

THE BIG IDEAS

What Is Mindsight?

It's awesome. Seriously.

Our Seventh Sense

5 + 1 + 1.

Well-Being

The three fundamental principles.

Integration

= Flexible + free.

River of Integration

Two banks: Rigidity + chaos.

The Hub of Awareness

Is where it's at.

Our Own Best Friends

It's time to become that.

Brain Hygiene Basics

= Exercise + nutrition + sleep.

Education Par Excellence

Training our attention.

SNAG it!

For neuro + synaptogenesis.

Getting the Ball Rolling

Into the valley of coherence.

"There are specific activities and experiences that can nurture mindsight throughout the lifespan... mindsight is a form of expertise that can be honed in each of us, whatever our early history."

~ Dan Siegel



Mindsight

The New Science of Personal Transformation

BY DANIEL J. SIEGEL, M.D. · BANTAM © 2010 · 314 PAGES

“Within each of us there is an internal mental world—what I have come to think of as the sea inside—that is a wonderfully rich place, filled with thoughts and feelings, memories and dreams, hopes and wishes. Of course it can also be a turbulent place, where we experience the dark side of all those wonderful feelings and thoughts—fears, sorrows, dreads, regrets, nightmares. When this inner sea seems to crash in on us, threatening to drag us down below to the dark depths, it can make us feel as if we are drowning. Who among us has not at one time or another felt overwhelmed by the sensations from within our own minds? Sometimes these feelings are just a passing thing—a bad day at work, a fight with someone we love, an attack of nerves about a test we have to take or a presentation we have to give, or just an inexplicable case of the blues for a day or two. But sometimes they seem to be something much more intractable, so much part of the very essence of who we are that it may not even occur to us that we can change them. This is where the skill that I have called “mindsight” comes in, for mindsight, once mastered, is a truly transformational tool. Mindsight has the potential to free us from patterns of mind that are getting in the way of living our lives to the fullest.”

~ Dan Siegel from *Mindsight*

[Dan Siegel](#) is one of the world's leading neuroscientists and psychotherapists. A Harvard Medical School graduate and Professor of Psychiatry at the UCLA Medical School, he founded the field of “Interpersonal Neurobiology.”

He's brilliant (!) and delivers his wisdom in a captivating, poetic style.

He's also an incredibly *good* human being. We connected for the first time years ago and I was immediately captured by his profound embodiment of the truths he teaches—a big heart and wonderful, loving presence matched with a deep sense of personal humility.

This book is fantastic. The central theme is that we have the capacity to observe and shape our own minds—an ability Dan calls “mindsight.” In short, the quality of our lives is shaped by our ability to cultivate our mindsight.

If you enjoy the Note, I think you'll love the book (get it [here](#)). And, I think you'll love connecting deeper with Dan and his work (visit his site [here](#)).

For now, let's jump in and explore some of my favorite Big Ideas, starting with a deeper look at what mindsight actually is:

WHAT IS MINDSIGHT?

“Mindsight is a kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds. It helps us to be aware of our mental processes without being swept away by them, enables us to get ourselves off the autopilot of ingrained behaviors and habitual responses, and

"One of the key practical lessons of modern neuroscience is that the power to direct our attention has within it the power to shape our brain's firing patterns, as well as the power to shape the architecture of the brain itself."

~ Dan Siegel

moves us beyond the reactive emotional loops we all have a tendency to get trapped in. It lets us "name and tame" the emotions we are experiencing, rather than being overwhelmed by them...

You can also think of mindfulness as a very special lens that gives us the capacity to perceive the mind with greater clarity than ever before... And it allows us to reshape and redirect our inner experiences so that we have more freedom of choice in our everyday actions, more power to create the future, to become the author of our own story. Another way to put it is that mindfulness is the basic skill that underlies everything we mean when we speak of having social and emotional intelligence."

There ya go.

Mindsight is the basic skill that underlies everything it means to have social and emotional intelligence.

(That's an important skill to cultivate, eh? :)

Here's another way to look at it:

OUR SEVENTH SENSE

"Our first five senses allow us to perceive the outside world—to hear a bird's song or a snake's warning rattle, to make our way down a busy street or smell the warming earth of spring. What has been called our sixth sense allows us to perceive our internal bodily states—the quickly beating heart that signals fear or excitement, the sensation of butterflies in our stomach, the pain that demands our attention. Mindsight, our ability to look within and perceive the mind, to reflect on our experience, is every bit as essential to our well-being. Mindsight is our seventh sense."

I just love that image of mindfulness as our seventh sense.

We can see + touch + smell + hear + taste (= primary 5 senses).

And we can perceive our internal body states (= 6th sense).

... and we can sense our own minds.

Mindsight.

It's the seventh sense you didn't know you have! :)

"The human mind is a relational and embodied process that regulates the flow of energy and information."

~ Dan Siegel

THE THREE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF WELL-BEING

"Everything that follows rests on three fundamental principles. The first is that mindfulness can be cultivated through very practical steps... Second, when we develop the skill of mindfulness, we actually change the physical structure of the brain... How we focus our attention shapes the structure of the brain..."

The third principle is at the heart of my work as a psychotherapist, educator, and scientist. Well-being emerges when we create connections in our lives—when we learn to use mindfulness to help the brain achieve and maintain *integration*, a process by which separate elements are linked together into a working whole."

So, three fundamental principles:

1. Mindsight can be cultivated. (Sweet.)
2. As we cultivate mindfulness, we actually change the structure of our brain. (Awesome.)
3. Mindsight helps us achieve INTEGRATION—which is one of the hallmarks of a healthy human. (Powerful.)

The essence of the book is about how we can achieve integration via mindsight.

Let's take a closer look at what integration is all about!

"Within each of us is an inherent drive toward health—a push toward integration."

~ Dan Siegel

INTEGRATION = FLEXIBLE AND FREE

"Integration enables us to be flexible and free; the lack of such connections promotes a life that is either rigid or chaotic, stuck and dull on the one hand or explosive and unpredictable on the other. With the connecting freedom of integration comes a sense of vitality and the ease of well-being. Without integration we can become imprisoned in behavioral ruts—*anxiety and depression, greed, obsession, and addiction.*

By acquiring mindsight skills, we can alter the way the mind functions and move our lives toward integration, away from these extremes of chaos and rigidity. With mindsight we are able to focus our mind in ways that literally integrate the brain and move it toward resilience and health."

Integration is huge.

We want to find the integrated fluidity that exists between rigidity and chaos.

I remember when Dan first introduced me to the idea that an integrated, flexible human being is like a river flowing between the banks of rigidity on one side and chaos on the other—with a healthy amount of structure (but not *too* much which leads to rigidity) plus a healthy amount of spontaneity (but, again, not *too* much which leads to chaos).

Really (!) powerful stuff.

Here's a deeper look at what the "FACES" of integrated flow looks like:

THE RIVER OF INTEGRATION

"Now the qualities of an integrated flow spelled a universally memorable word: FACES, for Flexible, Adaptive, Coherent, Energized, and Stable. We can say that any healthy complex system has a FACES flow. In other words, when the self-organizational movement of the system is maximizing complexity, it attains a harmonious flow that is at once flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable..."

I like to imagine the FACES flow as a river. The central channel of the river is the ever-changing flow of integration and harmony. One boundary of this flow is chaos. The other boundary is rigidity. These are the two banks of the river of integration."

Flexible + Adaptive + Coherent + Energized + Stable.

FACES.

That's how we want to flow.

...

And, let's remember: The river of integration has two banks—rigidity on one side; chaos on the other. We want to create a healthy amount structure + spontaneity in our lives.

THE HUB OF AWARENESS

"How we focus our attention is the key to promoting integrative changes in the brain. With the integration of consciousness, we actually build the skills to stabilize attention so that we can harness the power of awareness to create choice and change. This is why the integration of consciousness is the foundation for the other domains. Creating what I'll call a "hub of awareness" enables us to acknowledge troubling states without being taken over by them, and to

"How we focus our attention shapes the structure of the brain."

~ Dan Siegel

see things as they are, rather than being constrained by our expectations of how they should be."

The "hub of awareness" is one of Dan's really helpful frames to capture the essence of what we're aspiring to create as we cultivate our mindsight.

Imagine the hub of a bicycle wheel with spokes that connect to the rim.

As we cultivate our mindsight, we enhance our ability to stay flexible and stable and centered at the hub of our awareness—consciously choosing to explore different areas of our experience rather than getting swept up in them.

Guess what one of the best ways to optimize that hub experience is?

Yep.

Meditation.

BECOMING OUR OWN BEST FRIENDS

"In summary, here is what modern clinical research, 2,500 years of contemplative practice, recent neuroscience investigations, and my own experience all suggest: Mindfulness is a form of mental activity that trains the mind to become aware of awareness itself and to pay attention to one's own intention. As researchers have defined it, mindfulness requires paying attention to the present moment from a stance that is nonjudgmental and nonreactive. It teaches self-observation; practitioners are able to describe with words the internal seascapes of the mind. At the heart of this process, I believe, is a form of internal "tuning in" to oneself that enables people to become "their own best friend." And just as our attunement to our children promotes a healthy, secure attachment, tuning in to the self also promotes a foundation for resilience and flexibility."

What a great description of mindfulness and the fruits of its practice.

When we are able to attune to our internal processes and experiences while accepting where we are in a nonjudgmental, nonreactive manner, we can truly love ourselves—becoming our own best friends in the process.

(P.S. for Parents: Check out Dan's great book [Parenting from the Inside Out](#) where he talks about the importance of attuning to our children and the fact that the strongest predictor of a child's healthy attachment to us is the coherence of our own life narrative.)

(That was the first book of Dan's I read, years before I became a parent. Really good stuff.)

"With practice, a mindful state becomes a mindful trait."

~ Dan Siegel

BRAIN HYGIENE BASICS: THE FOUNDATION OF NEUROPLASTICITY

"I reminded him that with regular exercise, a good diet, and sleep, he could set the foundation for promoting neuroplasticity. Jonathan and I made a verbal agreement that he would follow this "prescription" for health. It's amazing how often these basics of brain health are ignored. Exercise is an underrated treatment—and now we know that aerobics not only releases the endorphins that can combat a down mood but also promotes the growth of the brain. Eating regularly and well, balancing the various food groups, and avoiding excess sugar and stimulants can help to reduce mood swings. And sleep, though in short supply and difficult at times to initiate for Jonathan, is a healer that can be approached in a systematic way. Sleep hygiene includes setting up a calming routine before bed. Minimizing caffeine or other stimulants once evening approaches, if not before; shutting off digital stimulation an hour or two before sleeping; and quiet activities such as taking a bath, listening to soothing music, or reading a book can all help the body as well as the mind to settle. With these brain hygiene basics in our contract, we could move into our specific efforts to promote integration."

I just love reading and sharing that.

"The observational distance that allows us to watch our own mental activity is an important first step toward regulating and stabilizing the mind."

~ Dan Siegel

Echoes what we talk about *all the time* throughout these Notes: Mastery of the fundamentals...

Remember: Dan is one of the world's leading psychotherapists and neuroscientists. Where does he start his process of creating integration via mindsight (at least in this case)?

With the basic fundamentals of brain hygiene.

Exercise + Nutrition + Sleep.

I'll repeat that.

—> Exercise + Nutrition + Sleep. :)

How are *your* fundamentals of brain hygiene?

The specific practices of integrating our minds via meditation and other practices are (obviously) powerful. But let's not forget the even more fundamental practices that give us the best shot at optimizing!

Here's to the consistency on the fundamentals!!

THE EDUCATION PAR EXCELLENCE

"The renowned psychologist William James once said, "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence." Though James also said, "It is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about," we actually do know how to refocus a wandering attention again and again—to use mindfulness practice to educate the mind itself."

Love that.

Voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention again and again and again is, according to William James (who is essentially the founder of the whole Psychology movement), THE essence to well-being.

(Sidenote: I once interviewed Sonja Lyubomirsky (check that out [here](#)) and she echoed this wisdom—saying that attention is *the* hallmark of happy people.)

The good news is we now know how to rock it.

Meditation.

Specifically, per Dan's recommendation, mindfulness meditation. Check out the book for a wonderful guided meditation Dan uses with his patients!

SNAG IT!

"I drew a picture of the brain and told Stuart about the left and right sides. Our goal, I said, was to help him develop a more balanced whole brain—to add new right-hemisphere abilities and reinforce his already well-developed left side. Then I introduced one of my acronyms, SNAG, for Stimulate Neuronal Activation and Growth. I said we could SNAG his brain to create and strengthen neural connections. Wherever neural firing occurs, existing neurons can make new or enhanced synaptic connections through the process called *synaptogenesis*. New neurons can be stimulated to develop, as well—a process called neurogenesis. I also explained how the myelin can thicken, which increases the electrical conduction among interconnected neurons. And, as I'd told Jonathan, among the keys to neuronal growth are novelty, attention, and aerobic exercise. Stuart liked the SNAG acronym, and I was happy his left mode seemed to appreciate the wordplay.

Short of using an electrical probe, how can we strategically target a particular portion of the

"Exercising attention is like building a muscle."

~ Dan Siegel

"People with mindfulness training have a shift in their brains toward an "approach state" that allows them to move toward rather than away from challenging situations. This is the brain signature of resilience."

~ Dan Siegel

brain? The answer is attention."

Dan is a master of coming up with handy-dandy acronyms.

We've explored FACES. (Remember: Flexible + Adaptive + Coherent + Energized + Stable = Integrated awesomeness.)

Now, it's time to SNAG!

Stimulate Neuronal Activation Growth. (I like.)

And, in the process, we'll be rockin' synaptogenesis + neurogenesis. (I *really* like. :)

GETTING THE INTEGRATION BALL ROLLING

"A cascade of positive effects seems to emerge spontaneously when integration has been initiated. It's like the old physics idea of pushing a ball up a hill to get it rolling down the other side. It takes considerable effort and deliberate attention to move beyond the initial engrained, nonintegrated state—to push the ball up the hill. This is the intentional work of change. But ultimately the emerging mind takes its natural course towards integration, and the ball flows effortlessly down into the valley of coherence. Integration is the mind's natural state."

What a great image. Perfect for the end of this Note.

Here's to the diligent, patient, persistent effort required to push our consciousness up the hill so we can watch it roll down into the valley of coherence!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of "Mindsight"

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.