

How Conflict affects



....the wiring in our Brains



What drives our response to conflict?






It's all in the wiring.



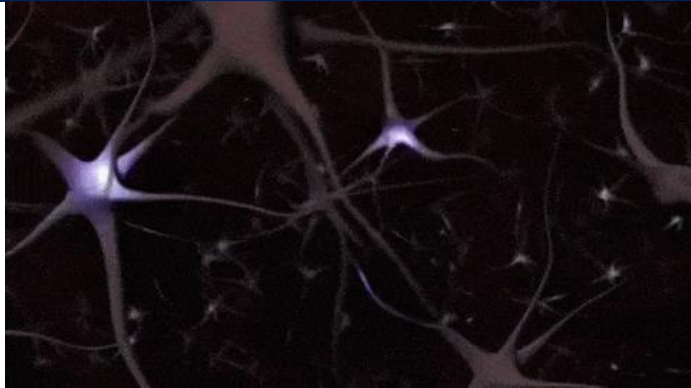
The last decade has seen huge steps in understanding what happens in our brains when we respond to perceived threats – especially from other people.

We are beginning to understand how much of our response developed through evolutionary pressures.

How the way we see the world is to an extent literally “hard wired” into neurone bundles that fix memories.

-  How memories of past events help us respond quickly to similar future events.
-  How memories “fixed” in the brain can be rewired, grudgingly, because of new information.
-  How all this affects how we respond to threats – real or perceived,
-  How this is beginning to explain why trust takes so long to form and rebuild if it is broken.
-  How understanding the brain’s workings can make it easier for us to manage conflict.

“Neurones that fire together, wire together”?

- ✿ For the sake of this discussion, imagine brain cells, like the ones in this image, are small lengths of wire, (neurones).
 - ✿ Each is connected to others to form a network.
 - ✿ Evidence suggests networks “fix” memories- what we have seen, touched, heard, smelled and so on.
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- The image shows a network of neurons with glowing purple cell bodies and thin, branching processes extending across a dark background.
- ✿ The more we experience a thing the more the bundles fire, the stronger the connection between them, so the more readily accessible the memory – “neurones that fire together wire together. “
 - ✿ Some memory bundles for the same experience can be held in different parts of the brain - a flower may have colour & shape as visual memories, smell as another and touch as a third.
 - ✿ When you see the flower all three may be triggered, instantly, unconsciously.
 - ✿ So memories may be thought of as networks of neurones.

What makes memories so important?

Memories of the past help us react quickly to current events – they are a survival mechanism.

- ✦ as a child you see a picture of a poisonous snake and someone says dangerous.
- ✦ Years later you see a snake and automatically take safety measures, without conscious thought.
- ✦ As you closer you see it looks more like a grass snake which you remember are harmless.
- ✦ If the memory is used often, it becomes fixed.



Which is where “trust” comes from:

- ✦ If my consistent experience of someone is positive I “trust” the next one will be too;
- ✦ But what if it isn’t? What if they do or say something I perceive as negative?
- ✦ I begin to doubt my memory, I may have to rewire my neurone network to say this person is not good.
- ✦ I may have to change my mind – or more literally my brain – about them.

Are Conflict Memories Real or Perceptions?

Our experience of the world and the people we meet is subjective, filtered and matched against the experiences we have coded in our neural networks.

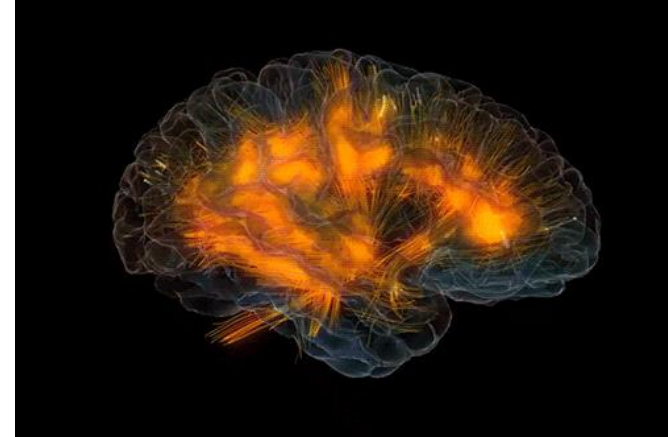
We sense something, match it to a memory and if the experience matches the memory, the network fires again and we trust our memory and so our senses.

In conflict we build networks about the other person:

- ✦ A bad experience causes us to doubt our memory / network of “people like them”.
- ✦ If we perceive a repeat of the negativity (by now we may be looking for it) this reinforces the memory network.
- ✦ We may even repeat the experience to ourselves (“reliving it”) and so reinforce the memory network.
- ✦ While of course our perception of ourselves is that we are good, nice people.

So Attribution Theory, that they are bad people and we are good people, is born.

And everything they do is filtered through negative networks, to reinforce our perception.



Can we rebuild trust?

Yes, but it means rebuilding the negative memories held by our neural networks and that takes time.

To “change our minds” or networks we need:

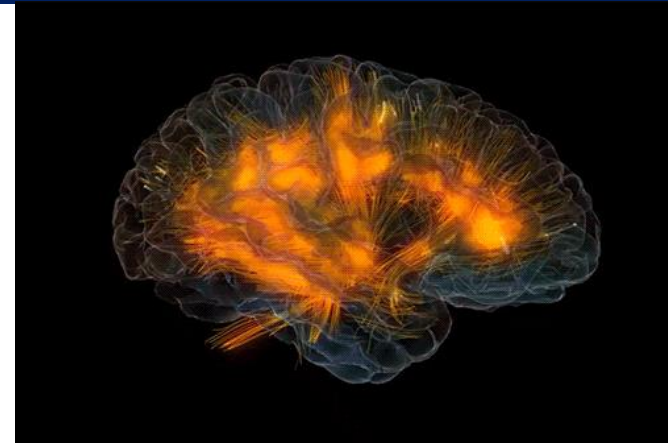
- ✦ new information about the other person,
- ✦ ideally from a “trusted source”,
- ✦ consistently over a period of time.

What could the new information look like?

- ✦ An explanation that helps us understand what motivated their action .
- ✦ Supported by them understanding the impact on us – and empathising with us.
- ✦ Supported by some agreement about positive future behaviour.
- ✦ Reached through calm, respectful discussion.

“Actions speak louder than words”, what they do will give us the experience / information that may enable us to gradually rewrite our networks about them.

If the experiences continue to be positive, we may come to trust those new memories.



How does this relate to mediation?

Mediators are impartial facilitators of difficult discussions between people who don't trust each other.

We maintain strict confidentiality and openness to build trust quickly and we believe what people tell us – it's their experience, wired into their brains and we are not there to disagree with them.

We are there to facilitate or make easier a conversation:

- ✦ That exchanges information in a calm, respectful way,
- ✦ Creates an explanation that aids understanding of what happened and why.
- ✦ Enables meaningful expressions of regret and empathy to be exchanged.
- ✦ Focusses on agreeing positive future behaviours so that trust can start to be rebuilt.

The older the conflict the more ingrained will be the negative neural networks, so time to exchange new information and demonstrate new behaviours must be given.

This allows old neural networks to be overwritten and replaced with more positive “memories” on which to judge the future.



And finally

- ☀ Was this useful for you?
- ☀ Are there some questions we haven't answered?
- ☀ What else might we be able to do to help?
- ☀ Please let us know



Thank you for your time.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeremy Scuse".

Jeremy Scuse