

Calming the Body Alarm: A Survival Guide for Combat Veterans

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If you've been in Iraq, Afghanistan or any combat zone, you know the story. Maybe you've seen trucks blown to smithereens by an IED, body parts falling from the heavens. Or you've lost dear friends, the best you've ever had - brothers and sisters of war who you ache for, while also feeling ashamed you survived.

Present-day sights, smells, and sounds - diesel fuel, blood, fireworks, garbage along the road - trigger combat memories. Drive

anywhere and cars (just harried commuters) invade your peripheral vision. If they come too fast, then, instinctively, without thinking, you gun it or switch lanes...*it could have been insurgents.* Same with driving under overpasses: you don't want a grenade dropped on your head, so you switch lanes quickly, as trained to do, before coming out the other end.

"*What the hell?*" Jim asks himself. "I'm home now. No Iraqis here. So why the F@#\$ does my heart pound out of my chest when I smell a diesel truck, or smell a garbage dump, especially on hot summer days? Why am I freaking out just because I'm stuck in traffic? My head is at home, but my body's still in Iraq. My buddies say get used to it, this crap doesn't go away. Am I crazy? What if they lock my ass up?"

There's a surprisingly simple explanation for all this. Our brain is really three brains in one. Dr. McLean, a famous brain scientist, aptly called it the *triune brain*. I call it the *Stone Age Brain*. A key point: the older the brain, the more it runs the show.

The *Reptilian Brain* is the oldest of the three. On high alert since Iraq, it sounds Jim's alarm even without present danger. That's what the reptilian brain does after exposure to the atrocities of war: it sounds the body's alarm, even when there's no danger. Exposure to trauma does that to all of us. With trauma in our past, small things, like being stuck in traffic yet knowing one's kids are safe at home, can cause full panic - our heart pounds, our breath is labored, we feel like we're having a heart attack, we feel dizzy, and then memories of real trauma flood us - smells, sounds, sights, and more.

The *Reptilian Brain* is more than 250 million years old; it manages the body's alarm system and runs all major organs. The second in command is the *Feeling Brain*, a mere 150 million years old. It infuses emotion and meaning into experience and directs us to rear our young instead of eating or abandoning them. The newest, just 3 million years old, is the cerebral cortex, the *Thinking Brain*. It gives us insight, impulse control, language, forethought and imagination.

A key point: the older the brain wiring, the more automatic or instinctive the behaviors are that it controls. (Remember: the older the brain, the more it runs the show.) Breathing, keeping our

hearts pumping, muscular reflexes, and, as any combat veteran knows, rage and the instinct to fight until death, are all managed by the oldest brain, the *Reptilian Brain*. But what we're not taught - yet what every combat veteran also knows - is that once the *Reptilian Brain's* survival alarm is cranked up in combat, it stays cranked up, even upon return to the civilian world. It's like a gas pedal that sticks and won't release, unable to slow down.

PTSD is having the *Reptilian Brain's* gas pedal stuck to the floor; the hypervigilance, rage, perception of risk, nightmares, and flashbacks - the *Reptilian Brain's* ancient survival tools - stay stuck on even after you take your foot off the gas (coming home from deployment.) Jim's heart pounds, his chest hurts, he can't catch his breath. His *Thinking Brain* (the newest, meaning-making brain, charged with explaining the *Reptilian Brain's* actions) trots out a few explanations: *Am I having a heart attack? No, too young and healthy. A seizure? I don't think so. I know! I'm losing my f@#king mind!*

If gutsy enough to seek treatment and lucky enough to get it, Jim would probably be treated by his family doctor, maybe referred to a therapist, maybe to a support group. He might look for a therapist (after "manning up" to having a mental illness from combat) to find the psychological roots of his attacks. Or, like too many veterans, he'd suffer invisibly, wondering what's wrong, ashamed by his inability to do simple stuff like shop, drive, or talk to strangers; wondering if he was losing his mind, often self-medicating with alcohol and drugs, and, sadly, often taking his life. (More young veterans have died from suicide than from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.)

As a former psychiatrist with the Veterans Administration, many of my patients served in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Vietnam. Most had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. The Vietnam vets have had it, often untreated, for more than 40 years. Here's what I would tell them: First, you're not losing your mind. PTSD is a normal response to life-threatening s@#t." (Veterans cuss a lot, and I do, too.) I would say, "Our brains, trained over millions of years, have evolved to replay life threatening memories over and over. If you think about it, this makes sense. Our ancestors whose brains replayed near misses with lions, tigers, and bears were much more likely to survive. You can thank our more successful stone age ancestors for your nightmares, flashbacks, and the fear of leaving your cave.

Then I'd blend in a contemporary metaphor: Your body, like many cars, has an alarm. Exposure to charred bodies, to lost brothers, to death in combat has turned your body alarm on high alert. In a car, if the alarm's set too sensitively, a passerby's footsteps, a truck rumbling by, even a gust of wind, can trigger the alarm. Nobody's touched the car, but the alarm's howling. Sound familiar? Your body alarm, deeply imbedded in your Stone Age Brain, is supposed to go off only when you're in mortal danger. Yet here you are, back in the USA. No more IEDs, suicide bombers (9/11 being one of a growing number of exceptions), mines or mortar attacks. But your alarm's still going off in the grocery store, in Wal-Mart, or even when you're doing things you enjoy. Your heart pounds, you gasp for air, you feel like you've got to run, and you're sure you're having a nervous breakdown. Well, you're not crazy, and you're not alone. Every combat vet I've seen tells the same story. Let's work together so you can manage that Stone Age Brain's alarm. It



might even turn out to be a friend, like a rough-around-the-edges combat vet who rode along with you in the s#\$t, and who got you home.

For most of my patients first introduced to the idea of PTSD, just hearing the Stone Age Brain explanation helped lots. What a relief to learn you're not crazy! (Our language for brain and mental problems has caused such shame.) We all have Stone Age Brains, and I'm convinced almost all of us would develop some PTSD if we saw and did what our veterans have seen and done.

In fact, all our so-called anxiety disorders are really an excess of normal anxiety, just too much of a good thing. We were designed to worry, to feel the full tilt of the fight or flight reaction when in mortal danger, to be obsessive-compulsive enough to guard the nest and to keep the fire going all night long, to avoid eating poisonous foods, and to phobically avoid deadly snakes and spiders or falling from a precipice. It is a question of degree. When too much anxiety interferes with leading a contented, productive life, it becomes, in contemporary medical thinking, a mental illness. PTSD is really just an excess of normal fight-or-flight anxiety occurring at the wrong time.



A large part of learning about living with PTSD, a part that, to our knowledge, has never before been taught, is this: How do we live with the Stone Age Brain, the three brains in one, that all of us have? After all, we're all taught to drive before we get our driver's license. So why aren't we taught the much harder less to learn: That we are all born with Stone Age Brains! Moreover, we're not taught that our *ancient* brain wiring doesn't understand the modern world. Our Stone

Age Brains get overwhelmed easily. When that happens, we feel anxious, we feel crazy. (Too much anxiety is very real, very intense, and overwhelming.) Hundreds of combat vets have shown me that understanding this, often even after our first meeting, brings much hope and relief.

Let's teach all veterans the simple truths about our Stone Age Brains and our body alarms, and help them settle back into the civilian world with a bit more comfort and hope; let's show them we have at least some understanding of what it's like for them to live with their body alarms stuck on high alert. Let's remind veterans they are not alone, and they can tell us they need a seat in the restaurant that keeps their backs to the wall without us judging them.

10 little-known facts about PTSD:

1. PTSD has nothing to do with courage. Even the most courageous warrior cannot force his reptilian brain to stop sounding the body alarm.
2. The human brain is actually three brains in one.
3. The older the brain, the more powerful its effects, and the more likely it takes over in combat; and the older the brain the less control we have over it.

4. The oldest brain, the reptilian brain, is millions of years old. Its language is not rational.
5. The feeling brain is less old than the reptilian brain, and the thinking brain is the newest kid on the block.
6. Being easily startled, easily enraged, distrusting strangers, and having repetitive daytime and nighttime memories of combat are the reptilian brain's hard-wired attempts at keeping us safe from future dangers, even when the dangers are no longer present.
7. Most soldiers and Marines (Marines hold to a separate identity as Marines) exposed to combat get hypervigilance, re-experiencing, rageful, low-threat triggers that remind the reptilian brain of combat.
8. Since 1980 the medical profession has, with good intentions, declared that the hypervigilance, repetitive memories and re-experiencing, emotional numbing, and rage from combat are symptoms of an illness they've termed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.
9. I believe that PTSD is not an illness, but a normal reaction to the horrors of war and to other traumas, a reaction that has helped humans survive since we first appeared, however; even if not an illness, PTSD causes great suffering, and those who have it should not be denied compensation by reimbursement systems like Disability Social Security and the Veterans' Administration's compensation for so-called service-connected disabilities that are determined using the definition of PTSD as a mental illness.
10. The more combat one sees, the more strongly the reptilian brain takes over even in civilian life.