

## Gray Matters on Grown-Up Temper Tantrums

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Oh, it's a thing. The full-grown adult, having a full-blown meltdown. You might have seen it in the grocery store when the customer's card is declined. It is evident on our roadways in the form of road rage (Lord, help us). Maybe you've witnessed it partner to partner, parent to child, between coworkers, and so on.

Our society has several ways to describe these outbursts: She had a fit, I lost my mind, she flipped her lid, he went berserk, what a lunatic, guy's a maniac... You get the idea. Layman's terms aside, what we are really talking about is when a person's cognitive functioning pops a breaker in their psychological fuse box, causing them to regress to a child-state. They yell, scream, throw things, punch walls (or people). It explains why adults run each other over with their cars when they become irate: they have the maturity of a child with the physical capability of an adult. People often deeply regret these behaviors... after the fact. In the moment, however, they feel perfectly justified. So, what on earth is going on here?

Nerd alert: to understand the phenomenon of the grown-up temper tantrum we have to understand a bit about biopsychosocial development. This is the interplay of biology, psychology, and socialization which can be complicated by environmental factors, mental illness, and trauma.

Current research shows that the pre-frontal cortex, the last part of the brain to fully develop, doesn't come into full maturation until our late 20's. This is barring any significant drug or alcohol abuse/misuse during those crucial developmental years. Ever know someone who is middle-aged but has the maturity of a teenager? This may be the result of their brain development flat-lining when they started using as a teen. (Imagine pruning the buds off a tree as it is blooming in the spring.)

What's the big deal? Executive functioning. It's housed in the pre-frontal cortex and is responsible for impulse control, emotion regulation, reasoning and judgement, decision-making, short- and long-term planning, to name several. The pre-frontal is greatly impacted during moments of high stress, alcohol/drug use, being tired, hungry, sick, experiencing physical pain, during menses, and so on.

In a properly developed brain, humans are able to experience emotions, even intense ones, while still maintaining access to their executive functioning. In other words, both can be simultaneously true: they can be really angry and are still completely in control of what they do and say.

When an emotionally immature, underdeveloped, or impaired brain gets triggered, it can cause the person to regress to a younger state of functioning. After calming down, people will admit that they felt out of control, lost access to grown-up words, and felt like a child during the tantrum. They lose their ability to reason and be reasoned with. Don't forget that the executive function goes offline for these individuals. During the tantrum, they might as well be a child trying to handle a grown-up situation.

There are several reasons why an adult might behave this way. They may have experienced caretakers who were ill-equipped to handle their own emotions, thereby leaving the individual without proper modeling of emotional expression. They could have severe, pervasive mental illness such as a personality disorder (Borderline, Narcissistic, or Anti-Social); folks who are prone to being insecure, abusive, egocentric, and/or lack empathy. Or maybe they fall into the category of brain development impairment

due to past or present alcohol or drug misuse where they lack the emotional intelligence to adequately experience and express emotions appropriately. Chronic, severe stress can greatly impact the pre-frontal, leaving folks at risk for post-trauma responses that are disproportionate with the level of actual threat in the moment (aka: *over-reacting*).

None of these reasons are meant to excuse the adult temper tantrum. Rather, they offer an explanation to better understand this phenomenon. And it is not an exhaustive list. Behavior is fluid, not static. What applies to one person cannot easily be used as a blanket statement for others necessarily. Human psychology is quite complex. Therefore, I strongly encourage anyone who is experiencing adult temper tantrums to get help. Furthermore, anyone who is on the receiving end of them should do the same for support, strengthening boundaries, and seeking safety. Therapy can help folks understand and resolve the issues that lead to these harmful behaviors; harmful to the ones experiencing them as well as those around them.

If you found this article tough to take because you are on the giving, receiving, or witnessing end of these tantrums, know that sometimes the words that are difficult to hear are the ones we really need to listen to.

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