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

The case for a B.R.A.I.N. pause

We may all recognise this feeling. Someone says something that feels unfair, critical, challenging; we feel misunderstood, blamed, powerless. Our heart beats faster, our muscles tighten, and we prepare our response rather than listen. We may interrupt, justify or defend ourselves, withdraw or repeat ourselves more forcefully. We may know how we would like to respond but struggle to do it in the moment.

When we feel threatened, our brain and body can shift into protection mode. This may make it harder to do the very things that could help us navigate the situation well.[1,2,7,8]

B.R.A.I.N. offers a way to notice what's happening in the moment, pause and choose a more thoughtful response.

Step	Reminder
B – Be aware	Notice your stress response
R – Regulate	Help your body settle
A – Attend	Bring your attention back to the present
I – Inquire	Question your assumptions and explore other perspectives
N – Navigate	Choose a constructive next step

What happens to our brain during conflict

Our brains respond to potential danger, including threats that are social rather than physical. Research shows that situations involving negative evaluation by others or a lack of control can produce a physiological stress response.[7] In healthcare, this might happen when a parent fears their concerns are not being taken seriously, a clinician feels their competence is being questioned, or a colleague feels undermined in front of the team.

Three brain regions offer a useful starting point, although each works within wider, interconnected networks.

The amygdala - detecting significance and potential threat. The amygdala helps detect emotionally significant information, including potential threats, and works with other brain regions and bodily systems to shape protective responses.[1,4]

The hippocampus - memory and context. The hippocampus helps form and retrieve memories, connect present situations with earlier experiences, and distinguish between contexts.[3,4]

The prefrontal cortex - thinking and regulation. Prefrontal networks support working memory, flexible thinking, planning and aspects of self-regulation: abilities we draw on when conversations become difficult.[1,2]

How past experiences can influence present responses

We do not enter difficult conversations with a blank slate. Imagine a nurse who was publicly criticised by a senior colleague. Years later, another senior colleague questions his clinical judgement in a meeting. The tone, setting or perceived authority may evoke that earlier experience. His heart races; he becomes defensive or struggles to speak. It may be harder for him to recognise a legitimate clinical question. The same can happen for parents. If they believe their child previously experienced a serious failure in care, they may understandably be especially

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alert to signs of something being missed again. A delayed response, unfamiliar member of staff or incomplete explanation may heighten their sense of danger. These examples are consistent with research on memory, context and learned threat.[3,4]

A strong reaction does not necessarily reflect trauma or make a concern unreasonable. Sometimes the threat is real and the response proportionate. What is happening now may nevertheless interact with what happened before. On the other hand, context also helps us recognise differences; an earlier situation may have ended badly, while this one may unfold differently.[4]

What happens to our thinking

Under acute stress, working memory and flexible thinking can become harder to access. While effects on attention and inhibition vary with the task and circumstances,[1,2,8] in a difficult conversation, this may mean finding it harder to hold several possibilities in mind, reconsider an interpretation or decide how best to respond. Common metaphors associated with these effects are "amygdala hijack", with the thinking brain going "offline", although the brain doesn't switch neatly between emotional and rational modes; interconnected networks continue to work together. But feeling threatened can make thoughtful responses harder. So being told to "calm down" or "be reasonable" may feel dismissive, especially when the person is already trying to manage their response.

Using B.R.A.I.N. to respond differently

B.R.A.I.N. helps us notice our response and choose what to do next, without suppressing feelings or pretending everything is all right.

B – Be aware: Notice your stress response

Perhaps your jaw tightens, your shoulders rise or your heart speeds up. You notice yourself preparing a rebuttal, wanting to interrupt or becoming increasingly convinced that the other person is unreasonable. Ask yourself:

- What is happening in my body?
- What am I feeling, and what am I wanting to do?
- Does something about this remind me of a previous experience?

You do not need to analyse your history in the moment. Noticing a familiar response may be enough to help you pause.

An internal reminder: Something about this feels threatening. I can notice that without acting on it immediately.

Notice early enough to have some choice, without judging yourself for the automatic reaction you feel.

R – Regulate: Help your body settle enough to continue

It often helps to begin with the body. You might:

- Relax your jaw and shoulders.
- Notice the contact of your feet with the floor.
- Slow your speech and take a few gentle, unhurried breaths.
- Pause before answering.
- Ask for a short break.

Research supports claims that breathing interventions reduce stress.[9]

An internal reminder: I do not have to respond straight away. I can give myself a moment.

We don't need to feel completely calm. Feeling a little more settled may make continuing manageable. If we're too distressed to think clearly, a break may be wiser.

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A – Attend: Bring your attention back to what's happening here and now

In a difficult conversation, we may hear criticism but miss the concern behind it. We may focus on someone's tone, anticipate what they'll say next or be so busy defending ourselves that we stop listening. Ask yourself:

- What has this person actually said?
- What am I assuming they mean?
- Am I responding to what is happening now, or what I fear might happen?
- What matters most in this conversation?

A practical way to refocus is to check understanding: *"Can I make sure I have understood what you are most concerned about?"*

Directing attention and reconsidering meaning are established emotion-regulation strategies.[5,6] Here, our aim is to return to the conversation and the person in front of us.

I – Inquire: Become curious about what you might be missing

When conflict takes hold, interpretations can harden into apparent facts:

"These parents are being unreasonable."
"The doctors are not telling us everything."
"She is deliberately undermining me."

Sometimes an interpretation may be accurate; sometimes it is incomplete.

First, ***inquire inwardly***:

- What am I assuming?
- What else might explain what is happening?
- What evidence might challenge my first interpretation?

Considering opposing possibilities can also help reduce judgement biases.[10]

Then, ***inquire outwardly***:

- What have I not yet understood?
- What matters most to this person?
- What would help me understand their concern more accurately?

You might say: *"I wonder if there is something important here that I have not properly understood?"*

Or: *"Could you help me understand what feels most difficult about this?"*

Consider possible explanations, then ask and check. Because imagining someone's perspective can't replace hearing it.[11] The aim is to remain open, without diagnosing someone or assuming their response is rooted in trauma.

An internal reminder: What if my first interpretation is not the whole story?

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N – Navigate: Choose a constructive next step

Now consider what the situation needs. That may mean listening longer, acknowledging a concern, offering an explain, challenging an assumption or setting a boundary. It may also mean acknowledging uncertainty, pausing or seeking additional support. Ask yourself:

- What does this situation need most right now?
- What might help rather than escalate?
- How can I remain respectful if we disagree?
- What is one constructive next step?

You might say: *"I can see we are looking at this differently. I'd like us to understand those differences before deciding how best to move forward."*

Regulating ourselves does not require agreement and is not a call for appeasement. We can remain curious and empathic while disagreeing, maintaining boundaries, challenging unsafe behaviour or making difficult clinical decisions.

Nor can individual self-regulation remedy unsafe care, inadequate staffing or repeated failures to respond to concerns. Those problems also require practical action and organisational accountability.

B.R.A.I.N. in 30 seconds

This brief aide memoire may be useful in a difficult moment.

Step	Quick reminder
B – Be aware	I am feeling defensive. What is happening in me?
R – Regulate	Feet down. Shoulders loose. Breathe slowly.
A – Attend	What is actually happening here and now?
I – Inquire	What if my first interpretation is not the whole story?
N – Navigate	What would help most right now?

Notice. Settle. Listen. Get curious. Choose.

The steps need not be linear, and we may may need to return to regulating several times. Alternatively, we may recognise that taking a break is the most constructive choice.

Why should it be me?

"Why should I do this when it's the other person who's wrong or being totally unreasonable?"

That's an understandable question, especially if we feel mistreated or repeatedly expected to make the effort. Using B.R.A.I.N. doesn't mean acquiescing, accepting blame, excusing unacceptable behaviour or taking sole responsibility for repairing the situation. What it does is improve our chance of being heard, assessing the situation clearly and responding in a way that serves what matters to us.

How we respond can influence what happens next more than whether we are right. And remaining curious leaves room to discover something we have missed without requiring us to abandon our position.

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We shouldn't have to do all the work, but B.R.A.I.N. improves our chance of success in inviting the other person to collaborate. And if they're not able to accept our invitation in that moment, we can still choose our next step calmly.

Summary

In conflict, we often feel the need to explain more clearly, argue more convincingly or make the other person understand. In fact, we first need to notice what is happening within ourselves first. Fear, pressure and past experiences may make listening and flexible thinking harder. B.R.A.I.N. offers a way to pause and choose what happens next, while taking our feelings and concerns seriously.

We can't necessarily prevent a stress response, but we can practice recognising it, helping ourselves settle and knowing when we need more time or support. When conflict makes understanding harder, becoming ready to listen well is a useful first step. Responding thoughtfully can help us feel more in control and give the conversation a better chance.

Related items:

The evidence beneath the B.R.A.I.N. Pause

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