CHAPTER ELEVEN

If You Ain't Got Pride, You Ain't Got Nothin'

A trigger is an event, behavior, or circumstance that consistently prompts negative emotions and propels us into fight or flight—the Survival Zone. We experience triggers every day, to greater and lesser degrees. Mostly they're annoyances, akin to a bee landing on your arm or a leg. You're distracted for a moment until you swat it away. Occasionally you do get stung, the discomfort lingers, and the pain becomes preoccupying. On other occasions, it seems as if we're being triggered all day long. One event after another drives us to impatience, fear, frustration, or anger.

Though it's certainly possible to be triggered positively—by a beautiful sunset, an unexpected compliment, or a happy memory—we're biologically wired to sense danger. The result is that we notice what's wrong with our lives far more readily than we do what's right. In a paper entitled "Bad Is Stronger than Good," Roy Baumeister and his colleagues reviewed dozens of studies on the subject and summarized them this way:

> Bad emotions, bad parents, and bad feedback have more impact than good ones, and bad information is processed more thoroughly than good. The self is more motivated to avoid bad self-definitions than to pursue good ones. Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones.

This phenomenon has also been called "negativity bias." "Over and over," explains Jonathan Haidt, "psychologists find that the human mind reacts to bad things more quickly, strongly, and persistently than to equivalent good things." When you receive a perfor-

mance review of some kind at work, do you focus more on the positive comments or the negative ones? Do you spend more time savoring your gains from investments you make, or worrying about your losses? Numerous studies suggest that losing something makes us far unhappier than acquiring the same thing makes us happier. Conversely, when we have to give something up, we're much more upset than we were happy to have acquired the same thing in the first place.

"It is evolutionarily adaptive for bad to be stronger than good," argues Baumeister. "Survival requires urgent attention to possible bad outcomes, but it is less urgent with regard to good ones." Although such vigilance is no longer as critical to our survival as it was thousands of years ago, we're still highly attuned to perceived threats to our everyday well-being.

As we've discussed, we each react to the perception of threat or danger in either fight or flight. Consider the following example: the strong likelihood, based on my experience, is that you're not reading this book with much focus or retention. Your mind is wandering frequently, and you're easily distracted by whatever is going on around you. The consequence is that you're missing much of the argument we're making. I'm also willing to bet that you rarely read with much focus, which is why most of your knowledge is superficial and you end up spending a lot of time winging it, without truly understanding what you're talking about.

How does that strike you? Have I got it pretty much right? My strong suspicion is that I do, even if you feel compelled to deny it.

Okay, now take a moment to scan your body. How are you feeling at this moment? Are you breathing any faster than usual? Do you sense any anxiety in your stomach or your chest? Are you feeling flushed or perhaps slightly uneasy? Perhaps instead you're feeling irritated and annoyed by what I just told you about yourself.

If so, fair enough. My *aim* was to trigger you. In reality, of course, I have no evidence that what I just said about you has any basis in fact. Even so, if you're like most people we work with, the likelihood is that it *did* trigger you, at least to some extent, and perhaps so quickly that you might not even have noticed it was happening. That may have occurred even if you suspected I was just trying to get a rise out of you.

Your amygdala—your early warning system—picked up the poten-

tial threat posed by my words even before your prefrontal cortex had a chance to evaluate whether the words had any reasonable validity. If your amygdala did take over, it sent a message to your brain stem, which, in a fraction of a second, engineered the release of stress hormones into your bloodstream, all to get you prepared to defend yourself. Those hormones are probably still coursing through your bloodstream, although the levels should be dropping now that your prefrontal cortex has gotten in on the act and figured out that this was all a ruse.

So how did you react to my insult? Was it in fight, so that you felt annoyed by my words? Perhaps you thought to yourself, "What an idiotic presumption. I *was* focused on what I was reading, and even if I hadn't been, it's not like what you're saying here is rocket science." Or did you react in flight, so that what you felt instead was a bit exposed or embarrassed or self-critical? As in "Boy, it's really true that I don't pay attention very well. I should definitely concentrate better. I wonder if people can tell when I'm not really listening to them." In fight, we react by turning our negative emotions against others. In flight, we turn negative emotions on ourselves. Neither response serves us very well for very long. We end up making ourselves feel bad or others feel bad or both, and rarely consciously. When we sense a threat, we simply react.

WHATEVER YOU FEEL COMPELLED TO DO, DON'T

The first place a trigger shows up is in our bodies. In fight or flight, you'll recall, the sympathetic nervous system takes over, prepares us to react quickly, and overrides our reflective capacity. It robs us, in short, of the chance to make an intentional decision. Your first challenge is to become aware of the feelings that arise when you're triggered, before you act on them. That may mean noticing your heart beating faster, a sense of tightness in your chest, or a feeling of frustration, anxiety, discomfort, or anger. When you begin to notice the negative feelings arising, the next step is to apply what we call the "Golden Rule" of triggers: "Whatever you feel compelled to do, don't."

The key word here is "compelled." Compulsions are not choices, and they rarely lead to a positive outcome. If your typical instinct is to

strike out when you feel threatened, the best thing you can do is to hold your fire. If your instinct under threat is to pull back, the best thing you can do is to stay engaged. In either case, the key is to move from automatic to intentional mode, so you're capable of making a conscious decision about how to respond. Simply taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly can be helpful because it's a rapid and effective way of decreasing your physiological arousal and returning to a state of greater calm. Feeling your feet—your toes, then the balls of your feet, then your heels—is powerful because doing so pulls you back into your body and out of the visceral experience of threat.

For Jonathan, a senior executive we worked with at a large consumer products company, realizing precisely what most often pushed his buttons proved valuable. "I now realize that the times I get most triggered are when I'm feeling really pressed," he told us. "Either there's a lot of things on my plate, or I'm trying to meet a really tough deadline. In those situations, it's easy for me to feel like people are wasting my time. So let's say I get an e-mail asking for something that I think the person could have handled himself. I'm liable to dash off a short, sarcastic response. The moment I click 'Send,' I know I shouldn't have, but then it's too late. I end up having to clean up the mess I've created, which wastes my time and theirs. What I'm learning to do now is to take a deep breath and hit the 'Draft' key instead, so my e-mail is automatically saved rather than sent. By the time I get back to it later, I've calmed down, and I almost always end up deleting the e-mail altogether or completely rewriting it."

OUR CORE EMOTIONAL NEED

If a trigger is a response to the experience of threat and danger, what exactly do we feel is at risk? Why, in short, do certain events and interactions predictably drive us into the high negative zone? This isn't the sort of question most of us think about very often, not least because we're rarely consciously aware that we've been triggered. Even when we do start to notice our negative emotions, we're usually more concerned with getting the unpleasantness behind us, or blaming it on someone else, than we are in figuring out what prompted it in the first place.

Nonetheless, because bad is stronger than good, triggers leaves a strong memory trace. When we ask people to recall a recent trigger, almost no one has difficulty time doing so. Over the years, our clients have shared literally thousands of examples with us. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the origin of the trigger can be traced to a feeling of having been devalued or diminished by someone else's words or behavior. Our core emotional need is to feel secure—to be valued—and challenges to our self-worth do just the opposite. They make us feel devalued and insecure. Most of us find such feelings uncomfortable at best and intolerable at worst.

James Gilligan, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, has spent forty years studying violence. "In the course of that work," he writes, "I have been struck by the frequency with which I received the same answer when I asked prisoners, or mental patients, why they assaulted or even killed someone. Time after time, they would reply, 'because he disrespected me.' " Gilligan has found that gaining respect, even more than money, is often the motive for armed robbery. "When I actually sat down and spoke at length with men who had repeatedly committed such crimes, I would start to hear comments like 'I never got so much respect before in my life as I did when I pointed a gun at some dude's face.' "

Gilligan tells the story of working with an inmate in a prison who seemed uncontrollable. The inmate kept assaulting guards, despite increasingly severe punishments, until he was finally placed in solitary confinement twenty-four hours a day. Even then, whenever a guard opened the door to his cell, the inmate attacked. Gilligan was brought in to try to help. "What do you want so badly," he asked the inmate, "that you are willing to give up everything else in order to get it?" Ordinarily so inarticulate that it was difficult to understand anything he said, the inmate stood up tall and replied to Gilligan's question with absolute clarity: "Pride. Dignity. Self-esteem." Then he added, "And I'll kill every motherfucker in that cell block if I have to in order to get it. If you ain't got pride, you ain't got nothin.' "

This need for respect is primal and survival-based. Elijah Anderson, a sociologist at Yale, has also spent many years studying violence. Specifically he studies something he calls the "code of the streets" that emerges out of the cultures of poor inner city communities in which opportunities for social mobility are severely limited. "At the

heart of the code," Anderson writes, "is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated 'right,' or granted the deference one deserves. Respect is viewed as an entity that is hard-won but easily lost, and so must constantly be guarded." The street codes include "If someone disses you, you got to straighten them out" and "Don't punk out."

The result is a classic zero-sum game: survival of the baddest. "The extent to which one person can raise himself up," says Anderson, "depends on his ability to put another person down. There is a generalized sense that very little respect is to be had, and therefore everyone competes to get what affirmation he can of the little that is available." Echoing Gilligan's experience with the violent inmate, Anderson has found that "Many inner-city young men in particular crave respect to such a degree that they will risk their lives to attain and maintain it."

The executives with whom we work have more ways to gain the respect of others than most inner-city kids do. But feeling valued is no less essential to them. Without a stable sense of value, after all, who are we? Much as we aspire to feel good about ourselves regardless of what others may say, our sense of self-worth is profoundly influenced by the degree to which others respect us. "We want them to acknowledge our existence, take account of us, and react to us," explains William Irvine in his provocative book *On Desire*. "We might want them to love us, and if not love us then at least admire us. And if we can't have people's admiration, we seek their respect or recognition." Or, as Daniel Goleman puts it, "Threats to our standing in the eyes of others are remarkably potent biologically, almost as powerful as those to our very survival."

Above all other stresses, it's the feeling of being personally criticized that appears to take the greatest toll on our bodies, and on our ability to think clearly. In a meta-analysis of 208 stress-related studies, the researchers Margaret Kemeny and Sally Dickerson found that the highest rises in cortisol levels—the most extreme fight-or-flight responses—are prompted by "threats to one's social self, or threat to one's social acceptance, esteem, and status." An impersonal stressor such as an endlessly ringing alarm is obviously annoying, but it prompts a far less pernicious stress response. When people are subjected to an uncontrollable alarm, their cortisol levels rise but return to a baseline level within forty minutes. By contrast, a threat to their self-esteem prompts cortisol levels to remain elevated for more than

an hour. That helps explains why even the most "constructive" criticism so rarely has much impact on us and is often counterproductive. To really take in and process critical feedback, it must be delivered by someone who makes us feel safe and who we truly believe has our best interests at heart. We're far less likely to feel inspired by someone who says "Here's what's wrong with what you did" than we are by a more forward-looking "Here's what works so far, and here's what I think you need to do to take this to the next level."

In another of his reviews of the literature, Baumeister and his colleague Mark Leary looked at the degree to which "the need to belong" is a fundamental human motivation. Abraham Maslow first gave the word "belongingness" currency in the 1960s, when he defined it as the most important need after safety in his hierarchy of needs. Baumeister and Leary were interested to see if the empirical evidence supported Maslow's hypothesis. "Much of what human beings do is done in the service of belongingness," they concluded, after looking at dozens of studies. "Belongingness can be almost as compelling a need as food." Or, as the UCLA neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman bluntly puts it, "To a mammal, being socially connected to caregivers is necessary to survival."

Positive connection with others underlies our sense of security, which is critical to our effectiveness. The more we feel our value is at risk, the more energy we spend defending it and the less energy we have available to create value. A trigger serves as an alarm, alerting us to a potential danger at hand. In our experiences with thousands of clients, the trigger almost always has something to do with the feeling of being devalued. Consider this list of the ten triggers we hear most frequently:

- Feeling spoken to with condescension and lack of respect
- Being treated unfairly
- Not feeling appreciated
- Not being listened to or feeling heard
- Someone else taking credit for my work
- Being kept waiting
- Someone else's sloppy work on a project I'm overseeing

- Feeling criticized or blamed
- Unrealistic deadlines
- People who think they know it all

A SECURE BASE

The need to feel cared for and secure has its origins at the earliest stages of our development, which makes biological sense. Without being cared for, we wouldn't survive. In a fascinating series of studies, Michael Meaney, a neuroendocrinologist at McGill University, found that the quality of nurturing a mother rat gives to her offspring literally alters the way the DNA in the offspring's genes are expressed. Exposed to stress, baby rats who've received a lot of licking and grooming from their mothers later produce fewer stress hormones than rats who receive less care. The more nurtured rats also grow up to be more alert, confident, and bold in their behaviors and more likely to nurture their own offspring. The same pattern is true, Meaney believes, of all species. More than any species, however, human beings carry this need for nurturing forward throughout their lives, at home and at work, the intensity of the need influenced by the degree to which it was met early in their lives.

The renowned physician and psychoanalyst John Bowlby spent a lifetime studying parent-child attachment in human beings, motivated in part by his own experience growing up in an emotionally chilly upper-class British family in the early 1900s. Like most such children at the time, he rarely saw his parents and was sent off to boarding school at the age of seven, an experience he found frightening and painful.

Bowlby's theories about attachment grew out of observing and treating children, many of them World War II orphans, as well as children who were hospitalized or institutionalized and therefore separated from a primary caretaker. The key to healthy emotional development, Bowlby came to believe, is what he termed "a secure base from which a child or an adolescent can make sorties into the outside world and to which he can return knowing for sure that he will be welcomed when he gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened."

In Bowlby's formulation and that of his American disciple Mary Ainsworth, a secure base and a safe haven provide a reliable source of emotional renewal that makes it possible for a child to risk exploring the unknown. The more secure the child's base, the more confident she becomes and the more willing she is to venture into the world, for longer and longer periods of time. Margaret Mahler, a psychoanalyst and contemporary of Sigmund Freud, specifically described the "return to base" as an opportunity to "refuel." In short, feeling valued and secure is a basic form of stress inoculation.

Our early-childhood experiences leave an imprint that powerfully and predictably influences our security—and our vulnerability to triggers—throughout our lives. Even as adults, Baumeister concludes, the fear of aloneness and the absence of caring relationships are "worse than the pain of emotional or physical abuse." Over time, the source of a secure base typically evolves from a parent to a spouse or a partner. The extent to which this need is met profoundly influences not just the quality of our relationships, but also our effectiveness in the world. "A great deal of neurotic, maladaptive and destructive behavior," writes Baumeister, "seems to reflect either desperate attempts to establish or maintain relationships with other people or sheer frustration and purposelessness when one's own need to belong goes unmet."

Phillip Shaver, an attachment researcher and psychologist influenced by Bowlby and Ainsworth, estimates that just over half of Americans demonstrate "secure attachment," marked by the capacity for trusting relationships, good self-esteem, and comfort in sharing feelings with friends and partners. Approximately 20 percent of us are what Ainsworth originally termed "anxious," meaning we often worry that we're not getting enough love and are clingy and overly dependent as a consequence. The other quarter of us are "avoidant," meaning we're distrusting of others, struggle with closeness, and tend to be more emotionally remote, withholding, and detached.

Threatening events exacerbate our need for a secure base, even as adults. "To remain within easy access of a familiar individual known to be ready and willing to come to our aid in an emergency," Bowlby wrote, "is clearly a good insurance policy—whatever our age." The need for such a person helps to explain the intriguing Gallup Organization finding that one of the keys to high engagement and high per-

formance is "having a best friend at work." A friend or trusted mentor at work creates a secure base—a source of continuing emotional nourishment, safety, and security in the face of everyday challenges. We frame this in energy terms: the greater the demand we face, the greater our need for renewal and recovery—not just physically but also emotionally.

Healthy emotional development—and the highest level of effectiveness—requires the ability to move freely and flexibly between autonomy and secure connection with others. Too little encouragement, love, and protection—on the job or off—leaves us feeling unsafe, insecure, fearful, and unprepared to function effectively. Paradoxically, narcissism—excessive self-regard and self-absorption—is one of the ways we defend against an underlying sense of inadequacy. "A common defense against the painful experience of deflated value is inflated value," explains psychologist Terrence Real.

Two behaviors are common among leaders and managers when their own basic emotional needs haven't been satisfied in nourishing, enduring ways. The first is insistently calling attention to their own value, often through the arbitrary exercise of power. The most obvious manifestations are a high need for control, poor listening skills, impatience, and self-aggrandizement. So long as leaders are unwilling to look honestly at themselves—to recognize their own fears and shortcomings—they can't grow or change. The people they lead or manage also pay a price. The second common deficit-driven behavior among leaders and managers is disparaging others to bolster themselves. This can take the form of relentless criticism of those they oversee and, more subtly, the withholding of any kind of positive feedback. The performance impact is clear: the less people feel valued and appreciated, the less engaged, loyal, and productive they tend to be.

In some cases, inflated self-regard is not a cover for insecurity but rather a genuine sense of entitlement, self-satisfaction, and superiority. In one study of 37,000 college students, narcissistic personality traits increased from the 1980s to the present at the same rate that obesity did. In a second study, 11,000 teenagers between fourteen and sixteen years of age filled out a 400-item questionnaire in either 1951 or in 1989. The most significant change came in response to the statement "I am an important person." Only 12 percent answered "yes" in 1951, while nearly 80 percent did so in 1989.

That could be perceived as good news, but the sense of superiority many of these self-important people feel is unwarranted. High self-esteem, for example, has not been correlated with better grades, test scores, or job performance. "College students with inflated views of themselves (who think they are better than they actually are) make poorer grades the longer they are in college [and] they are also more likely to drop out," say the researchers Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell. When narcissists are administered tests of their general competence, they're far more confident of their answers than their humbler counterparts but score no better. Nearly 40 percent of American eighth-graders report confidence in their math skills, compared to just 6 percent of South Koreans, but the South Koreans score far higher on actual tests. In another study, leaders who rated themselves high and also scored high on narcissistic traits were seen by their peers as below average. When employees view leaders as egotistical and self-absorbed, they also give them below-average scores in interpersonal skills and integrity.

Whether inflated self-regard is a thin cover for inadequacy or an inflated and unwarranted confidence, it's at least as dysfunctional as insecurity. Excessive self-importance, self-absorption, high need for admiration, and sensitivity to criticism—common traits of the grandiose—all undermine our capacity to learn, grow and take responsibility for our shortcomings and missteps. Envy, lack of empathy, and quickness to anger all conspire to prevent narcissistic leaders from establishing and maintaining close relationships and working effectively with others. In short, high self-regard unbalanced by the capacity to value and appreciate others can be pernicious.

Even well short of these extremes, the vast majority of us struggle to varying degrees with not feeling sufficiently valued in the workplace and are guilty at times of devaluing others. We spend much of our lives feeling either "one up" or "one down"—better than or not as good as. Both positions separate us from others, and neither serves us well. "The paradox of the grandiose position," writes Terrence Real, "is that it solidifies the very relationship disconnections whose pain it seeks to soothe."

Because our core need for value is so rarely acknowledged or addressed in most organizations, we typically try to keep this hunger under wraps and invisible at work. Vulnerability, after all, makes all

of us feel uncomfortable and at risk. At the same time, we go to great lengths and expend enormous energy to protect our sense of value when it's threatened—whether in the form of lashing out, blaming others, denying, rationalizing, or withdrawing.

The fight response to a feeling of insufficient value is to call attention to ourselves more aggressively. We see this in leaders who flaunt their power, hog credit for successes, blame others for failures, and brook no dissent. By contrast, humility is often a measure of a leader's true confidence. In *Good to Great,* Jim Collins identifies humility, along with fierce resolve, as one of the two key qualities of CEOs of the most enduringly successful companies. This makes sense from an energy perspective. The leader who is secure in his own value is free to invest energy in empowering others.

The flight response, when our value feels at risk, is a means of minimizing the threat by avoiding conflict with others altogether. At most organizations we've worked in, flight is more common than fight. But the impact on employees is at least as insidious. In one company, for example, the CEO simply refused to have conversations he felt would be upsetting to others and therefore difficult for him. He wanted to be liked, above all, but his behavior had the opposite impact. The CEO's most senior executives had no idea where they stood with him, learned over the years not to trust that he was telling them what he really felt, and felt destabilized as a result. The CEO's insistence on avoiding conflict prompted considerable enmity from his executives. They walked around feeling frustrated, insecure, and even angry but afraid to say anything about the problem, which undermined his own and the company's effectiveness.

Envy and greed are two of the other primary manifestations of our unmet needs for security and value. Money is a means by which we try to ensure our security but also to stoke our sense of value. What money buys is visible and concrete, but it's also limited and one-dimensional. Greed is a reflection of the experience that no amount of money is ever enough to fill our deeper needs. How else to explain the lust for ever-larger sums that led so many of those in the banking industry—already wealthy—to make the sort of reckless, shortsighted choices that led to the current financial crisis? Nor is money the only way we express our greed and our unmet need for value. Greed also

shows up in everything from the unwillingness to delegate to the hoarding of information.

Envy is greed directed at what others have that we want. It prompts us not just to squander energy by comparing ourselves unfavorably with others, but also to seek value at their expense. Is it surprising that when we gossip, the stories we tell are ten times as likely to be negative as positive? As François de La Rochefoucauld gently and amusingly observed, "We all have strength enough to endure the trouble of others." Or, as the novelist Pete Dexter put it more bluntly, describing his reaction to the success of fellow writers: "Jealousy's the wrong word for what I usually feel. It's closer to hoping they get hit by a car."

When we try to build our value at the expense of others, through greed or envy, they typically respond as if their own survival is at stake. It's akin to two drowning people trying to save themselves by pushing the other one down. Likewise, the attempt to prove our superiority over others ends up separating us from the intimate connections we so crave. Our well-being depends not just on building our own value, but also on actively valuing others.

CHAPTER ELEVEN ACTION STEPS

- Our core emotional need is to feel secure. In most cases, negative emotions can be traced to the experience of not feeling valued. Think of the most recent time you felt upset—angry, frustrated, anxious, even impatient. Can you trace it back to a perceived threat to your own value? Become more aware of how much energy you spend worrying about, or trying to restore, or asserting your value.
- Go back to page 139 and revisit the most common triggers. Triggers show up first in our bodies. Notice the next time you feel your heart beating faster, tightness in your chest, or queasiness in your stomach. This will give you a way of recognizing when you've been triggered, simply by the way you're feeling physically.
- When a trigger lands you in the "Survival Zone," the first key is to calm your physiology. That requires applying what we call the Golden Rule of Triggers: whatever you feel compelled to do, don't. Instead take a deep breath, and then feel your feet. Buy time until your body calms down, so that you can make an intentional choice about how to best respond to the trigger.