

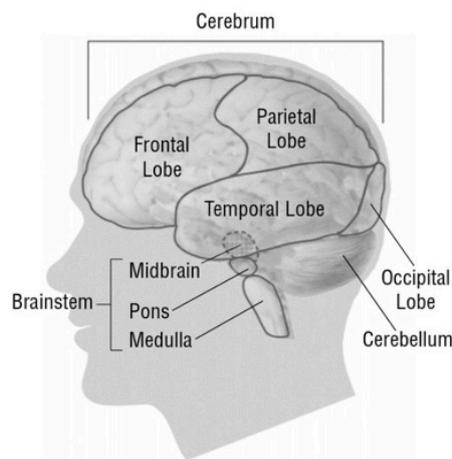


HANDLING OUR FEELINGS

People talk about “flipping out” and then “regaining balance” for a good reason.

The upstairs/downstairs (or hand) brain model

American Psychiatrist Dan Siegel has a great model to help us understand how different parts of our brain work ... and why we can “flip our lids” if we’re very angry or scared.



Fold your thumb into your palm, with your fingers over it. Siegel likens the point where our arm joins our wrist to that where the **spinal cord** enters the skull. Above it, our squishy palm and thumb represent the **brainstem** at the base of our skull and the **limbic system** of the **midbrain**. They work together to control our **automatic** emotions and **emergency responses** like fear, flight and arousal ... the ones that tell you to run away from a charging bull without having to think about it. He calls this the **downstairs brain**.

Anything above where your thumb runs across your palm represents the brain’s **cerebrum** and its lobed outer layer, the **cerebral cortex**, which is densely packed with nerve cells. Siegel calls this the **upstairs brain**. Our upstairs (thinking) brain controls how we feel, see and hear the world, our thinking, communication and reasoning, and our relationships to others. Where your index (pointer) finger is folded over represents a very special part of the cerebrum - the **frontal cortex**. In a real brain it’s behind our foreheads. It receives messages from the downstairs brain so it knows what’s going on down there. It also sends messages telling the downstairs brain to react the right way ... like maybe toning down an **automatic fight response** if it’s not really needed.

Think of the upstairs brain as keeping a lid on the downstairs one - just like your folded fingers are making a lid balanced over the top of your thumb.



What happens when we get angry?

When someone's really angry (or frightened) the signals from the downstairs brain are temporarily too powerful to be controlled from above. This causes them to "flip their lid", "lose control", or maybe throw a tantrum. In our model, it's like our thumb suddenly popped our fingers out from folded over to flat. If we think about how the distance between our fingertips and palm has increased, we can also see why it's now so hard for the upstairs brain to send strong enough messages to get the downstairs one back under control quickly. Real brains don't physically flip or change shape - but they do flip chemically: when we're very upset, parts of our downstairs brain cause large amounts of hormones like adrenaline and cortisol to flood through our bodies and activate our **sympathetic nervous system**, diverting oxygen away from our thinking brain and flipping on our automatic emergency **flight or fight responses**. To **regain balance** we need time for these hormone levels drop so the upstairs brain can take over again and work out how to best to respond to a situation.



How to avoid flipping your lid

Some signs you may be about to flip your lid include feeling flushed, cold or shaky, sweating, panting, a pounding heart, tightly clenched jaw, funny feeling in your tummy, angry tears, or just feeling so frustrated you want to scream or hit something ... If you feel like this - but aren't in real danger - try doing one or both of these things:

Walk away from whatever is causing these feelings and take some **deep breaths**. This removes whatever is causing the fight response, and lets the upstairs brain grab some much-needed oxygen so it can take over, calm the downstairs brain, and let you think again.

Name it and tame it by finding an adult or someone else you trust and telling them how you feel ("I feel angry", or "I need some time out", or "I need you to listen".) Just saying what's wrong often makes us feel better. This soothes the downstairs brain and lets the upstairs get back to problem solving in a calm and logical way.

USEFUL LINKS

Daniel Siegel, 29 February 2012. "Dr Daniel Siegel Presenting a Hand Model of the Brain". Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM9ClU740xw> 7 November 2017.

Kid's Want to Know, 12 March 2017. "Why do we Lose control of Our Emotions?". Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bKuoH8CkFc> 7 Nov 2017.

Managing our Functions, Life Education factsheet.



REFERENCES

Daniel J Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson, 2011. "The Whole-Brain Child." New York, Delacorte Press.

The Brain from Top to Bottom, McGill University, n.d. "The Amygdala and its Allies". Retrieved from: http://thebrain.mcgill.ca/flash/i/i_04/i_04_cr/i_04_cr_peu/i_04_cr_peu.html 8 November 2017.

Women and Children's Health Network, 19 September 2016. "Anger - Being the Boss of Your Anger". <http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetailsKids.aspx?p=335&np=287&id=1505> 7 November 2017.

Public domain image courtesy of WpClipart.org (brain). Photo (HOL hands) Life Education.