

The 3 Brains In Real Life

(What they sound like, look like, and need)

CORTEX (Thinking Brain)

Role: Logic, planning, reasoning, reflection

When it's online: We can think, choose, and learn

When it's offline: Overthinking, spiraling, or shutting down

What the Cortex Sounds Like:

- “Let me think this through.”
- “What are my options here?”
- “If I do X, then Y will probably happen.”
- “I need more information before I decide.”
- “This isn't ideal, but I can handle it.”

What the Cortex Looks Like:

- Making a pros/cons list
- Asking clarifying questions
- Reading, journaling, or reflecting
- Planning next steps
- Pausing before reacting

What the Cortex Needs:

- Time
- Information
- Calm enough conditions to stay online
- Fewer emotional threats

Example:

You get a frustrating email. Instead of firing back, you take a breath, re-read it, and draft a response you don't send yet. That's cortex at work.

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LIMBIC (Emotional Brain)

Role: Emotions, connection, meaning, belonging

When it's online: We feel, connect, empathize

When it's dysregulated: Big feelings, mood swings, shame spirals

What the Limbic Sounds Like:

- "I feel hurt."
- "I don't feel safe."
- "Why does this always happen to me?"
- "I just want someone to understand."
- "This reminds me of something old."

What the Limbic Looks Like:

- Crying or wanting to cry
- Pulling away or clinging
- Reading tone into messages
- Feeling rejected or unseen
- Seeking reassurance

What the Limbic Needs:

- Validation
- Safety
- Connection
- To be seen and heard without fixing

Example:

A friend doesn't text back. Your mind goes to, *"They're pulling away. I must have done something wrong."* That's limbic meaning-making.

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BRAIN STEM (Survival Brain)

Role: Safety, survival, automatic responses

When it's online: Fight, flight, freeze, fawn

When it's dominant: No logic, no nuance—just survive

What the Brain Stem Sounds Like:

- “I can’t do this.”
- “Get me out of here.”
- “I need this to stop NOW.”
- “I don’t feel safe.”
- “Just shut down.”

What the Brain Stem Looks Like:

- Snapping or yelling
- Freezing or going numb
- Avoiding everything
- Over-pleasing
- Using substances or distractions to escape

What the Brain Stem Needs:

- Physical safety
- Regulation (breath, movement, grounding)
- Slowness
- Zero shame

Example:

You walk into a room, and your body tightens, your heart races, and you want to leave immediately—even though “nothing bad is happening.” That’s brain stem protection.

HOW THEY WORK TOGETHER

- **Brain Stem** asks: *Am I safe?*
Limbic asks: *Am I loved and connected?*

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- **Cortex** asks: *What's the best choice?*

 You **cannot** reason someone out of brain stem activation.

 You **must** meet limbic needs before the cortex works.

 The cortex comes back online *after* safety and emotion are addressed.

COACHING / GROUP TEACHING LINE

“When you’re dysregulated, you’re not broken—your survival brain is driving. We slow down, create safety, feel the feelings, and then we think.”