

In a nutshell

January, 2014

Mindsight

Transform your brain with the new science of kindness

By Daniel Siegel, Oneworld Publications, 2010

This book explains in a respectful, intelligent and accessible style how the different parts of the brain function and why they don't always work together well. It examines why, for example, we fly off the handle in the face of certain triggers, or live with excessive anxiety; and why it is that some of us are very rigid in our approach to life, some chaotic, and why others seem to experience emotional equilibrium. *Mindsight* gives practical instruction about how any of us, at any age or stage of life, can develop the capacity to "use the mind to sculpt the brain" – to change our own brain to enable greater capacity to manage our emotions effectively.

One of the things I love about Dan Siegel is that whilst his career and therapeutic practice is steeped in scientific research, he champions acceptance of individuals' unique subjective emotional experiences – those which cannot be measured.

In the introduction to *Mindsight*, Dr Dan Siegel asks the reader to consider two statements: "I am sad" and "I feel sad". Despite the apparent similarity of these statements, Siegel defines what he calls the profound difference between them in this way: "*I am sad* is a kind of self-definition and a very limited one. *I feel sad* suggests the ability to recognise and acknowledge a feeling without being consumed by it." The book sets out to teach the skills to identify and accept what we *feel* without *becoming* our feelings: to feel something, even strongly, and retain perspective and the capacity to function well, rather than being blown off course by the feelings and their associated thoughts.

Siegel's clinical experience over many years showed that teaching people about the different parts of the brain and their functions proved beneficial in learning how to manage their response to emotional triggers. His central premise is that integration between the different parts of the brain (more than only the left and right hemispheres) is critically important for emotional health and wellbeing, and that higher levels of emotional health and wellbeing increase our likelihood of functioning well in our work and in relationship to others.

Siegel draws an explicit link between the quality of our early care in life – the attachment to our early caregivers – and the extent to which our brain parts are integrated. So, those with secure attachment in infancy tend to experience emotional fluency and stability expressed as flexibility, openness and general equilibrium. For those with less secure attachment in infancy – who did not feel "felt" or "seen" by carers, integration may be compromised. Siegel writes that low levels of brain integration lead a person's emotional system to develop tendencies toward rigidity or chaos, or for many, both.

Siegel uses the analogy of a river. The extremes of its left bank represent rigidity; the right, chaos. In basic summary, the left side leads to tendencies such as *All or Nothing*, *Right or Wrong* thinking; the right side to *And* thinking, where this *And* that may exist together.

As a way to remember the differences between left and right, Siegel notes that the left side features numerous elements beginning with the letter 'L' – linear, linguistic, logical, literal, labels and lists. The right side of our brain, when working well provides us with flexibility, possibility and creativity. Siegel's right-sided elements include holistic thinking, imagery, metaphors, whole-body self, autobiographical capacity, raw emotion, stress reduction. When the sides are out of balance it can lead to chaos, indecisiveness, endless exploration of options and capacity for distraction.

An integrated brain allows us to feel the highs and lows of life without being swept up against one or other (or both) of the banks – to experience the flow of the central current of life, emotional equilibrium. Developing capacity for that central flow is the aim of *Mindsight*. In developing a person's capacity to spend time in the central flow area, rather than bumping against the banks, Siegel's aim with a client is to gradually increase the person's tolerance of discomfort with their thoughts and feelings, to be able to experience a thought or a feeling without needing automatically to react to it. To this process Siegel applies the concept he calls "widening the window of tolerance".

As brain integration increases, and as a person learns the skills of accepting their thoughts with open and compassionate curiosity, the wider that window of tolerance opens and with the window opening, so the opportunity for emotional equilibrium increases. This equilibrium, the "river of integration", contains five key elements embraced by the acronym FACES – Flexible, Adaptive, Coherent, Energised and Stable.

In *Mindsight* Siegel introduces the intriguing and professionally bold proposition that almost all, if not all psychological illnesses and conditions listed in the mental health bible, the *DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - 5th Edition)* may be related to various degrees of poor brain integration. And he uses case studies of clients with conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar and other conditions to illustrate the ways in which a brain may recover healthy function, even after significant dysfunction, using integrative techniques.

In his client case studies, Siegel demonstrates the practical application of *Mindsight* techniques, sharing his fascination with the brain's capacity to change and grow at any stage of life. One of the cases highlighted is that of a 92-year-old man with a long life of extreme emotional rigidity stemming from cold and undemonstrative parenting. Having spent his entire life successfully "doing" in his work as a lawyer, never having felt or expressed emotions, even towards his wife and children, he gradually learnt to experience emotions consciously and learnt to connect and respond emotionally to his wife for the first time in their sixty year marriage.

Importantly, Siegel does not suggest his techniques are designed only for treating mental illness. While taking mental illness very seriously, and advocating very careful treatment for serious mental illness, he is also generous in sharing his techniques with a range of professionals including teachers, coaches and others outside the mental health world.

Siegel actively encourages individuals to use his book to learn his mind-focusing strategies to increase brain "hygiene" and wellbeing. And, specifically targeting parents, Siegel has written two

books teaching parents how to apply *Mindsight* to their parenting: *The Whole Brain Child* for parenting younger children and a new book released in January 2014, *Brainstorm*, focusing on the teenage brain.

When it comes to practicalities, Siegel discusses several important components of changing the way we manage our emotions. First is the concept that change requires physical, structural change in the brain: the building of new neural connections linked to and supporting new patterns of thinking and behaviour. In order to bring about such change, Siegel highlights various necessary elements. These include focused attention, novelty, aerobic activity and attaching emotional meaning to the desired change. I will not detail these specific processes here, but the centrepiece is mindful awareness – of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and, from there, development of the capacity to *accept* thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, learning in time to exercise greater choice in response to the inner world, rather than being chained to old patterns of reactivity.

Siegel, in his gentle way, highlights a paradox – that in seeking to change ourselves, our first task is to accept the reality of our actual experience. Only after that may we successfully make long-term, sustainable changes to our patterns of emotional response. He says:

“Our efforts to combat our actual experience create an internal tension, a kind of self-inflicted distress. But rather than march into our inner world and say, ‘No – don’t do that’, we can embrace what *is* and notice what happens. Amazingly, time after time, people discover that letting things be allows them to change.”

Ultimately, for those who have struggled with their own emotional experience of life, Siegel’s message is one of hope. Whatever our background and whatever we have previously made of it, with intention, focus, practice and care each of us is capable of developing greater capacity for emotional wellbeing.

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This *In a Nutshell* is part of our regular discussion of contemporary brain and mind research. A Mind of One’s Own incorporates elements of Siegel’s integrative practice into our work with writers’ emotional wellbeing and enhanced creativity.