

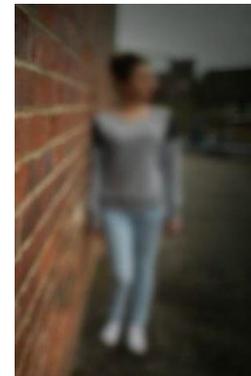
Understanding interpersonal communication through emotional intelligence

An EUGANGS case study by Ray Walters

Understanding how the brain functions when an individual is presented with a dangerous situation means students can understand their own emotions better, and develop strategies for dealing with people in a state of heightened emotion. On the EUGANGS course we looked at Daniel Goleman's explanation of emotional intelligence, and considered the neural processes that lead to fear, anger and aggressive reactions. In this case study, Ray Walters describes a situation he has found himself in as a youth worker, and reflects on what was happening in that situation in the light of what he has learned about emotional intelligence on the course.

A vulnerable teenager

I worked with a person who put herself at risk on a daily basis. She would befriend men in the local area, ending up in the local park with them. This put her at significant risk, as it was believed she was administering sexual favors in return for alcohol and cigarettes. This person suffered from low self-esteem and attachment issues, however refused to engage with the child psychologist. It was very difficult to build a trusting relationship with this young person.



Confronting the teenager and the men who were with her

There was one particular incident which sticks out in my mind involving this teenager. I was on an evening shift and she decided she would go off into the local area without staff permission. Staff went out to look for her and she was nowhere to be seen. We gave it half an hour or so then I grabbed the minibus keys and asked a female member of staff to accompany me to look for her. I drove the minibus straight to the local park entrance and we walked into the park to head towards the top. This was the place we had been told she was frequenting. As we walked up into the park we spotted her walking with seven or eight males of about 18-20 years of age. It was apparent she was putting herself in danger.

Understanding my reaction from an emotional intelligence perspective

As a carer and father, I became angered by what I saw about to take place, but I had to stay professional. I now realise, having learned about emotional intelligence what was taking place with me at that moment in time. Daniel Goleman in his presentation¹ demonstrates how sensory information goes to the amygdala in the middle of the brain. This then scans the information to see if there is a threat. It gives a fuzzy picture of what is going on, but if the amygdala thinks it has a match, it triggers what is called the hyperthelamic-pituitary-

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTltzKrNX68>



adrenal (HPA) axis. Once this is triggered it reorganizes memories and concentrates our attention so our focus is only on the thing that is scaring us, and our bodies are prepared for fight or flight. Counteracting this emotional response is the rational thought of the prefrontal cortex, which helps get things in perspective, can calm us down and make us think of longer term consequences. In extreme cases, however, the amygdala can dominate our actions, and create extreme emotional responses – this is called an amygdala hi-jack.

This did not happen to me in this case. As I say, I countered my anger at the situation by remembering I was the professional. My rational thinking ascertained the crucial facts i.e. there are 7 or 8 men here and you are with a female you are working you have to be professional and use your experience to talk to the young lady and the men.

Applying emotional intelligence to defuse the situation

I then called out to the young men to stop as I wanted to have a chat with them, I explained to them that I was a carer in the community the young lady was a minor and was known to the local police as being at serious risk.

The men were co-operative and left. We can explain this behaviour too in terms of emotional intelligence. The young men may have been experiencing sexual arousal and could have also been very close to committing a crime against a minor. However, once I mentioned her age and the police this will have encourage rational thinking in the prefrontal cortex to overcome their emotional desires. Longer term consequences for them could be prosecution, being added to the sex offenders register, and shame for their families.

The girl was very angry we had disclosed her age. I asked my colleague to offer her a cigarette to calm her down, which is not protocol, however in this situation I saw it as a lesser evil, and would explain my actions when we got her back to the unit safely.

Similar incidents occurred on more than one occasion, the young lady was reported as putting herself at serious risk, to her social worker the managers and the local police. She was subsequently moved to a dwelling on the other side of the city.



If you would like to find out more about Ray's engagement in the EUGANGS project, you can contact him at: walee_abufarah@hotmail.com

New skills and competences to address skills gaps and mismatch within the sectors working with Gang and Youth Crime across Europe (EUGANGS). (539766-LLP-1-2013-1-UK-LEONARDO-LMP/ Grant Agreement 2013 3382 /001-001). This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication [communication] reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.