



Mark Smith, M.S.W., R.S.W.
President of the Board of
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EDITING: TANYA HAWKE,
tjwordsmiths@telus.net

Leila Howard,
Business Office,
604 926 5496 ext.300,
livingsystems@telus.net

www.livingsystems.ca

Your Brain and the Emotional System

BY MARK SMITH, M.S.W., R.S.W.

A recent client, who I'll call Sam, has been working toward mastering his anxiety which he experiences in a palpable way. He sweats when he's anxious and his face flushes red quickly. What adds to his anxiety is that he worries about the anxiety coming on so he becomes anxious about being anxious. It's akin to someone who is socially self-conscious and worries about talking in a group of people. That person may worry about what he says or whether he will be able to say it without stumbling. Of course, the anxiety about the potential awkwardness is enough to create the anticipated event.

Anxiety is often about perception and giving something meaning. Each person's perception is unique to his or her life events. Stories are built around these events and emotionality gets bound up in them. These events and attached anxieties become embedded in the structure and function of our brain and from there it plays out through our central nervous system. Yes, anxiety has its purpose. We want our fight or flight response to kick in when we walk down the road at midnight and someone jumps out of the bushes. But, when we are walking down the same road midday and become nervous about every noise in the bushes, something else is going on and the anxiety is working against us.

Norman Doidge, M.D., in his book, *The Brain That Changes Itself*, recounts stories of brain neuroplasticity. "Neuro is for 'neuron,' the nerve cells in our brains and nervous systems. Plastic is for 'changeable, malleable, modifiable..." Doidge states that neuroplasticity "renders our brain not only more resourceful, but also more vulnerable to outside influences." While conventional medical wisdom suggests that the brain is hardwired and therefore change is not possible, Doidge became interested in the idea of a changing brain and began traveling around the world to meet scientists and therapists who have made unexpected discoveries.

"They showed that the brain changed its very structure with each different activity it performed, perfecting its circuits so it was better suited to the task at hand. If certain 'parts' failed, then other parts could sometimes take over. The machine metaphor, of the brain as an organ with specialized parts, could not fully account for changes the scientists were seeing." (Preface)

Doidge recounts the efforts of one therapist who, through the use of brain scans before and after treatment, has determined that talk therapy can change the brain. He found that identifying anxiety, thinking differently about it and acting differently toward it and, I would suggest, understanding systemically what contributes to it, actually changes the brain by growing new brain circuits. The individual is a learning system.

Sam made great strides this year by focusing less on harnessing his anxiety and more on finding ways to centre himself in the moment and not anxiously outside himself. He worked at defining more clearly who he is in his family, his own thoughts about the world and what he truly enjoys about life as opposed to what he perceived other people's agendas were for him. As well, he has worked toward understanding more clearly how his current emotional system shapes him and what impact events in his family have had in shaping his sense of self.

Although I didn't see Sam for several weeks over the summer, he was managing well and sweating hadn't been a problem. But when his brother, who had been living with him, moved out of the city, Sam found himself in a free fall and couldn't figure it out. After a shift in his emotional system the slightest bit of sweating sent him back to the old story. He'd lost his centre. "I must be anxious... I'm back to square one, I feel like I've failed after making such headway this year."

It was only after we surveyed what had recently changed that he became tearful about his brother moving away. Growing up, his younger brother was his only family ally, the only one he felt safe with and through whom he created stability. And then he laughed when he was reminded that everyone sweats. He saw the absurdity of what his anxiety was suggesting and let go of it. He was centred and grounded again, but faced with the reality finding the stability within him and not relying on his brother. (CONTINUED ON PAGE 2)



Murray Bowen made a conceptual leap from an individual perspective to a systems perspective when he noticed the interplay of how each individual within a family shapes their family and how the family shapes the individuals. He noticed how they are each inextricably tied together emotionally. We accept this as a given, but it is overlooked in its importance.

Dr. Bowen also suggested that the individual is a system. Our thoughts and feelings influence our biology and our biology influences our thoughts and feelings.

Like Sam, our external world gets into our internal world. A shift in the emotional system around us or in our perceptual system – “Oh no, I’m sweating; that must mean I’m anxious.” – plays out in our internal world and it is also expressed in our external world. Our brain becomes active and, through thoughts and feelings and physiology, it shapes our individual self on the inside and how we behave on the outside. Fortunately, we are a learning system and, as Doidge points out, our brain can change its perceptions and its structure by creating new neural pathways, meaning new functioning and new behaviours.

Our brain can be more resourceful than we know.

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