Downshifting—and its Impact on Wellness, Longevity, and Learning

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Brain References
Downshifting! Everyone has done it! Everyone everyone has observed it in others—but until the advent of brain scanning, no one really understood what was happening in the brain and the staggering consequences of downshifting—including kids failing in school, adults not following protocols for health and wellness, along with communication difficulties and misunderstandings.

It’s like taking a fast ride down a huge rollercoaster and getting stuck at the bottom with your brain having no idea where you are and your stomach in your mouth.
In situations that involve trauma, crisis, fear, or any type of threat (anything that triggers a sense of helplessness) the brain tends to direct its attention and energy automatically toward lower brain areas attempting to access functions that promote safety; tends to experience a sense of anxiety rather than the excitement of a challenge.

Any anger or fear shifts energy and attention from the neocortex to the reptilian brain (downshifting is designed for short-term situations of danger only).

—Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Biology of Transcendence*
Concept of downshifting appears to fit with what is now known about the triune nature of the human brain, and what can be seen happening continually at home / school.

Typical reward-punishment practices prevalent in education can trigger downshifting and result in learning failure on the part of the student.

Fear or anger related to health challenges can trigger downshifting; repress brain/immune system function and memory; and result in failure on the part of the patient to follow recommended protocols consistently.
Neocortex 3rd layer usually does the “driving” (think vehicle with an automatic transmission)

Anger or fear can trigger the reptilian 1st layer to grab the controls reactively

If brain attention / energy becomes divided among layers, the neocortex may think one thing, the mammalian layer trigger emotional impulses, and the reptilian layer act from impulses that differ from either thoughts or feelings
Reptilian or 1\textsuperscript{st} brain layer (brain stem and cerebellum)

- Processes present \textit{tense only}
- Perceives \textit{positives} (subconscious)
- Dominates when threat is perceived and can lash out
- Houses stress responses (fight-flight, tend-befriend, conserve-withdraw)
- Provides an awareness of the outer sensory world
- Loosely compares with the “id”
- Carries a perception that “I am here and it’s all about me (egocentric)
- Doesn’t use language but is able to perceive mental images in the mind’s eye created by language in the
- Houses the Reticular Activating System that influences one’s EAI position
- Is usually the last portion of the brain to die

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Mammalian or 2nd brain layer (limbic organs)

- Perceives the present and can recall the past
- A subconscious layer
- Perceives positives easily (1-step process); tends to follow pictures the words create, negative or positive
- Processes the sense of smell directly
- Directs immune system function
- Processes information 80,000 times faster than the neocortex or 3rd brain layer
Transfers information from short to long term memory

Assembles associations for memory recall (e.g., hippocampus search engine)

Can compare it to the “ego” – recognizes “I am here but so are you”

Generates emotional impulses as well as phobias; orchestrates relapses to old behaviors and addictions

Provides foundation for relationships with its tools of emotion
Neocortex or 3rd brain layer (8 lobes)

- Provides functions of consciousness
- Registers awareness of present, past, and future
- Can perceive positives and negatives but negatives are a 2-step process and a challenge
- Decodes most sensory stimuli (smell in mammalian)
- Can compare it to the concept of a “superego” – able to think of the good of others AND do good self care

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- The pre-frontal cortex contributes executive aspects (e.g., abstract thought, metaphor, planning, goal-setting, paying attention, conscience, willpower, morality, creativity, consistency, follow-through)
- Has limitless potential for processing concepts
- Uses all forms of language with complex analysis (reading, writing, spelling, grammar, speaking, listening)
- Can process 125 bits of information and 40 bits of human speech per second
You always give up something to get something—when downshifted you:

- Have reduced recall (e.g., tend to remember about 15% of what you were told or heard during a crisis)
- Experience a decrease in cognitive functions (e.g., learning, cause-effect reasoning, rational and logical thinking, planning, problem solving…)
- Find it difficult to engage in complex mental tasks (e.g., less creativity, taking cues or input into consideration when making decisions, perceiving options)
Fail to see interconnectedness or generate solutions to problems or practice Emotional Intelligence

Tend to reactivate old learned beliefs and behavioral patterns and are more likely to continue / relapse into addictive behaviors in spite of available information

Develop or activate phobias

Accelerate the aging process and suppress immune system function

Struggle with relationships and may ignore helpful suggestions or fail to access support networks

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Quickly, how many boxes do you count?
What do you see?
7H15 M3554G3 53RV35 70 PR0V3 HOW Y0UR M1ND C4N D0 4M4Z1NG 7H1NG5! 1MPR3551V3 7H1NG5! 1N 7H3 B3G1NN1NG 17 WA5 H4RD BU7 NOW, 0N 7H15 LIN3 Y0UR M1ND 1S R34D1NG 17 4U70M471C4LLY W17H0U7 3V3N 7H1NK1NG 4B0U7 17. B3 PR0UD 17 Y0U C4N R3AD 7H15. Y0U 4R3 UP5H1F73D!
Valid fear alerts you to actual or potential danger

• Identify the worst thing that could happen
• Evaluate possibility versus probability
• Can you do anything about the situation?
  ✓ If yes, take appropriate action
  ✓ If no, live the 20:80 Rule and manage the 80% or say the famous “Serenity Prayer” or …
Imagined fear typically represents learned behaviors related to negative thinking (e.g., *Life is hard and then you die—and who would even care ...* )

- It sabotages problem-solving
- Is typically unlikely to improve the odds
- Can be unlearned

✓ To change the way you feel, you must change the way you think because feelings follow thoughts!
To upshift - select 2 strategies and preplan to use them as soon as you become aware that you’re downshifted

- Think of something humorous and choose to laugh (a sense of humor is in the right frontal lobe of the neocortex; laughter is in the left frontal lobe)

- Identify something for which to be grateful (it is physiologically impossible for the brain to be in a state of fear and gratitude simultaneously)
Other options to help your brain upshift might include:

- Engage in positive self-talk
- Sing a song or think about playing a musical instrument that you enjoy
- Meditate, recite a poem or a mantra
- Exercise (especially cross-lateral)
- Access your support network
- Picture yourself climbing from brain bottom to top
Later on when you have upshifted, take time to identify the **symptoms** you tend to exhibit when you are downshifted (forewarned is forearmed)

Sighing, defending, stonewalling, arguing, crying, yelling, avoiding, pouting, whining, fighting, bullying, jumping to conclusions, overeating, taking things personally, isolating, overcomplying, conforming, becoming irritable . . .

Note: Sadness in response to a situation of loss may or may not involve downshifting
Next, identify **factors** that tend to trigger downshifting so you can be better prepared in the future (70% of downshifting is likely related to your past . . .)

- Illness, fatigue, over-work…
- What others said to or about you …
- Trauma, crisis, perceived negative experiences …
- Low self-esteem and self-worth, or Emotional Intelligence
Boys tend to have more difficulty coping with parental fighting or divorce (increases anxiety); effects are more intense and last longer—can take 2-3 years for a boy to return to learning readiness

Girls tend to have more difficulty coping with permanent separation or with death (↑ anxiety)

Woman: stressful events in the present, chronic stress, conflict, lack of rewarding relationships

Males: unemployment, divorce

Be aware that downshifting triggers may differ by gender

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After that, identify patterns of behavior you tend to exhibit when your brain downshifts

- Offender, victim, survivor, or other?
- Do you get symptoms of illness?
- When and where?
- Appropriate or not?
- How long do you stay downshifted?
And finally, define what you need in order to feel safe and take steps to obtain it

- Hone skills and develop competency in handling developmental tasks for your age
- Takes steps to raise your level of EQ
- Think ahead and make choices that are safe for you (prevention beats cure any day!)
- Be willing to leave a situation or environment if you perceive it to be unsafe
- Mentally learn to picture yourself in a safe place

- Feel safer by making a decision about something—anything (e.g., I choose to drink some water right now)

- Contract with yourself to “deal with it later in the day”

- Practice staying in the moment and being mindfully aware of what is happening

- Engage in a task that you can at least partially control
While your behaviors can trigger downshifting in others, you cannot make them upshift; but you may be able to help the other brain feel safer so it upshifts on its own. Strategies that can make it easier for a Downshifted brain to upshift include:

- Use affirmations - short, positive, present-tense words (all brain layers can perceive this one-step style)
- Offer a choice (only 2 options at a time): Do you prefer to sit on the stool or in the chair?

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Be congruent and make sure your facial expression, body language, words, and voice tonality match.

Studies have shown the way in which emotionally laden content is conveyed in face-to-face communication:

- **Verbal:** 7% to 10%
- **Voice tonality:** 15% to 38%
- **Body language:** 55% to 75%

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Be aware that typically M & F have differing speech styles

- Mona Lisa grin (dump it)
- Indirect-speech style that makes suggestions rather than commands
- Asks questions to start a discussion
- A tend-befriend stress reaction
- A sober resting facial style
- A speech style that gives directions rather than suggestions
- Rarely asks questions
- A fight-or-flight stress reaction
Minimize use of the word “why” as it can create a sense of anxiety and dis-ease in the other person’s brain.

Ask yourself: “What is my goal in asking the question? For example, try asking less threatening questions:

What did you want to have happen in this instance?

When you made this choice what did you think might result?

Is there anything you could do differently another time?
Think “enhancing their sense of safety”

- Use humor and mirthful laughter
- Communicate at eye level
- Mirror back their sensory language style
- Solicit input and feedback
- Offer a choice (brain feels safer when it can choose)
- Avoid arguing - each brain is unique and is unlikely to perceive anything the same way your brain does
• Aim to prevent and avoid unnecessary downshifting
• Identify downshifted states quickly
• Upshift as soon as possible

Remember: downshifting occurs automatically when the brain feels unsafe—upshifting occurs by choice

If at first you don’t succeed, try again—an ability to upshift quickly can help you walk the red carpet in life

Think: when communication is not going well, perhaps someone is downshifted—and it could be you …