

## Harnessing the Power of Emotions

Relationships are fueled by emotions, both positively and negatively. They can bring us our greatest pleasures and also cause us our greatest pain. This session provides an integrated biblical and neurological view of emotions. After establishing a foundational theology of emotions, we will examine the downward spiral of amygdala hijacking and emotional flooding. Finally, we will see how relational wisdom can help us to harness the power of emotions to build richer relationships and more productive ministry.

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*“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?  
Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” James 4:1*

1. Relationships can be challenging, because they are fueled by emotions, both positively and negatively.
  - Emotions, which are built into all people by God’s design,<sup>1</sup> are **physiological** experiences that involve measurable neural, muscular, respiratory, hormonal, and cardiovascular changes that impact our thoughts and **move us to action** (Exod. 32:19; 2 Sam. 18:33; Mark 1:41).
  - Emotions provide the greatest pleasures of life, such as love, joy, delight, acceptance, belonging, peace, worship, passion, and ecstasy, to name just a few.
  - Emotions are also tied to our greatest struggles and agonies in life, which often involve feelings such as sadness, embarrassment, anger, bitterness, jealousy, self-pity, and regret.
  - Jesus felt a wide range of emotions, including love, compassion, joy, pity, anger, sorrow, and agony (John 11:5; Matt. 14:14; Heb. 12:2; Mark 1:41; 3:5; 14:34; Luke 22:44). Yet he never sinned (1 Pet. 2:22). His emotions never surprised or overwhelmed him or moved him to act contrary to his Father’s perfect will (John 8:29).
  - Not so with us—because of the fall, sin has corrupted our whole being, including our minds, emotions, and will. Therefore, like a computer with a defective motherboard, we

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the theology of emotions see [www.rw360.org/Emotion-in-Christian-Anthropology](http://www.rw360.org/Emotion-in-Christian-Anthropology)

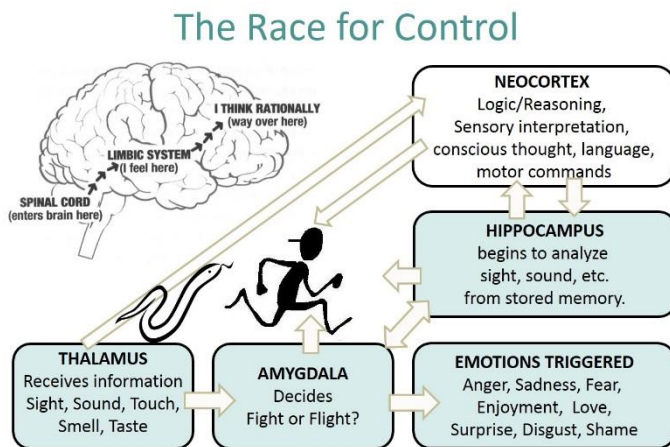
are unable to *consistently* understand and control the emotions that are triggered by people and events in our lives (Gen. 3:6-13; Jer. 17:9; Eph. 4:22).

- Therefore, while positive emotions usually move us to do good things, negative emotions often move us to sin against God and one another (Gen. 37:11; 2 Sam. 11:2-4).
- All of us are capable of feeling a wide variety of emotions

*"When my soul was embittered ... I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you."*  
Psalm 73:21-22

### AMYGDALA HIJACKING

- In high stress situations, the "emotional brain" can hijack the "rational brain" ... and your whole body along with it.



*"Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him."*  
Gen. 4:8

*"So David took Bathsheba ... and lay with her."*  
2 Sam. 11:4

*"[Peter] denied [Jesus], saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.'"* Luke 22:57

*"Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate" (Acts 12:14).*

Data enters the brain through the thalamus, which sends impulses to other parts of the brain. Impulses arrive at the limbic system (amygdala) a few nanoseconds before they get to the neocortex, which allows our emotions to take control before you are able to rationally process the information ([www.rw360.org/hijacking](http://www.rw360.org/hijacking)).

- Three classic signs of amygdala hijacking:
  - The sudden onset
  - Of an intense emotional reaction
  - That is later regretted

4. How the brain is wired

- Sensory impulses arrive at the *amygdala* (the emotional part of the brain) before they get to the neocortex (the rational part of the brain), so our emotions get rolling before we are able to really think about something

5. An example from *Cinderella Man* (“I Need You” video clip)

- What was Mae feeling and why? What did her feelings cause her to do?
- Think of a time when you were emotionally hijacked
  - What triggered your intense feelings?
  - What did they cause you to do?
  - How did it impact those around you?
  - How did you feel afterwards?

6. Four ways to defeat emotional hijacking (READ)

- **Recognize** your emotions
- **Evaluate** their source
- **Anticipate** the consequences of following them
- **Direct** them on a constructive course

**Recognize your emotions**

- Labeling emotions subdues your amygdala and activates your neocortex
- Search your heart and name your feelings
- Practice *identifying emotions* when you read books or watch movies

**Evaluate the source of your feelings**

- Understand what the Bible says about our desires and passions (James 4:1-2)
- God uses your circumstances to help us identify sinful desires and passions that have become controlling idols

**Anticipate the consequences of following your feelings**

- Back to Mae Braddock: how did her emotional outburst impact her family?

- Develop the habit of anticipating the consequences of following your emotions

**Direct your emotions on a constructive course**

- Buy yourself some time
- Breathe deeply
- Rejoice in the Lord ... remember that He is near (Phil. 4:4-5)
- Pray (Phil 4:6)
- Be thankful (Phil 4:6, 8-9)
- Do a 180 (Luke 6:27-28)
- Learn from your mistakes

7. Back to *Cinderella Man* (“Champion of My Heart” video clip)

- How did Mae apply the READ concept?
- How did her actions impact her husband?

8. Practice READ and make it a habit

**For a detailed discussion of these principles, see [www.rw360.org/hijacking](http://www.rw360.org/hijacking)**