

Transcript for R. Douglas Fields | Why We Snap (Episode 606)

Full show notes found here:

<https://theartofcharm.com/podcast-episodes/r-douglas-fields-why-we-snap-episode-606/>

DOUG: You know there's a difference between acute stress and chronic stress. Acute stress puts the brain and the body on a high level of alert and physical capability and mental capability and acute stress is actually not harmful, it's helpful.

JORDAN: Welcome to The Art of Charm. I'm your host Jordan Harbinger. Today we're talking with Doctor Douglas Fields, neuroscientist and author of [*Why We Snap: Understanding the Rage Circuit in Your Brain*](#). We're going to talk about violent emotional response and why this happens, how our brains subconsciously pick up on threats without knowing why, how our subconscious and conscious brains communicate, and the triggers that make us snap and how we can deal with those to avoid triggering ourselves or others in the future. By the way, if you're new to the show, we'd love to send you some top episodes and the AoC Toolbox. That's where we discuss things like reading body language, having charismatic nonverbal communication, the science of attraction, social engineering, negotiation, networking and influence strategies, mentorship, persuasion tactics, and everything else that we teach here at The Art of Charm. Check that out at theartofcharm.com/toolbox or in our iPhone app at theartofcharm.com/iphone. Also at theartofcharm.com you can find the full show notes for this and all previous episodes of the show. All right, we're glad to have you with us here today. Enjoy this episode with Doctor Douglas Fields.

Doug, thanks for being with us today.

DOUG: It's great to be on your program, thanks.

JORDAN: You did a great job with the book here because I first thought, "Okay this might be heavy duty brain science, which it is. But it starts off with this story of you getting robbed on the street

in Barcelona and kind of pulling some Batman moves. You want to tell us about that?

DOUG: Yeah that's exactly what got me started in this whole thing. I was on the way to give a lecture on my scientific research in Barcelona and I happened to be with -- travelling with my 17-year-old daughter, which is unusual. We were coming up out of the metro station, on the way to go see the Gaudi Cathedral just before my lecture, and I was robbed. And to my surprise, I fought to get my wallet back, instantly -- engaged in this street fight with what turned out to be a gang of pickpockets. To my surprise I fought with the robber to get my wallet back.

JORDAN: Wow.

DOUG: And if I'd thought about that, I never would have done that. That's a stupid thing, you don't want to fight with a robber. But then I realized, instantly, that there was no thought involved. This was a reflex, I instantly unleashed this aggressive move -- We need to understand, I guess the listeners don't know, okay I'm not Arnold Schwarzenegger. They've got to imagine Woody Allen here. I've got gray hair, you know -- 56 when this happened, 130 pounds, I have no martial arts training. Actually to go into a little bit more, the guy grabbed my wallet, I reached back and grabbed him by the neck, flipped him onto the ground, jumped on his back and put him in a choke hold, okay? So where did this come from?

JORDAN: Yeah what happened here?

DOUG: So now I'm on the ground and suddenly the thought bubbles up to my cerebral cortex, "What the heck are you doing?"

JORDAN: Yeah.

DOUG: And I realized at that point that there was no thought involved and then as a neuroscientist, I wanted to understand, well how does that work? I mean, if there's something in your

environment that can trigger this instantaneous aggressive reaction, with no conscious thought, where you risk your life or limb, I want to understand how that works at the level of neurocircuitry, and that's what lead to the whole book.

JORDAN: I think we should call you Doug the Neuro Ninja. What do you think?

(laugh)

DOUG: Well I think I've learned my lesson.

(laugh)

JORDAN: Yeah, I mean you must have felt pretty bad ass at the time. Or was that just -- did that come later?

DOUG: No it was pretty serious. If you read in the book, you'll see that it turned out not to be just one robber but a whole gang, and then they pursued us for two hours through the streets of Barcelona and it turned into a scene like from a movie -- a spy movie or something. So it was real. I'm sure many listeners have had their own brush with danger like that and as a species, we have threat detection circuitry wired into our brain because it's necessary for survival. So we were both, highly focused, intent on surviving in this very dangerous situation.

JORDAN: Okay clearly this is an evolved response. But, it wasn't necessarily a good response because it got you chased by a gang of Russian pickpockets throughout Barcelona. So, what response is this and why did we evolve this knowing that it could have just ended up worse?

DOUG: Well that's exactly what I wanted to know. I realized that this was a snapping response. And it's the kind of thing that we hear about every day, somebody snaps. And maybe it's verbally, herollor as we read in the paper every day, violent. And they always say the same thing, you know, "I didn't think." And so I realized it was the same circuitry. Also the same thing

that heroes say, when they instantly engage aggressively to come to somebody's aid. You know we just -- this week in the news we had that shooting down in Kansas. One of the heroes just said the same thing, he came to the aid of those two Indians who were shot and said the same thing, "I didn't think." So we have the circuitry because we need it. We call it snapping when the outcome is inappropriate, and I think that's what's important to point. We tend to read in the paper these violent actions or somebody losing it, even wrapping a golf club around a tree for a missed shot or something --

JORDAN: Sure.

DOUG: -- to say, "Oh, they're crazy." Or you know, "They're unstable." But we only say that if it's an inappropriate thing like wrapping a golf club around a tree.

JORDAN: Right.

DOUG: Otherwise we would say, "Oh, it's quick thinking or heroic." So I wanted to find out what caused me to do that in that situation in Barcelona. Would I always do the same thing? Would other people do the same thing? How does this all work?

JORDAN: The last time someone tried to mug me was years ago and it was actually somewhat similar. I mean I was in Eastern Europe and there was a drunk policeman -- which sounds ridiculous but over there is not totally uncommon. And my rage circuit popped for sure. It was later at night, I was walking through a park. You know it was that time of the evening where people walking through parks are all drunk, and people in parks who are sleeping are all drunk. And the cops in the parks probably just decided to drink with some of the people they had talked to earlier or arrested for drinking in the park. And basically he just kept poking me with his nightstick and he was following me, and he kept poking me with the nightstick. It was one poke to many and, you know, took it away from him and gave it back to him about 12 times before realizing what was going on and then ran away.

(laugh)

JORDAN This was by any measure a terrible idea though. You're in a Eastern European country, you're a foreigner, and you decide to get in a physical altercation with a policeman while intoxicated? I mean, going on the hero's mantra of I just didn't think, this was "I just wasn't thinking." But it's the same reaction.

DOUG: Yeah it's the same reaction and that's what's so important. That, first of all everybody can do this. I hear stories of little old ladies reacting the same way to a purse snatcher and beating the heck out of the guy. But first of all we need to realize what an amazing response that is. That you can instantly respond to some dangerous threatening situation and that this is all unconscious. Because if you deliberate about your actions in a threatening situation, in sudden threat, deliberation is just too slow.

So it's like pulling your hand away from a hot stove but that's a simple reflex. But you engaging in violence when you're provoked by those cops, or me in Barcelona, that was an instantaneous calculation that set you on a definite aggressive response. Now that's what's interesting. How does that work from a neuroscience point of view? And in your case, your point is, that that was inappropriate. That's what I want to understand, is how does this work? If you understand how it works, you can prevent the inappropriate snapping response.

So, if I could back up a little bit, I think that we've established we're hardwired for violence. We have the capability for violence. We need that to protect ourselves, protect our loved ones, and as a species we're carnivores. And we don't need to be taught this. It's embedded in our brain.

It's in the part of the brain called the hypothalamus. And this is in the unconscious part of the brain. Same part of the brain that controls sex and drinking and feeding. And if scientists

simulate part of the neurons in this part of the brain, called the hypothalamic attack region, the animal will react the way you and I did. Instantly engage in a battle -- in an aggressive encounter. So the question is, what feeds into that center of the brain, unconscious part of the brain, to trip that response? So the new neuroscience -- using new methods, we're able to actually trace out the circuits that will activate this hypothalamic attack region.

JORDAN: So we're all hardwired for violence. This is latent in everyone. It's not just weirdos like us with some kind of anger management issue or something like that lurking in the background? This is in every human.

DOUG: It's in every human because we need the aggression for survival. But it seems as though, almost anything can set off this response. You know the road rage or whatever --

JORDAN: Right.

DOUG: -- we read in the paper every day. That's not true because engaging in a physical battle is putting your life at risk. From a behavioral and neuroscience point of view, you're not going to engage in a behavior that's going to risk injury and death without very good reason.

JORDAN: It also has strange implications for society at large because if everyone's hardwired for violence and anyone can snap -- we see it a lot in the news, but statistically it still seems pretty low. Otherwise we'd all walk around carrying swords or something like that. I mean we would be stuck in a primal age.

DOUG: Statistics show that on the road, you're likely to encounter a road rage incident once every 20 minutes.

JORDAN: Oh, geez. We just don't notice how everyone's snapping around us because we're minding our own business?

DOUG:

Look this is one of the reasons I wrote the book because I feel like this is so important and it's over looked, you know? When you read the papers, what fills the paper is this kind of thing. Sudden aggression -- we tend to just dismiss it because it's unpleasant behavior and say the person snapped, we don't really understand what that means. We are kind of jaded to it. Of course it ranges everything from a verbal outburst to physical violence. But as we all know, you know an inappropriate verbal exchange at work, can ruin your career, for example. Or ruin a relationship with people. So we need to understand that this is not pathology, we have this circuit. We need to understand how it works so that we can use it when we need to and prevent misfiring.

And an important point here, is we have the same brain we had a 100,000 years ago when we lived in caves or the open plains in Africa. But our environment is entirely different. And so, our brain, and these circuits for aggression, are dealing with an environment they were never designed to deal with, like driving. And so this leads to misfires. This leads to more and more interactions. I mean, Facebook, and instantaneous communication around the world, is tripping these triggers of aggression.

JORDAN:

Well we definitely see rage tweets and we see rage response online and a lot of people blame the Internet for that. So would you say that then this is a response that's happening no matter what, it's just that the Internet gives us a different way to express it that maybe we didn't see before?

DOUG:

Yes but it's increasing the opportunities for aggression. And to understand that we have to go into what these triggers are. But modern communication and transportation and the fact that we live in a society that is stressful, in many ways, leads to increased aggression. Why did you do that in that situation? The cop needed to poke you a few times and if people will read to the end of the book, they'll see why I reacted that way In Barcelona because I had had another experience. My daughter and I had been dealing with some stresses. So we'll get to the

subject later I'm sure, that stress is an important factor in this response.

JORDAN: But is most violence caused by people with a history of violence or are people who snap often violent? Because if it's just a snap and that it happens to the best of us, and that's kind of terrifying, right? It sounds like that's what you're saying, and the example that you gave in the book of the grandmother murdering the grandmother by throwing her off of a bridge just randomly while playing or while walking -- It's just so hard for a layman like me to see this as depravity and just not straight up actual insanity. I mean are these people not insane for doing that type of thing?

DOUG: They're judged -- in the example that you just gave -- they were judged in trial to be not insane. Is this about so called normal behavior? I have excluded pathology. The psychopaths, that's not what I'm talking about. I don't even go into things like alcohol very much because people understand that leads to this disability. I'm talking about a normal behavior. You know I give one example where unfortunately during writing the book, you know some people I knew, lost their life in a rage attack. So this was someone I knew, everybody knew, and nobody ever suspected. You hear this every time you read the news article, you're like, "That guy was the nicest guy next door. Nobody had any idea he would do this." I firmly believe that I know these circuits of rage exist in every brain.

JORDAN: It's a little scary when you look at it like that, right? Because we think well, this isn't going to happen to me or my family because everyone in my family is normal. My friends are all normal, I live in a nice neighborhood where people are not insane, there's no housing projects. And all these stereotypes of this doesn't happen in my area, this doesn't happen to people who I'm with totally goes out the window when we look at this being a program running in the back of everybody's brain no matter what, and that it's just a matter of factors that are possibly outside all of our control before it hits the fan and somebody goes postal.

DOUG:

The way to understand this is what we're talking about here, is the brain's threat detection system. And a huge part of our brain is devoted to threat detection. All the sensory information comes into the brain, goes to the brain's threat detection mechanism before it ever goes to your cerebral cortex. We all have this circuitry.

Whether it gets tripped or not, depends if you find yourself in one of these situations that trips one of these triggers. So let me give you an example. What I was trying to say is that we now know that there are very specific triggers. Only nine of them, that I categorize them in my book, that will activate the hypothalamic region to cause you to engage in aggression. And these are independent circuit. You know listeners know one of them very well and that's maternal aggression. If you get between a mother and threaten her child, there's no thought involved. If she has to, she'll engage in aggression to protect her young. That's normal. And it's not just a woman, I mean, any family member will. Almost any animal will do that. That circuit has been identified.

We can go into the brain, put little cameras in the brain of mice that have neurons that light up when they fire and we can see which circuit in the brain is activated when you have a rat and put it in a situation where its pups are threatened and see that circuit. We can also knock out that circuit, disable it, or activate it, or disable it. If you disable that circuit, that mother will no longer protect her pups, but she will still respond aggressively to one of the other circuits, one of the other nine triggers. Defensive aggression, for example. She'll still respond. If a mother aggressively engages in aggression to protect her young, I think you would say that that's not abnormal. But on the other hand we do see that trigger tripped sometimes inappropriately, some examples where a mother will, in a parent teacher conference get angry and whack the teacher. That would be inappropriate but it's the same fundamental circuit.

JORDAN: Is this what people call the lizard brain. Is that's what going on here? I know in your book, you're not super fond of that term.

DOUG: No, not at all. That's a 50 year old idea. It was never a scientific idea, it was really just a popular idea, a way to get across some basic concepts but no, please leave that concept behind. The threat detection mechanism in your brain is highly sophisticated. It has to be. Like any threat detection mechanism or burglar alarm system, it can go off inappropriately, but the kind of response we're talking about, where you'll suddenly engage in a angry or aggressive reaction, is highly controlled. It only happens in specific situations and that's a really complicated mechanism to achieve that goal.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: So let's talk about how our brains subconsciously calculates risk because it's clearly doing this so fast that even our conscious brain is largely left out of the decision making process, hence your Batman moment at the train station in Barcelona. It seems like the examples in the book are just filled with this. This extreme skiing avalanche incident where this skier decided somehow to ski up the hill towards the avalanche, which is contra to all popular wisdom of what you should do, and yet that worked. And then later on it's, "Why did you do that?" "I don't know, I just did." And then it's, "Well if your brain takes in these 2000 data points, that was a good move." But that clearly wasn't happening at a conscious level.

DOUG: That's another part of the book that I really enjoyed researching and interviewing people like SEAL Team 6 members who deal with this threat constantly and use what we call this, you know trusting your gut. They depend on it. So do athletes. So the fundamental thing here is the human conscious brain is really feeble. We can hold a string of seven digits on average, in our working memory. That's pathetic.

JORDAN: Yeah, that's pretty weak.

(laugh)

DOUG: You can't even do long division, right? And it's not complicated but you just can't hold the intermediate answer in memory long enough to do the next subtraction. Now consider doing the right reaction in a threatening situation. If you had to hold all this information in conscious brain, it's impossible. For two reasons, one, you could not hold all that information in your conscious brain. Number two, that's way too slow. You know, you learn to play a guitar, you have to think about every finger motion that's very slow but in threat detection -- the neurocircuitry of threat detection, is such that every one of your senses feeds into part of the brain, the amygdala, and evaluates constantly your internal and external situation, looking for threats. It does that before it goes to your conscious brain, your cerebral cortex.

And that's why you will jump out of the way when a basketball comes towards you and you'll jump and then you'll say, "What is that?" That's because you have visual information from your eyes goes to your amygdala and if something comes into your field of view, it trips this threat detection mechanism, more like a burglar alarm, you can't actually see the ball and it says, "That's inappropriate," and it takes over and sets you on a defensive course. So that's the kind of thing that's going on. Your conscious brain can't hold it all, it takes too long. So now we're kind of talking about what our emotions and how emotions relate to snapping and whatnot.

JORDAN: Right and so it seems like the subconscious mind communicates with the conscious mind via emotion. It's just this sort of abstract set of signals where the conscious brain goes, "All right I don't necessarily understand all this." The rest of your body goes, "Doesn't matter, you don't have to understand, you just react." Your conscious brain is kind of sitting there going, "Well let's flesh this out and make a spreadsheet," and the other part of your brain is going, "Nope,

we're just going to dodge. We're just moving. We're going over your head on this one." Sometimes literally.

DOUG: You know the most complicated decisions we make in life we do that way, we don't do rationally. There are too many unknowns like where to live, who to marry. You can't make a rational argument for those kinds of complicated decisions and you go with your gut.

JORDAN: The idea that this decision making is happening at a different level, it's almost like a computer antivirus program. It's running all the time, it's running in the background, and it only trips and freezes everything that you're doing when it finds some malicious code. At least that's how it's supposed to work. And there's an example in the book that's fascinating to me, you can probably straighten me out on this one, but there was a person that was blind, and it wasn't because their eyes were damaged, it was because their brain or maybe some nerves in their eye area were damaged, and yet they could still react at a subconscious emotional level to images of angry people or dangerous things because the part that decodes images for you brain and translates them into data was broken, however the part that said, "This is dangerous," was still fully functioning.

DOUG: You're right and the reason I talk about that is specifically about plasticity in the brain and about the enormous amount of information available to the unconscious mind that we're not consciously aware of. Vision is something we rely on as a species, but it takes enormous computational power. A third of our cerebral cortex is devoted to vision. You know speech is like the size of a quarter of your cortex. So if you're congenitally blind, you have this huge amount of brain power with nothing to do. So in this woman's case, and other cases of blind people, the brain rewires to utilize sensory information that normally doesn't go to the visual cortex, but gets rewired to the visual cortex, and now you have powerful capability to analyze things like sound.

Many people who are blind can understand speech that's sped up five times faster than someone with normal vision can understand. So this woman is able to see with her fingers. And I couldn't believe it but she proved it to me. And what she's doing is she would sweep her hands over a photograph. She's picking up subtle changes in temperature, in conductivity. We would be capable of doing that perhaps, but we ignore all those kinds of subtle sources of information. But the point relative to the book is that yes, the brain's threat detection mechanism is highly sophisticated, doing an amazingly complicated data crunching process, online constantly, always on the lookout for threats, very little of which comes to our conscious brain. And when it comes to our conscious brain, it doesn't do so rationally or with logic or language. Language is located in the cerebral cortex it comes with these multicolored emotions you know, frustration, or envy, or fear. These are emotions of your unconscious brain's threat detection mechanisms saying, "You're in danger." And here this specific kind of danger is communicated by this emotion to your cortex and you become aware of it.

JORDAN:

Does our brain do this in crowds and things like that? Is that why some people go, "Oh, I'm getting a bad feeling," or, "I have a bad feeling about this person," or, "I have a bad feeling about being here in this group." Sometimes that's just generalized anxiety but I think other times there is something actually happening in the brain. And it's kind of like that Malcolm Gladwell *Blink* type thing where your brain's processing so many things, your subconscious mind -- it knows exactly what's going on and it gives you an emotional cue like, "Get out of there, be scared," whereas your conscious mind goes, "What you're just hanging out with a bunch of people, it's not that big of a deal."

DOUG:

Yeah no I give some examples from interviews in the book, SEAL Team 6 members who get a bad vibe when they go into a house and then they walk out and the thing blows up. You know and I'm a climber and many climbers have the same kind of feeling. If somebody says, "You know, this just doesn't

feel right," we respect that. We understand that there's something probably wrong, and you just don't quite have the conscious ability to know what it is yet and very often you will look back on it and find out there was something amiss but there was too much data coming in. And you know, this is very important in personal relationships. We size up people instantly using all these kind of nonverbal cues and other sorts of information in order to determine whether there's a threat or not.

JORDAN: What happens when people like me, who are always trying to analyze everything, try to add conscious processing into the subconscious mix that our brain is doing?

Doug: You can do it. There is time. And I interviewed many people in the book who are completely nonviolent. They're Jains, Quakers, and so it's possible to do that. Also the examples I was giving the SEAL Team 6, the Secret Service agents, they train to suppress this response because you know, you don't always want to flip out and do what I did, for example, in Barcelona. You know, I talked to this SEAL Team 6 guy and said -- and told him that story and he said, "Yeah I never would have done that."

Here's a guy who could've taken out the robber with a Judo chop and he never -- he would have handed him his wallet. But he's learned to do that because our prefrontal cortex feeds in and controls this threat detection circuitry but it happens slower. So it happens after the threat is detected. So if there's time, you can suppress it. And that's why, you know I developed this life L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S. mnemonic, because it will enable you to prevent the inappropriate tripping of this defense mechanism resulting in snapping.

JORDAN: It seems like we could also run the risk of getting into paralysis by analysis if we start to constantly try to add conscious processing into everything. And you mentioned in the book batters in baseball often will choke by trying to bring in too many conscious habits at the same time.

DOUG: Absolutely. That's a good example. Sports is full of examples like that.

JORDAN: Let's talk about these triggers though. I mean we've already talked about what snapping is, how you got interested in it and the fact that we all have the neurocircuitry for this so it seems natural that we should probably look to see if we can control some of this by understanding this. Is that even possible?

DOUG: Yeah, understanding how the mechanism works is the first step to controlling it. And again, what we've understood here, what we've been talking about, is that snapping is an inappropriate response. It's a misfire. So you don't want to inhibit this response if it really is appropriate. You know that's heroism or quick thinking. What we want to do is prevent this happening inappropriately, on the road for example, or something. So if you can understand what has caused this sudden feeling of anger, what's triggered that, you can quickly disarm an inappropriate firing of these triggers. So there are nine circuits. I mentioned the one, the maternal aggression which is -- I created mnemonic L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S. and that's F in L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S.

You know if somebody threatens your family member, you will have a sudden anger and if you can instantly realize that that's why I'm feeling anger. Then that anger will go away if it's inappropriate so the L in L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S. is life or limb. If we are attacked or -- any animal will fight back. That's perfectly reasonable biologically makes sense. If you're in a crowd and somebody bumps up against you, you suddenly stiffen and you feel ready and you feel ready to fight. If that person says, "Sorry," or, "Excuse me," that emotion goes away. Well what happened? What happened is your threat detection mechanism detected this threat, tripped the life or limb trigger, but then the other person identified that as a misfire and it went away. So you're able to do this same thing with all these other triggers.

JORDAN: That's super interesting so basically we can figure out how to flip the switch back into position, if given enough, probably time, and given the right set of circumstances?

DOUG: Exactly so it becomes a matter of a challenge to identify quickly, instantly. What causes this sudden rise in anger? You know you're on the road and suddenly somebody cuts in front of you and you feel that anger. What you have to instantly say is, "Why am I? Is it one of these nine life L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S.? If it is, you need to realize that you are in a situation designed by evolution by your brain to be a life or death situation, potentially ending in aggression, and violence, and we see that on the road. So if you can understand why you get angry when somebody cuts in front of your car, you can quickly defuse it if you realize that this is a misfire of that circuit. E for environment trigger.

One case in which animals engage in aggression is to protect their territory. And humans are fiercely territorial. Private property, somebody comes into your house and you can use aggression if necessary to get them out. And when you're on the road, we perceive the area around your car as your territory. And somebody intrudes into your territory, that trips the circuit. But that's a misfire because that circuitry was designed for a different time for protecting territory but it's an illusion. The brain didn't evolve at a time when we drive. So if you're running and having a foot race over a territory, you never have that emotion. People can cut in front of you, it doesn't matter. But it's this illusion. So now if you're on a highway, somebody cuts in front of you, and you realized that ,it's hit this E trigger, you're defending your territory, and you realize, "you know it doesn't matter if he's on my front bumper or my back bumper, it makes a difference of a couple seconds," the anger goes away.

JORDAN: Right so this has to do with the fact that we're going a little more quickly when we're driving or a lot more quickly when we're driving, therefore our calibration is a little bit off. Not evolved to deal with that effectively. And it sounds like also

this has to do with what we would call psychological space, right? Is that why if someone's a little too close to us, even if they're not doing anything, or even if it's just a cultural difference, we go, "I really don't like this and I just don't know why. They're too close to me," even though it's like who cares? It's a random person at an airport, no big deal.

DOUG: Yeah that's right, but just to extend that what I'm trying to do in this book is look at behavior of aggression the same way we look at other behaviors. So why would you get angry? Why would you want to fight somebody who cuts in front of you on the freeway. You know, it makes no sense. And it goes back to the fact that anger is the emotion that does one thing, it prepares you to fight. You're only going to fight for one of these nine reasons. Nine different circuits. And if you recognize that if your space is really invaded, that's one thing that you may need to use physical force to protect your space or your environment. But probably not, in most cases in the modern world you know?

JORDAN: So we've gone over life and limb, we've skipped ahead to environment, what about 'I'? What about the next trigger?

DOUG: Yeah 'I' is for insult. Animals that are social resort to use aggression to establish dominance, Okay? Especially primates, especially mammals. Think of, you know, head butting. As a social species, we're utterly dependent on society for our survival. For our resources, for access to mates, for opportunity. None of us can live outside of society. And so your rank in society as an animal, or a person, it has real consequences and survival value. So we're hardwired to use aggression to maintain rank or when you feel your rank in society is threatened because of this biological legacy.

Now humans have language. So we can substitute verbal insult for physical battle. So it's like head butting in bighorn sheep for humans to have language. So that's why I call it insult. But this can help you understand. Think of the help a teenager --

they're on Facebook and somebody disrespects them. Suddenly they're angry and they want to fight.

Well the question that I would like to ask is that, "What makes you angry?" and if they could understand, well of course it's natural. You're hardwired to be angry and want to fight when your rank in society has been threatened, and then the next question is, "Well is actually getting into a fight over a Facebook comment going to help?" It probably won't. So then the anger goes away. But there could be other situations where it would be necessary to be aggressive in a threatening situation. And one last thing is just how hard wired this is. I think people understand that this is hard wired, a legacy from our evolution. We see this in other animals, but you know, it wasn't that long ago that dueling to the death was accepted.

JORDAN: Right.

DOUG: It's accepted all around the world. You know every culture. This is not a cultural thing, it's a hard wired part of the brain because if your position in society is threatened, your dominance, you really are at risk.

JORDAN: So when we look at insults and things like that, we look at this practically and say, "Does this damage my standing in society in a way that's meaningful?" and once we start to attack this with logic, and say, "Well okay, even if yes, will me getting into a physical altercation remedy that?" The answer is almost always no. And so therefore when we attack this emotional problem with logic, we start to go, "All right I'm done. The moment has passed."

DOUG: I think it's very easy to understand how this works in the jungle or in nature. But what's harder and more of a challenge but actually fun, to see these triggers in the modern world. When you're passed over for a promotion at work, for example, you feel angry. So then if you can ask well why am I angry? Why do I feel anger? From the point of view of a neuroscientist, we can feel many different kinds of emotions. You might feel, I

don't know, sleepiness or something else. But we feel anger. The reason you feel anger is the circuit in the brain designed to allow you to fight for your dominance. And you realize that we're not in the jungle. Getting angry is not going to help. And it really just diffuses the situation because you're threat detection part of your brain has done its job, delivered this message that you're in danger -- because you really are in danger when your status is diminished. But then that goes to the cortex and the cortex takes a look at it and says, "Well duking it out with somebody is not going to help."

JORDAN: Right okay so life and limb, insults, and the next one, 'F.' Family and maternal aggression. We touched on this a little earlier.

DOUG: Yep, and we touched on that. Protection of family. We touched on 'E' environment, which is protecting territory and is mates. Mammals and especially primates engage in aggression to acquire and maintain mates. Again we have this legacy and much of the aggression you read about in the paper, you know, infidelity, domestic disputes, revolve around aggression related to mates. So that's the 'M' trigger.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: So essentially somebody trying to take away our significant other in theory, or even just look like they might be aiming in that direction is enough to trigger us to snap. And yes, we read about this a lot. It's so common that it's basically cliché, at this point, the mate thing.

DOUG: Yeah it also gets into the differences between male and female aggression. You know, 24 percent of American women have been sexually assaulted. And 18 percent of those are by rape or attempted rape. You know this is a very unpleasant subject and it is probably the most troubling one for me to research. But then, you know, we can't ignore this. How do you explain, you know, a quarter of women being sexually assaulted, having

that experience? So we can't deny that this propensity to use violence in connection with sex exists.

New neuroscientists find some really fascinating things, for example -- I mentioned that all these nine triggers are independent circuits in the brain and that's true with one exception and that's the 'M' trigger for mates. The same neurons in the brain that are responsible for mating in mice, at least, are responsible for aggression. So scientists can stimulate this neuron in one way and cause the animal to fight and stimulate it in a different pattern, and suddenly switch to mating. This seems bizarre.

JORDAN: Yeah. No kidding.

DOUG: You know because you seem diametrically at opposite -- you have love and affection in one hand and hate and fighting on the other. But what you have to realize, there are a lot of commonalities between sex and aggression. I mean there's a pleasure reward. You have a sense of pleasure and reward in fighting, that's what leads to this bullying behavior, you know in some males. Extreme excitement. Highest level of arousal and excitement occur during, you know, aggression and also during mating. And so some of the same neurotransmitters, some of the same neural circuits in the brain get engaged to both of those things, to produce those states. So there's a lot of interaction between the two. And this [00:39:24] a really fascinating area of the differences in the brain between male and female and threat detection and aggression is they're very different. Males and females face different kinds of threats. And so, their brains are wired differently.

JORDAN: What about 'O,' organization? This one is not so self explanatory.

DOUG: Yeah I think we're just too close to it. You need to kind of step back and look at humans the way a zoologist would look at a bird or something behavior but I call it organization or order in society because society is so essential for human survival. We

maintain the order in society by aggression. The same way other social species do, by violence. So in the modern world we use force like taking away a person's liberty, throw them in jail, fine them, take away their resources, or license to practice their profession. Those are all forms of aggression to control the roles in society. Otherwise we would have no society. It would all be a free for all. But I think it's hard to understand how unique that is. You know, if you see somebody run a red light, you are angry -- instantly angry. That person has violated society's rules. Step back, why are you angry? Why are you ready to go fight? It's because of this legacy in our brain that we condone the use of violence to maintain the rules and organization of society. So when you see somebody cut in line, you get angry because aggression is the way we maintain social order. And we -- it's still the way we do it, today. Again, it's vital to human nature, to society, and I don't think we appreciate it. I mean one cat really doesn't care if another cat doesn't use the litter box, right?

JORDAN: Yeah. yeah.

DOUG: But if we see somebody cut in line, we're angry.

JORDAN: Ah.

DOUG: And anger is preparing you to fight.

JORDAN: And lack of resources or resources for 'R,' this one seems pretty obvious. If I've got something and you go and take it, or you start to rob my house, I'm going to flip out. Not because I really needed everything that was in my house or not because you've offended my family and you've offended a Shaolin temple, but because, "Hey that's my stuff!"

DOUG: Exactly. That's what led to my snapping, right? When he took my wallet. Whether the right thing or the wrong thing. Some people freeze, fight, or flee in that situation but all animals will engage in aggression to protect their resources -- their food. In

the case of humans, it's more abstract, it's money and that kind of thing. Yeah that's a simple one.

JORDAN: This one is very apropos. 'T,' tribe. Us versus them or us and them, that mindset. That's something I think we're starting to realize is happening a lot more now and probably because of other areas coming under threat. Do these things work in concert with each other usually, or is it kind of like one tends to be the dominant trigger.

DOUG: No they do -- they do work together and if more than one gets tripped, then you're more likely to engage in violence. So, take the situation with me and my daughter in Barcelona. If my daughter hadn't been there, the 'F' family trigger, to engage in aggression to protect her wouldn't have been hit. And that's why if you can identify these triggers, you can see if you were in a very dangerous situation. I think in that wildlife refuge standoff in Oregon, boy, that was a powder keg. We won't go through it but if you analyze those things, there are about four or five triggers of aggression in that situation. So definitely these triggers can compound. So they're like colors -- they can mix together. But yeah, that's an important point.

JORDAN: And last but not least, the 'S,' stop. In other words, being trapped, restrained, or cornered. This one seems pretty visceral and obvious as well. Nobody likes to be backed into a corner. We see it in cheesy movies where somebody runs into a dead end alley and then it's time to fight, or even just somebody just getting restrained or held in an area by somebody else. Even looking at things where otherwise violent people who are already contained, like prison, those tend to be powder cakes. Close quarters tend to be powder cakes, things like that.

DOUG: That's right and again, the L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S. pneumonic that I created was to allow people to understand them and remember them so that they could control this. You won't find them in the scientific literature. So in the scientific literature this circuit is called the restraint aggression. So if you restrain an animal, it will engage in violence to break free. That's perfectly

understandable. So will humans. You know Aron Ralston cut off his own arm -- that backpacker who got trapped under a boulder. So, we have this because we need it. But this explains why when you're driving on the road, and suddenly you're stopped in traffic, you get angry instead of getting sleepy. You get angry because you are being restrained. That's an example if you can understand, "Why am I angry in this situation on the road?" Oh, and the road, by the way, hits you know almost all nine of these triggers -- then you can control it. But yeah, I think the stop trigger is very easy to understand. Definitely it caused a lot of violence. Did the 'T' trigger come across? I don't know, the fact that humans engage in violence to maintain their own tribe, I guess people understand that quite well and we are seeing a lot of that today.

JORDAN: Yeah, exactly. I want to close up with the other things that exacerbate these triggers, such as chronic stress. This is something we hear about a lot in the media and a lot of people are diagnosed with it, a lot of people are taking medication for it. How does chronic stress affect the brain circuitry for snapping?

DOUG: That's a good point. I mean, in addition to understanding and learning what these nine triggers of aggression are, the next thing that you need to really understand is how stress affects them, and why. What is stress? Stress is this unconscious threat detection mechanism in your brain, taking in all this information about your external environment, your internal environment, and concluding you're in danger. You may not even know exactly what the danger is but we know what stress feels like. When you're in danger, it makes perfect sense to lower the threshold on your threat detection mechanism. Same way you know we put military on heightened alert.

So this means all these nine triggers are now on a hair trigger. And again, this is not pathology, this is physiology, it's necessary. If you're in a hostile environment of East Baltimore, bad neighborhood, you're going to have your L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S. triggers on a low threshold because otherwise you'll be a

victim. You have to be on high alert. So that's important to realize that when you're under stress, you're more likely to snap, and again and misfire one of these threat detection L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S. Some stresses you can't even control so just knowing that you're under stress, you can kind of take guard against that. And that'll explain, as I said before, that my daughter and I were under some stresses that led to me acting that way.

(laugh)

DOUG: And probably wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been under those stresses.

JORDAN: And we see stress either happening over time, such as you're walking through a dark neighborhood where you're unfamiliar you might be stressed out, or we see it happen and spike all at once. And there's a video that comes to mind where they're interviewing some kid at a school and another kid jumps out of a garbage can right next to him with a mask on and says like, "Boo!" you know it's a Halloween prank. And the kid being interviewed, just turns around and clocks the other guy right in the fact. And he just goes, "Oh!" because he immediately realizes, "I'm at school. This is probably a prank, this is probably my friend, it could be my brother in there." But he had just gone whole -- laid into the guy and possibly knocked him out. I mean he went back into the garbage can pretty quickly. It's almost like temperature of water right. The difference between water that's 208 degrees and water that's lukewarm room temperature. It kind of looks the same but it only takes a little bit more heat to get it boiling when it's already warmed up. And so that seems like kind of what's going on here.

DOUG: That's a great example and you know we see this in the movies all the time right? In a scary movie, there'll be a bang and you'll jump, and you don't know if it's a gunshot or a door. That's because it was your threat detection mechanism that doesn't have the capability to distinguish those sounds, put on a high alert and causing you to have this defensive reaction and that

circuitry doesn't have the capability to distinguish a door from a gunshot. Again, this is a normal -- a normal response. And it makes perfect sense why you would put your threat detection mechanism on high alert. You know there's a difference between acute stress and chronic stress. Stress, again, this gets to the idea that this is not pathology we're talking about. Acute stress puts the brain and the body on a high level of alert and physical capability and mental capability and acute stress is actually not harmful, it's helpful. But chronic stress, day after day is a very different thing and this is very debilitating to the brain and body.

JORDAN: What are some of the differences between men and women when it comes to these triggers? In the book you say that women are faster at recognizing angry male faces -- happy faces. We know from just anecdotal stuff here at The Art of Charm that women are much better at decoding emotions, especially nonverbal communication. What's happening here and what advantage is this for women?

DOUG: Well the most important thing in aggression is sex -- is gender. Ninety percent of all people in prison for violent crime are male. Ninety percent of all people who have been given the Carnegie Foundation Award for heroism are male, and 25 percent of those gave their life in a heroic act. Often snapping to come to somebody's aid, aggressively -- even a stranger. So males definitely are predisposed for aggressive responses. The second thing is look it doesn't make any sense for a woman to get into a physical battle with a guy who weighs 100 pounds more than her, thinking now in terms of evolution. So over the course of evolution, that response has not been developed, because it's maladapted to get into a physical altercation. So women use different kinds of aggression. Indirect aggression, gossip, ganging up, poisoning, but not getting into a physical fight. That's some of the differences between males and females in terms of aggression in the L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S.

JORDAN: It seems like we can use these triggers -- well at least understand more about what's triggering us to snap or getting

us close to it, and then we can use that to short circuit this.
Can you give us a little drill or exercise to do with this?

DOUG: Well I would challenge listeners to pick up the paper every day and look at every story and say, "which of these L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S. caused this response?" You know and I did that. It's kind of challenging, you know, "Have I left out any circuits?" And I think you'll find that every one of these instances in the news can be traced to one of these things. If it's an act of heroism, you know it'd be the same trigger, but if it's snapping it was an inappropriate misfire. That's one thing you could do. Driving is a great one. And I gave the example of somebody cut in front of you, tripping your 'E' trigger to defend your territory. Then you suddenly feel this rising sense of anger. Rather than just, say you know, "Chill out," because you know that doesn't work. You tell somebody who's angry to calm down --

JORDAN: Calm down.

(growl)

DOUG: Yeah.

JORDAN: That's my 'C' trigger.

DOUG: What you're actually doing there is hitting the 'S' trigger in that person's mind and now you've added another trigger. You're impeding them. Better is to understand what is causing you to suddenly feel angry. I would challenge people in those situations to identify what the trigger is. You know the 'S' trigger for being held up in traffic. What trigger is it when the guy is on your right -- coming up where you're merging, and this guy comes up around everybody and cuts in. You know, what trigger makes you angry when that guy does that?

JORDAN: Right.

DOUG: And another example -- I was with my daughter, we're getting on airplane. You know how they have the tickets and you're supposed to order in your group?

JORDAN: Sure. Yeah, Southwest.

DOUG: So somebody comes up and is out of place. You know, out of sequence, and my daughter looks over and sees her and she just says, "Oh! 'O' trigger," and starts laughing. So instead of getting angry, she laughed. Because it -- she saw this woman committing a behavior that was so primal, that set off this threat detection circuitry in her brain, she could identify that it was violating order in society, the 'O' trigger, but rather than get angry, she laughed, and then she could engage the woman, say, "Are you group 3?"

(laugh)

JORDAN: I like it so we identify triggers that we see in the news, identify triggers that we see causing other people to maybe snap or get close to it, and more importantly or most importantly, look at events that are causing our own triggers to flip and see if we can maybe short circuit that. Either by changing the way that we deal with those particular instances, attacking the problem with logic, and thinking about it and being a little bit more mindful, or even potentially figuring out how to avoid these things from happening to or around us.

DOUG: And this was kind of a surprise. As I wrote the book, I thought I was talking about individual brains and individual behavior, and it spun out into society, groups, mobs, nations, war. And I think it's very important that we understand how these triggers work in group behavior. Because nobody is going to engage in violence unless one of these triggers are tripped, first of all. And we saw that in you know the Vietnam war. People would not engage in violence because they didn't perceive any of these L.I.F.E.M.O.R.T.S. being tripped. Secondly, leaders can push on these triggers and incite violence, incite war, by manipulating these triggers. And the example is again,

-- one example, is the Vietnam war because caused by -- you know started with the Gulf and Tonkin Resolution in which navy ship was supposedly fired on. Well 20 years later we learned that that never happened. So you can be manipulated by leaders saying you know, "Your territory is at risk," or if our country's attacked, the natural response, that hits the "T" trigger and you're ready to engage in violence to defend your territory. That's biology. But we need to be careful of having these triggers for violence manipulated by politicians.

JORDAN: Right because we know that other people are trying to cause us to experience some of these triggers in order to get a reaction out of us. Our kids do this to us too.

DOUG: Absolutely.

JORDAN: Doug thank you so much. This has been super interesting.

DOUG: Well thank you. I really appreciate the opportunity.

JORDAN: That was super interesting. The triggers, the Batman strength, all these little things. And as I read this book I started realizing when I was getting triggered, when other people were getting triggered, and you're right, you can really look in the news and see what's causing other people to snap and potentially avoid those situations in the future. The book title once again is [Why We Snap: Understanding the Rage Circuit in Your Brain](#). We'll have that linked in the show notes as usual. If you enjoyed this one, don't forget to thank Doctor Doug on Twitter. We'll have that linked in the show notes as well.

I'd love it if you could tweet at me your number one takeaway from this episode. I'm @theartofcharm on Twitter. And if you want to see the show notes, you can tap your phone screen. They should pop right up. Our boot camps, our live program details are at theartofcharm.com/bootcamp. To see people become part of the AoC family, the growth, the experience over the next months and years, really nothing short of amazing. Remember, we're sold out a few months in advance. If you're

thinking about it or you're just curious, get in touch with us ASAP. Get some info from us so you can plan ahead .I also want to encourage you to join our AoC challenge at theartofcharm.com/challenge. It's about improving your networking skills, your connection skills, working your way up that ladder, possibly at work or in your personal life. We'll also send you that fundamentals Toolbox that I mentioned earlier in the show which includes some great practical stuff. Reading body language, charismatic nonverbal communication, attraction, negotiation, networking, influence, persuasion, and everything else that we teach here at AoC. I also do regular videos with drills and exercises to help you move forward. It'll make you a better networker, a better connector, and a better thinker. That's theartofcharm.com/challenge or text the word charmed that's C-H-A-R-M-E-D to 33444. For full show notes for this and all previous episodes, head on over to theartofcharm.com/podcast. This episode of AoC was produced by Jason DeFillippo. Jason Sanderson is our audio engineer and editor. And the show notes on the website are by Robert Fogarty. I'm your host Jordan Harbinger. Go ahead, tell your friends because the greatest compliment you can give us is a referral to someone else, either in person or shared on the Web. Word of mouth really is everything. So stay charming and leave everything and everyone better than you found them.

