

Countering the Effects of Fear-Based Media: A HearYourselfThink Guide

OUR MISSION:

The HearYourselfThink Project is a 501c3 non-profit, grassroots organization working to provide the insights, tools, and strategies needed to counter the toxic and divisive influence of right-wing media in our relationships, politics, and culture.

HearYourselfThink is the brainchild of Erin and Dave Ninehouser, a husband-and-wife team dedicated to helping undo the damage caused by manipulative media sources that misinform and inflame Americans and to bend the cultural-curve back toward reason, critical thinking, and “a more perfect union” as opposed to ever-more polarized citizens.

Erin and Dave have combined their years of grassroots organizing experience (talking with tens of thousands of voters and seeing firsthand how the “The Fox Effect” poisons the national discourse with fear, misinformation, and conspiracy) and research on how the brain’s processing of strong emotion like fear and anger affects higher thinking, to develop a “deprogrammer training” to teach people how to constructively engage (not get into conflicts) with those that’ve been brainwashed by right-wing media.

This guide contains key elements and insights from the fuller training that will be useful in understanding how Fox, hate radio and other inflammatory media outlets manipulate people, and how to inoculate against their toxic influence.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE:

Right-wing media uses fear to hook its audience and build allegiance to their ideological worldview. It also normalizes the bullying style of high-profile pundits like Bill O’Reilly and Rush Limbaugh, sending the message that it’s not only okay to shout down and intimidate those who disagree with you, but a sign of the righteousness of your position and strength of your convictions. The effect of these dynamics isn’t confined to “politics” -- it infects, and can sometimes destroy once-strong friendships and weaken the ties between family members.

Rebuilding those ties and re-establishing those valuable relationships is part of the deprogramming process, and a necessary first step to having a long-term conversation about media manipulation and the dangers of political polarization. That’s why this guide addresses family dynamics and provides ideas to help you put together a plan to begin repairing relationships that have suffered under the strain of divisive right-wing media.

Disclaimer: This guide is not intended to provide psychological advice or professional counseling. If the strain between you and a loved one is serious enough that you fear physical or emotional abuse, you should seek help from a licensed family therapist (typically a psychologist, clinical social worker or licensed therapist).



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INTRODUCTION:

Ok. If we're going to "deprogram" someone from right-wing media disguised as "news" and credible information we should have an idea of how the brainwashing effect works.

And that leads us right into, where else, the brain.

Of course, we're not neuroscientists and we don't play one on TV. But we can give a very basic overview of the relationship between higher brain functions and the more primitive brain regions.

Now, we're always a mix of reason and emotion; even when we're doing a math problem there's some emotional motivation, as when we're in love we use our rational mind to make a plan to win our heart's desire.

But an extreme intrusion of negative emotions, like fear and anger, can impair higher brain function and create opportunities for those seeking to manipulate us.

CONTENTS OF THIS GUIDE:

- I. **"Founder Brain" vs. "Bunker Brain"** – a basic introduction to the role of fear and reason in the brain. **Pages 3-4**
- II. **Amygdala Hijack and the Fox Brainwashing Effect** – how right-wing media outlets use fear to open the door to ideological indoctrination. **Pages 5-6**
- III. **Fighting Back the "HearYourselfThink Way"** – strategies to "de-tribalize" interactions, move conversations from the Bunker to the Founder Brain, and tell a story about how media has changed. **Page 7**
- IV. **Deprogrammer Worksheet and Action Plan** – helpful exercises, questions, and ideas to put together your individualized plan for repairing your relationship and removing the manipulative influence of right-wing media from your friend or loved one's life. **Pages 8-13**

DON'T LET FOX
FLATLINE YOUR MIND
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NEOCORTEX = FOUNDER BRAIN

NEO-CORTEX

thinking, problem solving,
behavioral control, imagination

CORPUS CALLOSUM

passes information from left
brain (rules, logic) to right
brain (impulse, feelings)

CEREBELLUM

coordination and balance

BRAIN STEM

breathing, sleep, heart rate

BASAL GANGLIA

movement, reward, coordinating
brain messages, forming habits

HYPOTHALAMUS

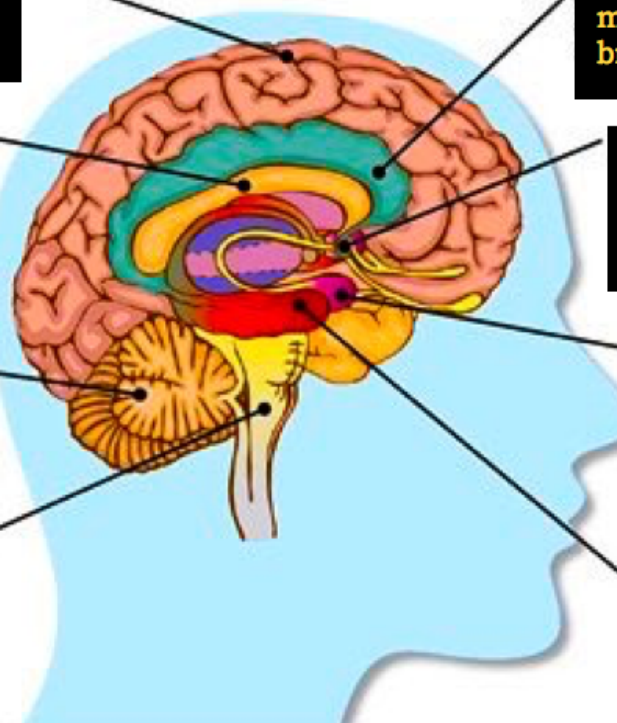
hunger, emotions, temperature,
pain sensations

AMYGDALA

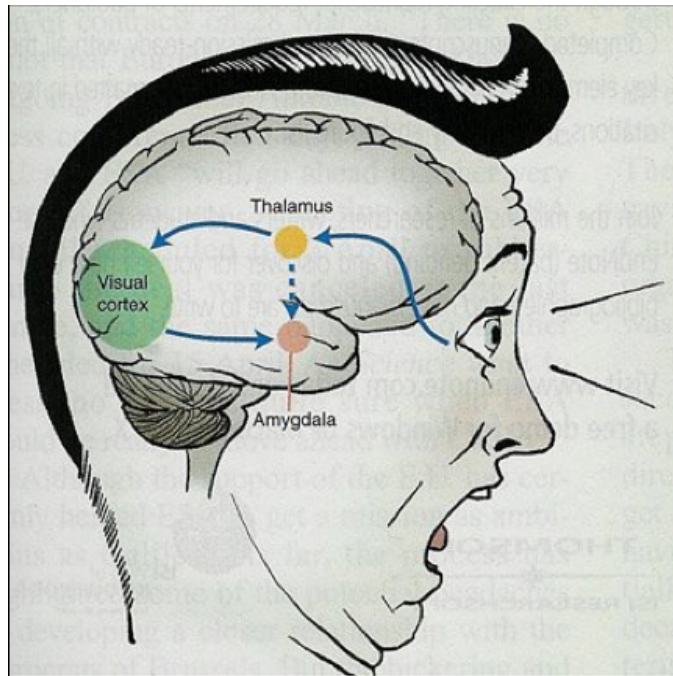
fear, facial recognition,
emotional memory, empathy,
aggression, senses danger

HIPPOCAMPUS

memory, learning, emotion



The Neocortex is the newest evolutionary feature of our brains. It's what makes us human. It's the region where rationality, imagination, higher moral reasoning, and long term planning happen. We like to call this brain region "The Founder Brain" because our nation's Founders, as products of the Enlightenment, were some of the biggest proponents in history for what happens in the Neocortex. But the Founder Brain isn't the only region in our brain shaping our behavior...



AMYGDALA CONTROLS:

Sub-rational emotions

- ▶ FEAR
- ▶ ANGER
- ▶ THREAT RESPONSE
- ▶ IN-GROUP EMPATHY



**AMYGDALA =
BUNKER BRAIN**

There's an older, more primitive part of brain that evolved before our Founder Brain. The Amygdala is an almond-shaped grouping of neurons involved exclusively with sub-rational impulses like fear, anger, threat-response, and in-group empathy. It's where our fight or flight instinct lives. It's what can drive a person to feel that holding their toddler with an assault rifle is the safest thing for them. The amygdala is our fear center, our inner lizard. We've taken to calling it "the Bunker Brain" — WHY? Because the amygdala drives aggressive, territorial behavior and the instinct to defend "your tribe."



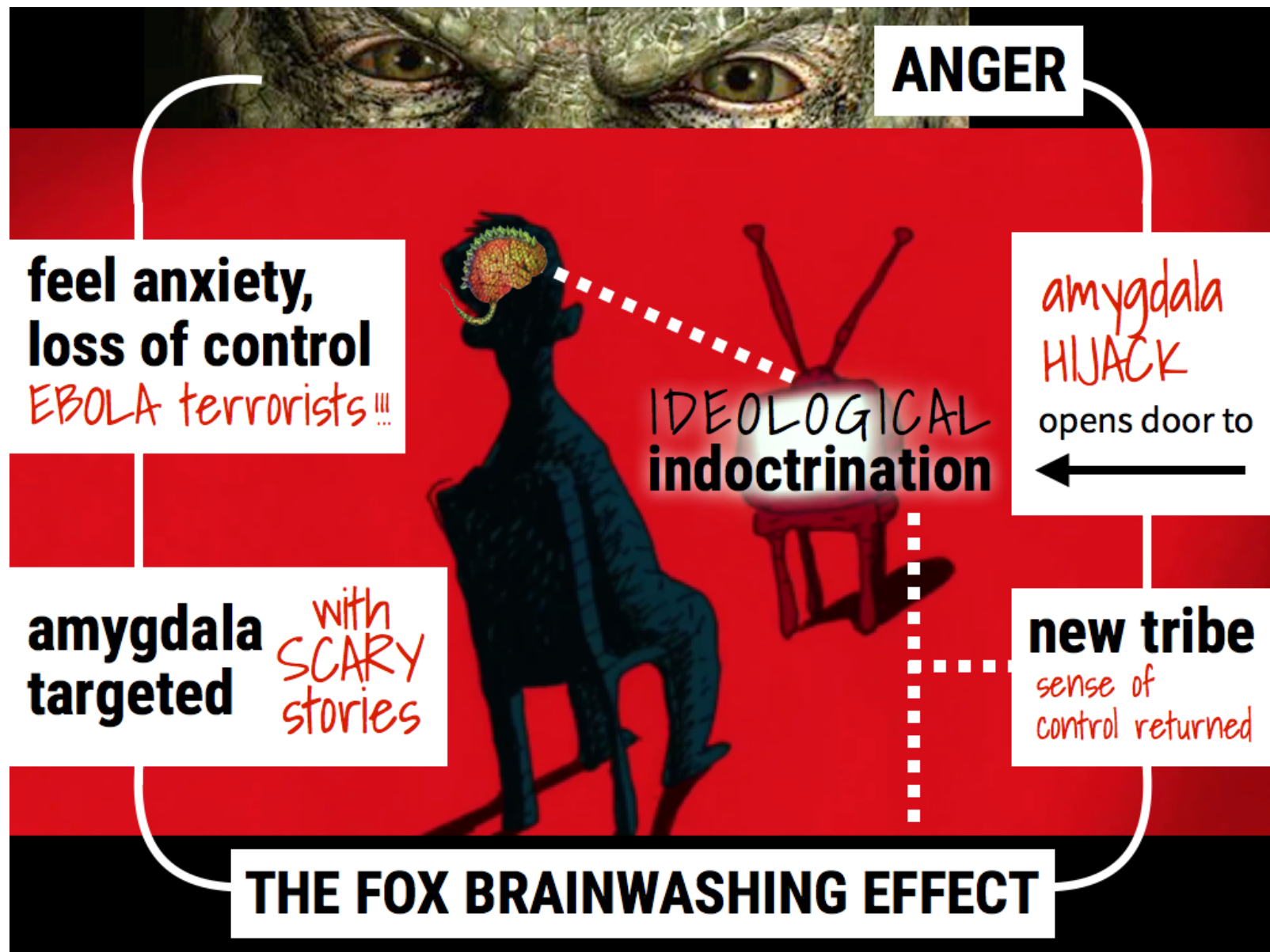
AMYGDALA HIJACK

**STRONG
EMOTIONAL
REACTION**

SUDDEN ONSET

**YOU REALIZE,
UPON
REFLECTION,
THAT IT WAS
INAPPROPRIATE**

We're not in the jungle anymore, but our Amygdala is still there, helping us alert and respond instinctively to threats. Even secondhand threats, like watching violence on TV can activate our Amygdala. **So can rhetorical threats. If someone attacks our ideological views or deeply held beliefs, our Amygdala kicks in.** Psychologist and Science Journalist Daniel Goleman has coined the term "Amygdala Hijack" to describe a situation where extreme emotion overrides higher-brain control and critical thinking, effectively putting the Lizard Brain in the driver's seat.



“Amygdala Hijack” helps us understand how the Fox brainwashing process happens. Fox “News” targets the Amygdala with a fear-based narrative, causing anxiety and a feeling of a loss of control. This leads to an increase in negative emotion culminating in anger. When the emotional response is intense enough critical thinking is severely diminished or may shut down (Amygdala hijack). The shutdown of rational thinking creates a void that the propagandist exploits, filling it with an ideological worldview which promises to return a sense of control, as well as a political tribe to align with.

Fighting “The Fox Effect” the HearYourselfThink Way



1) DE-TRIBALIZE

Right-wing media is designed to keep people looking outward — *for threats, enemies, attacks*. They want people reacting from a place of fear and anger (Bunker Brain), not thinking from a place of reason and fact (Founder Brain).

That's why it's important to de-tribalize the situation first. Getting into an argument will only make them entrench deeper in their beliefs and more fact-resistant.

Remember, the **goal isn't to convert someone to your ideological point of view. It's to create a crack in the absolute certainty they feel from the indoctrination they've gotten from right-wing media.** To get them to ask: *"can I believe everything I think?"*

Take deep breaths, use humor, stay cool!

Affirm what's good about that person:

"I can see you're really passionate about this. It's obvious that you care about the direction of our country."

Force them to see you as someone they don't agree with, but whose concern is coming from the same place:

"Do you have kids/grandkids? So do I, that's why I care so much too."

2) INFLICT SELF-REFLECTION

We're suffering from a national deficit of self-reflection due to the predominance of inflammatory media keeping our threat-centers on high-alert. **We need to induce "stop and think" moments to help break the grip of outward-looking fear.**

We can inflict self-reflection by asking questions. This builds a rapport, and forces people to think about what they're saying (rather than dig in and defend a position) and look at how they're (over)reacting from a place of fear.

Question-mode immediately steers an interaction away from the Bunker Brain and toward the Founder Brain.

Dig deeper on why they believe what they do, and the sources of their (mis)information:

"Can you say more about that?" (get beyond the talking points)

"How would that work?" (reveal limits of understanding)

"Where did you hear that?" (But that source was wrong about Ebola. Remember?)

"Do you think you're getting the whole story? Is there another side?" (reveal agenda)

3) TELL A STORY ABOUT MEDIA

Creating a crack in their certainty opens the door to have a conversation about media, how it's changed, and why we need to be careful when it comes to our media sources.

Talk about what's been lost as news has become more like entertainment and why this trend is bad for democracy.

"Remember journalists like Walter Cronkite? He felt a responsibility to accurately inform the American people. He worried that the push to make money from news would corrupt journalism and make it more like entertainment."

"Conflict, controversy, and sensationalism are good for ratings, but they're bad for our ability to work together for the good of the country."

Remind them of the 1938 Martian Radio Panic. People believed it because it was a scary story that pretended to be a newscast.

Create the space for them to hear themselves think about how their media sources are manipulating them.

Creating the opportunity for people to draw conclusions for themselves is more effective than pushing acceptance of your position.

How Has Right-Wing Media Affected Your Friend or Loved One and Your Relationship?

	BEFORE	AFTER
What was [your friend or loved one] like before they got hooked on Fox/ right-wing media?		
What was your relationship like?		
What words would you use to describe the person?		
What kinds of things did you do together?		
How did the time you spent with them make you feel?		

Write Your Happy Ending: How Would You Like the Conflict with Your Friend or Loved One to Be Resolved?

Don't worry about what you think is possible, or how it sounds. Be free from the fear of argument or conflict — just write down (as honestly as you can), what you'd like to say to your friend or loved one about how their immersion in right-wing media has affected them, and your relationship. Describe how you'd like things to be different in your relationship:

WHAT YOU'D LIKE TO SAY	HOW YOU'D LIKE THINGS TO BE DIFFERENT

Getting at the Heart of the Problem/Underlying Issue Attracting Your Friend or Loved One to Right-Wing Media

When a friend or loved one begins mimicking the bullying behavior of right-wing pundits, shouting you down at the mention of anything remotely "political" or demeaning your deeply held ideological beliefs (in social justice, or helping the underdog, for example), you can't help but feel agitated, angry and defensive. Remember that the Amygdala triggers in response to perceived threats, even rhetorical ones. But, that anger and the impulse to fight back (and defend your "tribe") can stop you from addressing the underlying fears, anxieties and concerns your friend or loved one may have that are being effectively exploited and heightened by right-wing media demagogues. Taking a step back to think about what may be troubling them, and how you could help is an important part of de-tribalizing the situation (not seeing them as the "enemy") and beginning to repair your relationship.

REAL FEARS/ANXIETIES THEY MAY HAVE	HOW YOU MAY BE ABLE TO HELP
Health:	
Economic/Retirement Security:	
Isolation/Disintegration of Close Relationships:	
Being a Victim of Crime:	
Crisis of Meaning in Life/Self-Worth:	

Brainstorming Ways to Reconnect: What Activities or Outings Could You Do Together in a Neutral, Fox-Free Zone?

Think about places and activities you can do to create the space for a different and more positive dynamic in your relationship. Trying to have a conversation about media or how you’re genuinely hurt by the divide created by intense political polarization in the living room where the TV is just won’t work. Being intentional about doing something meaningful, fun or new together can de-escalate the familiar tensions and allow you to have a more honest conversation that goes deeper. Consider activities where the person has a mastery or skill they could share with you, like: knitting, hunting, fishing, painting, or things you could do/learn together, like: hiking, bowling, gardening, making crafts, visiting a museum, learning photography, etc. Be sure to think about what boundaries you will set to make sure this time is special, i.e.: no screens, no politics, it’s about spending and enjoying your time together.

PLACES THAT HAVE SPECIAL MEANING FOR YOU	ACTIVITIES YOU’VE DONE TOGETHER IN THE PAST	NEW ACTIVITIES/ OUTINGS YOU CAN DO TOGETHER	BOUNDARIES TO SAFEGUARD THIS TIME/ MAKE IT SPECIAL

FOX Got Your Tongue? Ideas for Segues and Conversation Starters to Talk Honestly and Reconnect

When right-wing media has come between you and your friend or loved one for so long, it can be hard to find the right words to use to begin bridging the divide, especially when the instinct (or familiar pattern) is to argue back on a rhetorical level or debunk a piece of misinformation.

But remember that the goal in deprogramming someone isn't to convert them to your political point of view, but to (over time) get them to realize the negative effect right-wing media is having on them — keeping them in a heightened state of fear, separating them from the people they love and the activities they used to enjoy. Crowding out their ability to enjoy life's simple pleasures, because they're always on high alert for the next crisis, a soldier in a scorched-earth battle that never ends. (That's exhausting!)

Think about segues and phrases that will help steer the conversation away from "politics" and toward an honest assessment of how your relationship has suffered and how you wish it was better.

It might feel awkward to be so brutally honest, but it can be a powerful wakeup call for your friend or loved one to know that you care enough about them and your relationship to talk openly and directly about your feelings, despite the risk of being vulnerable.

IDEAS FOR GOING DEEPER IN YOUR CONVERSATION

I feel like politics is getting in the way of how we used to connect
[over X activity, memory, etc...]

I wish things weren't so tense between us; I miss the time we used to spend together

Do you remember when we used to... that [activity, memory, etc.] meant a lot to me...

When was the last time you felt at ease (relaxed, at peace)?

What are you thankful for?

When you reflect back on [your life, your time as a parent, etc.] what are you most proud of? What do you wish you did differently?

Timeline and Support Team: Developing Your Action Plan

You don't have to do this alone! HearYourselfThink is here for you — and so are all the people we're working with who understand how frustrating it is to have watched someone you care about change for the worse under the influence of right-wing media.

We're available to check in with you, listen and support you through challenges, and celebrate breakthrough moments.

It can also help to involve someone close to you — a mutual friend or relative who can support your deprogramming efforts over the long-term. They can help:

1. Provide you with moral support, checking in on how it's going, sharing ideas on new activities or ways to have deeper conversations.
2. Support you or be there for an activity, outing or honest conversation about the harm their media habits are causing to them and your relationship.

The right-wing media's propaganda and brainwashing efforts worked *over time, not overnight* and the same is true for our efforts to deprogram and reconnect. Commit to a specific timeframe, and start!

ACTION	TIMEFRAME
First conversation that addresses current bad dynamic in relationship and asks for activity/outing to reconnect, free from politics and outside distractions.	Day/Month:
What activity/outing will you suggest to reconnect? Will it be recurring?	Day/Month:
When will you check in with people for moral support and continued guidance?	Frequency/Start Date:
When will you begin planting the seeds that will (over time) cause them to "stop and think" about the dangers of polarizing media, how to recognize when you're being manipulated/selectively informed and what's lost (peace of mind, personal connections) when everything is seen through the lens of political warfare.	Day/Month: *Plan to check in with us again beforehand for a practice round or 2!