

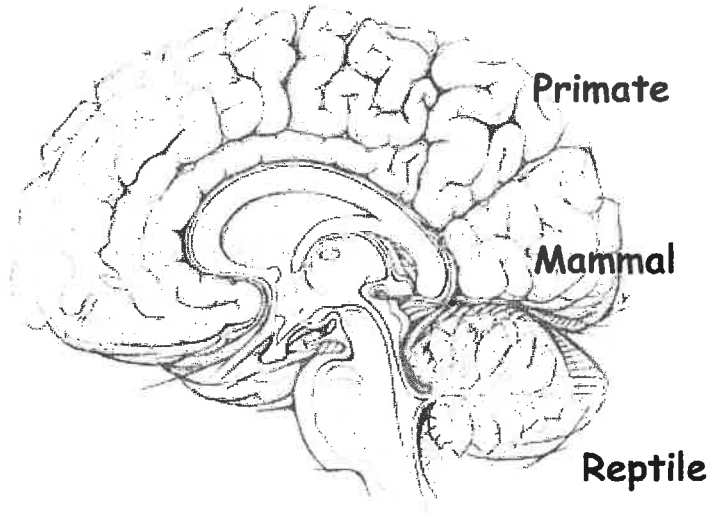
## Keep Your Lizard, Mouse, and Monkey in Mind

Robert King

I just read three brilliant blog posts by neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, in which he identifies three parts of our human brains:

- The **primate brain** (cortex) focuses on connecting with others.
- The **mammal brain** (limbic system) focuses on approaching rewards.
- The **reptile brain** (brainstem) focuses on avoiding harm.

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Though we like to think of the primate brain as the first one (after all, *primate* means “first”), it’s actually last. It was the last part to develop, and it’s the last part to receive signals from the spinal cord. So Dr. Hanson deals with the most ancient part first.

### The Lizard Brain

The lizard brain (brainstem) keeps us breathing and our hearts beating—keeps us alive. Lizards that weren’t particularly interested in surviving ended up getting eaten, which is why this part of the brain is hardwired to feel a constant vigilant anxiety.

Dr. Hanson says this background anxiety impacts our ability to think and be happy, so he prescribes a simple technique for soothing it:

#### “Pet the lizard.”

1. Recognize the anxiety.
2. Remind yourself that you are all right.
3. Take a deep breath and feel the whole breath.
4. Relax your body, which will soothe the lizard.
5. Maintain this state for 10, 20, 30 seconds—as long as you can.

### The Mouse Brain

The mouse brain (limbic system) regulates our emotions and desires. Its main job is to move us toward the things that give us life. Mice that weren’t constantly sniffing out food and gobbling it down didn’t survive.

Dr. Hanson says this constant hunger makes us fail to notice all the ways that we are being constantly nourished. He suggests a way to feel better:

**“Feed the mouse.”**

1. Consciously acknowledge ways in which you are being fed.
2. When you eat, realize the food is becoming part of you and is nourishing you.
3. When you breathe, feel the air entering you and giving life to you.
4. When you get paid, recognize it as nourishment.
5. “Feel protected, enabled, and delighted by human craft.” I love that wording.

**The Monkey Brain**

The cortex handles the higher functions of our brains—thinking, making mental maps of our world, and connecting with others. Hanson identifies this last bit as the key need of the cortex. Monkeys that did not connect with other monkeys did not survive.

Dr. Hanson says the nagging worry about whether or not we belong hampers our thinking and happiness. He recommends the following strategy:

**“Hug the monkey.”**

1. Think of someone who genuinely cares for you. Bring that person into your mind.
2. Think of someone you genuinely care for, and bring that person in as well.
3. Create a circle of caring in your mind.
4. Remind yourself routinely that you are in that circle, a critical part of it.
5. Feel your belonging.

**Emotional Intelligence**

As we’ve seen, the higher-order thinking of the cortex comes *after* all this lower-order thinking. Until the lizard and mouse and monkey in our heads feel safe and fed and part of the group, we don’t get much actual thinking done. Dr. Hanson likens the mind to a jungle. You can’t get rid of those beasts, but you can calm them down.

I’m certainly going to be using Dr. Hanson’s simple but powerful techniques to help me through this holiday season and the year that follows. And if we all can help students apply these strategies themselves, we’ll have happier, healthier learners in our classrooms.

**Apologies to Dr. Hanson**

I know—I just basically hijacked Rick Hanson’s brilliance for my own blog post, but I wanted to summarize his points in one place before sending you off to read his actual words. Do read them. They are terrific!

Just click on the links below to find the articles. (I’m sending you to Dr. Hanson’s personal blog, but all three articles have also been published on *Psychology Today* online.)

<http://www.rickhanson.net/just-one-thing/pet-the-lizard>

<http://www.rickhanson.net/just-one-thing/feed-the-mouse>

<http://www.rickhanson.net/just-one-thing/hug-the-monkey>

And when you read these posts, take time to feel how you are being nourished!