

How to Get the Piranhas



Out of Your Head

By Pamela Woll

**For Rosemary Bell,
whose patience as a fisher
is exceeded only by her skill
and her kindness.**

How to Get the Piranhas Out of Your Head

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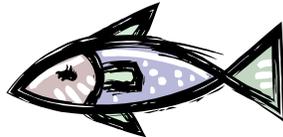
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Piranha Bait!

I don't remember exactly how long ago I realized I had piranhas in my head. But that insight made a lot of things clear—like the nasty little voices that tore into me whenever I believed I'd failed. I'd always just thought I hated myself, but this made much more sense: I was piranha bait!



For example:

- When I was threatened with success, the piranhas would step in, telling me my dreams weren't worth it—or I wasn't worth it—and pouring my time into things that weren't important to me.
- If I lost a romantic relationship, they'd start whispering lies, telling me I was ALL ALONE and UNLOVABLE.
- If I thought someone had insulted me, the piranhas would weave a web of words around the insult, trapping it in my head, where it bounced around, growing larger and more absolute every time it hit the wall.
- And if I made a mistake—particularly a mistake that hurt someone else—they'd swarm on me in a feeding frenzy.

These piranhas could be vicious. Vicious fishes. I knew I'd never treat anybody the way the piranhas treated me.

But I would, of course and I did: They were **my** piranhas.

For a while I thought the piranhas were the voice of my conscience, swooping in for the kill after I'd messed up—or the voice of reason, protecting me from getting my hopes up for no reason. But they weren't.

No matter how good my intentions were, I discovered that I couldn't always be kind, respectful, or reliable as long as I was busy dodging piranhas. Under the piranhas' spell, I messed up more, and I had much worse luck. The piranhas weren't there to protect me or to make me a better person.

At one point I decided to do something symbolic to exorcise those pesky little piranhas. I bought a bag of fish-shaped crackers and decided to spill them out on the kitchen floor and dance on them in high heels, smashing their little cracker fish heads against the tiles. But when I opened the bag, they looked so cute that I felt sorry for them, and I realized I couldn't brutalize them. So I ate them.

I even thought about finding some way to get a really mean cat into my head, so it could eat the piranhas. But when I had a cat in the past, it peed on everything and stared at me a lot. I figured that might be worse than the piranhas.



Another thing the piranhas did: They seemed to push me into hanging out with people who said the same kinds of things they did, as if they had piranhas coming out of their mouths. It felt like being around these people made my own piranhas shut up for a while, but I think it only drowned them out. So sometimes I tried to stay away from people completely, thinking that **people** were my problem. But then the piranhas would get louder. It was worse when I was tired or under a lot of stress—which was most of the time.

Having piranhas inside my head also made me want to escape the pain of living, in any way I could. Of course, the things I did to try to escape only brought me more pain—and more piranhas!

At some point I started noticing that a lot of other people seemed to have piranhas in their heads too. Their piranhas might not always say the same things mine did, and they weren't always triggered by the same things, but their feeding patterns were very much the same.

I decided it might be a good idea to study these piranhas and map out their territory, in case that might help us avoid them, get rid of them, shut them up or—at the very least—understand them.

So that's what we're going to do in this little booklet. We're going to take a quick look at the basic nature of the Brain Piranha—its needs, its tastes, and its feeding patterns.

To do that, we'll also have to look at the environment in which the piranha lives and feeds—the brain. But instead of the usual model of the human brain (brain stem, limbic system, cerebral cortex, yada yada), I've come up with another model of the brain, based on my own observations.

Then I'll offer some suggestions for staying out of the jaws of the piranhas. These are things I've learned from other people, from books, and from trial and error. All the things I'll suggest have been suggested and used by many, many people before me—often with a lot of success.

This booklet has a few short chapters:

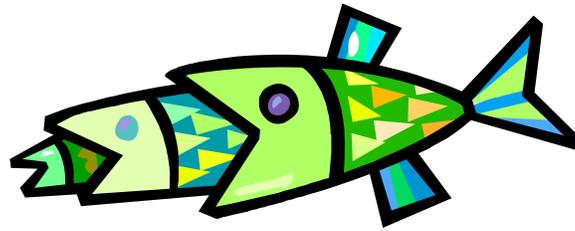
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I'll confess one thing up front: The title of this booklet—How to Get the Piranhas Out of Your Head—may be a little ambitious.

I don't know if the piranhas ever really die or go away, but they definitely get slower, and their appetite shrinks. And when you're about to be a meal for a bunch of piranhas, every bite counts.

So if you're game (no pun intended), let's go for a swim!

The Care and Feeding of Piranhas



Piranhas love drama. Drama, drama, drama. They feed on drama. They like people who stir things up and situations that are easily stirred. They like gossip, conflict, chaos, clutter, injury, insult, injustice, scandal, outrage, excess, deprivation, destruction—stuff like that.

Piranhas don't like work or effort, and they can't stand ambiguity or ambivalence—any mixed or conflicted feelings. So they live in the places in the brain where we have it ALL FIGURED OUT.

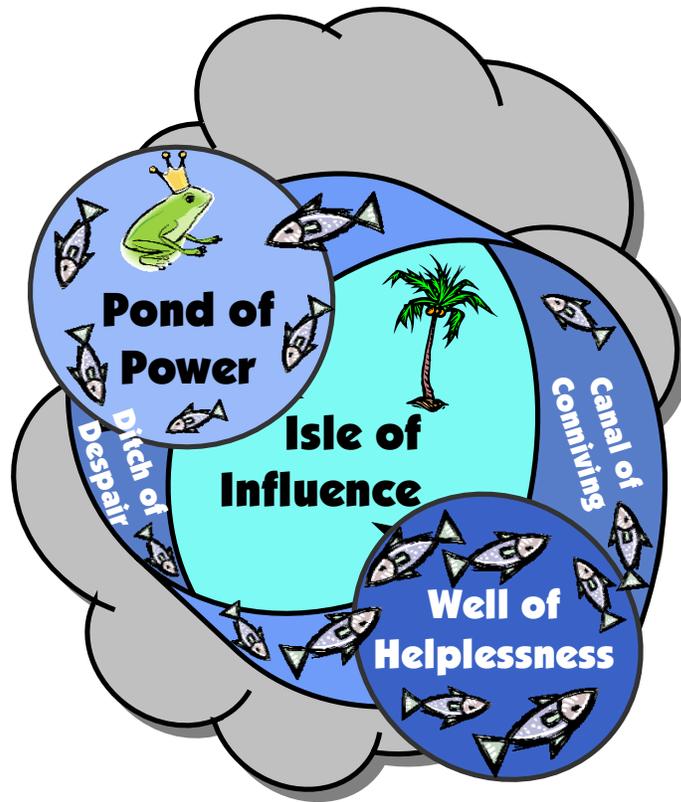
Scientists think the brain includes some gray stuff and some white stuff and some brown stuff, with a bunch of chemicals telling all that stuff what to do. And in a very limited sense, they're right.

But as useful and impressive as all the advances in brain science might be, they still can't tell us why certain chemicals in certain areas of the brain make us think what we think.

For that, we need my new model of the brain.

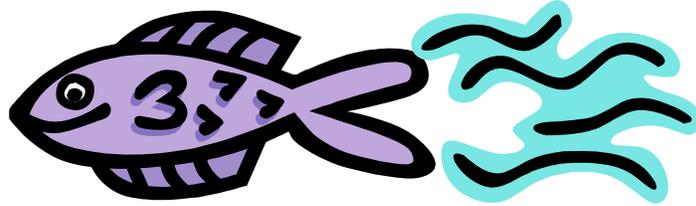
The Human Brain

Remember when they told you our brains were 70% water? They weren't kidding. The human brain is made up of four major bodies of water, surrounding an island. We'll look at these five major areas of the brain one by one as we trace the life cycle of the piranha.



The Life Cycle of the Piranha

Okay, let's get this out of the way: Baby piranhas are very cute. They seem tiny and friendly and—yes—harmless.



Piranhas are hatched in an area of the brain called the Pond of Power, where they're nourished on the expectations that grow there like seaweed. In the Pond of Power, piranhas don't cause any trouble. They tell us exactly what we want to hear.

The Pond of Power is a very interesting place. It's where we keep all our Absolutes—our belief that things HAVE to be this way or that way, that we HAVE to do this or that, and that others HAVE to act the way we expect them to. As you can imagine, the Pond of Power is a very comfortable place.

Absolutes are delicacies to baby piranhas. These include concepts like absolute safety, absolute fairness, absolute power (our own or somebody else's), absolute control, absolute perfection, absolute love, absolute certainty, absolute freedom, absolute beauty, and absolute pleasure.

The Pond of Power is a very small pond, and like many small ponds, it contains a very large frog.



The piranhas, of course, worship this frog—and so do we.

- Some of us think the frog is ourselves: the all-powerful, always-right, deserving-of-everything ME.
- Some of us think it's somebody else: a parent, a boss, a spouse, a friend, the crush of the week, or the all-knowing THEY (as in "What will THEY think?").
- Some of us think it's a Higher Power: an absolute God who is On Our Side, whose Will we know absolutely—and who happens to agree with us on just about everything.

Of course, this frog is not ourselves, another person, or even a Higher Power. It's just a frog. But more about that later.

For obvious reasons, most of us would like to spend our lives in the Pond of Power. Like the piranhas, we're well fed there, and we don't have to do anything difficult. It feels good. It feels RIGHT.

Unfortunately, though, Absolutes don't really exist in the world. They exist only in our heads. Without even trying, life shows us ample evidence of the limits of safety, fairness, power, control, perfection, certainty, freedom, pleasure, and the many other things we think we HAVE to have.

When we look to other people to confirm our Absolutes, we often find that they too are limited—or they have a whole different set of Absolutes. They might argue with us, hurt us, laugh at us, prove us wrong, or show up our failures.

And even the power and good will of our Higher Power sometimes comes into question, as planes crash, the earth quakes, good people get sick, brave people die in battle, loving marriages fail, hard-working people lose their jobs, and the weather misbehaves in spectacular ways.

That's where the piranhas come in. When we run out of Absolutes and the frog turns out to be a frog, the piranhas turn on us.

Their first move is to chase us into the next major area of the brain, the Ditch of Despair. This is a long, slippery slide that takes us by surprise after the comfort and certainty of the Pond of Power.

On the surface, we experience that sinking feeling, and our brains shift into overdrive. We cling and claw at the sides of the ditch, trying to make our way back. But gravity, the piranhas, and the force of our own motion are against us.

By this time, the piranhas are full-grown and healthy, feeling frisky and ready for a meal. They scream in pursuit as we slide down the chute and spill out into the next major brain structure, the Well of Helplessness.

Picture a big, tasty meal for a large and lively family, who yell and scream as they eat. Now picture yourself as the main course. That's what the Well of Helplessness is like.

We may or may not be aware of all this. We might hear what the piranhas are yelling, or we might just know we don't feel quite right. We might feel miserable, afraid, angry, betrayed, lost, angry, abandoned, disgraced, or horribly guilty. We might have that haunted and hopeless feeling, and see no way out. Or we might not be able to feel anything.

But whatever we feel or don't feel, in the Well of Helplessness there's no doubt: We feel like victims, even if we see ourselves as heroes or others see us as villains. Either it's NOT FAIR and we want Justice, or it's ALL OUR FAULT and we deserve to wallow in it. But whether we're victims of injustice or our own guilt, our piranhas are fat and happy.

At some point, most of us start thinking of ways to get our Absolutes back. If we're afraid, we look for certainty wherever we can pretend it is. If we're angry, we nurse our grudges or plot our revenge. If we're feeling guilty, we dream about getting back in the world's good graces.

Pretty soon we discover an exit, leading upward. It's called the Canal of Conniving, and we make our way up it by playing the angles. Meanwhile, the piranhas are smiling and waving behind us. They know what will happen when we reach the top and plop back into the Pond of Power.

We'll get all fattened up, and then we'll feed their babies.

So What Else is There?

Did I mention that there's an island in the middle of all this? It's called the Isle of Influence. It's easy to miss when we're floating through the cycle of power, despair, helplessness, and conniving. But it's there.



In the Pond of Power, the piranhas will tell you the island is dry and bare, with nothing to sustain you. It's boring because there's no drama, and it's not safe because there are no Absolutes. It's frustrating, because you can't get everything you want or everything you expect. Everything there is limited!

In the Well of Helplessness, they'll tell you the island is NOT FOR YOU. You're either too good for it or too worthless for it. It may work for other people, but not for people like you. Anyway, it's too hard, and it's all hopeless!

Of course, piranhas lie. Their special gift is the blending of half-truths with half-lies, with an occasional whopper thrown in. Pretty soon, you forget how to question them. Then you're dinner.

But the truth is that the Isle of Influence is the only place where the piranhas can't get to you, because—of course—fish can't swim on dry land. There are springs and streams and plenty of rainfall on the island. But there's no way to swim in from the pond, the well, or either of the channels that carry you and the piranhas back and forth between them.

So what's it like on the island? The first thing you notice is that there are no Absolutes. Safety, fairness, power, control, perfection, love, certainty, freedom, beauty, pleasure—and all the other things you value—are there in great supply. You can work for them, and you'll often get them. But you can't make them last forever, and you can't control or even predict when they will or won't happen.

There are no perfect people, either, and no worthless people. People have extraordinary good qualities and extraordinary bad qualities—and a lot of very ordinary qualities in between. Sometimes they'll let you down, sometimes they'll be boring and predictable, and sometimes they'll come through with stunning beauty or shining heroism. The same goes for you.

And if you look to a Higher Power, the lack of Absolutes on the island will make that Power a lot more mysterious, with room for free will and the laws of nature. You won't be able to blame your Higher Power for all the bad stuff that happens or use that Power to excuse cruelty, violence, or selfishness.

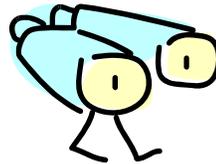
So what's left? Life, death, joy, pain, love, hard work, and all the human feelings. But no piranhas.

Decisions, Decisions

Most people don't just hear about the island and head for dry land right away, as if all they were waiting for was a sign. Most of us need to think about things, not think about them, try them on, go back and forth, experiment, and change our minds a lot. Here are a few suggestions.

1. Just Pay Attention

Notice when you're in the Pond, when you're in the Well, and when you're sliding or swimming from one to the other. Notice how you feel there and what you're thinking there. Practice telling the difference between the voices of your piranhas and the voice of reason or the voice of your conscience. Notice the choices you're making, and recognize them as choices. Watch without judging, as an interested observer. But when you do make a choice, know that you're also choosing its consequences.



2. Look for Patterns

See if you can trace your journey from the Pond of Power, down the ditch to the Well of Helplessness, and back up again. Notice the people, situations, and events that inspire you to enter the Pond—and those that send you sliding down to the Well. Keep track of these in a journal, if you like. See if you can find some patterns that happen over and over.

3. Name the Absolutes

This might be harder than you think. These guys are a little slippery sometimes. They're usually the extreme ends of things you value highly for very good reasons. Under almost every Absolute is a perfectly good value. It's just its "absoluteness" that causes problems, because you think it HAS to be. When you nail that, you're on your way to understanding what keeps you stuck in the piranhas' cycle.

Rule of thumb: Wherever there's a piranha, there's an Absolute that's been attacked or kept out of your reach. So when you start sinking, look for the wounded Absolute.

4. Watch the Drama

Not everyone is addicted to drama, but those of us who are tend to take a lot of people down with us. It can be useful to pay attention to your relationship with drama. Is there drama in your life? Do you do or say dramatic things? Are there less-dramatic words you could choose? Do you get caught up in other people's dramas? Are you drawn to dramatic people or situations? Do you make choices that get you caught up in drama—or get others caught up in your drama?

Now notice how your piranhas react to drama. Do they like it? Do they love it? Does it satisfy them, or does it make them all the more hungry? Where in your cycle of power-despair-helplessness-conniving does the drama come in?

Look at each part of the cycle. If that part of the cycle were a movie, what would its title be? Is this a new movie, or have you watched it over and over and over again? Is it still exciting—or even interesting? Are there still a lot of new things you can learn from it, or are you just a little bit bored?

Plotting Your Escape



If you decide you'd like to make a break for the Island, there are a few things you can do. Let's continue the numbering system we started in the last chapter.

5. Don't Do It Alone

I don't know of many people who escaped on their own steam. Most people get help—from friends, family, books, counselors, teachers, coaches, prevention programs, treatment programs, spiritual sources, recovery communities, faith communities, doctors, you name it. The best way to get help will depend on who you are, what you want, and what you need. And if one way doesn't work, there are others.

6. Dial It Down

One of the things that keeps us caught up in the cycle is simply the intensity of our beliefs, thoughts, feelings, moods, and actions. Even feeling numb or "stuck" can be intense!

What would happen if everything just came down a notch or two? What if you said things like “I want to...” instead of “I have to...,” “I want...” instead of “I need...” and “I don’t like...” instead of “I hate...”? What if you waited until you’d calmed down a little before deciding what to do or say?

If you find you can’t dial it down, there might be something physical that’s driving your intensity. Maybe it’s too much caffeine, sugar, alcohol, or drugs, and you need to cut down or quit. Maybe you’re too upset to think clearly, and you need to do some exercises to use up some of that energy. Maybe your body has too much or too little of the natural chemicals that control energy, mood, and anxiety, and you need to see a doctor. For everything out of balance, there are people who can help you figure it out and get **in** balance.

7. Question Things

The piranhas are counting on your unquestioning loyalty to the drama and the Absolutes—and your belief in all their lies. They don’t want you to know you have choices. They don’t want you to know the frog is just a frog.

Next time the piranhas say something nasty, try correcting them—or making fun of them. Repeat the corrected version over and over, until it drowns out the piranha-talk. Or try making a space in your head where there are no words for a while. And next time you think you **HAVE** to do something that’s brought you pain in the past, ask yourself, “Do I **really** have to? Why? What would happen if I didn’t?” Try questioning some of your beliefs—about yourself, about other people, about the world. If you find out you were right, you’ve turned your belief into a conviction. If you find out you were wrong, that just means you’re still learning.

And you won’t be feeding the piranhas!

Life on the Island



Some people will tell you the only way to get to the island is to sink deep into despair, until you have nothing left to lose. It's true that the island looks more attractive from the Well of Helplessness: A root canal would be a big step up from there!

But the truth is that we step onto and off of the island on a regular basis. We can climb on anywhere and slide off at any time. But the more time we spend there, the stronger we get, and the weaker and slower our piranhas get.

Of course, we have to work to stay on the island. There are at least three tasks that are new to us when we first escape the piranhas. If we keep the numbering system from the last two chapters, we'll end up with an even 10.

8. Learn to Live in Degrees

At first life might seem a little weird without Absolutes. What can you believe in, if nothing is absolute? What can you hold onto, if nothing lasts forever? Why try, if you can't be perfect? Why love, if nobody else is perfect?

But we find that we do believe, we do hold on, we do try, and we do love, because it's in our nature to do those things. Our belief doesn't forget to keep searching, our holding-on accepts the possibility of loss, we try to do the best we can, and we love imperfect people. It's real. And it's enough.

9. Feel What You Feel

The piranhas lied to us about feelings. They told us we could spend our whole lives in the Pond of Power feeling good. They told us their chatter was keeping the "bad" feelings away, when it was really trapping them in with us.

On the island, we feel things when we feel them, and we let them go right through us. We don't try to stop them, schedule them, shrink them, blow them up, or use them to get people to do what we want. And whatever our strongest feeling is, we also feel whatever else we might be feeling at the time. Having different feelings at the same time doesn't mean we're wrong or dishonest. It just means we're human.

10. Find New Excitement

Is it boring on the island, without all that drama? At first it might seem boring—even a little uncomfortable. But after a while you'll start to find excitement in the courage it takes to speak a quiet truth or take a chance on your dreams. You'll find beauty and heroism in ordinary acts of kindness and respect. You'll find your mind and soul caught up in experiences whose mysteries you'll never unravel.

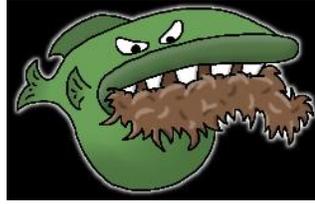
I'll tell you who **will** get bored, though: The piranhas. At some point they'll get so bored and tired they won't even try to heckle you from the water.

And you won't even miss them!



Escape from the Piranhas: Ten Suggestions

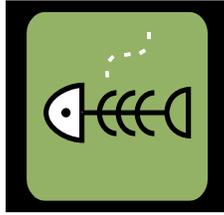
1. Just Pay Attention
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4. Watch the Drama
5. Don't Do It Alone
6. Dial It Down
7. Question Things
8. Learn to Live in Degrees
9. Feel What You Feel
10. Find New Excitement



About the Author

Pamela Woll, MA, CADP is a Chicago-based writer, trainer, and consultant. Pam has been writing books and manuals in addiction treatment, prevention, and other human service fields since 1990, on topics including stigma, strength-based approaches, cultural competence, evidence-based practices, violence, disaster human services, and addicted families.

Pam wrote a book with Terence T. Gorski called *Worth Protecting: Women, Men, and Freedom From Sexual Aggression* (a self-help book for men and women on building healthy relationships and not using or hurting one another). She's also written a number of manuals for the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center, including two self-study workbooks: *Healing the Stigma of Addiction: A Guide for Treatment Professionals* and *The Magnet: A Plan for Aligning Purpose and Professional Practice*.



How to Get the Piranhas Out of Your Head

This booklet is a positive, practical piece for anyone who's ever been pursued by piranhas—those nasty little voices in our heads that tell us we blew it, we can't succeed, we suck, other people suck, etc. It has fishes and frogs and—oh, no—an entire remapping of the human brain!

How to Get the Piranhas Out of Your Head follows the life cycle of the Brain Piranha from an infancy nourished on our expectations, our Absolutes, and the drama in our lives. It describes the endless cycles we navigate, pursued by piranhas, as we try to cope (or avoid coping) with life. It ends with ten practical suggestions for coping effectively, finding peace, and keeping the piranhas at bay.

With its silly illustrations and tongue-in-cheek humor, *Piranhas* takes an entertaining, non-threatening, but never simplistic look at some very serious and sometimes painful aspects of being human—and the strengths and resources we can use to make more courageous and constructive choices.

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