

The Flat-Brain Theory of Emotions

by Dr. Jim Petersen

Excerpts:

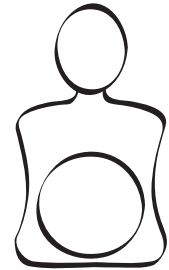
JOIN ME NOW for a serious, tongue-in-cheek look at how our minds and emotions interact and how we can learn to relax and accept ourselves and others more easily.

Stomach functions

That big circle in the stomach area is where I locate the feelings, because that's where I notice butterflies before public speaking and feel pangs of hunger that tempt me away from the computer toward the refrigerator. You may locate your feelings elsewhere, but for convenience, I'm going to stash them in the stomach.

Stomach functions consist of our emotions or feelings – those inner nudges that let us know when we're uncomfortable, happy, excited, interested, attracted, irritable, angry, resentful, frustrated, curious. Feelings are our internal responses to the world around us, to what we're thinking, and to our bodies.

The round container suggests that emotions by nature are the personal part of us. They connect us with each other, because we all experience them. You and I may enjoy different things, but the "enjoying" part is the same. Because I enjoy steelhead fishing even in a downpour, I can feel a connection to the golfer sloshing along under a huge umbrella.



Heart functions

We relate with our heart functions. I put a yin-yang squiggle inside the heart to suggest that "it takes two to tango," that you and I both have something to offer, and that we can learn from each other.

Healthy heart functions give and receive concerns, suggestions, and support and are ready to consider many options and possibilities. Healthy hearts recognize that we don't possess "the whole truth," but are confident both in owning our views and remaining open to the views of others, a rare maturity in our contentious world.

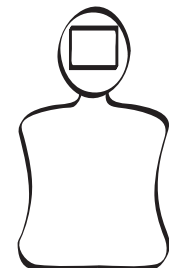
The yin-yang divided heart reminds us how essential the qualities of owning our views and openness to others are to relating – to building friendships and human communities.



Head functions

The head functions incorporate thinking, planning, remembering, reviewing, deciding, rationalizing – what we consider the logical part of us. The brain processes what we see, hear, feel, remember, and imagine. It picks up messages from the emotional system inside our skin and the world of people and events outside. It decides what to do with the input. The brain can create and problem-solve.

I've drawn the square corners and hard lines to suggest that head functions are the computer-like, non-personal part of us. Relating to people based on logic/thinking alone rarely builds close relationships.



How it's all supposed to work

One simple theory of behavior suggests that we humans move from a state of bother to a state of calm. For example: We get curious (bothered), we jump on the internet, we Google the topic we're interested in (behavior), we get the info, and we relax (calm). Or, we become concerned (bothered) about hungry children, we research helping agencies, we send a check or go to a rural community to teach agriculture (behavior), and we settle down (calm). We use up our emotions to fuel deciding and acting.

Emotions are the energies that move us. When heads notice that stomachs are getting active (anxiety, love, excitement, hurt), then we decide whether to tell anyone and/or act further on any of those feelings.

Heart functions allow us to be open with others and to collaborate with them, thus multiplying our individual abilities to build a better world and enjoy life.

However, while human beings have enough caring for people, concern for the environment, curiosity to learn, desire for justice, worries over the way things are, and broad interests to right the wrongs in the world and do everything that needs creating, organizing, building, or beautifying, you may have noticed that a lot of people in the world are not getting along well enough to pull this off.

What's that about? The Flat-Brained Syndrome will suggest that the heads, hearts, and stomachs of the world are getting overloaded or short-circuited somehow and not working well together. We'll look at what we can do about that on a personal level.



NOW, LETS TAKE THE flat-brain theory of emotions a step further, into the flat-brain syndrome. It shows what happens to us when our systems go out of whack. For example:

- Our stomachs expand with an overload of mixed emotions.
- They press the heart functions into bricks in our chests, sending our relating abilities south on us.
- The upward expansion flattens brains against the tops of our skulls, forcing our thinking, hearing, and seeing off kilter.
- When flat-brained we can't hear well, see accurately, think straight, or act sensibly.

We'll have a little fun with this model and pick up some clues about what to do about flat-brain fallout (yours or someone else's).

Stomachs overload

Most of us have hurt-feeling residue from earlier painful situations that we hadn't unloaded well enough. The hurts arose from feeling inadequate when big people could do everything better than we could, from check marks on school papers, from adolescent anxieties over who likes whom better, from worry over arguing parents and world crises, and from whether we'll find a job, or ever get married.

These lumps of hurt feelings clutter our emotion containers and don't leave much room for current stomach activities – falling in love, anger, committing to life direction, fear, joy, or any emotions that move us along toward decision-making and action.

Then something happens to upset us even more – hurt from an unkind remark, worry about finances, news about a medical issue, fear of public speaking, shock over a near accident, serious infatuation.

The disturbance adds to our stomach containers, expanding them beyond their normal sizes, like tumors, gradually pressuring internal organs out of place, perhaps even squeezing them between ribs. It



pushes everything out of place. We feel awkward, uncomfortable, and slightly off-balance. Women who've experienced pregnancy have no trouble getting this picture.

Whenever emotion containers expand, normal activities or conversations take a turn for the worse. If a husband hugs a wife who is full of worry about a sick child, he may get rebuffed (as cuddled ribs pinch organs) with the comment, *"How can you think of sex at a time like this?"* Emotions under pressure can turn explosive, like steam in a pressure cooker. Jammed-up feelings often cause us to blurt them. We lose our ability to do stomach talk.

Feelings under pressure tend to produce edgy, erratic behavior, where we take them out on others, rather than sharing them. In a corporate setting, this can create chaos. It can even turn deadly, as in "going postal."

In the packed gut, feelings mush together and lose clarity. We may know that we're "really upset," but not be at all clear what kind of upsets we have or much less, what caused them. It's no wonder we get touchy and feel like exploding when we're on system overload.

In addition, warm friendly feelings get displaced by strong negative ones, that is, they get pressed flat against the container walls. Emotions need room to flex for us to "feel" their movement. That's why resentments need to be unloaded before we can "like" our spouses again after a conflict.

At times I've counseled a long-term-conflict couple for months before the hurt, angry one had an inkling of a warm feeling toward the other. It took time to unload the fat belly, to relieve the resentments before "liking" could peel off the container walls and move enough to be felt again.

Hearts turn bricklike

When stomachs bulge they squeeze the heart functions up into the chest cavity. The yin-yang squiggle blurs and disintegrates. We cease to be open to other people or to varied options. We can't give or receive suggestions. And our ability to cooperate vanishes. Shades of grey disappear into black and white, and it's either: "Knuckle under or fight," or, "Deed them the company or get rid of them."



When bothered, our hearts spread and turn bricklike, which pretty well describes my ability to make small talk with folks before speaking to a large crowd. When an upset is more serious than pre-speech jitters, we lose self-confidence, our friends seem more like enemies, and we can feel quite alone.

Any ability we had to use heart talk, to share and be open with each other morphs into put-downs, absolute statements, and resistance. Our collaborative inclinations go up in smoke.

And brains go flat

Expanding bellies push up through our bodies, until the pressure hits our brains, flattening them against the top of our skulls. Brains are designed to work well when shaped like short fat footballs (or the squares in my pictures), but not when squashed. Flat brains create serious defects in our head functions.



Flat-brained folks tend to think that others are the problem. *"I wouldn't be upset if you would just be different than you are."* Quite logical, if you have a flat brain and your thinking is askew. Any wonder that people who are fat-bellied, hard-hearted, and flat-brained don't focus well on us and when we are that way, we can't focus on them either?

When I have to introduce people to each other or to a crowd, I get uneasy. The uneasiness hits my brain, which goes flat, twisting my memory chips. *"I want to introduce my good friend. We fish together, been*

through thick and thin, ah, ah..." How embarrassing, my memory gone. Later, when I relax, I can almost feel my brain un-flattening and the name dropping onto the back of my tongue.

For many students timed-tests stir enough anxiety to flatten brains and crash memory banks. Everything they learned the night before is irretrievable, until they are drinking coffee and relaxed after they bombed the tests.

Our thinking goes funny, that is, it resembles the emotions in our stomachs. If we're excited, we think there are no mountains we can't climb; if depressed, life is not worth living; if suspicious, that someone tried to scuttle us; and if angry, that other people caused all of our problems.

When flat-brained we say crazy things that seem reasonable to us at the time. But later, when our brains aren't flat, they seem as out of line to us as they did to others.

For example: After we say something in anger, we try to repair the damage by saying, *"I didn't mean what I said when I was angry."* But it doesn't help, because they (and we) know we did mean it at the time. Everyone believed it because our words, tone of voice, tight-jawed body language, and finger waving produced a congruent message.

When you understand the flat-brain syndrome, you can carefully and respectfully listen to the person you hurt, and then say: *"I meant those awful things when I said them. But, my emotional system overloaded and my brain went flat (I was nuts, off-balance, crazy). I'm afraid I say dumb stuff when I'm flat-brained. But now that I've calmed down and my brain is working again, I don't mean what I said anymore. I apologize for hurting your feelings. Now what I mean is ..."*

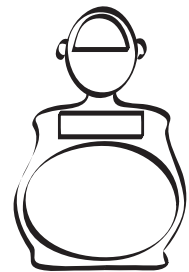
Falling in love too can make brains really flat. In the early throes of infatuation we promise to climb the highest mountains and swim the deepest oceans for our beloved, yet later when our brains un-flatten, we have trouble taking out the garbage (or listening patiently).

I don't think it makes sense to hold what people say against them when their brains are flat. When we realize we all get flat-brained – say hurtful things and damage people – we will better be able to accept other people and discover forgiveness as a two way street. Some one said, *"The more you understand people, the less there is to forgive."*

The three-day-return law that allows for changing our minds after major purchases, recognizes, accepts, and acts on the reality of the flat-brain syndrome. Perhaps we could apply a version of the return law to things we say and do when someone is flat-brained. After three days we could go back and check to see whether we or they still really meant what was said or done.

Hearing is skewed

Imagine what flattening a malleable brain against a skull might do to eardrums. As a child on a family vacation in Yosemite, I enjoyed watching the tourist-fed squirrels. One fatter and bolder than the rest, would stay and eat a little longer, then waddle toward safety under the cabins. To get there he had to go between a couple of two by fours, making his crawl space a tight one and five-eighths inches. As he flattened from football to waffle, his fat little body pressed out in all directions. A similar sort of squirrel squeeze happens to our brains. They flatten and spread equally in all directions, putting pressure on eardrums from the inside, turning them into tone-deaf misinformation gatherers.



Wonder why we have trouble hearing each other? People with flat brains and crushed eardrums simply can't listen well.

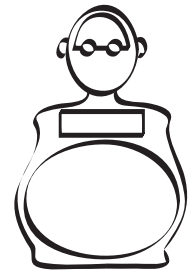
What we hear is affected by how we are feeling. For example: A wife's question asked out of curiosity: "Do we have enough money to go to the beach this weekend?" when heard by an insecure flat-brained husband, could sound to him like: "You never will make as much as the guy I should have married."

Or, if I'm excited about the possibility of you going fishing in Alaska with me and you say, "I'll think about it," the hope-full pressure on my ears causes me to hear: "Sure, when do we leave?" And I mistakenly make airline reservations and start packing.

To test the flat-brain effect on ears, try explaining something logically to a person who is upset. Nothing you intend to say gets through. A youngster coming home from school in tears, says, "The teacher yelled at me in front of the class." We try to explain that teachers have bad days too. The child hears: "She wouldn't have yelled at you if you didn't deserve it. We're on her side." Flat-brained kids don't hear any more accurately than adults who are fat-bellied and flat-brained.

Seeing is distorted

You guessed it. The same goes for the eyes. The fault line across the bottom of a flat brain is at eye level, so the brain presses on the eyeballs from the inside. When I'm uptight about being late, having a helpful gas station guy show me a map does minimal good. Little penetrates through my eyes and not only do his vocal directions fuzz over, but I can't remember more than two turns. The flat-brained syndrome strikes again. (Thank goodness for technology and a GPS to rescue me and others like me.)



I've noticed that flat-brained folks often have eyes that bulge a bit – a little pressure from the inside. Take notice the next time you hear someone say, "You're always late!" Or, "I didn't do that!" Or, "I just caught my first salmon in years!" Or, "I've decided to divorce my overbearing spouse!" I'll bet you'll see bulging eyes.

In pre-marital counseling, a common experience for me is asking a couple with differing backgrounds, interests, educational levels, hobbies, and attitudes about children how they will handle their differences. They answer in effect, "We're in love. That's all that matters!" When I notice the slight bulge in their eyes, I have a pretty good idea about the state of their eardrums. I say to myself, "Mmmm. Serious cases of flatbrainitis. They can't see, hear, or think straight." Incidentally, I'm still researching to see if this term might just come from the Latin *flotabrainaura*, but in any case, I know there is no point in showing them statistics about their poor chances of working out a successful marriage or talking to them about conflict resolution and decision-making.

Nothing much is working above their mouths.

What I do is listen to them talk about their love/meeting, their resistance to parents and friends who said it wouldn't work, their fear that if they lose this one they'll never find another one, or whatever is in their emotion containers. When enough emotional steam escapes through their mouths, their brains unflatten, and their eyes return to normal size, then I can talk with them and help them think about what it takes to put a complicated relationship together.

It takes unloading stomachs to allow head functions to work, but that's getting ahead of myself. Let's check on the mouth.

And the mouth works overtime

So a flat brain damages thinking, skews hearing, and distorts vision, what about the mouth? Check my favorite drawing: With the brain flattened against the top of the skull, there's more than enough room for the mouth to work freely (and it usually does). Note however, that the mouth is connected to a defective brain. In this condition, while it can be useful in unloading pressure from the stomach, it's not very good at conveying reliable information.



So again, when people are flat-brained, please don't hold what they say against them. And don't hold hurtful things you say or do against yourself either. Remember, we all get flat-brained.

One of the beauties of the flat-brain syndrome is that it is so accepting. It describes a state we all experience on occasion. I'll bet you recognized yourself in parts of it. I hope you smiled when you did. It's meant to give you a tool for lightening tense situations. And it works.

The people around me use this common language, and I can just see people relax when someone says, "My brain is flat." Then others think: "Oh, that's the problem. I know about that. I'll cut you some slack." This accepting process keeps us from misreading each other's tense behavior and gives us room to work out our upsets. Families and work groups alike find that a common understanding of the flat-brain process helps them diffuse uncomfortable situations and allows them to work better together.

True and not true

I had just finished describing the flat-brained syndrome to about fifty people, when a young nurse raised her hand and asked me if this was a new physiological theory developed since she had finished her training five years before. After the chuckling in the room settled, I answered that it's one of those theories that is both true, and not true at the same time.

While it isn't hard science, it does describe how we operate. We get upset and that causes our bodies to go out of whack.* Our ability to act with emotional and logical clarity diminishes. In the middle of the last century a psychiatrist said about a sudden increase of emotional energy or anxiety, that it "has more than a little in common with a blow on the head."



For how to deal with flat-brains, yours or others, read and enjoy
Why Don't We Listen Better? Communicating & Connecting in Relationships.

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