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# Consider Yourself

Dear Janice,

## **The Lesson of Phineas Gage**

Phineas Gage was a construction site foreman who was decidedly unlucky. And I mean very, very unlucky. One day at work he accidentally shot an iron rod through his head leaving part of his brain on the end of it. Apparently prior to this accident, he was a patient, friendly man. After, he tended to be impatient, rude and temperamental. Perhaps you're thinking "well I would be too if I'd shot myself in the head". The interesting thing though is that his behaviour wasn't a choice. Rather, the connection between his thinking brain and his emotional brain was destroyed by the accident, and his thinking brain could no longer control his overactive emotions.

Whereas for most of us, we can think about the consequences of our emotional responses and modify those responses if we realise that they would be inappropriate.

The reverse effect was experienced by a successful corporate lawyer after the removal of a brain tumour. When the tumour was removed, like with Phineas Gage, it severed the connection between his thinking brain and his emotional brain. Only this time, the patient didn't turn into an impatient, rude person. Rather, even though he lost his wife, home and savings, he didn't express much dismay at all. And, although he could still use logical reasoning, he struggled to make decisions because he wasn't able to decide how he felt about various options. So even when we apply our logical decision making skills, it's essential that we are able to feel about what we're thinking.

To get along well in the world, it's not only important that we can think about our emotional responses before we act and recognise how we feel about our thoughts: It's also important that we can recognise the feelings of others and adjust our behaviours to reflect that understanding. To put this in context, let me share an example from my life, which if you have children I suspect you might empathise with. My daughter can wake up in a very grumpy mood. I never know from one day to the next whether a ray of sunshine is going to wake me up or a tornado. On the days when I'm greeted by a tornado, sometimes I'm great at recognising what's going on for her, thinking about my emotional response, and responding in a mature, supportive, calm way. On other days, when the tornado blows in, I lose my cool. Gone is the mature, supportive woman, and in her place is a petulant tornado to match the one that blew in. And

along with the petulant thoughts and behaviour, I also recognise that what I feel about this is... drum roll please... guilty. But, once I recognise how I feel, I can think about that reaction and modify it. In other words, because I have a connection between my thinking brain and my emotional brain I can manage my interactions with my daughter by thinking about what I'm feeling and feeling about what I'm thinking.

So the moral of this story is that our emotional intelligence matters... oh, and stay away from iron rods.

Warmest regards,  
Janice

PS After attending a talk on emotional intelligence by speaker Richard Jones, I hopped on the Internet to do some more reading. I came across a blog post titled [Your Emotion Brain - Left Brain/Right Brain Myth](#), from which I've paraphrased some ideas in this newsletter. I recommend reading the post if this topic interests you.

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