



Dr. Burt Bertram

The Brain Can Be Triggered in Less Than One Second

Here's something to consider.

Utilizing brain wave analysis, linguistics researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Amsterdam exposed subjects to "value-based disagreements" in the form of offending political or ethical opinions. Brain wave activity reflecting disagreement was produced in less than .5 second following the first trigger word – which means that once triggered we almost instantly stop listening and start arguing, either mentally or verbally.

Right or Wrong? The Brain's Fast Response to Morally Objectionable Statements. Jos J.A. Van Berkum, et al, Psychological Science September 2009 vol. 20 no. 9 1092-1099

The brain is designed to be anticipatory and will naturally attempt to predict upcoming information. Therefore, when we hear certain words (or words with a certain tone or inflection) the brain immediately runs ahead in an effort to make meaning out of what the other person is about to say. In many cases the meaning created by the brain becomes the truth of the message – regardless of what the other person actually said. Because the brain's anticipatory function has helped human beings anticipate danger and react accordingly, when we encounter offending values it feels like "real danger" – automatic survival reactions take control of the brain's executive functioning.

A common thought associated with offending value statements is; *"That's ridiculous, stupid, and ignorant"* followed by an overwhelming impatience to either get away from the source of the offending comments or to tell the person how wrong they are and how they should correct their faulting thinking or feeling.

The implications for miscommunication and damaged relationships are quite obvious. While the research described above focused on "value-based disagreements" I suspect the brain functions in a similar way whenever we encounter someone who triggers a hot topic. Once triggered by a word, tone or even a "look," it takes just a nanosecond for the brain to reach a conclusion. In half of a second listening stops and reactive / defensive words or body language gush from every pore of our being.

Once triggered, how can you ever listen long enough to a patient, colleague, spouse, or family member in order to know what they are really trying to communicate? The simple answer is; "you can't" unless you marshal a conscious effort to keep listening which means you will have to silence and soothe the automatic reaction that wants to scream; *"Stop being so stupid!"*

So, the obvious question is; *Who in your life triggers your half-second reaction?* Are you open to running an experiment to see if you can respond to what the person actually says rather than react to your brain's pre-mature conclusion?

Thanks for reflecting.