COACH Notes

Volume II, No. 10 Newsletter

Decision Making: Emotion or Reason?

Have you ever made a foolish decision that had unpleasant consequences? Needless to say, we all have. Consider the following:

- We go grocery shopping with the resolve to eat healthfully and buy a gallon of ice cream... just in case friends stop by.
- We need to replace our used car... and end up buying a brand-new one.
- We bet on a sports team we don't really think can win because the risk offers great financial reward.
- We take a job with long hours because the benefits seem too good to pass up.

Later, we cannot seem to find rational explanations for our decisions — but we still manage to come up with "logical" excuses for our illogical behavior.

Neuroscientists learn more about the brain each day, including how it processes information and how we make decisions. While much remains to be discovered, we may not be as rational and "in control" as we think.

The closer scientists look, the clearer it becomes that we're much like our animal ancestors. To better understand the brain, think of it as three layers:

1. Reptilian or primitive
2. Dog
3. Human

Three Brains in One

The reptilian brain consists of the top of the spinal cord and the base of the brain — the parts we share with reptiles and fish. It's responsible for many of our automatic survival systems, such as breathing and hunger.

Wrapped around these structures is the limbic system, which is similar to that found in dogs and other mammals. It controls basic emotions (fear, aggressiveness, contentment).

Encasing these primitive structures is the cortex: the folded gray matter that sets us apart from other

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Are your dreams big enough? Let me help you unleash your potential and accomplish more than you ever dreamed possible.

...David Herdlinger

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mammals. While many animals like dogs and chimps have cortexes, the human cortex is much larger and manages sophisticated processes like hearing, vision, language, reasoning, abstract thinking and personality.

The prefrontal cortex serves as the "executive" part of the brain, considering all of the input it receives, making decisions and setting goals. According to scientists who image the brain, both the ancient dog brain and prefrontal cortex are activated during decision making, and they engage in an ongoing debate before a decision is made. The dog brain may win the debate even when logic should prevail.

Experiments demonstrate that healthy adults place risky bets even when they're sure to lose. If there's a chance an opponent can lose, our desire to punish him can override our desire to win.

Physiologically, our dog brain is topped with a human cortex. While the cortex represents all that is human, logical, rational and civilized, our animal tendencies sometimes dominate, winning an argument with the executive brain and making a decision that defies rationality.

Emotion and Reason

Both the dog brain (emotional) and human cortex (rational) are critical in effective decision making, which requires us to evaluate input from both parts.

You don't have to be a neuroscientist to see how emotions can cloud judgment. We've all been there — and parents witness such behaviors every day in their children. But as adults, we're also prone to impulsivity and the lure of instant gratification. Anyone who's ever shopped or gambled knows this firsthand.

Risk and Reward

Much of the traffic between the primitive and executive parts of our brain is devoted to the conscious calculation of risks and rewards. Humans are unique because we can look to the future and visualize the consequences of a decision or action. This sets us apart from dogs and other mammals.

We can contemplate what may follow after making a decision to chase immediate gratification. We get a thrill or instantaneous pleasure just from the prospect of future gratification.

The Thrill of the Hunt

We sometimes seek the pleasure of anticipation more than the actual experience. Depending on your personal taste for risk, the anticipation of a certain activity may be more thrilling than the event itself. The brain clearly distinguishes between the thrill of the hunt and the pleasure of the feast.

The brain's desire for reward is a principal source of bad judgment in teenagers and adults alike. Its reward system is complex, spanning the primitive and executive parts. So, it's no surprise that chocolate, sex, music, pretty faces and sports cars arouse this reward system — as does our taste for revenge.

Sweet Revenge

The desire to retaliate and punish others' bad behavior often leads us to make a bad decision. When this happens to other people, we shake our heads and say, "What was he thinking?" The brain's reward system is triggered even when we contemplate revenge.

Whether we are bestowing a reward or exacting punishment, the brain reacts similarly, eagerly anticipating a satisfying experience.

Know Your Brain

Some of these ideas confirm what we already know about decision making. We sometimes go with our gut, making impulsive decisions without really knowing why — and they turn out to be right.

There's some comfort in knowing that our dog brains occasionally win out. Freud wasn't far off when he suggested we struggle between our animalistic *id* and our rational *superego*. But he may have been too optimistic in his assessment of the superego's ability to channel our emotions.

We now know our dog brains prevail over rationality many times, and we later come up with logical excuses to justify our decisions. These interactions occur so deeply within our brains that we're often unaware of them.

This is what Malcolm Gladwell illustrates in his book *Blink*. We make instant emotional decisions without knowing why and then come up with rational reasons to justify them.

The picture that emerges from neuroscience labs is clear: Ignore your gut at your own peril. We must gain further understanding of our similarity to other animals. Whether we trust a partner, buy clothes or a car, or hire a new employee, our dog brains are busily making assessments, but in a much different way than our human brains do so.

Pay attention to this part of yourself and realize its impact on your choices.