

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

OPINION

Taming our 'inner teen wolf' to find post-election peace

In stressful times, we can flourish and connect by strengthening the neural pathways to peace.



Supporters embrace after Vice President Kamala Harris delivered a concession speech on Nov. 6 in Washington, D.C. (Jacquelyn Martin/AP)

By Due Quach

Nov 28, 2024



When I was 12, I saw what living in an environment full of suffering and strife can do to the human brain.

After school, I helped my parents run a takeout restaurant in inner-city Philadelphia. One evening, as a young man walked out of the restaurant, his brains were blown out.

An ambulance took him away but left the cleanup to us. The image of the ground covered in blood and bits of his brain became forever seared into my own brain.



Due Quach

This experience showed me that trauma changes our brains and can cause human beings to inflict horrific pain upon each other.

A childhood full of such experiences set me on a path to learn how violence and stress affect the brain and how to address these effects on my own brain.

Today, the insights and techniques I used to rewire my brain can help us as individuals and as a country navigate the stresses and divisions that surfaced in the recent presidential election. In a polarized world, they can help us experience peace, access our inner wisdom and connect with each other.

Roughly three quarters of Americans were anxious about this year's election. Though Trump voters generally are happy with the outcome, many Harris voters are struggling. [A recent poll](#) found 66% of Harris supporters weren't just "dissatisfied" with the election but "upset" by it.

The political chasm that has opened in the country is a reflection of how people are increasingly choosing to live in echo chambers socially and geographically. A New York Times [report this year](#) found that Americans these days are moving to more ideologically homogeneous neighborhoods.

This climate of “us versus them” reminds me of my childhood. My family left war-torn Vietnam to seek refuge in the United States. However, we were often greeted with racial slurs and threatened with violence.

These adverse experiences fueled a fire inside me to change the world, which drove me to work hard and gain admission to Harvard University. Yet chronic hypervigilance, panic attacks and feelings of doom followed me there. Eventually, I sought help, and my psychiatrist explained that my childhood traumas had affected the development of my brain.

Although I benefited from medication and therapy for a time, they did not address the stressors in my life or provide the healing that I wanted.

Out of necessity, I became a mind-hacker, diligently mining neuroscience to crack the code of how the brain works and make mine function better. My goal was to build a brain that could excel at Harvard and rise to the leadership roles I would later hold in management consulting and private equity investments.

In 2013, I returned to Philadelphia to share what I learned to help others. I started an organization called Calm Clarity that uses science to help people rewire their brains. More than 10,000 people — ranging from business executives to students from low-income neighborhoods — have used our techniques to access their inner wisdom, navigate obstacles, and positively impact their community.

The key is to discern how our inner thoughts and feelings correspond to one of three patterns of brain activation.

These three patterns govern how we experience our default mode network. Also called the “inner narrator,” the default mode network is a critical part of the brain whose function is to weave a mental model of the world and make predictions to help us navigate social interactions. Negative experiences, such as being bullied, can cause the default mode network to create a distorted mental model and narrate stories of fear and insecurity.

The pattern I call Brain 1.0 focuses on self-preservation and corresponds to freeze-flee-fight-fawn survival mechanisms taking over the default mode network. Brain 1.0 is like an “Inner Godzilla,” armored up, fearful and quick to lash out.

Brain 2.0 uses dopamine hits to feel good or make bad feelings go away. It corresponds to the brain's reward system taking over the default mode network, often in reaction to Brain 1.0 getting triggered. Consider it our "inner teen wolf," dependent on the highs that come from impulsive behaviors, cravings, addictions and winning.

Only in Brain 3.0 can we experience wholeness, open our minds and hearts, see the big picture, and form healthy connections. In Brain 3.0, the default mode network serves as an "inner sage," guiding us toward well-being and emotional mastery. It is a state of brain integration. In Brain 3.0, neural pathways from the prefrontal cortex calm and regulate the threat system and the dopamine system.

Put simply, Brain 1.0 settles for surviving. Brain 2.0 fixates on feeling good. Brain 3.0 brings out our best selves.

The human brain continuously adapts to experience by strengthening the neural pathways we use the most and pruning the neural pathways that go unused. This means our capacity to live peacefully depends on whether we actively cultivate and strengthen the neural pathways to peace and flourishing in Brain 3.0 — rather than those that lead to escalation and violence in Brain 1.0 and Brain 2.0.

So how do we get to Brain 3.0 — especially when we are surrounded by negative news as well as polarizing political commentary? We shift our default mode network by changing our pattern of brain activation.

Three simple exercises can help boost Brain 3.0, anytime, anywhere, for free.

Calm Your Body. Breathe slowly until your lungs fully inflate and deflate. This activates the parasympathetic nervous system — our "rest-and-digest" state — and restores blood flow to the prefrontal cortex, which makes it easier to access Brain 3.0.

Clear the Noise in Your Head. Focus your attention on the sensations of breathing at your nostrils. At some point, your default mode network will activate and start to chatter. Greet your default mode network and observe whatever it says with curiosity and compassion. Then redirect your attention to the sensations of breathing. Practicing this regularly for five minutes strengthens your capacity to observe your default mode network without getting swept up in what it says.

Connect to Your Humanity. Silently or aloud, express positive wishes to all people like this: "May all people be happy. May all people be healthy." Add whatever wishes are meaningful to you. Visualize these wishes as golden light spreading from your heart to people across the world to support them to rise to challenges using Brain 3.0. Then

take in positive wishes that people of good will are sending to you. This practice builds your sense of interconnectedness with all of humanity, opening your mind and heart to forming sincere, supportive connections.

When done consistently, these exercises are powerful. Thanks to practicing mind-hacking techniques like these for decades, my brain, conditioned as it was by trauma to operate in Brain 1.0 and Brain 2.0, has become one that can help others activate and build Brain 3.0.

Despite differences in our political views, we all want to experience well-being, flourishing and prosperity. Living and making decisions in Brain 1.0 and Brain 2.0 creates suffering, scarcity, and social division. Our capacity to experience well-being and cocreate a future where we all thrive only gets unlocked when we strengthen Brain 3.0 in ourselves and each other.

We have to acknowledge that it's difficult to live in Brain 3.0 when leaders manipulate Brain 1.0 and Brain 2.0 to blame, shame and divide us. To genuinely prosper, we have to cultivate and elect leaders who strengthen Brain 3.0 and bring us together to cocreate solutions to our shared challenges.

We all are impacted by adversity, scarcity and fear, including the stress and social strains of the recent election. However, we can choose to respond in a higher state of consciousness.

I will never forget cleaning up the gory mess that was left behind after the young man was shot.

Let's not allow any more brain matter to be wasted on violence and dysfunction.

Let's build our best brains for peace.

Due Quach is the author of "[Calm Clarity: How to Use Science to Rewire Your Brain for Greater Wisdom, Fulfillment and Joy](#)." She is the founder of Calm Clarity, an organization that helps people use neuroscience to improve their lives, organizations and communities.