

The Body's Alarm System

We all have a built-in alarm system that signals us when we might be in danger. One reason why human beings have been able to survive over time is because our brain recognizes signals around us that tell us danger might be coming. This helps our bodies prepare to deal with danger when it comes.

THE HUMAN DANGER RESPONSE

When our brain recognizes danger, it prepares our body to deal with it. We have three major ways to deal with something dangerous: We can fight it, we can get away from it (flight), or we can freeze.

What we pick to do sometimes depends on the kind of danger. So, for example, if a really small squirrel is attacking you, you might fight it, because you're bigger and stronger than it is. If a car comes speeding at you, and you're standing in the street, you'd probably run, because you can't really fight it, and if you stand still, you'll get hit. If you saw a big bear or some other animal nearby, you might freeze, because you can't really fight it, and you're probably not fast enough to run away.

OUR BODY GIVES US THE FUEL/ENERGY THAT WE NEED TO SURVIVE

When it's time for our body to fight, or run, or freeze, we need a lot of energy to do those things. So, when the brain recognizes danger, its "action" or "doing" part sends a signal to our body to release a bunch of chemicals, like fuel for a car. Those chemicals give us the energy that we need to cope with the danger.

THE OVERACTIVE ALARM

When the danger signal goes off, the "thinking" part of our brain checks out what is going on around us. If it is a false alarm, and there is no real danger, the "thinking brain" shuts off the alarm, and we can keep doing whatever we were doing. If there is danger, the "doing brain" takes over and gives the body fuel to deal with whatever is going on.

Sometimes, though, the danger alarm goes off too much. That usually happens when people have had lots of dangerous things happen—like their parents hurting them, or someone touching them when they didn't want it, or someone yelling or fighting a lot. For people who have had to deal with danger a lot, the "thinking brain" has gotten tired of checking things out and just assumes that the signals mean more danger. So now, when the alarm goes off, the "thinking brain" stays out of the way and lets the "doing brain" take over.

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FALSE ALARMS

False alarms can happen when we hear, or see, or feel something that reminds us of bad things that used to happen. Those reminders are called "triggers." Our brain has learned to recognize those reminders because in the past when they were around, dangerous things happened, and we had to react pretty quickly.

Different people have different reminders. So, if someone got yelled at a lot, hearing people yell might activate the alarm and make the "doing" part of the brain turn on. If someone didn't have enough attention paid to them when they were little, feeling all alone or scared might turn on the alarm.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE ALARM GOES OFF?

Once our alarm turns on, our brain preps our body for action. When that happens, our body fills with "fuel" to prepare us for dealing with danger. This is really important if it's real danger (like a bear, or a speeding car, or a really mean squirrel), but not so helpful if it's a false alarm, and there isn't really any danger around. Imagine if you were in math class and something felt dangerous—suddenly, your body is filled with fuel.

Remember that the fuel gives us the energy to fight, or get away, or freeze. When our body has all that energy, we have to do something.

So—some peoples suddenly feel really angry or want to argue or fight with someone. Some peoples just feel antsy or jumpy. Some peoples want to hide in a corner or get as far away as they can—and sometimes they don't even know why. Other peoples will suddenly feel really shut down, like someone flipped a switch and turned them off. All of these are ways your body is trying to deal with something it thinks is dangerous.

Sometimes, though, what set off the alarm isn't really dangerous—it's just something that feels bad or reminds us of something bad that happens. When peoples have a false alarm like that, it can be hard for other people to understand what just happened, and to help. Sometimes, peoples even get into trouble.

RECOGNIZING TRIGGERS

It's important to learn about what kinds of reminders might feel dangerous to you and how your body reacts when those reminders are around. Everyone has different triggers and different ways to respond when the alarm goes off. If we know what sets off your alarm, and how you respond, we can get your thinking brain on board to help figure out when the danger is real and when it's a false alarm.

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