



# UNHOOKING



## HOW TO UNHOOK FROM EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY

*By practicing the below steps regularly, you can strengthen your wise brain and become more resilient in the face of challenging or triggering situations.*

### Step 1: Recognize the "stuck" feeling of being hooked

- **Recognize.** Notice the signs of being hooked (reactive thoughts, feelings, sensations, or behaviors). Simply say or acknowledge to yourself *"Ah, this is the feeling of being hooked."*

### Step 2: Practice relaxing into the uncomfortable feeling

- **Pause.** Get grounded and focus your attention on your feet, your hands, or your breath.
- **Name It To Tame It.** Name the feeling (e.g. *"anger" "irritation" "fear" "disappointment"*).
- **Allow + Relax + Breathe.** Allow space for the emotion to simply be there. You can also experiment with softening your whole body and breathing into or around any sensations of tension or contraction.
- **Kindness.** Offer yourself kind words of encouragement (*"It's okay... this is hard, and this will also pass"*)

## What does being "hooked" mean?

"Hooked" refers to the experience of getting caught up in negative emotions, thoughts, or reactions. It is a habitual pattern of the mind where we become entangled in emotional triggers without conscious awareness or control. When a stressor or challenging situation arises, being "hooked" manifests as an immediate and often unconscious response, such as anger, fear, anxiety, or any other form of distress.



## Here are two examples of being "hooked":

- **Workplace Scenario:** Imagine receiving critical feedback from a colleague during a team meeting. Your survival brain immediately interprets it as a threat to your competence, triggering a knee-jerk reaction. Instead of considering the feedback constructively, you may become defensive, engaging in unproductive arguments or shutting down communication.
- **Home Scenario:** Picture a situation where a family member repeatedly challenges your choices or lifestyle during a gathering. Your survival brain perceives this as an attack on your identity, triggering defensiveness or emotional withdrawal. These unconscious reactions can strain relationships and hinder your resilience.

Being hooked has a visceral quality associated with grasping or pushing away. It's the feeling of "I like, I want, I need, I don't like, I don't want, I don't need, I want it to go away." It's usually accompanied by a feeling of tightening, closing down, or withdrawing when we're uncomfortable with what's going on. It is also quickly followed by a strong urge to find relief from those negative feelings by clinging to something that gives us pleasure.

In terms of automatic stress reactivity, being "hooked" can be seen as a function of the survival brain, which is responsible for our instinctive fight-or-flight response. When triggered by stress, the survival brain takes over, activating a cascade of physiological and psychological reactions designed to protect us from perceived threats. This automatic stress reaction can perpetuate a cycle of suffering and lead to further negative emotional states.

The key to addressing being "hooked" and automatic survival brain (stress) reactivity is to practice pausing, recognizing, and investigating the hooked feeling with kindness and compassion. Cultivating greater self-awareness and insight through conscious reflection, in time, rewires the brain to recognize and acknowledge the hook without reacting.

# How to Unhook ~ A Closer Look

## ✓ Step 1: Recognize

The first step is to become aware of when you're 'hooked', that is, when your survival brain is in control. Being aware means tuning into physical, emotional, mental, and/or behavioral signals that indicate a shift into reactive survival mode.

- **Physically**, you might notice an increased heart rate, shallow or quick breathing, muscle tension/contraction, or a feeling of unease in your stomach.
- **Emotionally**, a sudden onset of fear, anger, frustration, or anxiety could be the signs.
- **Mentally**, you might find yourself with racing thoughts, struggling to concentrate, or becoming fixated on a particular issue.
- **Behaviorally**, you may notice signs such as a shift in your communication style, perhaps becoming more aggressive or defensive. You might also find yourself engaging in negative coping strategies, like overeating, drinking, or withdrawing from social interactions. Alternatively, you may experience an urge to act impulsively, a difficulty in listening to others, or a tendency to catastrophize situations.

These signals, indicate that your survival brain reactivity is taking over. Recognizing these signs as they appear paves the way to shift towards wise brain responsiveness.

## ✓ Step 2: Pause

After recognizing that you're hooked, the next step is to pause. This means grounding yourself in the present moment – noticing the contact of your feet on the ground, taking a deep breath, stepping back from the situation, or simply noting your feelings without immediately reacting. This pause disrupts the automatic response loop, giving your wise brain a chance to come online.

## ✓ Step 3: Name It To Tame It

Once you've paused, try to identify and name your feelings. This process helps shift the neural activity from your survival brain (amygdala – alarm center) to your wise brain (prefrontal cortex – executive control center), reducing the intensity of the emotion and helping you understand why it's there. Is it fear? Anger? Anxiety? Naming the emotion can help tame it.

## ✓ Step 4: Allow + Relax + Release

Now, with your wise brain engaged, you can explore allowing, relaxing, and releasing the emotion. This isn't about denying or suppressing your feelings, but first about simply allowing the emotion some space to be there. Sometimes allowing is all that you need. Sometimes, other techniques like conscious relaxation and deep breathing can help you soften around or through the emotional energy in a way that helps release the "hooked" feeling.

## ✓ Step 5: Practice Kindness

Lastly, bring a sense of kindness or warmth into your experience. This is about accepting and treating yourself with compassion, which supports the activity of your wise brain. Recognize that it's natural to feel the way you do, and extend the same kindness to yourself that you would to a dear friend, family member, or colleague. You could offer yourself a gentle or soothing gesture – like a hand over your heart or your abdomen. You could also offer yourself kind words of encouragement ("*It's okay...it makes sense to feel this way....this is hard....this will also pass*"). This process can help lessen the impact of emotional triggers over time.