

# MEET YOUR AMYGDALA

*neuroscience*

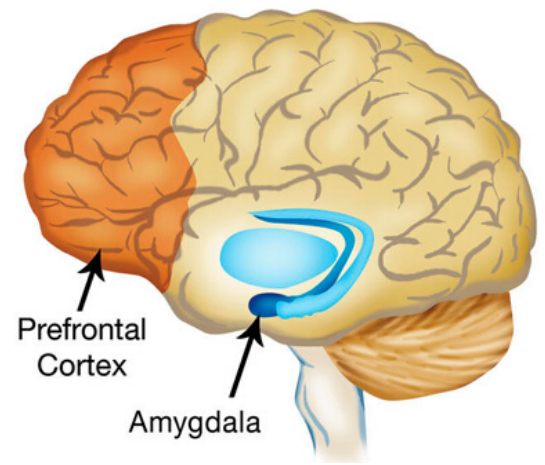


## WHAT IS THE AMYGDALA?

The amygdala consists of two almond shaped structures and is involved in the fear circuit in your brain. It is responsible for the fight-or-flight response that motivates you to react to threats.

## HOW DOES IT WORK?

When you encounter a threatening situation, your body sends signals to both the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex. If the amygdala senses danger it initiates the fight-or-flight response within a split second, before the cortex has time to overrule it.



Your body then releases adrenaline, which increases your heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing, and you experience a sudden and intense unconscious emotional response that shuts off the cortex, making it hard for you to think clearly about the situation. As your brain triggers the release of stress hormones such as cortisol, you find it increasingly hard to problem solve and concentrate. This whole process takes a toll, and you may not recover to your original level of functioning for several hours.

**Although many of the threats you face are symbolic** (an overflowing email inbox versus finding a sabertooth tiger in your office), **your body still responds automatically**, to some degree, as though there is a real physical threat. An overactive amygdala will trigger this stress response over and over, which can cause high levels of anxiety and chronic stress.

## HOW MINDFULNESS HELPS ALLEVIATE STRESS

Research demonstrates how mindfulness practices – such as awareness of breathing and releasing tension in the body – offer some of the most effective ways to **calm the activity of the amygdala** and increase feelings of calm and clarity.

The practices also help strengthen the connection between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex (which is responsible for keeping the amygdala, or stress response, in check).

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In addition, **mindfulness supports emotional intelligence - a strong connection between the emotional center of the brain and the executive (thinking) center.** Emotionally intelligent people know how to de-escalate their own emotions as well as those of others by becoming engaged, focused, and attentive to their thoughts and feelings.

With consistent practice, you can grow your awareness of how you respond to stressful events (when the amygdala is activated). Over time, this practice can help you **create the space to CHOOSE A RESPONSE** that will support your wellbeing, instead of reacting unconsciously in a way that exacerbates the problem, perpetuates the stress cycle, and drains you..