

## No Hopeless Cases

Isn't it fascinating how so many of us have a deep desire for lives of balance, joy and kindness and to simply be good people? We'd love to quit our addictions, be nicer to our kids, pets and partners, work with a cheerier attitude, make a difference and be part of the solution? And we might get close at times, but so often snap back into cravings, grouchiness, giving up, blaming--just adding to the mix of angry, anxious, finger-pointing, numbing out people.

Hey, it's not us. It's our wiring. Just like old houses can have some pretty funky electrical hodgepodes behind their walls, we humans have some pretty primitive electrical chemical neural circuitry that is not as evolved as we wish. It's that wiring, called allostatic circuits, that keeps tripping us up. We really don't need a different job, more money, a new spouse, better acting kids, a hotter body, etc. to experience the joy, balance, peace and well being we desire. We just need updates in our wiring.

So that's where EBT or Emotional Brain Training comes in. It's a program developed at UCSF that helps people rewire their own brains. It takes practice (you know how the brain needs repetition, think of Spanish or yoga class). It takes support (unfortunately we can't go it alone, we are social mammals, our brains need other brains to develop, it's called "interpersonal neurobiology," the "social engagement system" or "limbic resonance"--all great descriptions of how humans co-create and how brains stretch and grow in community).

But the exciting thing is it works. Maybe not perfectly (there are too many mysteries still in neuroscience and human behavior) but it's the best we have in my field (health psychology) so far.

Here's how it works, but first just a little on the underlying theory, simplified to embarrassingly bare bones. George Valliant M.D., who wrote *Spiritual Evolution* and was the Director of the Study of Adult Development at Harvard for 30 years, says that we are designed, through evolution, for joy. Valliant's joy is not "happy happy, bliss bliss" but rather the frequent and sustained feelings of connection with self, others, and the spiritual (whatever your belief is), the peaceful feelings of balance and well-being, the warm feelings of compassion and love.

Joy encompasses it all, that higher state that so many spiritual practices are trying to help us achieve. Our brains are designed to move toward these states. In EBT, we call it the "1" state. It's our more evolved prefrontal cortex in charge, and we're in a state of "neural integration". Like a plant moving toward the sun, we're designed to move toward joy, the "1" state.

But, we also have survival circuitry, that faulty electrical wiring I was talking about earlier. If you want to talk in terms of ego, our ego can be considered part of the activation of our survival circuitry. More primitive regions of our brain take over, our unconscious emotional memories from childhood get triggered, even inherited circuitry,

the faulty beliefs and fears from our ancestors can light up. This is all subcortical, outside, or just on the edge, of our conscious awareness. When you start doing something that you wish you weren't doing (numbing out with ice cream, zoning out to bad t.v., arguing with your spouse about something stupid, yelling at your kids, choosing to stay online instead of taking that walk, feeling stuck in a dead end mindless job, etc.) chances are it's your survival circuitry that's ruling the roost. It's not you, it's your primitive wires. In EBT we call times like these the "4" and "5" brain states. They basically are stress states, our allostatic circuits have taken over.

So back to how it works. We all go in and out of brain states, depending on what parts of our brain are lightening up in a given moment. The 1 and 2 states are considered homeostatic, our joy states. 3 is pretty neutral, 4 and 5 are stress states. The problem is, the more time we spend in lower states, the more likely we are to get stuck there. The brain loves the familiar neural pathways, and pretty soon feeling bad feels so familiar it feels good. Or at least easy. The brain likes easy, the path of least resistance. This becomes our emotional set point.

In EBT we learn first how to check in and see what state we are in, then we learn tools to switch up our state, to raise our state. We practice this over and over and over again until the brain begins to change (the brain literally restructures itself, see the Sharon Begley reference below) and our emotional set point begins to shift upward toward that 1 state. Change your state often enough, you change your "trait".

It takes a combination of mindfulness (we have to be aware of our state, which is a combination of thoughts, feelings, body sensations--we practice lovingly observing our inner state), emotional tools (yes, the unconscious stores emotional memory, we can't bypass emotions, they are the root of the human experience and our brain state), cognitive tools (the brain distills emotional experience into beliefs about self, life, others, etc. and we learn to uproot these unconscious beliefs and rewire them), and body based lifestyle tools (our bodies need to be in homeostasis or balance or our emotional life won't be able to shift much—that means exercise, healthy eating, sleep, etc.). The good news is, it's a lot easier to take care of our bodies when we are in 1 or 2 states, so as we rewire our brain toward 1, the lifestyle elements come more easily.

It's the daily practice of the skills and tools in EBT that slowly but surely begins to rewire the unconscious, subcortical survival circuitry so we can spend more moments of our precious lives in joy. And isn't that what we are all longing for? To feel love, to feel joy, to radiate peace.

This is what is so exciting, when we are devoted to joy and have these tools, it is much easier to let go of our over consumption, greed and judgments and move toward the compassion and kindness which is at the heart of our very being. Think of a world at 1! A planet in joy. Or at least more moments or more people devoted to compassionate, balanced living.

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