part of you that, that wants what it wants when it wants it. It is the part of you

that when it senses danger, reacts "instinctively." It doesn't know the difference between past and present, but constantly scans to see whether your environment is safe or dangerous.

You need this "primitive" part of the brain to recognize if there is real danger around us. When it makes the determination, then it sends a signal to:

The Mammalian Brain

This is the second part of our brain, also called the limbic system, where our feelings are stored. While you can cut off from your feelings and bury them deeply, in fact you still do feel them, since that portion of your brain never ceases to exist. If the reptilian or "old" part of our brain senses danger, it sends that message to the mammalian brain which is going to feel afraid. Conversely, if the old brain signals that the environment is safe, then the mammalian brain can relax.

The New Brain

Finally the message gets sent to the neo-cortical brain, also known

as the cerebral cortex, the brain that uses logic and reasons. This portion of the brain we human beings share only with monkeys (to a smaller extent) and dolphins (to an even greater extent) than humans. In Imago Relationship Therapy, we call it the New Brain, which gives us the capacity for creativity, intuition, and logic.

The reptilian (or Old) brain is constantly scanning for danger. But it doesn't think rationally nor can it feel emotions. So once it signals that the surroundings are safe, then the mammalian brain can relax, freeing the New Brain to do all kinds of positive things like mate, nurture, create, and play. However, if the mammalian brain is afraid because the Old Brain is flashing DANGER!, then the New Brain must formulate all kinds of plans to restore back to safety and either fight or flee whatever caused the fear.

When we feel danger, we often respond in one or more of five common immediate, instinctive ways: either freeze, hide, submit, flee or fight. Which best describes you?

It's vital that all three parts of your brain work together. If danger threatens, your Old and Mammalian brain help you think and act fast. When safety returns, your New

continued

Old Brain versus New Brain, continued

Brain can relax and enjoy its surroundings and connect with others.

But what if things are safe and your Old Brain still senses danger? That's where problems occur. If your Old Brain feels threatened, it immediately signals your New Brain to effect one of the five responses to get back to safety. Yet if you go with the Old Brain's directive when no real danger exists—with no real need to behave in a threatened, defensive way—you can easily make wrong decisions that only worsen the situation.

For example, I often see gays and lesbians who stay closeted, even when it is safe to come out! Their relationships stay distanced, if not ruptured. Often family and friends are waiting for them to talk about it, but the gay or lesbian individual is trying not to make anyone feel uncomfortable—even though they won't. The danger their Old Brain perceives isn't even there!

Automatically relying on your Old Brain isn't always best! But “unreal” dangers are hard to distinguish, I know. That's why we must rely on our New Brains to stay in touch with what's really going on. As you continue through your day, which brain is doing the most work?