

The Lizard

The Logic, Science, and Art of Maintaining Safety between People

By Al Turtle © 2001 (2008 Proofing and Editing by Ian Woofenden)

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The number one issue of relationships is safety. It is the most primitive and first condition of connection with others. Safety is an easily misunderstood concept. People typically say they are "safe" when their actions show they are quite unsafe. And thus it is quite important for people to get a common understanding of what safety is and how it works.

This is particularly true as our culture uses "threat" as a normal everyday tool to get what it determines is "good" behavior. Many couples, during their romantic period, withdraw from the mainstream of our culture, and isolate themselves in order to start building a safe community for just the two of them. And yet every couple I have seen, comes into the office making the same mistake – they are using threat in an effort to get love.

I intend this paper to help people define "safety", understand its structure and processes, and to develop strategies to remove threat and to build, ensure, and recover safety.

The Brain and the Problem of Safety

Safety starts with the way the human brain is built. When I was a student of brain physiology, I was first introduced to the **tripartite** brain. The idea was that there were three distinct major subsystems in our brains.

At the base of the brain, in the bottom of our skulls, starting in our upper neck and including the spinal cord, is a grouping of structures called the hindbrain. Sitting on top of that is curved group of structures called the mid-brain, or sometimes called the limbic system. And then capping the whole was the large forebrain – the cortex. The names given these three brain sections came from comparative anatomy and seem to reflect evolution. The lower structure is common to all spinal corded animals. Reptiles have this section alone and it is commonly called the reptilian brain. All mammals have this reptilian brain, plus the curved addition of the mammalian brain. We humans have a reptilian brain, plus a mammalian brain, plus the new addition of the so-called primate brain.

I do not like the word "brain" for all these pieces as I think it implies that they can act independently – which they can't. I like to think of the reptilian brain as the basic system, to which is added a mammalian addition in mammals, and finally a primate addition in the "higher" animals. Thus the functionality of each piece is added on to that of the lower sections. This understanding of "additions" helps me understand human behavior much better.

The Primate Addition, Cortex

To understand "safety," I've found it useful to grasp a few concepts about each section of the brain. Remember, the cortex is what makes humans able to do what mammals cannot.

We Forget Nothing, Though We May Misplace It for a While.

The primate brain, or cortex, is like a giant computer hard drive. It is all about data storage. The vast majority of whatever happened to you is stored in your cortex. What happened to you yesterday, what you dreamed of last night, what went on during final exams in high school? It is all in there. This is your memory. It is vast. Memories are stored there even if you can't recall, remember, and retrieve them at the moment. Also stored are memories of events from the very distant past. If you opened your eyes at the time, what happened in the delivery room when you were born is there, including the color of the walls. There appear to be memories from the womb stored there. I remember the first time I was working with a male client when he recalled memories of his circumcision. Not a nice memory! While everything is remembered, there is no real mechanism for forgetting.

Our Memories are Dated or Aged

Every night the primate brain sleeps. This is very critical. During the early part of your sleep, the indexes to memories are re-written. It is kind of like a librarian rebuilding the card indexes to the book files each night. By the way, if people don't sleep, things get weird fast. Within just a couple of days without sleep, hallucinations, where you can't tell the difference between the outside world and the inner world, will start. When you are in the hospital, one thing the staff is very interested in is your sleep. They know they are giving you drugs that may interfere with sleep and they don't want you hallucinating while they are responsible.

Memories are coded with a sense of when they happened – with a kind of "how long ago did this happen?" One of the re-indexing operations is the changing of these dates. After one sleep, today's memories become yesterday's. Each day the distance of the memory from "now" becomes greater. This mechanism allows us to "put memories in the past," to get some "distance" from the events. This is part of the system that helps us recover from trauma – scary events. Those of us who work with people who experience a severe trauma, like the events on 9/11, want people to sleep in order to get a distance from their fears.

Trauma Memory – The Legacy We Carry of a Scary Childhood.

A baby is born with the primate brain incompletely developed. Apparently the reptilian brain is fully functional some time before birth. The mammalian brain comes online within months of birth. But the cortex is still developing for years and becomes complete around age 12. The last capacity is the ability for abstract thinking. This skill has a significant effect on safety. A person needs abstract thinking in order to deal with memories of terror and to grasp that a memory or thought is not the same as the real event.

An example of this is the difference between how eight year olds and fourteen year olds handle horror movies. The younger kid likely will be somewhat frozen by the movie. The events are real for him. No amount of telling him, "It's just a movie" will work. His brain is not ready for that concept. Now the older kid may enjoy the movie and tell you all about it. I've learned that the difference between the younger kid and the older is that the older one can hold "ugly facts" in their awareness, while the younger cannot handle this material without turning away. What happens to the younger kid's memories? The design of the developing primate brain handles this. The horror memory is shunted into a section of memory called trauma memory. This is a place where ugly memories are stored, but do not need to be consciously remembered until the cortex completes its ability for abstract thinking.

I recently witnessed an event where an eight year old was in the forest when a bear ran straight at him. Adults were present. Some dogs scared off the bear. When asked later about the incident, the boy said, "What bear?" He didn't remember the incident just an hour later. He'd "forgotten" already.

That's enough about the wonderful cortex.

Mammalian Addition, Limbic System

There are several interesting characteristics that relate to the mid-brain. Remember, these functions are things that humans all do also, and that reptiles cannot.

Emotions: Joy and Grief

Here is the location of the functions we call the [emotions of joy and grief](#). Since the lower brain, the reptilian, controls the emotions of fear and anger, mammals have the entire full set of emotions. This might be part of the reason that children like mammals so much. Mammals are fully emotional like us, but don't have the cortex's capacity for lying or being sneaky.

Reliable Community

The most interesting, to me, functionality of the mammalian brain is the need for [reliable community](#). Here is that need for living in herds, in packs, in villages. Horses are trained easily; they even train themselves, by threatening dismissal for bad behavior. Mammals need membership like they need air. Going further, we can say that human hermits are not born. They are taught. Humans as well as mammals are designed to live in a community. The need for togetherness, the avoidance of aloneness is hard-wired. A hermit is a person who needs closeness, but whose experiences of closeness have been so bad, that they prefer loneliness, to what they remember about closeness.

Reptilian Brain: The Brain Stem

While the upper brain sections are fascinating, it is the lowest brain that is the seat of all the energy of safety. The following functions are common to all humans, mammals and reptiles.

Automatic Functions

First, the reptilian brain provides all the automatic functions: breathing, digestion, heart rate, etc. This part of the brain is so reliable that we enjoy sleep. Who keeps us going while we sleep? Our reptilian brain does – 24 hours a day. It never sleeps. I like to think that the Good Lord came upon a design of a brain about 500 million years ago and found it so good that He/She didn't change it at all since. All of us have pretty much the same design of reptilian brain as everyone else. The functions are pretty simple, but elegant, and of all things – reliable. Here is something all of us can really trust.

And, boy! do we normally trust it! This is the part that takes care of you when you sleep. Do you sleep? Do you like to just take a break after a strenuous period and just let it all go? For a moment, think how delicious sleep can be. Then think about who is keeping you alive during your nap? Who is keeping you from smothering yourself by accident? That incredibly reliable, yet simple, device called your old reptilian brain is fully in charge. Simple! An IQ of 1, but what a one!

Survival

The second function of this lower brain is survival. It makes sense that this important function would be in this reptilian part of the brain. Without it early evolutionary creatures, dinosaurs, would have died out so long ago. Evolution wouldn't have had the time to create apes.. And humans wouldn't have come to exist. This elegant device that resides in all of us manages, not only our survival, but also the entire issue of safety that is so critical to couple's living together.

If you are not comfortable with the theory of evolution, let me just point out that God decided to put this function of survival in all creatures: lizards, mammals, and primates. And to accomplish this, He placed it in the simplest common part of all our brains.

Here is how the Survival function works. About 50 times a second, this part of the brain asks the question, "Am I safe?" If the answer is "Yes," we experience a set of actions related to safety. If the answer is "No," then this reptilian part of the brain takes over in milliseconds, and we operate in an emergency mode. This is what I call the panic or not-safe mode. I once heard the phrase, "the triumph of reaction over reflection". Well, it is this survival function in the base of our brains that is the source of all reactivity. It is simple. We react automatically.

Life or Death

This part of the brain is not designed for subtlety. It seems to only think of life or death. When it is relaxed, "there is no sign of death coming" from its point of view. Fear, to this part of the brain, is something like the idea that "Godzilla is out there." A little fear, anxiousness, means "Godzilla is far off but is wandering around." Panic comes across as "Godzilla is standing right behind and trying to grab you." This part of the brain is either in safe mode or panic mode, but never both.

Getting to Know Your Lizard

Getting to know this reptilian brain is to make friends with a co-resident being. It has a mind of its own. It is very powerful. It cannot be controlled. It sees things following a fairly simple set of rules. I call it my lizard, and getting to know my lizard has been a joy and relief. So many of my behaviors and reactions now make sense. First let's get to know him. (Sandra tells me all lizards are male.) You will know him by his activity. He has two gears: safe and unsafe.

Unsafe

When your lizard or mine believes he is going to die, he kicks into one of four behaviors that you can easily see in yourself or others: flee, freeze, submit, or fight. As I describe these behaviors, look at your own actions and those of people you know. Learn to recognize a reactive, panicky Lizard at a glance.

Flee

Fleeing is "a most visible behavior that removes a person from a situation." Reptiles scramble away across the rocks. Birds dart off. Bunnies hop off. The only survival skill for horses is running away. But humans, with their cortex full of learned, optional behaviors, are vastly more complex. When the reptilian brain says, "Flee!" the cortex comes up with 1001 ways to get away, such as:

- Get in the car and drive off
- • Go out to the garage
- • Stay at work
- • Hide behind the newspaper
- • Golf

- • Sit at the computer
- • An important engagement
- • Change the subject (my favorite)
- • Remember the song: 50 Ways to Leave Your Lover

A subtle example shows in driving a car. I recall during my history of driving home from work and driving to work. Sometimes I would drive home slowly, minimizing my time at home – for home was not safe. Sometimes I would drive to work slowly and drive home quickly when home was safer than work.

A tricky one showed up in a couple I worked with. They used to fight late at night. In the middle of the argument one of them would suddenly go to sleep, sometimes in mid-sentence. After I taught them about the lizard, the couple shared with me that this was fleeing behavior. The sleeper had run away!

Remember, a lizard that is thinking for itself and is judging the situation to be a life or death condition initiates each of these behaviors. It doesn't help to blame a person who is fleeing. Their fleeing makes sense – to their lizard.

I have also learned to never go after, or pursue, a person who is fleeing. After all, their lizard already is running from "imagine death." This is why stalking doesn't work. Note: when someone pulls away from you, in panic, give him or her an assist. Help them get away. They will come back all the quicker. Since it was typical of me to pursue my partner, I put up a sign at home. "You will never get love by chasing a lizard!" The sign helped me.

Freeze

Freezing is the behavior of the deer in the headlights of a car. Freezing is becoming motionless – invisible. There is a principle among lizards and mammals that "if I am not moving, I am not seen, I am not there." Think of what reptiles do most of the time at the reptile house in the zoo. They do nothing. Actually, they are becoming invisible for the sake of survival. Becoming motionless involves decreasing all bodily activities such as breathing. When our lizard tells us to freeze, our cortex rushes through the 1001 ways to become invisible and tries one. In my office, I watch people's breathing. When they stop for a moment, I sense that their lizard has become panicky. I don't know what about, but I tend to look around in what they or I were saying at the moment before the breathing stopped for a source of fear.

When I teach about safety to a group, at this point I usually ask for a volunteer to come up and be in front of people. I tell them they will stand up on a chair and do something safe but a bit silly. Then I wait for the volunteer to come forward. While I wait I count the number of people sitting dead silent, usually the whole group. Then I say, "Well, now I have 24 people freezing."

Freezing is the behavior of kids in a classroom when the teacher asks a particularly difficult question. No one moves. No one wants to call attention to him or herself. A very common form of freezing among males is practical joking. A practical joke is a piece of cruelty done to another person. I've come to see practical jokes as a kind of sadism – cruelty done for pleasure. But what makes this cruelty freezing is the comment, "Can't you take a joke. I was just funning!" By those comments the cruel one is erasing their meanness. They are becoming invisible.

Another extremely common form of freezing is asking questions. Let's say you have been thinking about going out to dinner all day. You have been imagining a particular restaurant and the wonderful way they serve food. When your partner arrives home do you say, "Let's go to dinner tonight at so-and-so!"? No. What you say is "What do you want to do tonight?" That question is popped on the other person and all the thinking about dinner is invisible. Now if your partner is sensitive, they may guess you are up to something. They may start a tricky kind of guessing game. "Uh. Let's see. McDonalds? Oh, oh, no! (seeing the slight downcast

look on your face) Well, how about a movie?" All the time they are trying to figure out what you want.

Of course the reason people are freezing, hiding their sadism, asking questions, is because from their lizard's point of view, being direct means getting killed. Lying low is safer. Lying, particularly the passive kind is a form of freezing. Active lying is saying that which is not so. Passive lying is not saying what is so. I am so used to lying as a normal form of survival among my clients that I have a special definition. "To leave someone in a state of misunderstanding about something that you believe to be important to them." People lie for one reason only: it is not safe to tell the truth. More fully they lie because their lizard thinks they will be killed for telling the truth.

It doesn't help to blame someone for freezing. Their freezing makes sense – to their lizard. Try to make them feel safe. I also think it foolish to blame a person who lies. If someone is lying to you, consider what you are doing to come across as a source of danger to his or her survival. Remember, it makes sense for them to tell a lie – sense to their lizard.

Another typical way of freezing is responding to a question by saying, "I don't know." It is a safe way to retreat. "I don't know" usually means "don't ask again" and "don't get any closer."

I think the general goal is to recognize the panic behavior and work toward safety.

Submitting

Submitting is the behavior of giving in to another.

You've probably seen puppies playfully fighting. At a point, one rolls onto its back and doesn't move. The other stands over the prone one for a bit, becomes bored and walks off. That rolling over with legs in the air is submitting in mammals.

By the way, don't trust cats. One of their attack modes involves pulling a threat over on top of them, holding on with front legs and disemboweling the other with their hind legs.

Turn lizards, birds, or alligators over and they will become paralyzed for a bit. Submitting is a survival mechanism of the old lizard brain.

Wolves do not fight other wolves to the death. Each member of the pack is too valuable to kill and they don't want to lose even one. So, wolves fight to the submit gesture.

Grizzly bears fight standing up, clawing at each other. Suddenly one turns its head to the side and bares its throat. Both stop fighting and walk off.

In western national parks, the rangers give instructions that if a bear attacks, you should roll in a ball, protecting your stomach, and lie low. The bear will think you are submitting and consider you a non-threat almost every time.

But there is an additional thing to submitting. Recall the puppies fighting playfully. When the "winner" walks off, it is often attacked from the rear by the previously prone "loser." This is a reminder that submitting is a two-step process: submit, and then revenge or attack later.

This second step is not so important among mammals, who have little memory. Dogs submit nicely, most of the time. But the second step of revenge becomes a major problem in humans with all that memory. Step two is often called resentment. And resentment builds. It is a primary destabilizing force in human relationships. When you see a human submitting, you probably can sense that "there is trouble ahead" sometime.

Let me illustrate this by an image. Let's say you are assigned as a hunter to kill a grizzly bear that has been causing a lot of trouble, killing cattle for example and is now threatening people at a remote camping area. So you take your gun, 200 calibers, and go to the camping area.

You look around. No bear. So you put your gun on the camp table, pick up your bucket and go to the stream to fill it with water. Then the bear jumps out at you. So you form a ball, protect your vitals. The bear paws you around a little, maybe scratches you. You lie low. The bear gets bored and walks off. What happens when it is 100 yards away? You get up, get your gun and blow it away. Now, why did the bear die? It has too little a brain. It saw you submitting and said to it self, "Oh heck, the hunter is submitting. So I am the winner. Where are some berries to eat?" And thus the bear dies, all because of a small brain – no cortex. If it had a bigger brain, it might have said something like this. "Oh heck, the hunter is submitting! No problem. Oh, wait a second. Hunters have a cortex. They'll revenge me if I walk off. I guess I have to kill this one." This way the bear lives. Bigger brain.

In the 1960s, about half of our population woke up to the idea that they had been submitting for years, centuries, millennia. Women began expressing their resentment in powerful ways and painful ways that startled men (small brains?). Men, who had been used to women's submission for centuries, now were finding themselves divorced. I think this process is still spreading across the country in various economic and social groups. Women simply do not see the need to submit anymore. For a while it was pretty easy for them to take their children, divorce their husband, and get paid for the whole thing. If you wonder about this resentment thing, go listen in to discussion groups at any local women's center.

In the 1980s, the other half of our population began to show signs of resentment. Men haven't had a good deal in our culture any more than women. Men's resentment is a bit harder to detect. The major symptoms are men giving up their traditional role as wage earner. Men started dropping out - quitting careers in industry and becoming cooks on dude ranches. Men became "couch potatoes." Men got depressed.

I recall many women who had divorced their husbands and who now were surprised when their husbands filed for bankruptcy. The women's income was cut off. They were shocked. (Little brains?)

Another slight variance between traditional male submission and female submission involves emotions. Women traditionally start serious submission around age 10 – 12 as the "beauty ethic" takes them over. Read the book, [Reviving Ophelia, by Mary Pipher](#). This process of submission to "looks" takes a terrible toll on women.

Men traditionally start submitting around age 4-6, when they realize that the culture expects them to be tough and prepare for war. Boys are taught to hold back emotions just at the age when they should be learning how to appropriately express those emotions. They are also taught to compete and not to relate to others, just at the age when relationship skills are best learned. And these lessons are typically brought to the growing boy by the socializing parent, his mom. As adults, men are criticized for being unemotional by their wives, who are members of the gender that told them to not be emotional in the first place.

I recall watching a showing of "Saving Private Ryan." The women in the theatre were turning away from that long, horrible, first scene. Then men were slowly nodding in recognition of the horror they had all their lives been preparing to have to face. I often tell women that if they want to understand men, they might watch that movie. Men are brought up to believe they cannot escape that terror. Often women think they are entitled to avoid it. This makes for an enormous gender difference!

With all this submission, and related resentment, flowing around between the genders, there are lots of reasons for people to be angry at each other.

There is another group in our culture that submits even more than men or women. Childhood is almost one constant process of submission from birth up. Children are to be seen and no heard, etc. etc. And then when kids get to be teenagers, we adults are shocked at their rebellion and rage, and resentment. (Do we adults have little brains?) Of course, our culture's solution to this problem is to build more jails! It won't work.

It doesn't help to blame a person who is submitting. Submitting makes sense – to their lizard. Find out what makes their reptilian brains so threatened. Work to make them feel safe.

Fight

Heck, you know what fighting is. So I won't expand on it. But I just want to point out that most fighting is just a behavior of the lizard brain being defensive. I think that without threat, fighting won't occur. It doesn't help to blame a person who is fighting. Fighting makes sense – to their lizard.

Safe

When your lizard sees no indicator of death, he relaxes and permits four visible behaviors. As I describe these behaviors, look at your own behavior and see if you can witness your safe lizard. Also take a look at how you feel when you observe others doing these things.

Play

Play is play. Play is silly. Play is ridiculous. Play is non-productive. Play usually involves farts.

Play is never competitive. Football is competitive but is really an analog for war. Competition is all about winning and making the other into a loser. Competition is all about fighting and making the other submit.

In children, play is often about learning how to do adult things. In adulthood, play is about relaxing in groups.

One way to know if a person's lizard is active is to ask them to be playful. If they can't be silly, their reptilian brains are inactive.

Mate

In primates and some higher mammals, mating is an extension of play. Mating is really not about making babies. In humans, the impulse to mate appears before babies are possible. The mating impulse occurs frequently throughout the month with no respect to fertile periods. And the mating impulse continues long after humans can no longer have children.

Mating is similar to play as it is silly, ridiculous, fun, non-productive, and often involves farts. We "do it" in the backyard, in trees, on top of mountains, in the bushes, in the bathroom, and probably anywhere people can go.

There is another form of activity that produces babies just as well. It is really someone submitting, and someone fighting or demanding. It's called rape.

Nurture

Nurturing is the act of investing energy in the growth, health, and well being of another living being or yourself. Nurturing is always focused on the other, on the nurtured-one. Nurturing is one form of love – a decision to invest energy in the well-being of the loved one. When I look at the plant in my room and want to nurture it, I check it for water, for sunlight, etc., all the things it might need. I never tell it to grow corn, as it is not a corn plant.

Unfortunately, many children do not experience nurturing throughout their childhood. The focus of some parents is not so much on the growth, health, and well being of their child, but more on their own needs. Children often know they weren't nurtured. What they often experience is a kind of submitting, fleeing and freezing in the face of their parent's fighting demands. Childhood is often remarkably unsafe.

Creative Work

Creative work is the kind of work you do even if you don't get paid. It is fun, joyful, and attractive in its own right. Hobbies, gardening, painting, and volunteer work are examples.

Most work is a kind of submitting in the face of the fighting demands of employers.

Many people find parts of their job are creative work and put up with the submitting in order to get to do the fun stuff.

This is work that feels "worthwhile."

Take a Look at Your Lizard

Ask yourself these questions:

- In the last 6 months when I am with my partner I thought "my lizard is not safe" what percent of the time?
- What percent of the time am I fleeing, freezing, submitting, fighting?
- Or conversely, what percent of the time is my lizard playing, mating, nurturing, and doing creative work."
- In the last 6 months, what percent of the time has my partner been lizard-safe: i.e. fleeing, freezing, submitting, and fighting?
- When I first fell in love, what were the percentages of safe and not safe?"

Share your answers with your partner and begin a discussion of the issue of safety.

How Does Your Lizard Make These Decisions: Safe or Not Safe?**The Lizard Jumps to Negative Conclusions**

The first thing about the lizard is that it is extremely quick to react. Since this part of the brain is over-engineered toward survival, it takes less than 1/5 second to go from fully relaxed to fully defensive. This is what we call reaction. It takes at least 20 minutes to recover and this is normal. Think of trying to shoot a gopher as it pokes its nose out of its hole. If you miss, it will take a long time to come back to the surface again. This quickness is the source of all the "jumping to negative conclusions." Apparently those creatures that erred on the negative side, as often as the positive, died out a long time ago. We are designed to go for the worst conclusion every time.

We've all experienced this when we wake up from a nightmare. We turn the lights on, look around the room, for danger. And nothing is there. But it takes a long time to "calm down." We are built this way. Trust, i.e. a sense of safety, is slow to build. Doubt or fear is almost instantaneous. Reactivity is what keeps us alive!

We experience this as a "flooding" sensation all over our bodies. The chemical transmitter is adrenaline, which is squirted into our blood stream and in less than a half second hits the majority of cells in our body.

This is the stress reaction that prepares us for flight or fight (or freezing and submitting). It also shuts down our immune system, reduces the movement of our chests (breathing is

interrupted), reduces the blood flow to our skin (we feel cold and get cold sweats), moves blood to our stomach (feel sick), dilates our eyes, and maybe empties our bladder and bowels. Strong stuff. Read the book [Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers by David Ruenzel](#) for more on stress reactions.

These chemicals take about 20 minutes at a minimum to be removed from the blood stream. Thus it takes a fraction of a second to move to full emergency reaction or panic mode, and about 20 minutes to recover or relax – no matter what.

[Rule 1: When in doubt, the Lizard reacts and goes on the alert.]

The Lizard Protects the Rest of the Brain

Interestingly, the Lizard reacts if the normal functions of other parts of the brain are threatened. If the mid-brain's need for community is threatened, the Lizard reacts in survival mode. While the mid-brain is producing the emotion of loneliness, the Lizard may initiate panic and fighting behavior to make sure that you are not left alone. If the primate brain's need for diversity or difference is threatened, the Lizard may avoid contact – freeze or flee. If the primate brain's autonomous behavior is threatened, the Lizard may begin submitting behavior.

Our brains resist and find painful many things that our society says are normal. For example, the John Wayne image of the independent, loner male is scary to our mid-brain. Human brains are designed to live in close community. Another example is that society tries to coerce conformity and agreement, while our cortexes are completely designed around diversity. Again society teaches obedience, while our cortex is designed around independent decision making. In a way, our Lizard's reactions are often "rational" responses to a "crazy" society. The Lizard's actions frequently appear anti-social when they are really simply reactive against particular dysfunctional types of social norms.

Frequently it is the hidden fear— the deep "Lizard" dynamic—that is buried in our frustrations. Mending or soothing these profound fears seems to be a successful strategy in resolving interpersonal frustrations.

[Rule 2: Your Lizard is your best friend. Understand it.]

The Lizard is Kind of Blind

Located in the brain where it is, apparently it cannot see the outside world very clearly. It seems to get glimpses only. That's enough. Basically it looks up at the mid-brain, which looks at the cortex, which is processing the images of the outside world.

[Rule 3: The Lizard cannot tell the difference between reality and a vivid imagination.]

Our cortex is often called an associational cortex. It looks at the outside world and then associates what it sees with vast memory resources in order to make "sense" of what it sees.

The lizard looks in on this associational activity. I often think that 5 percent of experience is outside our bodies and 95% is found in the activity of our brains trying to make sense out of those experiences.

Anyway the lizard reacts to the associations, the activities of the Cortex, and not to the "reality" of the world outside the brain..

What do you think a nightmare is? It is full of associational activity, of imagination. During dreaming your brain has no "reality" to go by. Yet our lizards believe all those imaginings are real and reacts.

When you wake up from a nightmare, you look around and see no danger. But it takes twenty minutes minimum to calm your lizard down. It takes very little for our lizards to imagine that

everyone is looking at you when you walk into a room – and to react to that imagination.

The Lizard is in Charge

In the last example, you can see that waking up does not stop the lizard's reaction. It has its own rules (20 minutes to settle down). You cannot choose to control it. You can cooperate with it, ally with it, but not control it. If you fight with it too hard, i.e. you say, "It is safe" when your lizard is in survival mode, it will take over. It holds control of the blood flow to the cortex, and will cut that back or even off. You will pass out, faint, and drop to the floor. And your lizard will be much happier. It got rid of its problem - your thinking. This state is often called a coma. Lizard is happy. Cortex is shut down.

**[Rule 4: Never tell anyone, "there's nothing to be frightened of."
If their lizard is active, there is something to be frightened of,
but it may be in their remembered or unremembered history.]**

You can see an example of this in a panic attack. These occur when our survival mechanism creates its own nightmare and the feedback situation runs to the limit. Kind of like when a microphone gets too close to the speakers in a public address system. The cortex is thinking thoughts that scare the lizard. The lizard starts to take action, such as shallow deeper breathing, and the cortex perceives the breathing as threatening. This further scares the lizard. The extreme result of a panic attack is passing out, shutting down the cortex. Panic attacks are a great learning experience. If you master them, you have learned how to give your lizard its proper priority in your life – it comes first.

[Rule 5: Cooperate with our Lizard. It always wins.]

The Lizard Has Full Access to Trauma Memory

All the stuff you don't recall from your childhood is fully available to your lizard. This makes sense. Would it be in the interest of your survival for your brain to "forget" dangerous, traumatic experiences? In a way, the lizard is responsible for trauma memory. On the one hand the experience you faced as a child was dangerous to your lizard. On the other hand, letting the as-yet-undeveloped cortex look at these memories is dangerous to the lizard. So the lizard, actually a part called the amygdala, makes the decision and routes memories of the experience into trauma memory.

Thus your lizard will react frequently to stuff you don't "know" anything about. And trauma memory never goes away. Since trauma memory is full of recollections that were painful, and pain for children is wounding to a greater or lesser extent, your trauma memory is full of things that probably need to be addressed as an adult – that need healing.

**[Rule 6: Your lizard never forgets the past,
and reacts strongly to subjects that need healing.]**

The Lizard Has No Sense of Time

This may seem odd, but apparently the reptilian brain has no concept of time. It lives in the forever-now. Anything it perceives appears to be going on "in the now." Thus when your cortex is recalling an event from the distant past, the lizard perceives the event as going on currently and reacts in the same way to historical events as it does to current events.

**[Rule 7: Your lizard lives in the "forever now."
It is immediate, direct and simple.]**

The Lizard's Way of Seeing the World – A Story.

I tell this story only to show the logical operations of the lizard.

"I once saw a woman who was referred to me because of a panic attack. She had discovered herself in the gutter outside a laundromat, vomiting next to her car. This seemed to the hospital staff as a unique, one time event, and they knew of my work with subjects.

She was 38, fearful that she was "going crazy", had been recently divorced and was now living in an apartment. This was her first visit to this laundromat. She had apparently made it to the door of the store when panic hit her and her next memory was from the gutter.

I suspected her lizard had detected something pretty strong and very scary which both involved her sense of smell and her stomach. I told her to not go to that laundromat, but to visit all the other laundromats in town, only to go into the doorways of the stores. Next week she came back and reported that she had a strong reaction in three of them and no reactions in the others.

I told her to wash her clothes in any laundromat that she had no reaction to. Then I told her to get on the phone and ask the owners about what fragrant products they used in their stores. Based on this data, I asked her to see if the four reaction-causing stores had some product in common, a product the other stores did not use.

She called me three days later (with clean clothes I imagine) to tell me that the problem product was the bleach, Clorox. I asked her to come in next week, for I had recalled something about Clorox, but wanted her in the room when I shared the information with her.

When she came in, I invited her to be relaxed. I told her I had an idea that might frighten her lizard. (I had already explained all about the reptilian brain to her.) I said I would only tell her my idea when she asked me to. She sat quietly for a moment and then said, "Ok. I'm ready."

I told her that clear liquid products, particularly those that are very dangerous to drink, are required to add a sharp odor to alert the unwary. I had recalled a study from New York City that was passed on to me by my wife from the Women's Center here in Coeur d'Alene. Apparently the odor in Clorox in some ways closely resembles the smell of male semen.

She stopped breathing as I said the words. I waited, told her to take her time, and to remember to breathe. Finally she burst into tears. Through them she told me of the memory of having been orally raped from age 4 thru age 8 by her father. It had happened as often as twice a week. Afterwards she would go to the bathroom and vomit.

It was all there. Those experiences were long buried in her trauma memory so that it would not bother the little girl she was then and would let her survive. That memory, somehow, was not very deep any more and when she smelled that odor at the laundromat, her reptilian brain saw that penis coming again and her lizard took over and got her away fast.

It all made sense to her, as long as she understood the way her reptilian brain operated. Also with that understanding she was ready to grasp that she could now handle that memory and didn't have to look away. By the way, subsequently she took some rather dramatic action within her family, many of whom had turned away from her troubles as a little girl, and some of who had suffered similarly."

What To Do About the Lizard?

The Problem

As you can see, your reptilian brain rapidly jumps to conclusions, can't see clearly, reacts to things that our society says are normal, is fully aware of lot of scary memories – some of which you are unaware of, and reacts to long-gone events as actively as it does to current events.

Thus your all powerful-undefeatable lizard will react passionately to small and seeming innocuous events (triggers) that remind you of long repeated past events. Probably 95% of a person's emotional reaction is to

their history and 5% is to the event that triggered it. Cure the 5% and you still leave the 95% untended-to.

The purpose of this paper is to help people manage safety, lizards being calm, when they are together. When alone, there are several sources of panic.

One source is triggers that remind us of past frightening events. An example is a strange noise in the house triggers images you have seen in scary movies. Another source is the very act of being alone. This is scary for the mid-brain and the lizard picks this aloneness up and can panic.

The major source of unsafety is within relationships. Almost all wounds from childhood occurred in a relationship: between the child and caretaker. And almost all adult reactivity—lizard panic—occurs in relationships of one form or another.

Intimate relationships provide the greatest possibility for reactivity. Your partner, the one you selected by the process of falling in love, will provide those panic triggers in abundance – believe me. And remember, my experience is that if you pay attention to the triggers only, you miss the point.

The Solutions: Quick or Long-term

The Quick Fix

The easiest thing to do is to somehow increase your lizard's awareness that your partner is not the people that they remind you off. If I react dramatically when you do so-and-so, because it reminds my lizard of the 2,000 times that dad did that same thing, all I do is invite you to clearly distinguish yourself from my dad (in my lizard's eyes). Then the next time you do so-and-so, my lizard may pause a moment and double check, "Is this dad or is this my partner?" Those few seconds of pause can grow and grow over time.

How do you do this? It is actually quite easy. I focus on these traits of the lizard: It is a bit blind, easy to fool, and it loves nurturing. I get you to do something my lizard interprets as "nurturing" and I get you to do that often. My lizard begins to see you as both reminding me of "threats" and doing "nurturing" things. Confuse that lizard!

Caring Behaviors - Make the List

Each of you makes a list of things your partner does currently that triggers you to feel "cared-for" or "loved." The semantics of those words seem to reliably point at behaviors that lizards interpret as "nurturing."

Each of you makes a list of things your partner (or any partner) did in the past triggered you to feel "cared-for" or "loved."

Each of you make a list of things your could do that you think might trigger you feel "cared-for" or "loved."

Now you have a long list of actions that might work. Remember that the lizard is pretty blind and it really recognizes actions and repetition. It seems to be completely blind to thoughts, or promises, etc.

Now convert your three lists into one that only mentions the actions. Just list actions, not how many times they should be done. This is a kind of "do this and I will probably feel cared for or loved – i.e. safer." Here are some examples:

- Bring me a cup of something hot.
- Take my arm in public.

- Massage my feet with oil. Take 10 minutes.
- Give me a greeting card.
- Cook breakfast for me.
- Call me when you leave work to tell me you are coming home.
- Ask me about my day.

There are lots and lots of these. Make sure your list is simple and clear. Now, trade lists and practice. Each of you starts doing, daily, something from your partner's list. If you are not clear what an item means, ask for clarity.

Put your partner's list up somewhere that to see, and practice, practice, practice.

You may learn some things. Your partner may do something from your list that doesn't work. Just change your list.

Here's an example. In one couple, a woman put on her list, "Give me a card." During their early dating, her boyfriend had sent her greeting cards and she liked that a lot. So, like an average guy, her husband went out and bought 24 cards. On Monday he gave her a card. She loved it. On Tuesday he gave her another card. She looked at him "kind of weird." On Wednesday he gave her a card. She said, "Give me my list, please." She changed her request to "Give me a card, no more than once a week." As she tells it, "One card made me feel valuable. But the cost of three cards hurt me."

The Long-Term Fix

Here is a wonderful phrase: "There is a short path that becomes the long way. And there is a long path that becomes the short way." Listing and doing caring behaviors are a nice start. The goal is "To become a source of safety to your partner's lizard."

I think the principle is to pay more attention to whether your partner's lizard is panicking than to what they are saying. How about this idea? Lizard actions speak louder than words. I have a friend who says that he addresses his wife's lizard sometimes more than he speaks to her.

When your partner displays the lizard behaviors of flee, freeze, submit, fight, stop whatever you are doing. Seek to do things that will calm their lizard. Only they can know for sure what will work, and perhaps even they don't know for sure.

Still I believe the best way to go is the following:

1. Hold in your mind (perhaps say this out loud) that it is your goal to become a source of safety to them, their lizard.
2. Say, "I would like to know what can I do right now, practically, that would help make your lizard feel more safe. Do you have any ideas of what I can do?"
3. Try to do what your partner says. See if it works. If it does, do it again. Remember it, since it is probably one valuable clue to bringing safety to the two of you.
4. If your partner doesn't know what will work, then fall back on giving them time to think. Take a time out, gently. "Let's take a break for an hour, then. I'll check in with you in a little bit." Quiet time that is structured with an ending is very calming. Make sure you take at least 20 minutes off. Make sure you announce how long you will take.

Your long term goal is that your partner's lizard pushes your partner to move toward you because you are a source of safety to it.

This is What I Have Learned.

Good luck. This has been for me, quite a challenge. One time, in 2005, my partner told me, "You've done it. You told me you were going to be a source of safety to me. And you are. Thank you." Hearing that made it all worth it.