



SCARF Summary

Adapted from Rock, David. (2008). "SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others." *NeuroLeadership Journal*.

Over the last two decades, advances in neuroscience have provided remarkable new insights into human behaviors and experiences based on a deeper understanding of the brain. One of the most striking findings from this work is that the brain responds to perceived social threats in the same manner as threats to survival. This means that a social threat can trigger a survival response (such as "fight, flight or freeze") as easily as a threat to one's physical well-being.

Neuroscientist David Rock has developed the acronym "SCARF" to represent the five domains of social threats that can provoke a survival response:

Status: a sense of importance or value relative to others; a person's perceived role in the "pecking order"

Certainty: an ability to predict what will happen next; a sense of consistency - particularly in relation to essential needs

Autonomy: a feeling of having control or influence over events or one's environment; having choices

Relatedness: the feeling of being safe and connected with others; being part of a community

Fairness: the perception that interactions between people are unbiased and appropriate based on shared standards; decisions are just

When a person perceives a threat in one of these areas, the brain sends its resources to respond to the threat by triggering a survival response. This type of response involves a dramatic increase in cortisol (commonly referred to as a "stress hormone") and a decrease in oxygen and glucose available for brain functions that support cognitive reasoning. Therefore, when someone perceives a social threat, they are unable to reason clearly or take in new learning.

Because these threats occur based on perception, an event that might appear harmless or insignificant to one person may trigger a survival response in another. When leading, teaching or collaborating with others, it is important to plan for opportunities to strengthen a sense of belonging, autonomy, a sense of worth or status, as well as helping students or adults develop trust through consistency and fairness.