

The Alternatives to Violence Project and Neuroscience

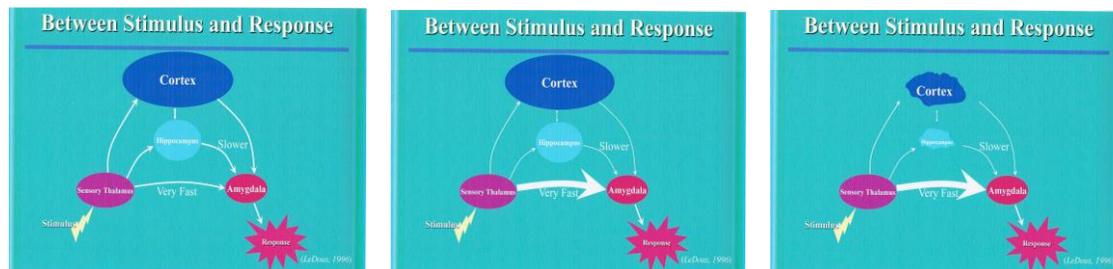
One of the primary reasons for the success of AVP workshops is its design. Every workshop utilizes an active experiential methodology. In order to understand the process by which this methodology impacts attitude, it may be helpful to explain how the brain works [as we understand it today] and how attitudes are developed. An external [or internal] event or stimulus occurs and the brain first processes it subconsciously in the amygdala, our fight-flight-freeze center, which determines if there is danger. If there is danger, the amygdala initiates a very quick response. If there is no immediate danger, the amygdala then sends this emotionally coded information to the hippocampus where it is compared to other recent experiences putting the event or stimulus into context. This process takes half a second to accomplish. Now the emotionally coded information which has been compared with other more recent experiences is sent to the neocortex where rational thought can be applied and a response is formulated.

Thus, “information processed subconsciously at enormous speed, is compared to patterns already existing in the brain derived from previous experiences. On this basis, the emotional brain decides whether what is happening now is threatening or non-threatening. Only after this filtering process has occurred is information sent ‘up’, if necessary, into consciousness . . . It is the emotions that propel the higher cortex towards deciding on appropriate reaction to a particular situation. We become conscious of a feeling of anxiety, distrust, anger or attraction, and the higher neocortex then has the choice of ratifying or questioning it. That is when thoughts come into play.” [Human Givens by Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell, 2013 page 238] The process by which this all takes place is called “pattern matching,” is emotionally based, and **takes less than half a second**. This is how attitudes are developed, through experiential learning, not conscious thought. Conscious thought can impact attitudes when experience supports it.

When a person does not feel safe and must be constantly “on guard,” the hippocampus is less able to function properly and the communication between the amygdala and hippocampus diminishes. When this happens, the amygdala becomes the organ of response and the rational mind’s involvement is greatly reduced. This is especially true for a trauma pattern where it can literally get trapped in the amygdala and not be brought to the conscious mind at all. With complex trauma, the neuropathways to the amygdala are so over used, the amygdala increases in physical size and the hippocampus actually decreases in size making its response slower and less effective in setting context and transmitting that to the neocortex. The end result can be PTSD. To reverse this process, the neuropathways to the hippocampus must be strengthened, and this is accomplished when the person feels safe and has less need for the amygdala response.

What all this means is that in order to help people change their attitudes and behaviors, they must feel safe. Otherwise, they will not be open to new experiences and ideas, which may conflict with their existing beliefs. When they don’t feel safe they will be focused on their physical environment and the threats that exist and are therefore unable to step back and observe themselves in the environment. Without the capacity to step back and observe, their self-awareness is greatly limited and everything negative that happens to them is someone else’s fault. They cannot take personal responsibility for their actions or thoughts. It is as though they are experiencing tunnel vision.

The first diagram below shows the normal processing of a non-stressful event. The second diagram illustrates a response to a traumatic or stressful event. The neuropathways are stronger to the amygdala. With complex trauma or when repeated stress occurs, the hippocampus and neocortex actually shrink in size along with the neuropathways to those organs and those organs become less able to process information effectively, which is the case with PTSD.



This is the reason successful therapeutic programs begin with developing a relationship where the participants feel safe and can trust, so the amygdala is not engaged. The National Institute of Corrections, in its publication on Cognitive Behavioral Treatment [CBT], states that in order for CBT to be effective, a positive relationship must be developed between the staff leading the program and the inmates participating in it. They say this can take many sessions to accomplish. Also, when a program is punitive in nature, as is the case with the “interdependent compliance” model where everyone gets penalized for one person’s unacceptable behavior, the outcomes are not good. Laws and structure will make people conform, but connection and community [feeling safe, accepted and respected] will empower people to transform. **Probably the strongest benefit of the active experiential training design is that a high level of trust and safety is established within a matter of a few hours, not days.**

An AVP workshop begins with establishing safety and trust so that participants feel valued and respected. These conditions promote learning and when you add effective tools, including interpersonal skills, and fun to the training, the learning process is energized even more. Participants are literally transformed by the training. Comments like:

"I went into the workshop as a pessimist and I came out as a changed person. I was alive. I was actually alive. I liked what I saw in myself. I liked what I saw in the mirror."

"It has always been hard for me to trust other people. I've spent my whole life not trusting other people. AVP has allowed me the opportunity to develop trust in myself and in other people and it has made an incredible difference in how I look at the world and life."

"There is good in every one. We have not known how to see that good without being perceived as weak and vulnerable. AVP showed me how to reach down and see it, to tap that guy that has always wanted to come out but was afraid to come out. When I see someone now, I see them with a different perspective. I'm looking for something good, before I was looking at all the negative things in someone."

"To spend three days without negative energy has a profound effect on people."

"I had been in every group in the institution and they were all generic. They gave the same information. There were very few solutions offered. When you are given the information without the solution, you are still lost. AVP gave me some concrete solutions."

"If there is such a thing as a miraculous change in an individual, I can truthfully say that it was during my involvement with AVP that I began to grow from a person filled with hate, anger, and despair, into a person who believes he too is responsible for the protection, preservation and enrichment of humanity."

"Thank you for showing us how to divert our violent attitudes into a positive and peaceful outcome. Peace of mind is so hard to find these days. By some miracle, I found it here in the AVP program. I looked inside of me and found a loving and caring me."