

Albert Einstein was once asked the most important question facing humanity. His response, "Is the universe friendly place?" was not original to him, but he elaborated in an interesting way. He said:

For if we decide that the universe is an unfriendly place then we will use our technology, our scientific discoveries, and our natural resources to achieve safety and power by creating bigger walls to keep out the unfriendliness and bigger weapons to destroy all that which is unfriendly...

That is, if we believe we live in an unfriendly universe we will build walls to defend and weapons to attack. However, if we believe we live in a friendly universe, we will create bridges to connect.

As a psychologist, I see this as an important question from an interpersonal, and even neuropsychological perspective. Our brains have systems to detect and respond to threats. This is the lizard brain or System 1 thinking in the earlier reading. In response to threats we have three different neuropsychological responses 1) fight/flight; 2) freeze; and 3) tend and befriend. Fight/flight and freeze suggest weapons and walls, respectively, while tend and befriend suggest bridges.

Flight/flight is a fast response in our sympathetic nervous system built to quickly trigger attack or defensive retreat in response to a perceived threat. This is helpful if we are facing a bear, but not a way to move through life. When the world triggers our fight/flight response and its associated emotions of fear, anger, and hate, the emotional center of our brain is active, and the self-reflective and planning parts (System 2) are quiet. We cannot access our reflective or higher selves. Similarly, the primitive freeze response of shutting down, while adaptive when faced with a threat we cannot fight off or flee from, does not enable us to engage in a helpful way.

However, there is another neurological pathway. Sensory input from our body goes through our insular cortex (part of our reflective self), the part of our brain responsible for empathy, and then signals go out to the autonomic nervous system to trigger the fight/flight, freeze, or tend and befriend response. This insular cortex is where emotions, memory, and sensation are integrated to guide behavior. This is what enables us to switch from weapons or walls to bridges.

Being aware of our bodily sensations in response to perceive threats, such as people who espouse beliefs that jeopardize our well-being or that our loved ones, allows us to recognize when our fight/flight or freeze responses have been triggered. Then we can make the decision to activate empathy and thus the tend and befriend response. That is, we can switch from the lizard brain to the reflective brain. Signs that we are in fight/flight include increased heart rate, breathing rate, and blood pressure, muscle tension, and feeling on edge. Signs of freeze are the opposite, decreased heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure, feeling weak or slowed down, and difficulty focusing. These can be clues we need to regulate to be able to return to tend and befriend.

This tend and befriend response allows us to believe that we are in a friendly universe. When we use empathy to tend to our loved ones and befriend new people, we build connections. Connections are evidence that we live in a friendly universe and are necessary for well-being. But how do we believe we live in a friendly universe when there is so much evidence to the contrary? How do we use empathy to switch from fight/flight to tend and befriend when there are people loudly espousing hurtful beliefs?

Early in my career as a clinical child psychologist, I realized I was going to have to find a way to cope with my fight/flight response to hearing about people victimizing children without burning out or hardening my heart. I knew that I had to find a way to continue to believe that I live in a friendly universe so that I could continue to be the compassionate person I value being. So that I could continue to connect with my loved ones and do the work that was so important to me. I discovered a question that opened the door to empathy for me—what would have to happen to me to get me to act like that? Once I really explored that question, I could have empathy and act with compassion to help people, even when I was vehemently opposed to their actions or beliefs. That is, I found a way to use my reflective self to quiet my lizard brain.

Once I was able to understand why a person might have done something, I was able to respond from compassion rather than feeling threatened. Sometimes acting with compassion rather than anger or fear enables me to help people start the process of change. Sometimes my actions are an example to show others that we live in a friendly universe. If nothing else, my behaviors are evidence to myself that I live in a friendly universe so I can build bridges rather than walls or weapons.

Building bridges is crucial to our current sociopolitical crisis. The surgeon general in 2023, Vivek Murthy, said this country is experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. Chronic loneliness is linked to right wing and extreme populist voting. Social deprivation is associated with anti-feminist sentiment. Clearly, we must find a way to connect to heal the societal wounds and prevent further harm. Thus, compassion, empathy, and connection as a response to fear and hate can disarm weapons, tear down walls, and build bridges.

The path forward is to build bridges, even when tempted to build walls or weapons. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Many people have shared this sentiment in other words. I urge you to find a version that resonates with you. It can become a mantra to turn to when the fight/flight or freeze responses are triggered to enable us to use empathy to activate the tend and befriend response instead. I frequently ask myself, “Is this the kind of person I want to be?”

It's interesting to note that when we are able to respond with compassion, it sends signals to others that often triggers their tend and befriend response. Thus, we can create a positive feedback loop of compassion. Humans are wired to mirror each other through specific brain cells, mirror neurons. Thus our aggression or compassion trigger similar responses in others.

Of course, we must ensure the safety of ourselves and others. This may mean disengaging and caring for ourselves or others who were harmed. Then we can get curious. Why is this person doing this? What happened to them? Where is the hurt or fear? What do we have in common? How do we share the human experience? How are we similarly vulnerable? In this way, we can begin to connect. Proceed with caution to avoid harm, and courage to support healing connection where possible.

How can this play out? I recently had a situation where I was trying to work with someone who repeatedly misgendered one of my loved ones despite my repeatedly correcting them. This disrespectful language was unacceptable, and I was literally shaking mad. That shaking response let me know that my fight/flight response had been triggered. I quickly ended the conversation and started to reach out. I texted my spouse, posted to a supportive Facebook group, and talked with caring co-workers. By reaching out and connecting, my nervous system calmed. The next day I was able to send an email to that person and their supervisor explaining that the behavior needed to change and providing resources on how to make that happen. I received a lukewarm response, but what is important to me was that I was able to calm myself and feel supported. By reaching out (tend and befriend), not lashing out (fight/flight), not checking out (freeze), I was able to respond in a way that I could feel good about and not be in prolonged distress. I left that difficult situation feeling grateful for my people and glad that I was able to stand up in a way that was consistent with my own values. I may not have changed that person, but I didn't let the person change me. I could still believe that I live in a friendly universe and my own actions (and support of others) were the proof.

In addition to connection to get out of fight/flight, we also can use the following strategies.

- **Humming:** The vagus nerve passes through by the vocal cords and the inner ear and the vibrations of humming is a free and easy way to influence your nervous system states. Simply pick your favorite tune and you're ready to go. Or if yoga fits your lifestyle you can "OM" your way to wellbeing. Notice and enjoy the sensations in your chest, throat, and head.
- **Conscious Breathing:** The breath is one of the fastest ways to influence our nervous system states. The aim is to move the belly and diaphragm with the breath and to slow down your breathing. Vagus nerve stimulation occurs when the breath is slowed from our typical 10-14 breaths per minute to 5-7 breaths per minute. You can achieve this by counting the inhalation to 5, hold briefly, and exhale to a count of 10. You can further stimulate the vagus nerve by creating a slight constriction at the back of the throat and creating an "hhh". Breathe like you are trying to fog a mirror to create the feeling in the throat but inhale and exhale out of the nose sound (in yoga this is called Ujjayi pranayam).
- **Valsalva Maneuver:** This complicated name refers to a process of attempting to exhale against a closed airway. You can do this by keeping your mouth closed and pinching your nose while trying to breathe out. This increases the pressure inside of your chest cavity increasing vagal tone.

- **Diving Reflex:** Considered a first rate vagus nerve stimulation technique, splashing cold water on your face from your lips to your scalp line stimulates the diving reflex. You can also achieve the nervous system cooling effects by placing ice cubes in a ziplock and holding the ice against your face and a brief hold of your breath. The diving reflex slows your heart rate, increases blood flow to your brain, reduces anger and relaxes your body. An additional technique that stimulates the diving reflex is to submerge your tongue in liquid. Drink and hold lukewarm water in your mouth sensing the water with your tongue.

Using our reflective selves to enable compassion helps us build bridges. Building bridges creates solidarity. Solidarity enables us to resist the unfriendly forces through love, not violence. It creates the friendly universe we need. Each time we use empathy to tend and befriend rather than freeze, fight, or flee we strengthen our reflective, compassionate nervous system. We create new neural habits that make it easier to rely on compassion to trigger our tend and befriend response even when faced with hurtful words and actions. We can build bridges rather than walls or weapons. We might not change the world, but we will not let the world change us.