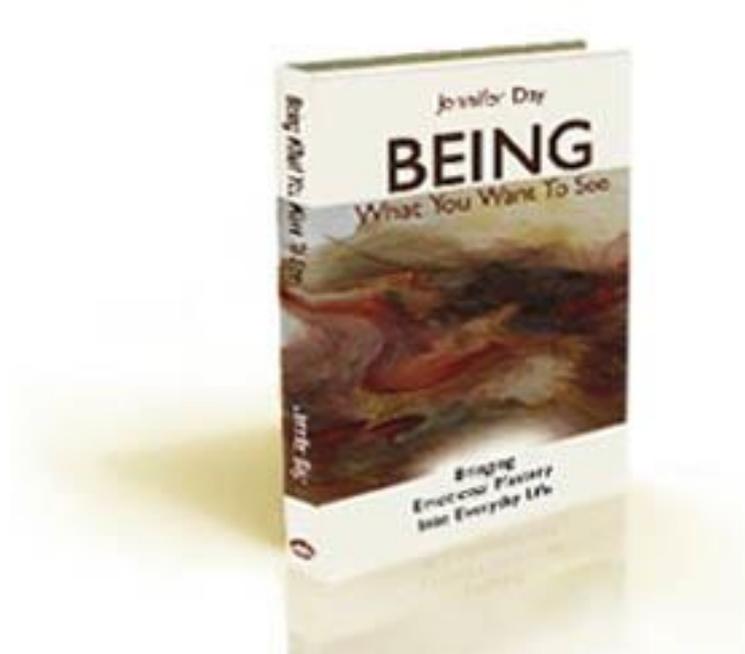


The Biology of Emotions and Positive Change

excerpt from

BEING

What You Want To See



Bringing Emotional Mastery
into Daily Life

By

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Illustrations by Tammy Day

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EXCERPT

CHAPTER 3

The Biology of Emotions and Positive Change

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Viktor E. Frankl

When we find ourselves in a situation where we are ready to make a change, to grow, to learn something new, we are predictably interested, motivated, focused, ready to absorb the information we are presented with, to process it, maybe question it, and interact with it until we have understood and integrated its very essence. When this has occurred, our retention and capacity to recall our newly acquired information requires little or no effort. This optimal learning state is a state of openness, growth, and mastery. It is a state that is actually quite natural and inherent to us as human beings.

There are essentially two ways in which we learn and grow; through integrated thinking, when learning is a response to information received in a safe and emotionally supportive environment, and through conditioned survival, when learning is a response to perceived threat.

When Mike and Clare had their first meeting with me, Mike’s stress level was clearly high, as was Clare’s unhappiness. As they talked about their experiences and their feelings it became evident that some discord had existed in their relationship for a number of years.

“I think I have been discontent and critical for many years!” Mike said. “In fact my business success is probably due to my drive for perfection - a perfection that I never actually feel I achieve!”

They had agreed when they married that Mike would put all his energy into the business, and Clare would stay home and raise their children; a classic model that Clare admitted was no longer working.

“I feel betrayed in a way, that I am raising these children almost on my own. Although I agreed to that, it was under the assumption that there would be loving support, not constant criticism.”

As our conversations progressed, Clare realized she had ‘learned’ some behaviors from their interactions that she had been hitherto unaware of; apologizing in a small voice almost as soon as Mike walked in the door, and other submissive expressions of ‘a meek and dutiful wife’ had become the norm, although this was not in keeping with her personality at all. Many years of apprehension and feelings of inferiority and betrayal as well as the constant tension had caused her to feel unsafe emotionally and as a result she had developed these ‘defensive’ behaviors .

“It’s just not me, but I do it anyway, as if I’m programmed!” she exclaimed.

CONDITIONED LEARNING - FOR SURVIVAL

What we learn in order to secure our survival occurs in the area of the brain known as the limbic system, often called the ‘emotional brain’. A function of this part of the brain is to make an evaluation; to receive information from all our senses in order to determine whether we are either safe, or threatened and in need of defending ourselves.

The limbic system encompasses a part of the brain called the amygdala as well as an area know as the hippocampus, each having a specific function in the learning and reactive process. The amygdala is involved in creating and storing our emotional memories, - i.e. the feeling of abandonment and fear when mother puts you in the crib and leaves you, - and the hippocampus is involved in creating and storing the context within which these memories exist, - i.e. mother’s facial expression, her back walking away, the smell of her perfume, the door closing, etc. -.

All human experiences are filtered through this part of the brain, its function being to answer the question, ‘am I threatened?’ In order to answer this question, the ‘emotional brain’ looks to match the new experience to anything vaguely similar in its storage of known ‘threats’. If a match is found, the amygdala ‘alarm bells ‘ ring and the ‘thinking’ or logical reasoning part of the brain is effectively bypassed. The alarm bell’s instructions are first sent straight to the body (heart, stomach, lungs, etc) to prepare for action and respond to the perceived threat. This process happens at immense speed and is entirely unconscious. Following this immediate ‘trigger’ response, news of the threat eventually reaches the ‘thinking’ brain, or cortex, which then may modify or inhibit the response that is occurring. If on the other hand no match is found and the ‘emotional brain’ determines that no threat is present, information regarding the new experience continues to the cortex for appropriate responses.

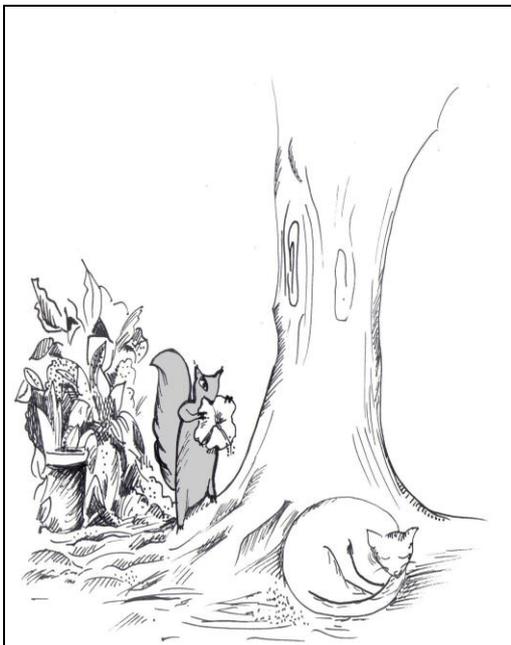
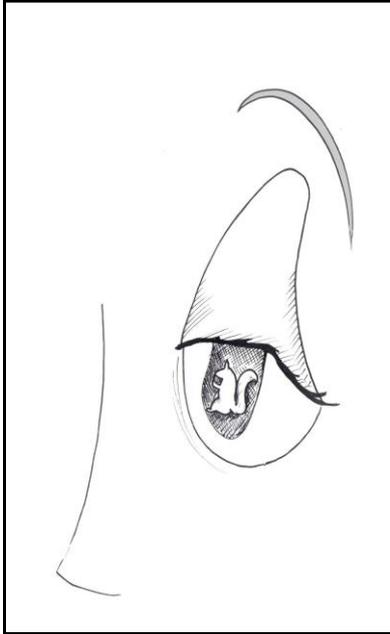
In Clare’s case, the perceived threat was Mike’s criticism, which usually occurred upon his arrival home in the evenings. So as soon as she heard the door open she would feel

emotionally threatened, 'prepare for action' and respond to the perceived threat with self-protective apologies and submission, her *learned* defensive position.

INTEGRATED LEARNING

Learning (and integrating information) that enables change and facilitates growth & transformation on the other hand, emerges from a state of openness and receptivity. As opposed to the defensive state, this state of receptivity involves full activation of the cerebral cortex or frontal lobes of the brain, which is the part of the brain situated at the front, just above the eyebrows. It is what differentiates us from other species, and plays a major role in intellectual thinking, problem-solving, creativity, etc. When this part of the brain – often referred to as the 'thinking brain' – is involved, integrated learning occurs.

Integrated learning is most clearly described by educator David Kolb as occurring in a sequence, consisting of **experience**, **reflection**, **abstraction** and **active testing** (Kolb 1984). We have an **experience** (for example, we hear and see something such as a squirrel moving towards our newly planted flowerbed), which is followed by an internal observation of or a **reflection** on what we have experienced, (relative to whatever references our brain recognizes from past experiences, - such as having seen squirrels dig up plants in their search for buried nuts - giving context to the experience). An **abstraction** or idea is then generated (in the front part of the brain), determining what the appropriate response should be, (such as 'if I clap my hands together loudly, the squirrel may retreat'), and when and where it should be carried out ('I will do it immediately!'). Finally, signals are sent to the appropriate body parts for the action or 'motor' (**active testing**) to be carried out (hands clap frenetically as we run towards the flowerbed). When the action or 'testing of the idea' is carried out, a resulting new experience is initiated (for example the squirrel runs away but so too does our hitherto happily snoozing cat), and the whole process begins again. Within this one process, the integrated learning may be that clapping can be appropriate to get rid of a squirrel, but that we must consider the greater environment and other critters as well.



Each 'integrated learning' process (see brain illustration Fig. 2) occurs with great speed, and is repeated over and over again, millions of times a day.

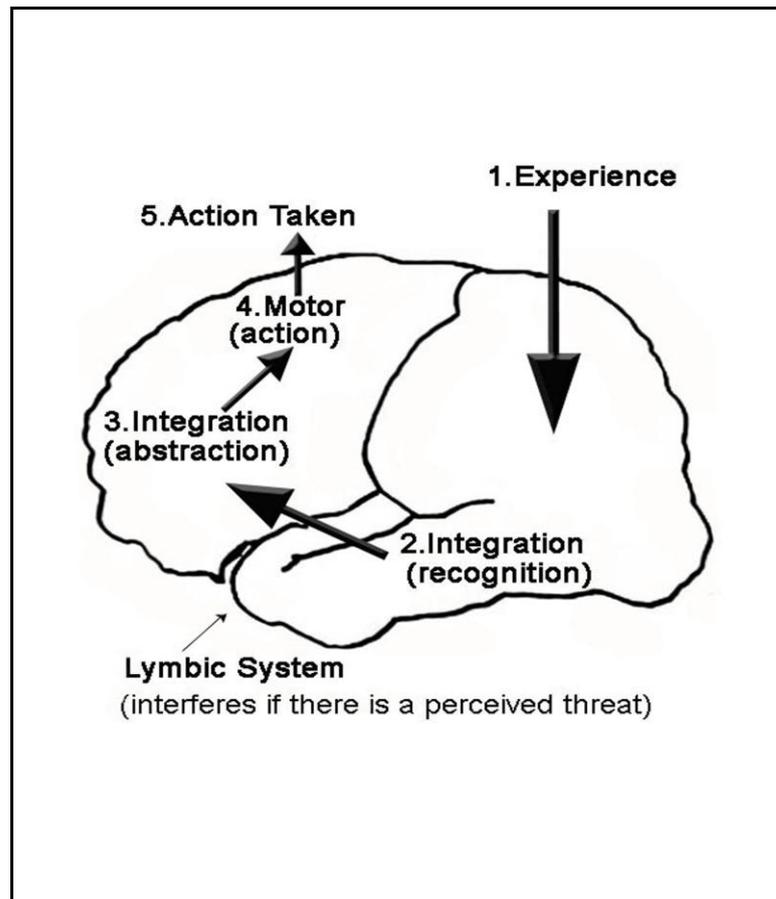


Figure 2.

The proper function of the cerebral cortex (or ‘thinking brain’) requires a feeling of safety and emotional support. If the limbic system or emotional brain detects a threat, this part of the brain becomes inhibited and will not function as well because the physiological signals it receives will be alarm signals provoking shut down and survival responses. Only when the limbic system perceives that there is no threat, can the cortex function creatively, without interruptions, at its full potential.

This need for safety and emotional support is very well illustrated by ‘Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs’ (Fig. 3) a concept developed by psychologist Abraham Maslow more than fifty years ago. Although this is a simplified version, it gives a very clear visual picture of basic human emotional needs and the order in which they can be met. As with any structure, human beings need a strong foundation and that foundation, according to Maslow, is the knowledge that we are able to survive and be safe, - without giving it too much thought! Only then can we begin to meet our other needs; our need for love – to love and be loved -, our need to feel a sense of belonging, to develop self-esteem and finally, to self-actualize - to realize our highest

values, visions and dreams. For each developing stage to be effective, the one beneath it must be established. If, for example safety is not taken care of, there is little use in attempting to build self-esteem, or even to feel a sense of belonging. If we don't feel safe, meeting our need for 'SAFETY' is the level at which we will operate and behave – no higher. For any sustainable change or growth to take place we must look at where on this pyramid we spend most of our time, emotionally. The lower we are on the Pyramid, the more defensive and further away from growth and transcendence we move.

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

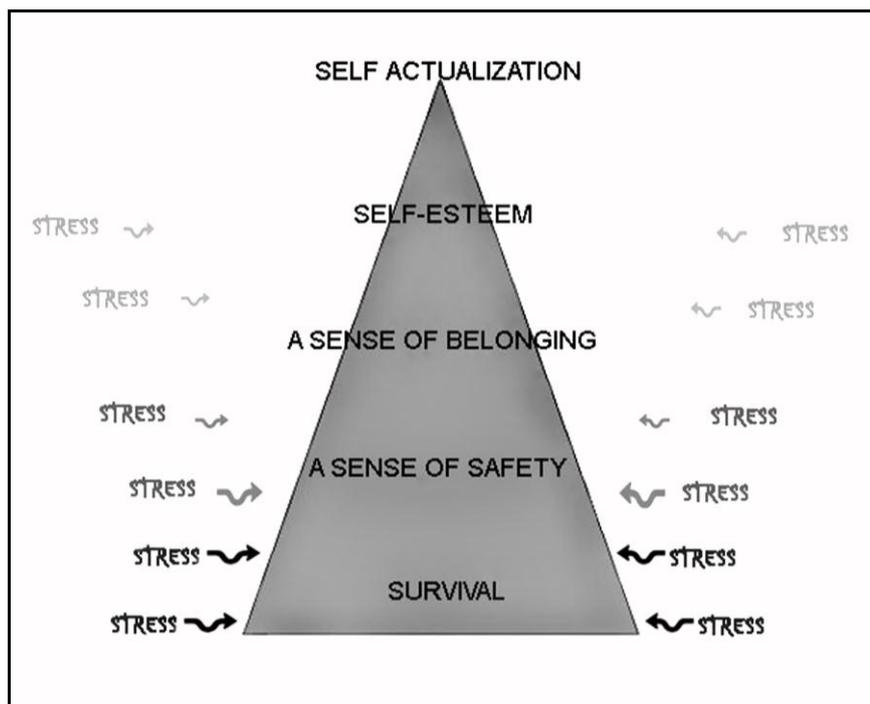


Figure 3

Maslow found that in order for someone to function well at each level, with few exceptions, the needs of the preceding levels must be met. Naturally, we cannot expect to have all our needs, emotional or otherwise, met at all times or in all environments, and we can make this concept considerably more complex. However, simply put; if the needs at each stage are not met in *any* environment, we become unable to progress effectively towards the next level of fulfillment. For example, if we are in 'survival mode', everything else is irrelevant. Or if we do not feel safe, we are unable to feel a meaningful sense of belonging or to experience balanced, sustained feelings of love. If we do not feel love, loved, or a sense of belonging, we will not be

likely to succeed at building a sustainable, positive self-image or esteem, etcetera. (more about this in Chapter 13).

Additionally, we must *perceive* that our needs are being met. When stress is present, a person's perception is clouded and distorted which also results in an inability to progress towards the next level of fulfillment. And the lower we are on the Pyramid, the more vulnerable we are to the damaging effects of negative stress! The good news is that we have much more control of all of this that we typically are given to believe.

~

[BEING WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE is now also available on Kindle.](#)

Read the whole book for a step-by-step process to building emotional mastery and the management of stress, into everyday life.

Integrating cutting-edge scientific research in areas such as neuroscience, psychology, psycho-neuro-immunology, and education, the information is made simple and easy-to-understand and apply, with dozens of practical exercises, tools and skills for feeling more calm, confident and in control, acting and interacting more the way you really want to, and for truly living the life you want!

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