

## Chapter One

# Adrenaline Overload: Flooding

**Y**ou may have noticed that people stop making sense when they fight. Sound, cooperative, intelligent people stop acting like themselves and do inexplicable things. They kill projects they love, walk away from people they care about and get into furious arguments over last year's tomato plants.

Barring a takeover by an alien life force, something happens to make reasonable people act this way. It's called flooding.

Flooding is an adrenaline overload that was the subject of landmark research by Dr. John Gottman and later, psychologists Kim Buehlman and Lynn Katz. Flooding shorts out most of the higher parts of the brain and leaves people acting irrational, mule-headed, defensive or quarrelsome.

People are roughly familiar with this as the 'flight-or-flight' syndrome, but Gottman and his associates have taken this concept much farther. By using sophisticated equipment they have been able to pin down exactly how the brain is misfiring and how that translates to human behavior.

In short, the problem is not character, but chemical. And the first step in managing conflict is to be braced for this chemical onslaught, because it will undermine every other useful skill you own.

Here's what it looks like:

Glen is trapped in his office by an abrasive woman who is always pushing for something *more*:

"I feel an accelerating heart-beat and a flushing in my face. My mind seems to go completely blank. I simply forget to think. This seems to be caused by an urge from within to do or say

anything that will get this woman away from me. I have suffered from this in the past, and made decisions and issued instructions that I later lived to regret...”

Tessa comes home early to find her teenaged step-son, who is supposed to be in school, making out with his girlfriend in full view of all the neighbors:

“Rigidity, locked knees, clenched fists, and grinding of teeth... a racing heartbeat... I have too many thoughts, all wanting to be expressed immediately... Logic seems to have vanished... And I can’t remember what I wanted to say after I start talking.”

Cal hit a computer glitch and had to seek help from the dreaded tech staff:

“I struggled for computer vocabulary. Now I really felt like a fool and my face began to turn red. Every icon looked like a blur of color. I could not distinguish which icon I used every day for the past year. I was being perceived as an idiot but I knew what I was talking about and this made me more angry. I couldn’t think clearly after that moment. My reasoning and logic skills were nowhere to be found...”

Cindy’s boyfriend calls ten minutes to deadline, after she’s repeatedly asked him not to call on deadline days:

“...all I can see is red. My blood rushes all at once to the top of my head and my eyes seem to glaze over. My heart is beating faster than I’ve ever known or realized it could, and I feel like I’m losing control, because I can’t hear anything my boyfriend is saying... I feel hot and it feels like the walls are closing in on me, almost like a claustrophobic person would feel in an enclosed place...”

These were intelligent, effective people who found themselves so upset they couldn’t think or speak or function. Like stage fright, it’s

an entirely human reaction. It isn't stupidity, weakness or an incipient nervous breakdown, but the normal result of flooding. Flooding short-circuits the higher parts of the brain, like logic, speech and judgment, which leaves people stranded in bad situations without the very skills they need to get out again.

When you're desperately trying to explain yourself and find yourself babbling like a fool, that's flooding. If you're dashing out the door and can't find your keys—even though they're lying right in front of you— that's flooding. When you can't face seeing your ex-wife, your boss or your father-in-law, even though you've done nothing wrong and they happen to be trying to help you, when the sound of a certain set of footsteps can make the lungs seize up in your chest, that's flooding. It's normal, it's human and it can be controlled.

Flooding happens to everyone sometime, and to many of us as a regular event. Controlling flooding becomes top priority in conflict management, because flooding will undercut every other rational skill you own.

Flood control can be done by anyone, barring an active psychosis. First you need to recognize flooding when it hits; the sooner you recognize it, the less power it will have over you. Next, know its hazards: know what flooding does and what you need to watch for, both in yourself and others. Finally, at a quiet time, create a personal plan you can use under stress to head off flooding so it won't hijack your brain.

The object of the game is to control flooding rather than letting it control you.

## **Recognizing Flooding**

The physical symptoms are easiest to spot. Your heart speeds up, or your breathing goes tight. Your head starts pounding as your blood pressure rises: it may feel like a headache or a tourniquet tightening around your skull. Your face may flush and your skin feel hot; fair skinned people turn red, while dark skinned people get darker. Your