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## Fight, Flight . . . or Tend and Befriend?

*In the 1990s, it was commonly accepted that there were two ways that people coped with fear: fight or flight. But a more recent theory tells a different story.*

By **Orli Peter, Contributor**

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Recently at a party I heard a left-wing political activist angrily claim that the conservative agenda to use military force to deal with the Mideast conflict is based in fear. "They're all just really afraid," she said, "so they want to squash the threat to make themselves feel safe."

Later I heard a talk by a conservative political scientist who said that the left-wing agenda for solving the Mideast conflict was hard to distinguish from surrender. "People are afraid," he said, "so they try to appease rather than face the bully."

I wondered which one is right. Or, are they both right?

commonly accepted that there were two ways that people coped with fear: fight or flight. The scientific understanding at that time was that when we sense a threat, our body shoots noradrenalin in our blood stream, causing our heart to pound faster, and our muscles to fill with increased blood. This biological response readied us to sustain increased physical activity, whether to fight or run away. The fight or flight theory lent credence to the liberal's contention that the conservative response to wage war in Iran was a response to fear-- to fight.

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But a more recent theory supports the conservative contention. When Shelley Taylor at UCLA looked at the research on fight or flight, she found that it was primarily based on studying men. In her studies of women, she found a very different response to fear, which she termed "tend and befriend." It also had biological underpinnings. When women sensed a threat, they emitted oxytocin, sometimes called the bonding hormone. Rather than fight or flee, they would talk, soothe, and try to connect. I saw a similar response to fear when I worked with women rape victims. Many reported that rather than fight off their assailant or try to flee, they were kind to the rapist in hopes that he would change his mind.

Both ends of the political spectrum lob accusations at their opponents for feeling fear, as if it is a shameful feeling-- the adult version of the "You're a baby" attack. But I contend that it is more admirable to feel fear than to block or minimize it.

danger even before our consciousness is clues in. Fear is so important to our survival that our biological structure does not allow us to wait the extra milliseconds it takes for us to understand the threat, before we are prepared to respond.

Why block the important information from the amygdala, the part of our brain that alerts us to danger? As my eleven year old son says, "The amygdala is like our sixth sense."

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Shouldn't we feel some level of fear when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad believes that the Shiite version of the apocalypse will happen within two years, has threatened to wipe a country filled with millions of people off the map, and is about to have nuclear weapons so that he could carry out his threat?

Unfortunately, we are all motivated to protect ourselves from feeling fear, because, well, it is uncomfortable and terrifying. As Churchill said, we fear fear itself. If we fail to feel our fear, we may put ourselves in more danger. We may underestimate

capacity to confront it. Each of these distortions will move us towards fearlessness, and make us temporarily feel better when we don't want to feel terror. But they also render us more vulnerable in the face of a threat because they block us from an accurate assessment of our danger and the best way to protect ourselves.

Those of us with liberal leanings may be more likely to underestimate the severity of the threat-- just as many of my patients who believe that holding discussions with their violent husband or simply providing more love to their bullying child will be enough to secure safety for themselves or others. In the case of Ahmadinejad, how long do we continue cajoling someone who is bent on our destruction before we confront the horror?

Those of us with conservative leanings may be more likely to overestimate our strength. Is military force really sufficient to deal with the threat? Does my patient's abusive husband really secure his safety in the relationship by terrorizing my patient when she has thoughts of leaving him?

It's the process that determines whether my liberal friend or the conservative professor chose the better option for dealing with the threat. Did they value their fear enough to be able to attend thoroughly to the seriousness of the threat? Were they able to accurately assess our capacity for confronting the threat and then select strategies that are most likely to protect us effectively--whether fight or flight, tend or befriend.

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we need to face our own fears squarely. We need to feel our fear fully in order to assess how dangerous our situation really is. Then we will be able to decide how to respond: fight or flight, tend or befriend, or a combination.

To restate John Lennon's famous saying, give fear a chance.

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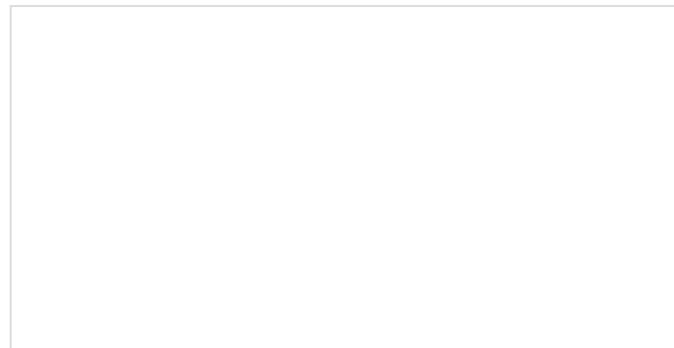
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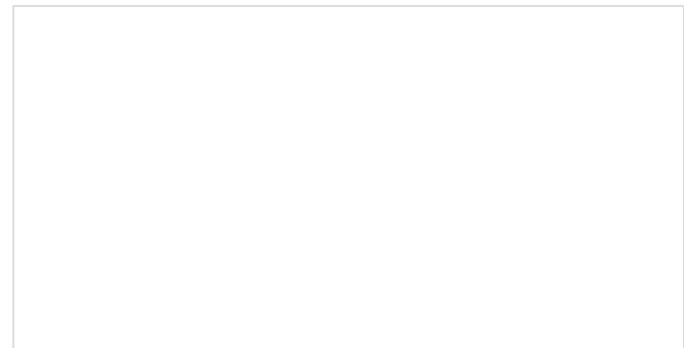
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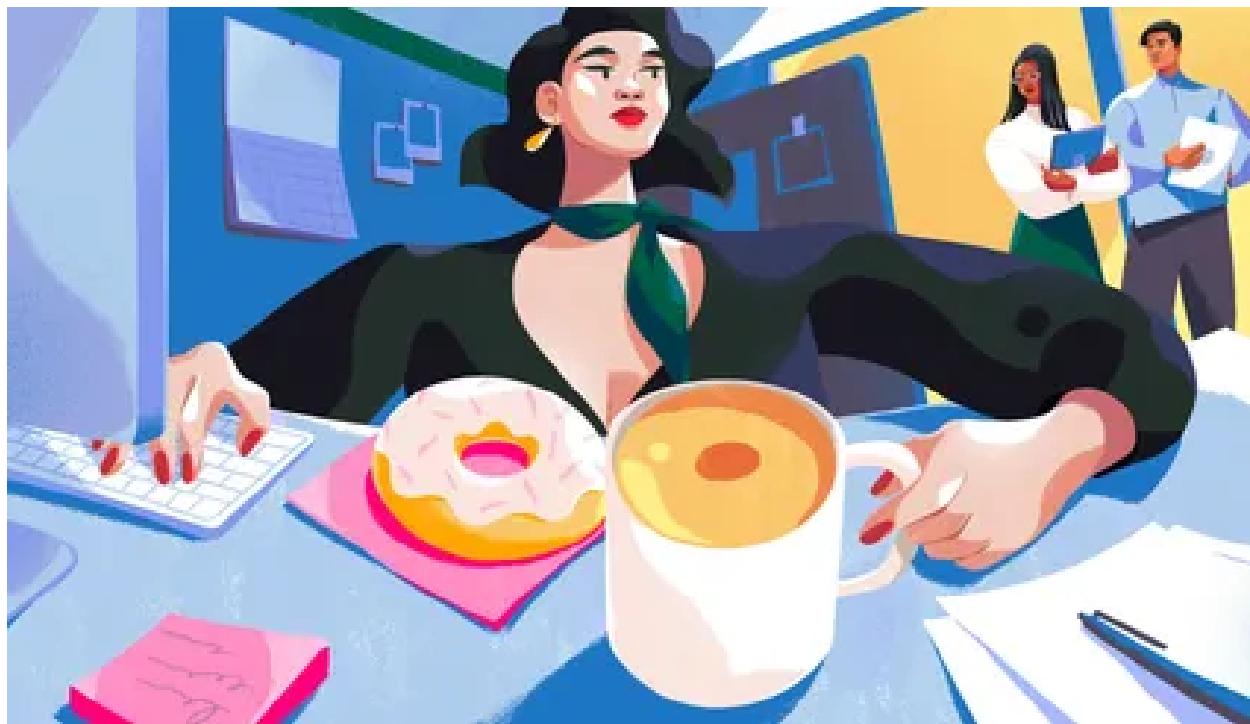
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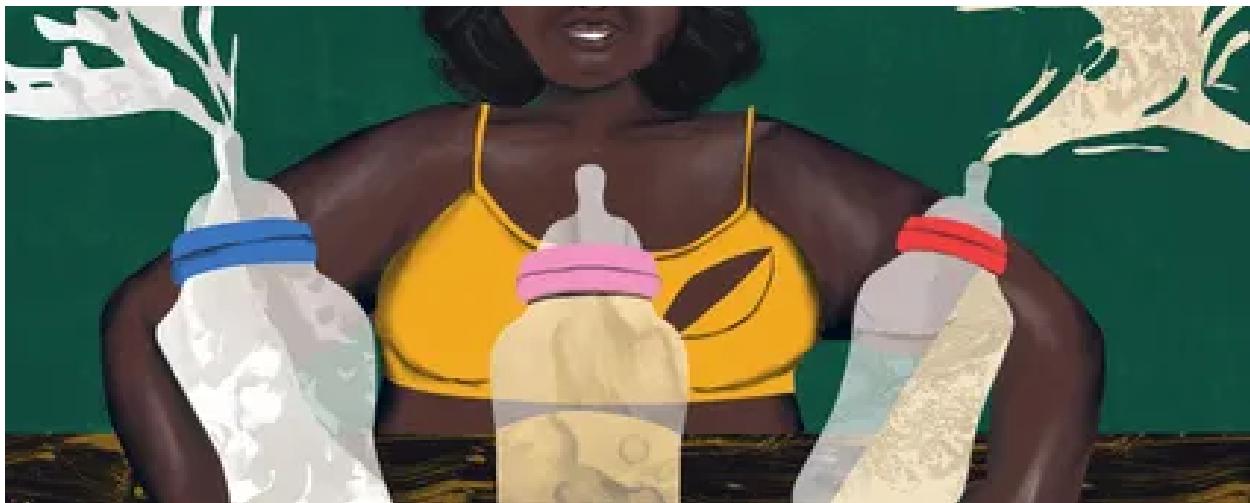
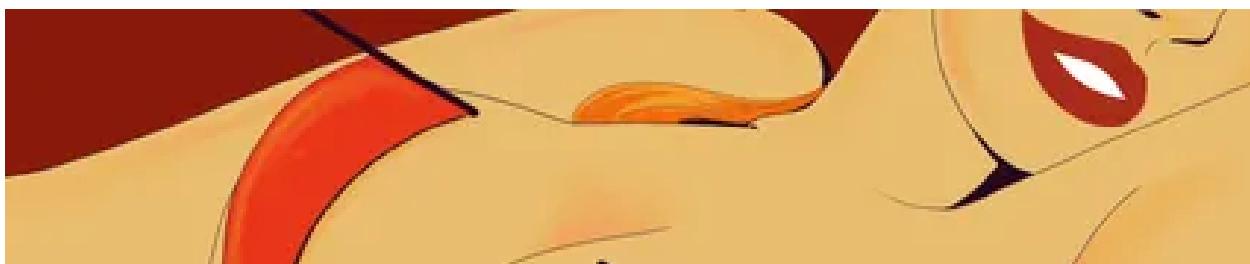
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Kristen Mulrooney  
@missmulrooney

...

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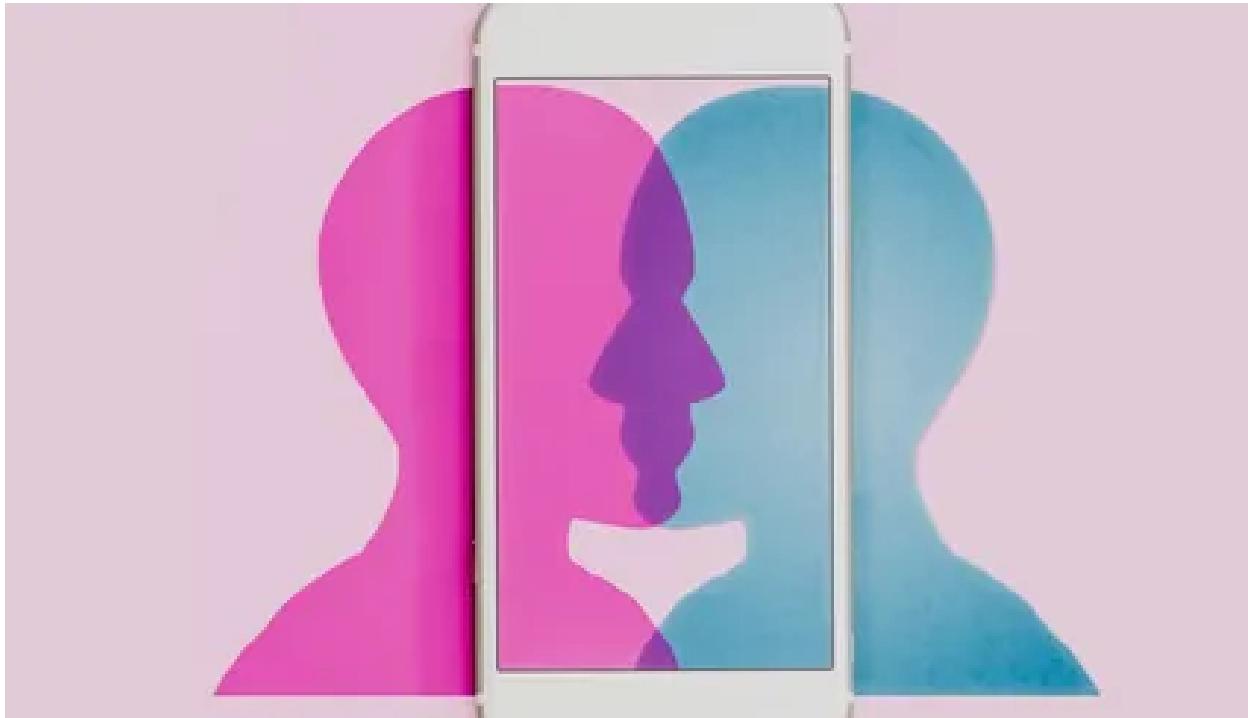


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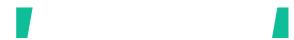
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