



Finding Balance

4. Overwatch and the Survival Brain

Why think about the brain? Like learning about the body's stress system, it can help you understand that what happens to people under and after stress really does make sense. It can also make you a little better at questioning your own thoughts and getting perspective on things like anger, anxiety, guilt, shame, and a sense of hopelessness. When you get to know which part of the brain is talking to you—and what its “agenda” is—you have a little better idea of whether or not to believe everything it's telling you.

It would be great if there were one or two “bad” parts of the brain that cause all the problems. We could just figure out which wire we need to snip to disconnect them, and everything would be fine. But the truth is that:

1. Many different areas of the brain are involved in the way we handle stress, our experience of threat and safety, the thoughts and feelings we have, and the way we interpret the people and events around us.
2. Many brain areas are involved in more than one important task, and many important tasks need the efforts of multiple brain areas.
3. Most of the brain areas do some things that make life easier or more pleasant, and some things that make life harder or more unpleasant.

If we divide it up in general terms, the brain makes more sense. When it comes to the way we process stress and threat (to ourselves, others, important ideals, etc.), it's helpful to group some of the more important parts of the brain into two groups:

- The **survival brain**, made up of parts that are most often linked to the fast system, fight-or-flight chemicals and reactions
- The **higher brain**, made up of parts that are more often linked to the slow system, rest-and-reset chemicals and reactions

Of course, these are not their official names.³ But to make sense of this information, it's often helpful to use metaphors or images from everyday life—like describing the survival brain as a watchdog or an alarm system, and the higher brain as a wise teacher.

Finding Balance for service members and veterans describes these two “brains” as two units, one on patrol in a valley, and the other positioned on high ground, providing the surveillance and backup function that the military calls “overwatch.”⁴ This might also be a helpful way for you to think about the brain, especially if your service member or veteran is also studying these materials and wants to talk to you about it. If the military example doesn't work for you, you might instead think of a parent watching over a child.

The Survival Brain

The survival brain's main job is to keep us safe and alive. It's like the unit on patrol, moving across dangerous ground in the valley. Its position doesn't give it a very good perspective on the area, so danger might be around any corner. The survival brain also receives information about the immediate situation very quickly, but that information is primitive and incomplete. Sometimes it looks like there's a threat when there's not.

What are three situations in your life **today** that sometimes seem threatening—to your safety, your well being, or your dignity—even when there's really no threat?

In an ambush, this unit's job is to respond automatically, without thinking, returning fire as quickly as possible. In the case of the survival brain, this means triggering fight-or-flight chemicals at high levels that put the body and brain on “overdrive.”

Describe one time in the past week when it seemed like your survival brain was making split-second decisions and overreacting based on incomplete information:

What were some of the consequences of this reaction?

³ Appendix C, “More About the Brain,” combines a lot of the information in this section with the technical names and functions of the main brain areas involved in stress and threat.

⁴ In military lingo, the overwatch unit is one that stands guard from a distance, with better perspective, to provide more information and support for the unit on patrol.

The Higher Brain

The higher brain is like the parent watching the child or the unit providing overwatch for the survival brain. It's positioned on higher ground, with a better view of what's going on all around, and what's far ahead. Of course, the one disadvantage of this position is that, from this distance, the overwatch unit may not know about the attack until it's already underway. The unit in the valley knows right away, and responds right away.

Like the overwatch unit, the higher brain has a much better perspective than the survival brain, and it receives much more sophisticated information about the situation at hand. If it's a false alarm, the higher brain can see that the survival brain is overreacting. It can send out signals, triggering chemicals that will calm the survival brain down, slow down the body's reactions, and help you think more clearly. Then it gets to work looking at the most important facts about the situation, your options, possible consequences, moral concerns, and steps you might take to meet the challenges at hand.

Describe one time in the past week when—in spite of some stress—you were able to calm down enough to see the situation clearly, see more than one option, predict the consequences of those options, weigh them carefully, and make a plan. What was that experience like? What were the results?

One problem is that the higher brain also receives its more sophisticated information much more slowly. In case of an ambush, if the unit in the valley waited to return fire until the overwatch had spotted the enemy and radioed instructions, it would wait too long and increase the danger. It's the same way with the survival brain: In case of real physical danger, we can't afford to wait for the higher brain to figure out the situation.

Another problem is that the survival brain's automatic, extreme response works well in a high-threat environment, but not so well in a low-threat environment. When the survival brain has gotten used to real danger, it's very hard for it to remember how to slow down and wait for information from the higher brain. The chemical reactions can go off automatically—and cause problems—even when there's no real physical threat.

That's where you come in. If you've been living under high levels of stress, you may have been spending a lot of time operating out of your survival brain. But even if the stress is still high, it's time to learn to spend more time operating out of your higher brain—unless there's a physical threat. The tool on the next page breaks down some skills of overwatch and asks you to use them on a situation in your present life.

Tool: Practicing Overwatch

Please try this process out on a situation in your present life that's bothering you:

Gathering Information: In overwatch, you collect a lot of information—what's around you right now, the history of the situation, your knowledge of the people involved, what your “gut” says. In your situation, what kinds of information do you still need to look at?

Observing Yourself: In overwatch, you still experience your life, but you also stand back and notice your experience without judging it. You're still having your thoughts, feelings, and actions, but you're also standing back as a compassionate but objective observer. How would you describe yourself, and your experience, in this situation?

Calming the Survival Brain: in overwatch, one of your jobs is to keep yourself calm and in control of your reactions. What can you tell yourself to help you calm down?

Looking at Options: In overwatch, you can look at many options and their possible consequences. What are three options in this situation, and possible consequences?

Options	Possible Consequences

Making a Plan: In overwatch, you get systematic about problem solving, making plans that reflect all the thought processes described on this page. On a separate piece of paper, you might try writing out some steps you can take to meet the challenges involved in this situation. For each step, look at options and possible consequences.