

# The Peaceful Productivity Podcast

## Ep #95: How to Be More Effective



## Full Episode Transcript

[The Peaceful Productivity Podcast®](#), with your host *Kim Christiansen*

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Welcome everyone. I'm Kim Christiansen and this is The Peaceful Productivity Podcast, where I share strategies to help you get the most outta your time and feel better in the process.

Hi everyone. Welcome back to the podcast. I am really happy that you're here. Today I wanted to share with you some reflection that I was doing on a recent experience of Amygdala Hijack. Okay. Spoiler alert, I did not show up in this situation like I would've wanted to show up. Have you ever had that experience where you're looking back on something in you, you're thinking, why did I show up like that?

If you've ever found yourself thinking, why did I say that or Why did I do that? Or Why did he eat that? Or basically, anytime you took an action that was not intentional, then you're likely familiar with the experience of amygdala hijack. What I like to do often is unpack certain experiences that I have so that I can really understand.

What was happening for me and others in that situation and take away the tools and the learnings from those situations so that I can offer them to myself to be more effective in the future, but also offer them to you so that you can find something in it that might benefit you as well. So this recent experience that I had was what I would call amygdala hijack.

I said some things in the heat of the moment that I now regret, and I ended up doing some things to help myself feel better. That actually ended up being very unproductive. Basically it was a stress response to an emotional trigger that then went on to impact how I showed up in that moment as well as for the rest of the day.

So I was unpacking it and I was also studying it a bit because I think that really helps my brain to understand it, is to understand sort of the underlying mechanisms in the brain and the physiology to really. To make sense of it for myself. So I also wanted to share some of that with you. So to start with, I want to define what I mean when I say Amygdala hijack.

This is a term that I became familiar with a while ago. I believe that it comes from Daniel Goldman. He wrote a book in 1995 that was titled Emotional Intelligence, why It can matter more than IQ. I like this term because it's very specific to what's going on in our brains when we're feeling overwhelmed or in the heat of the moment, or stressed out.

It's a great way to describe what's happening in that moment when you feel like you're not making effective decisions for yourself. To explain the physiology of amygdala hijack. What I understand is that the amygdala is a structure in the midbrain and it forms part of the limbic system. The limbic system is a critical part of our brain that's involved in behavioral and emotional responses, especially when it comes to behaviors that we need for survival, such as feeding, reproduction, caring for our young and fight or flight responses.

The amygdala is involved in processing strong emotions and memories associated with intense experiences like fear or pleasure. What I also understand is that the amygdala is a very important part, the survival system, because it enables us to deal with threats and dangerous situations. And this is helpful for me to remember because sometimes I might judge myself.

Or get frustrated when I have these very normal and natural responses to a situation. So it's helpful for me to remember that this is hard wiring in my brain that is actually really, really useful when I'm dealing with situations that are threatening and dangerous. What happens in the brain when there is a perceived

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threat from the environment is that that sensory information, that sensing of the threat, it gets relayed to the thalamus, which is another primitive part of the brain.

The thalamus acts as the brain's relay system, so it directs information to the appropriate part of the brain in order for us to determine our response. And of course, this is all happening in a split second. The thalamus relays the sensory information to the, what's often referred to as the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that's responsible for things like perception, planning, decision making, language, and creativity.

So that sensory information is transferred from the thalamus, from the relay station part of the brain over to the prefrontal cortex to apply logical thought and creative problem solving to it. Now, that's if the threat is determined to be not serious, then the prefrontal cortex takes control. And it can often result in a well thought out response to the situation.

For example, you notice an email in your inbox from your boss or your customer, and what might happen is that, it can be perceived as a threat and it can actually bypass the prefrontal cortex. So the thalamus, that relay station where that decision is made to send it to the prefrontal cortex, can sometimes look at a potential threat and decide that it actually doesn't warrant rational thought.

It just requires action. So it totally bypasses the prefrontal cortex and the information goes straight to the amygdala. This is why sometimes it feels like the solution to a problem is to take action. It's because the sensory information has gone straight from the thalamus to the amygdala to trigger action to solve the problem.

Rather than exploring options or any type of creative problem, solving the amygdala just drives us straight to action. This immediate action is designed on purpose to help us eliminate the threat. The way that this is achieved is that the amygdala produces an emotional response, which is then followed by a flood of hormones and enzymes.

Things like epinephrine and cortisol that are released to create suitable emotions and actions. Really, that whole physiological response is aimed at getting the body ready to fight or to flee the situation. It's that nervous system response that we typically refer to as the fight or flight response.

This fight or flight response where we bypass the prefrontal cortex altogether and just go straight from the thalamus over to the amygdala. That's what's known as amygdala hijack. Now, this can be super helpful when there's a real threat such as a bear in the wilderness or oncoming car in traffic. And it helps us to take immediate action.

To avoid that threat when it's not helpful is when the threat is a perceived threat, and it's actually a mistake that happens in the thalamus. The thalamus says, okay, we need extreme action right now, and it sends it to the amygdala, but it's an overreaction. To the actual trigger, the actual threat, and this can happen with the most mild of circumstances.

It can be something like your toddler gets outta bed for the fourth time and comes to your room and your brain starts thinking, I can't do this. I can't have another sleepless night. I need some sleep. So already that amygdala hijack is happening, or it could be an email. This is why you'll often hear the advice that never write an email when you're emotionally charged.

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Or if you do write it, sit on it for 24 hours before you send it, or it can be a series of small events that in isolation would not be anything but what we call the final straw causes us to snap over into Amygdala Hijack. So it can really be anything. And more often than not, it's related to. An emotional trigger, so an intense emotion, anger, aggression, anxiety, fear, a psychological threat like a stressor from modern life work or from your relationships, or it can be the result of a suppressed emotion.

Adverse life events or previous trauma can cause us to suppress emotions. So if something in current life reminds us of those past events, even if it's on an unconscious level, then at the thalamus, when the thalamus is interpreting whether this is a threat or not, it is being influenced by these past memories or by these intense emotions.

Side note, the hippocampus. This is also a structure in the brain that is responsible for storing memories, so the hippocampus and the amygdala. These two structures may interact with each other when an emotional memory is triggered. I share all of this in case it's helpful if you're like me and you like to understand what's going on in the brain.

And I also share it because it really makes sense to me that when I'm having what might be deemed an irrational response to something and I might be inclined to get frustrated with myself or get down on myself, then it's really helpful for me to remember that that split second decision in the thalamus is largely out of sight of my control.

It's being influenced by things that I'm not even really conscious of. And so that decision to send it to the prefrontal cortex or to send it to the amygdala, it's outside of my conscious awareness. And when it's outside of my conscious awareness, it's outside of my control. But there are things that I can do once it gets to the amygdala and I notice that I'm in amygdala hijack.

There are also things that I can do to reflect on my experiences and use that information to help to, to bring it into my conscious awareness so that there aren't decisions being made at the thalamus level that impact my actions and my behaviors. So those are the two things that I wanna talk to you about today, is what do you do in that moment when you feel like you're in amygdala hijack?

And what can you do after the fact in order to prevent it from happening with the same trigger again? So the first thing that you can do when you find yourself in a amygdala hijack is just to notice and declare it to yourself. That awareness alone can sometimes be enough to interrupt the amygdala response.

It can reactivate the prefrontal cortex. So if you were to say to yourself something like, Oh, I notice that I'm in Amygdala Hijack right now, or I notice that I'm feeling overwhelmed, or I've noticed that my brain is flooded and I am not really thinking clearly. All of those types of thoughts can help to bring your prefrontal cortex back online.

Something that can also be very helpful in the moment is focusing on your breathing. You'll hear this all the time, that when you're feeling stressed out to take your attention and focus and concentrate it on your breathing. And the reason why that this can be helpful is because it can often trigger the parasympathetic nervous system, which is the system that's responsible for rest and relaxation.

So when you notice that your nervous system is activated, And you're starting to shift into that amygdala hijack situation. Then when you focus on your breath, it can be another unconscious signal to your nervous system to trigger rest and relaxation. Particularly a focus on the exhale can be very, very helpful.

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So what I like to do for myself is the 4 78. So I'll inhale for four. I'll hold for seven. Exhale for a count of eight, which just reminds me to focus on my breath and also really concentrate on the exhale. Sometimes it's not quite enough to just recognize that you're in amygdala hijack and focus on your breathing.

Sometimes you need something a little bit more like changing your setting. So just excusing yourself from the situation and getting up and moving can be enough to help you to automatically start to consider your surroundings, which then reactivates the prefrontal cortex again, because you're having to focus on something other than the issue at hand.

You're now focused on putting one foot in front of the other or assessing your surroundings. This is also why exercise can be quite helpful in those moments. Something else that can be helpful to jumpstart your prefrontal cortex, your rational thinking is to do a quick math problem. This helps to momentarily distract you from the issue that's causing the intense emotional reaction and engage your logical brain.

The last strategy that's helpful for in the moment of Amygdala Hijack is sharing the mental load. It's fascinating to me that researchers have found that when two hikers are going up a hill with one another, they perceive that the hill is actually less steep than when they were hiking alone. So what this tells us is that when you are hiking up the emotional hill, it is often perceived to be less challenging, less stressful, less effort when we share those feelings with someone else.

Something that I found really helpful is I notice when I'm in Amygdala Hijack, I don't necessarily remember to do any of these things, nor am I really inclined to seek out help? The amygdala isn't capable of rational thinking, so when it comes to strategies, rational strategies to help ourselves when we're in amygdala hijack don't necessarily seem available to us in that moment.

So what I've done is I've created a tool kit that's kind of like a first aid kit that's available to me. When I'm feeling this way, and it just includes some strategies that I've tried in the past and that have been successful for me, it also has items in there that remind me that the situation is temporary and that the prefrontal cortex when it comes back online has the ability to help me feel more in control and that that will happen. It always does, regardless of how I feel in that moment. So you could put together a little bit of a toolkit for yourself, or you could even come back to this podcast and it could serve as your amygdala hijack toolkit. So those are some of the things that help me in the moment, something that helps me after the fact is some reflection. The reason why this can be so helpful is because what I notice is when the prefrontal cortex does come back online and I have the space and grace to look back on the experience, I often notice that the triggers for me have a bit of a theme. There's a pattern there.

And that pattern is often related to some suppressed emotions or some emotional triggers that I can process when I have more capacity. If you want any assistance with becoming more conscious around what's going on for you and your triggers, and how to use that information to become more intentional and more effective when it comes to planning and achieving your goals, then I would be happy to support you.

Thanks everyone for your time and attention, and I hope you have a great week. Take care.

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Are you looking for a coach who will help you increase your business profit while protecting your time and your wellbeing? If so, I'll invite you to check out my website, [financialwellnesscoach.ca](http://financialwellnesscoach.ca).