

Mindfulness and Me

Some of you are no doubt familiar with Dr. Dan Siegel's recent book, *The Mindful Therapist* (Norton & Company, 2010). At the Colorado School of Professional Psychology/University of the Rockies, I have been leading a small group of intrepid doctoral students in a perusal of Dr. Siegel's highly readable tome.

Any time yours truly can identify himself with anything having to do with 'mindful', he tries not to miss out. Yes, it's bad for his image, but hey...

'Mindfulness' is quite the catch-phrase these days. Simply stated, this construct has to do with the development of several uniquely human capacities such as interpersonal *presence*, *attunement*, and *resonance*.

In *The Mindful Therapist*, Siegel identifies some intriguing neurobiological tapestries related to attachment. In a sense, mindfulness puts added meat on the bone to the old Gestalt Psychology concept of the *I-Thou* relationship (a notion that asserts the importance of genuine relatedness, as it relates to the psychotherapeutic relationship).

Recall that in last edition's *Graymatters* I marveled at the contrast between an abused canine brain's ability to attach, versus that of an abused child. Further, the little almond-shaped amygdala on the right-side of the brain appears to be instrumental for healthy attachment capacities to occur.

Current thinking—spurred on in part by Siegel—posits that early abuse, in essence, mucks up the amygdala—sending it into something of a perpetual state of *neutron detonation*. As a result, said neutron detonation (i.e., emotional dysregulation to beat the band) throws a massive Sears crow bar into the brain's *machinery*, thereby preventing normal attachment capabilities.

Why? Because the impaired amygdala is causing the brain to preoccupy itself *ad nauseam* with fight/flight/fear reactions from now until next Tuesday—precluding the brain from turning its attention to the vital process of developing its *hard-drive* related to interpersonal attachment.

So, tell me again why it is that many abused children possess such a horrendous time of it in attaching to loving/nurturing parents? I mean, didn't we establish in last edition's *Graymatters* that, as far as we know, there are no appreciable differences in the amygdala of an abused puppy, versus that of an abused youngster?

Let's start with which area of the brain is clearly different between a canine and a kiddo? The pre-frontal cortex (PFC), of course.

Siegel's writings chronicle the assertion that the human PFC—in contradistinction to my two Golden Retrievers: Autumn and Amber—is infinitely complex and convoluted. Essentially, the human brain possesses a PFC that allows for 'mindfulness'.

That's the bad news.

And the good news.

The bad news is that the human PFC—in synchrony with the brain’s anterior insula and anterior cingulate (in concert with the aforementioned impaired amygdala)—allows for early abuse to do a WWF body-slam on Billy’s attachment capacities. Further, the Tex-Mex combo plate of language juxtaposed against implicit and explicit memories also factors in here. Not only do my two Golden not possess a highly evolved PFC, but neither comes equipped from the factory with complex language.

What about the good news? Hold your horses, Broca’s breath; I’m getting there.

As Siegel explains, mindfulness is something that can be acquired at any age and at any stage of life. It begins with parents and clinicians exercising their own mindfulness with children who are attachment-challenged. Thus, Siegel confidently asserts that “It is never too late to earn secure attachment status. This is the great news about neuroplasticity and the power of the reflective mind to change the brain”.

Holy brain behavior, Batman! My new credo for holistic health and wellness: *Being mindful of being mindful.*

So, I’m looking forward to joining with you in finding additional ways to help struggling families—building upon Siegel’s important work.

Until we meet again, be mindful.

