



Developing Mindsight, by Dan Siegel

Oftentimes people hear the word mindfulness and think "religion," but the reality is that focusing our attention in this way is a biological process that promotes health - as a form of brain hygiene - not a religion. Various religions may encourage this health-promoting practice, but learning the skill of mindful awareness is simply a way of cultivating what we have defined as the integration of consciousness. []

We learn more effectively when we are physically active. Novelty, or exposing ourselves to new ideas and experiences, promotes the growth of new connections among existing neurons and seems to stimulate the growth of myelin, the fatty sheath that speeds nerve transmission. Novelty can even stimulate the growth of new neurons - a finding that took a long time to win acceptance in the scientific community. Neuroplasticity can be activated by attention alone, or when we participate in an activity that is important and meaningful to us, but if we are not engaged emotionally and the experience is less memorable, the structure of the brain is less likely to change.

Dissolving fixed mental perceptions created along the brain's firing patterns and reinforced relationally within our cultural practices is no simple accomplishment. Our relationships engrain our early perceptual patterns and deepen the ways we come to see the world and believe our inner narrative. Without an internal education that teaches us to pause and reflect, we may tend to live on automatic and succumb to these cultural and cortical influences that push us toward isolation. Part of our challenge in achieving well-being is to develop enough mindsight to clear us of these restrictive definitions of ourselves so that we can grow towards higher degrees of integration.

Seeing the mind clearly not only catalyzes the various dimensions of integration as it promotes physical, psychological, and inter-personal well-being, it also helps us dissolve the optical delusions of our separateness. We develop more compassion for ourselves and our loved ones, but we also widen our circle of compassion to include other aspects of the world beyond our immediate concerns. With integration, we see ourselves with an expanded identity. When we embrace the reality of this interconnection, being considerate and concerned with the larger world becomes a fundamental shift in our way of living.

-- Dan Siegel in *_Mindsight_*