IT people often think like Spock

Interview by: Jan Sedlák   for Lupa.cz

" IT people often think without emotions like Spock, it can cause relationship problems... "

With psychologist and therapist Sebastian James about why IT people often put emphasize on logic instead of emotions and why they have relationship problems due to that.

Sebastian James is a psychologist and therapist who also develops the concept of so-called radical honesty. His clients often comprise of people from the information technology environment, among other reasons owing to loneliness and the impossibility of establishing closer relationships with partners and friends. In the interview for Lupa.cz, James describes why IT people often try to act like Mr Spock and why they prefer logic to emotions...

One-third of your clients are IT people. It is going to be a generalization, but why do they visit you most often?

It's good that you are declaring that we are going to generalize, because we are really going to do that in this interview. However, the most common reason for IT people to seek out psychotherapy is a long-lasting experience of loneliness and a continuous failure to establish quality and fulfilling relationships. IT people are sometimes surprised that they are successful in most other areas of life, but they don't feel good socially.

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Anxiety and depression are also relatively common. Usually it's not as straightforward, but life slowly ceases to make sense to them as it once did before. They become aware that they are missing something, but can't identify what it is or don't have the social skills to obtain it. At this moment endless isolated thinking about what the solution could be doesn't help them anymore, but it actually makes things worse and can make them go into a downward paralyzing spiral.

Does it relate to general prejudices people often have towards people from IT?

What prejudices?

For example, the fact that they live somewhere in the dark, in the basement, do not go out, do not understand the world around them etc.

That sounds nasty, but it can be like that a little bit. IT people, and very intelligent people in general, often find themselves having a greatly developed logical mind while emotions tend to be in their way. Therefore, we often talk in sessions about what emotions are good for, that they are not just an obstacle, but by being evolutionarily much older than logical thinking they have an important function in our life. The fact that someone in the 21st century evolved with high intelligence and fine logic would not have happened without the previous 150 million years of the emotional brain development.

The logical brain - the neocortex - is evolutionarily only two or three million years old. The amygdala is part of our brain perceiving danger in the world and is sending signals both to the logical and emotional part of the brain. However, the connection to the emotional part is shorter, so, the millions of years old fight or flight alarm system kicks in, and only after, the logic begins to say vainly that there is no reason to feel stress.

Therefore, this type of self-talk rarely calms people down. It usually spins the wheel of stress even more and what is even worse, people begin to be hateful and critical towards themselves for not being able to control their emotions. But emotions were never meant to be controlled, they are meant to be understood and listened to.

So, we learn together not to be afraid of emotions and not to perceive them as an enemy. Our emotions always inform us about something valuable. They're like a type of biofeedback. Unfortunately, most people don't understand this. When a person is sad, he usually thinks that it is something bad and wants to suppress or avoid such a feeling.

So, is it Mr Spock from Star Trek style of thinking, namely that logic is superordinate to emotions which only hinder?

I couldn't have said it better. But Mr Spock was Vulcan, and he was wired this way. However, our human nervous system works differently, and we need to understand that.

What are emotions good for?

Not only joy but also so-called "negative emotions", such as sadness, anger, fear or embarrassment play an important role in our lives. And I want to point out that the reason we mammals have emotions is far more complex than just to try to seek out the those pleasant and try to avoid those unpleasant.

On the one hand, emotions help us to "process" our experiences and return our body to a certain kind of homeostasis and preparedness for new everyday situations. At the same time, they give us important feedback about our needs. If we are sad, we are probably missing closeness or understanding. If we are angry, we probably need to create a boundary of some kind. When we are afraid, we are missing safety or support.

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Last but not least, emotions help us to communicate with each other; to express our feelings, needs and motives and to understand feelings, needs and motives of others. They are primarily emotions, not logical explanations which help us to communicate with each other. The language of emotions is evolutionarily much older than language itself.
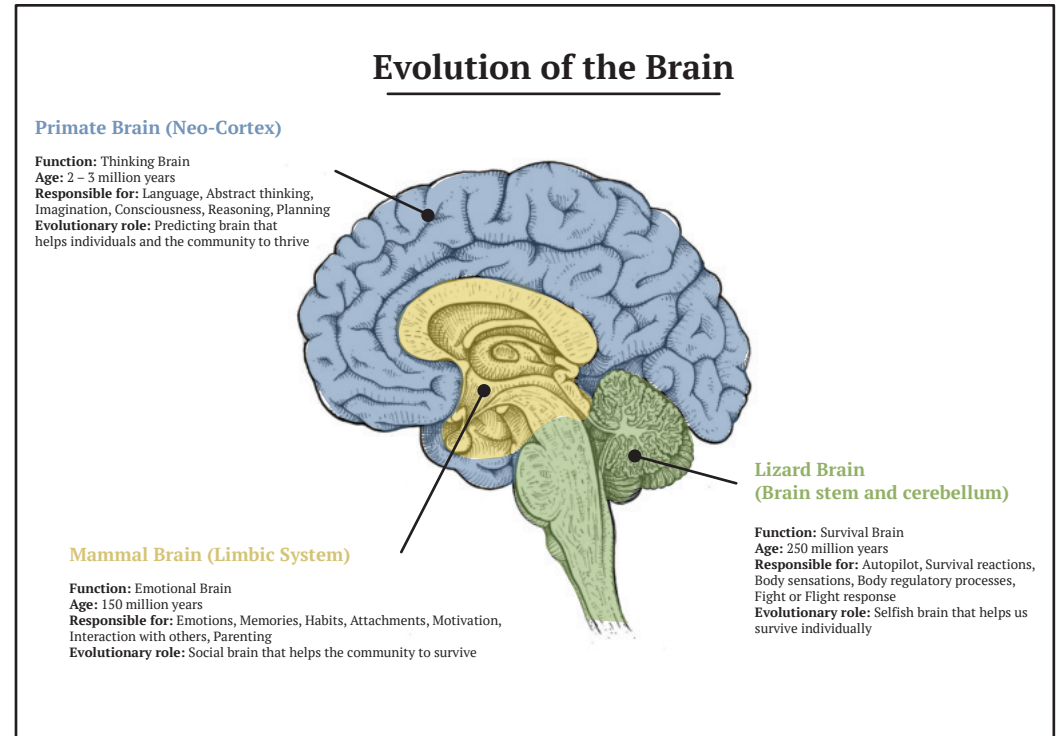
Why do IT guys try to prefer logic to emotions?

Logic tends to be favored in our society generally. People favor what they excel in. If someone is proud of his intellect, this person will give preference to this part. Pure logic often works very well, for example, they can take us a long way regarding school grades or business success. However, not that often in interpersonal relationships.

Another effect is that intelligent people may start to think that they know everything the best and it is difficult for them to admit, that they don't understand something or they haven't got something under control. This, of course, doesn't help their ability to build relationships much. Women sometimes want to see a certain vulnerability or know that a man can admit he doesn't know something. When a woman is sad she is usually not interested in receiving advice and instructions. For logically oriented clients it's hard to accept that some situations have no solution, more precisely, their "solution" is that emotions are shared and people somehow collectively calm down through this process of sharing. However, it's not a solution in the IT sense of "problem solved, it won't occur anymore". We are talking about relief, not solutions.

Do IT guys etc. have ideas about an exact formula or function which exist as the solution to all problems?

It is often the case. I even see some clients try to approach interpersonal relationships through directions and schematic manuals they read somewhere or learnt about at some flirting workshop. But women usually very quickly see through it and sense that it is staged and inauthentic.

Evolution of the Brain

Primate Brain (Neo-Cortex)
Function: Thinking Brain
Age: 2 – 3 million years
Responsible for: Language, Abstract thinking, Imagination, Consciousness, Reasoning, Planning
Evolutionary role: Predicting brain that helps individuals and the community to thrive

Lizard Brain (Brain stem and cerebellum)
Function: Survival Brain
Age: 250 million years
Responsible for: Autopilot, Survival reactions, Body sensations, Body regulatory processes, Fight or Flight response
Evolutionary role: Selfish brain that helps us survive individually

Mammal Brain (Limbic System)
Function: Emotional Brain
Age: 150 million years
Responsible for: Emotions, Memories, Habits, Attachments, Motivation, Interaction with others, Parenting
Evolutionary role: Social brain that helps the community to survive

I have clients who spent a lot of money on dating coaches and workshops. But then they are surprised that it usually doesn't work for them. Therefore, in comparison with most dating gurus, psychotherapy is a much more solid investment. (laugh)

Do women show understanding towards weird behavior from IT men?

Unfortunately not. It's sometimes sad, because a bunch of IT men can be very perspective partners. They just need to grow socially and emotionally a little bit. Most women have a tendency to underestimate and overlook IT men, but I know quite a few women who are happy to be married to an IT guy. Many of these men have very good financial stability, are intelligent, are family oriented, and hold fairly humanistic and modern values.

> " Sometimes IT people forget about the importance of friendships. They tend to have fewer friends, often from IT area. However, a network of quality friends is an important prerequisite to having a quality life and a healthy partnership… "

And isn't it also the other way around that hardly any woman is "good enough"?
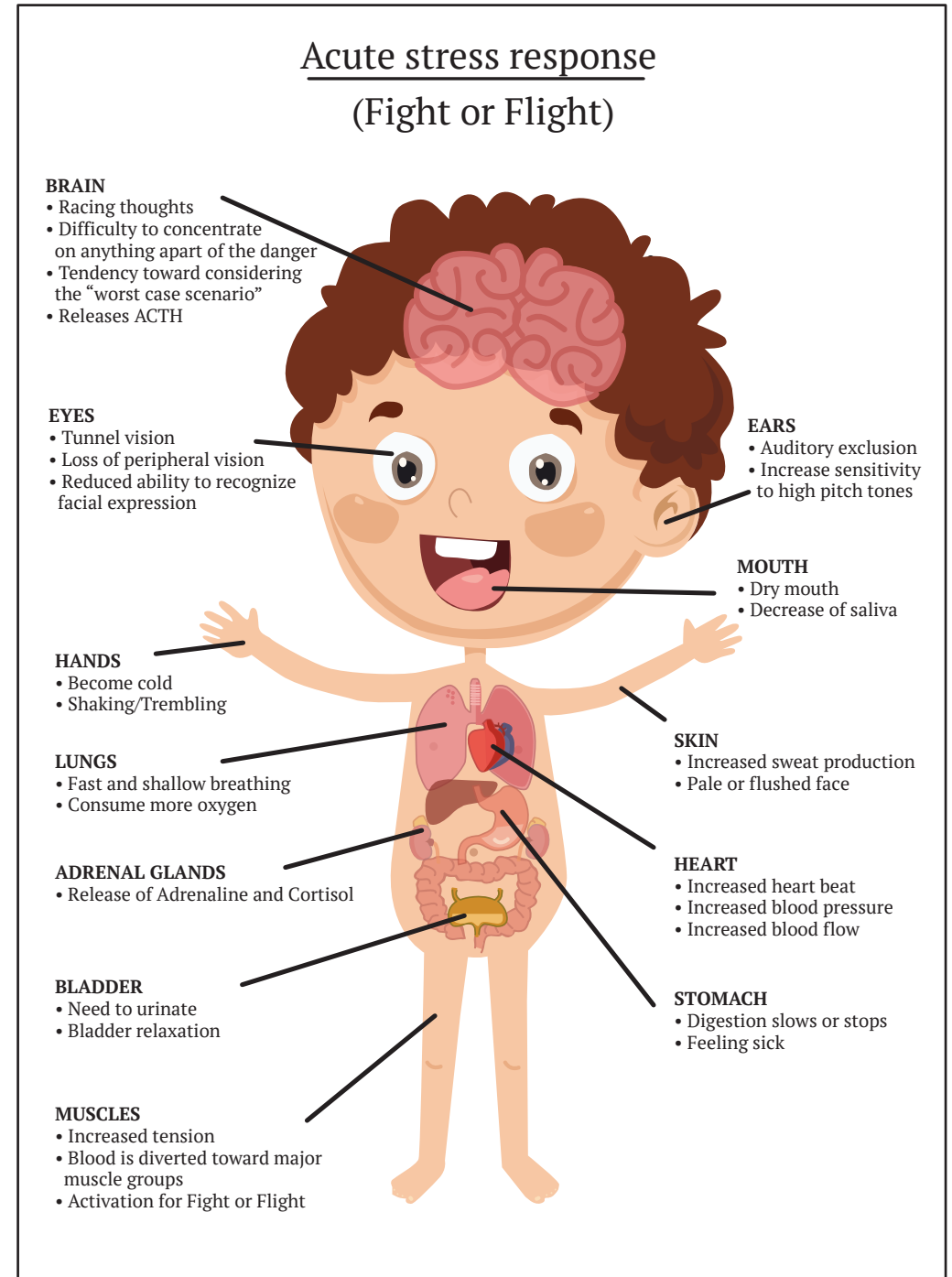
Yes, this is also often the problem. Some IT guys can be a bit arrogant and demanding. When someone is not as intelligent as them, this person is not good enough. However, such a person can have other advantages, for example, social intelligence, elegance or sensitivity.

A similar cause sometimes leads IT people to forget about the importance of friendships. They tend to have fewer friends in general, often from one area: IT. However, a network of quality friends is an important prerequisite to having a quality life and a healthy partnership. It also helps to reduce the pressure in the beginning of a romantic relationship when one side can sometimes push too strong and can scare the other person away.

When do IT people decide to seek professional help?

It is related to what I mentioned before about emotions and that they cannot be ultimately suppressed. All the suppressed sadness, loneliness and frustration accumulates in the background and both the body and the mind begin to protest. For example, people stop enjoying the job they always liked; the same applies to hobbies. Some people realize it by themselves, to other therapy is recommended by some of their friends.

Acute stress response
(Fight or Flight)

BRAIN
• Racing thoughts
• Difficulty to concentrate on anything apart of the danger
• Tendency toward considering the "worst case scenario"
• Releases ACTH

EYES
• Tunnel vision
• Loss of peripheral vision
• Reduced ability to recognize facial expression

EARS
• Auditory exclusion
• Increase sensitivity to high pitch tones

MOUTH
• Dry mouth
• Decrease of saliva

HANDS
• Become cold
• Shaking/Trembling

SKIN
• Increased sweat production
• Pale or flushed face

LUNGS
• Fast and shallow breathing
• Consume more oxygen

HEART
• Increased heart beat
• Increased blood pressure
• Increased blood flow

ADRENAL GLANDS
• Release of Adrenaline and Cortisol

BLADDER
• Need to urinate
• Bladder relaxation

STOMACH
• Digestion slows or stops
• Feeling sick

MUSCLES
• Increased tension
• Blood is diverted toward major muscle groups
• Activation for Fight or Flight

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What do people need to learn about their emotions?

The most important thing is to start becoming consciously aware of our bodily sensations and to stop suppressing them and stop trying to distract ourselves with thinking. When we first notice our body sensations, they are often unpleasant at first, but we need to gain the ability to "stay" with them for a while. The sensations themselves will cease to be so scary and unpleasant relatively shortly. The second most important thing is to gradually learn how to communicate about what we feel. When we are sad about something, it is good to say it outload. In this way we also develop vulnerability and authenticity. The next step is to start understanding the evolutionary meaning of emotions and listen to them as a form of biofeedback. When that begins to make sense, then we are halfway there.

How long does the therapy last, and what is the success rate?

It is usually a matter of at least a year and a half, and it's absolutely no shame to attend it even longer. I try to explain to people that psychotherapy does not mean to find a quick solution and fix a problem forever, but we rather learn to view it as an periodical self-actualization process. It's sort of a regular software update for the soul.

The success often depends on how the client can suspend his belief in the omniscience of "logical thinking". Intelligent people often think a lot and their thinking tends to be very hypercritical. However, such thinking usually doesn't lead to happiness, acceptance, connection or love.

So, is success when a binary-thinking robot becomes more human?

That reminds me of Mr Data in Star Trek who also tried to become more human. He was lucky to have a lot of loving support around him.

In Red Dwarf, Lister tried to help Kryten the same way.

Yes, nicely said. It is definitely good when clients start to see value in humanity, vulnerability and softness.

What is the most common reason for the failure of psychotherapy?

All that we already mentioned above. Arrogance, overestimating the power of logical reasoning and hypercriticism, which people almost always tend to turn against themselves.

And how does a successful therapy look like?

I remember a client, a man in his thirties, he was both very intelligent and very critical. This, of course, led to endless arguments with his parents, siblings and almost everybody around him. As a result, he was quite lonely and prone to depression. What was even worse, he criticized himself for being "weak" and tried to hide these feelings from everybody else. This, of course, made him feel even more depressed.

Therefore, we worked mainly with sadness and anger, which in his worldview were forbidden emotions originally. Firstly, we learned to be consciously aware of the emotions. All the emotions that had been suppressed for such a long time needed to be acknowledged and consciously experienced. This process was a bit uncomfortable at the beginning but inevitable. By accepting emotions, a person begins to accept himself/herself more. And to learn more kindness towards oneself is often the most
important thing in psychotherapy.

As time passed, this man learned to express himself better and talk about his emotions and needs with real people in his life. He never got everything that he wanted, but he got the courage to take more risks in communication.

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Occasionally, he spoke to a woman, occasionally, he felt close with his family, and eventually he even negotiated significantly better conditions for himself at his new job.

At the same time, he expanded his circle of friends who began to appreciate his openness, sensitivity and authentic vulnerability. As a result, they began to understand him more. Even if he sometimes came into conflicts, they were usually shorter and less destructive. It helped him a lot not to take himself so seriously, and he also developed a great sense of humor.
After two years of psychotherapy and several attended workshops he concluded that he doesn't need therapy anymore. These days he has a nice partner and has two kids.

Sebastian James * 1985, Czech Republic

Sebastian James is a psychologist and facilitator working both for the private and corporate sector. He studied in Europe and the United States and worked for companies such as Novartis, ExxonMobil and PwC. In his work he focuses on authenticity, direct communication, understanding human emotions and needs, expanding body awareness, relaxation and play. Sebastian facilitated personal development workshops in the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, France and Greece and worked with people from over 25 countries.

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