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The evidence beneath the B.R.A.I.N. Pause
Helping our thinking brain come back online when conflict gets under our skin

B.R.A.I.N. is an evidence-informed practice approach designed to help us respond thoughtfully in conflict. Its rationale draws on neuroscience, experimental psychology and research syntheses. These support aspects of its components; the five-step approach has not itself been independently evaluated in healthcare conflict.

Social threat and stress. Threat need not be physical. A synthesis of laboratory studies found that tasks involving negative social evaluation or uncontrollability could elicit cortisol responses, with the largest responses when both were present.[7] This helps explain why criticism or perceived powerlessness may feel threatening, without implying that every disagreement produces the same response.

Stress and thinking. Research describes mechanisms through which stress can disrupt prefrontal networks.[1,2] A human meta-analysis found impairments in working memory and cognitive flexibility, with more complex effects on inhibition.[8] This supports creating space before responding. "The thinking brain going offline" remains a metaphor: emotion and cognition involve interacting networks.

Memory and context. Hippocampal and related networks contribute to memory and contextual learning.[3,4] Earlier experiences may therefore influence present interpretations. This provides a plausible basis for the healthcare examples accompanying B.R.A.I.N., without serving as evidence that a particular person's response reflects trauma or misplaced fear.

Awareness and emotion regulation. Laboratory research links labelling emotional stimuli with altered activity in networks involved in emotional responding.[12] Reviews and a meta-analysis also support some regulation strategies, including cognitive reappraisal, while showing substantial variation between strategies and circumstances.[5,6,13] Redirecting attention is not uniformly helpful.

Breathing and settling. A meta-analysis of randomised trials found a small-to-medium reduction in self-reported stress with breathwork.[9] Breathing practices may help some people settle, although studies do not establish that a few breaths during conflict restore clear thinking.

Questioning and understanding. Experiments suggest that considering opposing possibilities can reduce particular judgement biases.[10] Research also distinguishes imagining another person's perspective from obtaining it through conversation: asking can improve accuracy where perspective-taking alone does not.[11] Together, these findings support questioning our interpretation, asking and checking, rather than assuming we understand.

In these ways, B.R.A.I.N. brings these insights together as a practical practice. It's important to acknowledge that the effectiveness, sequence and usefulness under pressure have not been formally evaluated and it can't guarantee de-escalation. And it's important to affirm that responsibility for safe care and fair treatment remains shared.

The purpose of the B.R.A.I.N .pause is to increase our options while taking legitimate concerns seriously.

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