

amygdala’s reaction. The culturally responsive teacher’s ability to manage her emotions is paramount because she is the “emotional thermostat” of the classroom and can influence students’ mood and productivity.

Recognizing Common Triggers

An important part of identifying your triggers is recognizing universal triggers that are hardwired into the brain. The field of social neuroscience has identified some of the high alert categories that have been hardwired into our amygdala. Think of it as preloaded software that every person comes with as a result of human development over time. Research has shown that humans have a fundamental need to belong, are incredibly sensitive to their social context, and are strongly motivated to remain in good standing with their social group to avoid social exclusion (Rock, 2009).

There are five elements of social interaction that activate strong threats and rewards in the brain, thus influencing how we react in given situations: *standing, certainty, connection, control, and equity* (Figure 4.3). They have a strong influence on our implicit bias and cultural frames of reference. Do some reflection and think about which ones trigger you.

Figure 4.3 Social Interaction Elements That Activate Threats in the Brain

Element	Description	What’s the Threat
Standing	Standing refers to one’s sense of importance relative to others in one’s social network or organizational hierarchy (e.g., peers, coworkers, friends, supervisors). It also relates to how one believes others in the group perceive him—negative or positive, competent or incompetent.	The fear that one would be expelled from the “tribe” (such as being fired from a job, evaluated poorly by the principal, ostracized by peers because of doing things differently).
Certainty	Certainty refers to one’s need for clarity and predictability in a social situation in order to make accurate social moves. It also relates to one’s ability to predict what will happen (e.g., routines, cause and effect, action and reaction).	The fear of possibly embarrassing oneself or being unable to know what to do in a given situation. The feelings of being out of control or unable to be safe because of venturing into the unknown with new teaching practices and unfamiliar ways of organizing the classroom.

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Figure 4.3 (Continued)

Element	Description	What's the Threat
Control	Control speaks to one's sense of control over his life and the perception that one's behavior can have a positive effect on the outcome of a situation (e.g., getting a promotion, finding a partner) rather than something out of his control having more influence (e.g., class, race, language, or gender).	The fear of someone telling you what to do, where to go, and how to behave that is inconsistent with your values (such as with English only laws or Jim Crow laws).
Connection	Relatedness focuses on one's sense of connection to and security with another person, one's family, or one's peer group. It also is concerned with whether new people one interacts with are friend or foe.	The fear of being an outsider and excluded. We fear losing important connection with others. People do not want to be out of relationship with others, especially an important peer group.
Equity	Equity refers to having a sense of fair, just and nonbiased exchange between people (e.g., equal opportunity, equivalent pay for equivalent work, the elimination of unearned advantage and disadvantage).	The threat can come when one feels he or his group (class, geographic, linguistic) is being subjected to unearned disadvantage or someone is receiving unearned advantage. It may also be associated with distancing oneself from unearned advantage.

Practicing Emotional Self-Management

Self-management involves being aware of one's feelings and the ability to use this awareness as information to manage and adjust one's emotional state. For a culturally responsive teacher who is working to empower dependent learners who may be resistant out of fear, this practice is critical.

From neuroscience, we know emotions are contagious, so if one person in the classroom gets emotionally hijacked, it's likely others will be infected with anxiety, resistance, or disengagement. So just as we take precautions not to spread physical viruses, we want to avoid spreading toxic emotions that make everyone reactive rather than responsive. Remember that the brain has a **negativity bias**, meaning that the brain is more than 20 times more focused on negative experiences than on positive ones. Think Velcro versus Teflon. There are steps you can take to calm your amygdala.