



WELLBEING

With Heart

The worrying brain - 5 tips to give it some calm

Our brains are wired to look out for the negatives in the world. This may sound morbid, but it is an evolutionary adaptation that has kept us alive. Survival of the fittest.

Another very important strategy that we have adopted, is safety in numbers. By being in a group, having a mob around us, we have learnt that we are safer together than alone. Our brains are looking out for dangers and know the importance of being in a group.

So why does the brain worry so much?

The adolescent brain goes through the biggest period of remodelling and change than in any other developmental time of life. During childhood, the brain is like a sponge, soaking up everything that it can, creating new synapses. During adolescence, the brain begins to prune out unnecessary synapses helping the brain to become more specialised. Some areas mature earlier than others. For example, the amygdala – the area for emotions and reactivity ‘fight flight freeze frenzy’ part – is at its most mature. Whereas the prefrontal cortex – the area for higher order thinking and logical decision making – is still developing, not reaching maturity until mid to late 20s. What does this mean for our behaviours in adolescence?

With the amygdala at its finest, adolescents are more likely to process emotions, detect and

react to threats, including if they are only perceived threats (not real snakes or sabertoothed tigers). Hence, adolescents are more likely to be reactive and emotional. So, you can see why threats and feeling isolated and alone can be so hard, especially in adolescence.

Due to neural pathways being created and pruned (neuroplasticity), the brain can also become primed to repeat a reaction as your amygdala becomes conditioned to react. That is, if you have a panic attack when walking into the hall prior to performing, next time you enter that hall your amygdala is likely to fire, ready to set off another response. The great thing about neuroplasticity, with training, the brain can continue creating and pruning to learn new neural pathways to counteract this response. Go brain!

5 tips for calming our worrying brain

1. Breathe

Yes we all breathe, however it is a bit like food. We can nourish ourselves with healthy food, or taint it with unhealthy food. Breathing too can be healthy, it can be controlled and intentional so to help kick in the nervous system which calms the brain and body. There are many different techniques (beyond the scope of today's WBWH) but whichever you go with, most important is to breathe out for longer than you breathe in.



2. Exposure

Our brains prefer that we avoid whatever it is that is threatening us – perceived or real – however learning to sit in the difficult and work through the threatening thing builds up our distress tolerance and reduces the reactivity of the amygdala ‘alarm bell part of our brain’. Practice moving towards the thing that is worrying you rather than avoiding it.

3. Exercise

Get your dose of wellbeing! Moderate exercise releases all the D.O.S.E goodness into you. Dopamine, Oxytocin, Serotonin and Endorphin are the helpful neurotransmitters which make us feel good. Researchers studied 66 college students and concluded that negative thoughts and anxiety were noticeably less prevalent when participants exercised: lightly for just under 2 hours per day, moderately for 80 minutes per day, or vigorously for 45 minutes per day(1). Choose whatever works for your ambition and schedule. Get out and move your body!



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4. Sleep

Nothing works without rest. A body under duress will be more anxious. Sleep 8 – 10 hours per night will help restore the body so that one can then tap into the cognitive skills such as perspective taking, fact checking, positive self-talk, noticing when catastrophising. Control what you can, get some sleep.



5. Make Healthy Choices

One of the most helpful questions you can ask yourself is, “Is what I am doing helping or harming me?” (2)

This reflective question makes us look at the choices we are making and how that impacts our wellbeing. Eg: Is watching another episode rather than sleeping right now, helping or harming me? It puts you back in the driver’s seat to make a decision on ‘How this is impacting me?’ It gives you some control over your decision making.

References

(1) <https://www.inc-aus.com/bill-murphy-jr/feeling-anxious-neuroscience-says-these-5-simple-tricks-will-calm-your-anxiety-instantly.html>

(2) https://www.ted.com/talks/lucy_hone_3_secrets_of_resilient_people?language=en



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