Full Mental Jacket

By

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A compilation of blogs

Blue Flame Project
Chapter 1: Understanding Fear & Anger

Over the years, a combination of factors, including my studies in psychology and rehabilitation as well as my experience as a police officer, injury management consultant and HR professional has led me to the view that we do not teach our children key “vital behavioural skills.” More specifically how to take control of our thoughts, because without doing that it can then lead to a significant number of issues later in life.

There are certain key behaviours which involve enhancing self-awareness, and how an individual then chooses to deal with situations as they arise. If parents and schools were more aware of the physiological and social psychology, they can certainly help them to grow up and deal with life in a much more robust way.
I am going to cover off some basic psychology for ease of explanation, but acknowledge that there is a greater complexity involved, which includes neurotransmitters and hormones etc., but in this context, we do not need to go to that detail.

I will focus broadly on 2 areas of the brain (see image below to show size differences)

1. The Cerebral Cortex (which I will refer to as **BLUE BRAIN**)
2. The Amygdala (which I will refer to as **RED BRAIN**)

![Brain Image]

**Blue Brain** is quite a large part of the brain. It is:

- The reflective part of the brain.
- Linked to where we do our conscious thinking and analysing.
- It involves our imagination, creativity and labels our emotional state
- The blue brain requires a lot of blood to function.

**Red Brain** on the other hand is:

- Linked with Fear the Primary Emotion and the Secondary Emotion Anger
- Responsible for the Emotional Component of a memory.
- Activates bodies response to danger.
- Involved in emotional learning.
- Memories of emotional experiences are imprinted in synapses in this area

In this instance I am going to focus on how fear and anger can have a negative effect on us. While the emotions themselves are not bad, they can be extremely limiting and dangerous if we allow it. As a police officer I have seen many angry people who have done things in anger that have left their lives and others destroyed because of their actions.
Fear is another component which can be limiting and dangerous. Fear at its extreme can lead to phobias and high levels of anxiety that prevent people from even venturing out of the house in some instances or have such irrational thoughts and worries it affects their lives in a very detrimental way.

As we grow up this “fight or flight” instinct (Red Brain) can become a big component of unconscious learning and this forms an undercurrent of the type of lens that we look at the world through.

The way we are wired affects how we learn when we are young. It is important to understand that there are 4 parts involved in what we learn and how we make decisions over time in terms of what we have learned and “how” we have learnt them in the past.

The 4 components are:

1. Conscious Thoughts (Blue Brain)
2. Unconscious Thoughts (Includes various parts of the Brain)
3. Body (Physical)
4. Emotions (Feeling/Physical)

As a baby most of what we take in is quite passive and because we are not able to “consciously” make sense of the world from our experiences and surroundings, we are mainly taking things in unconsciously, even the physical experiences although tangible, are processed on an unconscious level.

Young children don’t yet have an analytical mind to edit and make sense of what happens to them, so most information they absorb comes in at a subconscious level. As children we are more highly suggestible so if something happens with high emotion, on a subconscious level
we build a subconscious association with whatever caused that emotion, which is how early childhood experiences become subconscious states of being.

It is also important to understand what actually happens when we have a thought and how the body, brain and emotions all become involved. According to Dr. Joe Dispenza in his book **You are the Placebo**. When we have a thought, the brain creates a neurotransmitter and it creates a neuropeptide which sends a message to the body, which reacts by having a “feeling.” The brain then generates a thought matched to that exact feeling that will create chemical messages that allow you to think the way you were just feeling. As we complete this process for the first time as babies, we are greatly affected by what is happening around us.

If you are unfortunate enough to be born in a violent or angry environment you make sense of the world through the experiences you have, and you have thoughts and “feelings” that go with that experiences. Ultimately the more you repeat the pattern of thoughts, and go through the same process described above, it becomes hardwired and eventually the body subconsciously becomes conditioned to become its own mind or decision maker.

We have this view that we make decisions with our conscious and rational brain (blue brain) but in reality, we make it with how we “feel” and how it has been hardwired into our body through the experiences and emotions we have attached to it. How we react in situations is also dependent on the others around us. The social aspect of us as humans plays a huge part in our behaviour.

To illustrate, I would use the following example. If I fall over in front of my group of friends, they will laugh and point at me, and more than likely I will laugh too and probably not worry about it too much. But let’s say the same thing happens in front of a girl or boy I really like or complete strangers? Suddenly the context is different even though the event is the same. Now there might be an element of embarrassment or shame. This can turn into something if we “choose” it to.
As we grow up and interact with others, we constantly get feedback on how we should behave, and we learn the rules of the society or culture that we live in. Often, we use fear as a way to get people to comply. The laws of the land often have penalties associated with any breaking of those laws. This is intended to create a fear of punishment to create law abiding citizens.

In a smaller way and at the family level, parents and other family members will also use fear to get their children to be obedient and conform to what that society considers acceptable behaviour. This can be subtle but is intended to make the person fearful. Comments about body image or not being good enough or wearing the wrong clothes from a parent can have lasting effects and the child has that thought patterns hardwired and feel an emotion associated with that thought in the body.

This is all quite unconsciously learnt, and the child will have their thoughts and behaviour shaped. This is also not a bad thing as we want our children to be accepted within society and follow the rules and become strong citizens that contribute to the world in meaningful ways, but sometimes the intention causes negative patterns. So, if someone is continually “feeling” fear, they can develop that undercurrent of fear and then they develop that fearful lens. Fear and anger do go hand in hand as the survival instinct is either Fight or Flight, so over time some people can develop an anger pattern, which plays out in them being bullies or just aggressive as their undercurrent.

In my roles in HR I have come across patterns of behaviour that show the impact of this undercurrent of Red Brain. The Human Synergistics research gives some insight on this, as it compares managers across the world based on 3 styles, one, which is the constructive style (Blue) and the other 2, funny enough is based on an Aggressive Defensive style (Red) and a Passive Defensive style (Green). Those with high scores in these 2 styles tend to be less effective. Those with the aggressive styles in short have more people related issues, while those who are highly passive, and defensive tend to be highly compliant and people pleasers and tend to worry more.
So, what has all this have to do with helping with mental health and resilience, I hear you ask? I believe that the reason a lot of people don’t ask for help if they are struggling with mental health issues is because there is a fear factor attached to them discussing the issue. Possibly the fear that they will be considered weak or of being laughed at or many other fears, but ultimately it is our home life and society that has instilled that “pattern” in us, so we don’t talk about things in a good constructive way.

The reason people don’t raise issues at work is for the same reason. There is a fear factor with raising poor behaviour with a colleague. There are common factors in a lot of these social interactions, but it is actually the mental struggle and the understanding of this Fear and Anger and how it can dominate how we interact and how we can either choose to act or choose not to act. Making a decision to not do something is also an action.

Understanding Fear and Anger and how it shapes the individual, especially in a social context is the key to helping children to grow up into healthy, mentally and socially strong individuals. I will now refer to the 4 components that really make up a person:

- Conscious Thoughts (Blue Brain)
- Unconscious Thoughts
- Body (Physical)
- Emotions (Feeling/Physical)

If you think of the person in this context, most of our initial thoughts have been quite unconscious and the emotions and how we feel is already hardwired into the body and taken place mostly unconsciously. Regardless of what is hardwired, the only way to make changes if Fear or Anger has been a dominant factor is to consciously think our way out of it ourselves, or parents and schools can help provide an environment and opportunities to develop better patterns of thought, which can then be hardwired and diminish the effect of fear and anger.

You don’t drown by falling in the water, you drown by staying there!!

Edwin Louis Cole

While I am mostly focusing on Fear and Anger, because it is a survival instinct and can have a significant impact on us, doing this work can also assist with others helping us deal with other emotions. As the quote above suggests, our emotions aren’t bad, but being stuck in a consistent pattern of an emotion can be devastating. Sadness, shame, fear and anger can all have a negative impact if we let it.

My view on what skills is vitally important for schools to introduce and to provide regular opportunities for the children to practice is “crucial conversation” skills. The reason this is important is that if done well it can allow the children to overcome any fears of having any type of conversation. Being able to address issues early on is extremely important to calibrate behaviour. It needs to be deliberate by the school in terms of what behaviour is expected and what will not be acceptable.

In the book Crucial Conversations by the team at Vitalsmarts they introduce the Dialogue Model (below). In a nutshell when we have a conversation we are throwing information into a Pool for anyone listening to hear. Each person sees or hears that, they tell themselves a story, they feel a certain way and then they act. If both parties are feeling comfortable in the
conversation/ dialogue, then they will continue to put information into the pool. But if there is some element of safety not being present, they can then go outside the pool and be in the red zone which takes them to silence or violence.

Again, Fight or Flight comes into the equation. If the person goes to violence it ultimately ends up in an aggressive response by one of the people and then if the other person also responds that way, we have an argument, and no one is having a constructive conversation. If one of them goes to silence, they essentially “clam” up and won’t say what they really mean. If you follow the sequence from See & Hear to Act, this is essentially based on that pattern of behaviour we have developed leading up to school.

As students start at school, teachers should be made aware of the dialogue model and how they help create the safety for the students to have conversations in the pool to address issues and focus on solutions. Essentially my suggestion would be to allocate specific time each day, preferably towards the end of the day for students to talk about things that happened to them, which they may not have been happy with, including someone else’s behaviour. These should be facilitated by the teacher who is looking for anyone getting defensive or aggressive. The key here is to make it regular and get the students used to giving and receiving feedback.

Over time it gives them the skills to effectively talk about issues and it also allows much better calibration and feedback on each person’s behaviour, because each student also hears what behaviour is and isn’t acceptable. It also allows the individual to hopefully stay calmer in those situations and develop less fear at the “Feel” phase before they act.

The other component for the teachers to understand is how they develop “courage” in their students. Setting up those conversation opportunities is helpful but to accelerate the process and get them to overcome negative unconscious patterns they have developed before they got to school they need to understand the importance of the Conscious Thoughts power.

Dr. Joe Dispenza likens our unconscious thoughts as like riding a wild horse. It can take us to great places, but if we let it, it can take us into bad places as well. He says that in order to get it to work for us, we need to take control of it. The only way to do that is through the Conscious Thoughts. As described earlier you understand how our thought patterns develop early on, but
we can proactively develop good thought patterns as well and these get hardwired and become habitual as well. The key is around using our Conscious Thoughts to do this if there are any habitual negative thoughts.

Through my work with people with PTSD we can obviously develop negative patterns of thought through a number of different ways, even from 1 very bad experience. The key again is to Consciously do something to change it and then use that Conscious Thought patterns to develop plans to change the old habits into better ones and make them become hardwired, so that the “Story” we tell ourselves is a more positive one and our feelings are better which lead to better actions.

In the next instalment I will cover off on strategies to help with those who are struggling with mental health issues.
Chapter 2: The brain and counselling

In my last post I covered off what happens when we have a thought and how that thought leaves an impression on the body and how we create a lot of our thought patterns unconsciously. In this post I really want to focus on how we break negative thought patterns once the person is already stuck rather than focus on preventative strategies.

There are obviously a number of ways we can end up with negative thought patterns and being stuck in those patterns. Some of these patterns can be mildly negative and others can be catastrophic for the individual and others around them. When someone is in that mindset where they are ruminating about the same thought or memory, they are essentially firing neurons in their brain because it is a thought.

In my previous post I covered a small component of what happens in the body when we have a thought. I will take it a small step further, and again I’m trying to keep it simple, so any clinicians out there I know there is more neuroscience and biology behind this. In a nutshell when we have a thought or recall a memory we fire neurons in the brain. If we rethink that same thought or memory we fire the same neurons. If we repeatedly rethink that thought or memory over and over those same neurons fire together repeatedly. Dr. Joe Dispenza in his book You are the placebo, states that in relation to neurons, “What fires together wires together.”
In a nutshell if you do it enough times you effectively create a “thought shortcut” and that thought is now almost automatic and requires a lot more effort to change than if it was not hardwired. Our brains are designed to be able to create shortcuts, so we can learn and then do things with less mental effort. To illustrate this, think back to when you learnt to drive, how hard you had to concentrate on what you were doing. You were thinking and concentrating on the road, your hands, your feet and the rules of the road. While you are learning to drive, you usually come home quite mentally drained. Fast forward to my age and you have been driving almost 30 years and you can drive for hours and not even be aware of things, especially not the driving part, because our brains are cognitive misers.

We are designed to try to save energy and we create these shortcuts, which in essence is just a pattern of thinking. Most of the time this is a good thing for us, but when we set up shortcuts which can lead to destructive thought patterns it can be a problem. When I worked with people with PTSD, where a single event has caused them to develop a destructive thought pattern. It is evident that by “reliving” a memory, that the body has quite similar physical reactions to the memory or thought, which is what makes it so destructive.

Let’s say you were shot at like one of the police officers I dealt with when doing counselling work. The event was very real and very scary for him and probably most of us. In that moment his “Fight or Flight” instinct kicked in and this starts a cascade of events almost immediately and quite automatically with no conscious thought being required. That cascade involves adrenaline being released into the body, you take a deep breath to get quick oxygen into the body and your blood starts to be dispersed to your muscles to get ready to either run or fight. Your heart rate increases dramatically to distribute the blood quickly. There are some other physical components to this cascade, but this is designed to get you out of trouble quickly and avoid whatever threat is there.

In this officer’s case it kept him alive because he ended up not being shot and was able to shut down the threat. End of story you think? Unfortunately for him after the event and in the confines of his own head, he replayed the event over and over and basically he tricks his own brain into turning this thought into a shortcut because he has “practiced” this thought repeatedly and the brain being the cognitive miser it is turns it into a habit requiring less energy and accessing it a lot easier and quicker. To go with that, each time he has the thought it sets off the same physical cascade that is associated with the memory.
Dry Neil describes it this way:

When our fight or flight response is activated, sequences of nerve cell firing occur and chemicals like adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released into our bloodstream. These patterns of nerve cells firing, and chemical release cause our body to undergo a series of very dramatic changes. Our respiratory rate increases. Blood is shunted away from our digestive tract and directed into our muscles and limbs, which require extra energy and fuel for running and fighting. Our pupils dilate. Our awareness intensifies. Our sight sharpens. Our impulses quicken. Our perception of pain diminishes. Our immune system mobilizes with increased activation. We become prepared—physically and psychologically—for fight or flight. We scan and search our environment, “looking for the enemy.”

When our fight or flight system is activated, we tend to perceive everything in our environment as a possible threat to our survival. By its very nature, the fight or flight system bypasses our rational mind—where our more well thought out beliefs exist—and moves us into “attack” mode. This state of alert causes us to perceive almost everything in our world as a possible threat to our survival. As such, we tend to see everyone and everything as a possible enemy. Like airport security during a terrorist threat, we are on the lookout for every possible danger. We may overreact to the slightest comment. Our fear is exaggerated. Our thinking is distorted. We see everything through the filter of possible danger. We narrow our focus to those things that can harm us. Fear becomes the lens through which we see the world.

So back to my officer, every time he thinks about this memory it sets off that same cascade. This is only designed to last less than 10 seconds, but when our thoughts make us relive the same event and create that shortcut, it has implications in terms of energy usage, the amount of hormone and other chemicals in the body like cortisol. These can be physically damaging to
the body. Even just having the blood shunted from the digestive tract repeatedly means nutrients aren’t going where they need to go. It is not hard to see visible signs of physical effects on someone who is going through this for prolonged periods.

When I am dealing with someone with PTSD, my focus is pretty much on what we can do to change the neurons that are wiring and firing together when he has this thoughts or memories. Essentially, we are trying to initially interrupt the thought pattern and replace it with another. To simply illustrate, let’s say 100 neurons are fired when he has the thought and it sets off the stress response and it leads him down a path that leads to him feeling shamed for reacting the way he does (this is what this officer did). With him I got him to first do a thoughts diary, where all he did was write down the time he had that thought and write something about how it made him feel, with specific focuses on his physical feelings and sensations.

The purpose of this was to interrupt his previous pattern even just a little, so as an example maybe only 90 of the initial 100 neurons were firing, so it created some small change. As well as cutting the numbers of neurons firing, by making him do analysis work, it means he needs to use a different part of the brain (Blue Brain from my last post). This helps the interruption but because that part of the brain is so large, it requires more blood which also interrupts the Fight or Flight cascade, because he needs to send more blood to the brain rather than to his limbs, so it actually helps him at that physical level as well.

In just 1 week, he actually decreased the number of times he would enter having that thought in the diary, just by doing that analysis work. Naturally this doesn’t work for everyone, but the point is that any intervention can work if it gets the person to somehow interrupt and or change the repeated wiring and firing of those same neurons that takes the person to a bad place.

Even though I have studied psychology, I don’t really have a preference for which type of psychology theory or therapy strategy is used, as long as it interrupts the neurons firing. This is why many strategies can work. Even talking to someone or doing something physical can help. Some people find religion and that works for them, because they have a Blue Brain focus rather than a Red one. Meditation also has a calming effect and actually slows the brain waves, which again is giving the person an opportunity to alter their original thought pathway.
The key for helping anyone in that kind of pattern is figuring out ways to get them to do something, anything to change those neurons and keep doing it with whatever helpful methods you can come up with. Asking them high level questions also forces that blue brain to think and come up with answers. Obviously sending them to a professional would help, but if they are not the type of person to seek that help, then do whatever you can. There are lots of things on the internet and various mental health organisations that give information on strategies that they have used and that you can try.

Also remember from my previous post which includes the Dialogue Model, that to get someone to talk about these kind of issues is to create the “Safety” to have that conversation. If someone doesn’t want to talk about it, then there is something that makes them feel “unsafe” to have that conversation with you, so it is important to figure out what that is. Often it is them feeling shame for not being able to deal with the issue. Pointing out that this is quite a common problem may help them feel less shamed and then feel that you aren’t going to judge them. There are various methods to try to create that safety and finding out what they may be afraid of in having that conversation is a key to getting them to open up and start talking about helping strategies.

I hope you find this useful. Also check out my podcasts on this subject. See the URL below.

https://anchor.fm/clint-adams
Chapter 3: Creating resilience

As a parent I know most of us want the best for our children and we try to do things to shelter them from harm. But are we actually creating future adults who have very little resilience and are more likely to struggle with life and mental illness in the future? I personally think so.

In one of my previous posts I explained how we as humans learn and develop a lot of our “personality” or our “self” quite unconsciously and we are shaped by who we interact with in our very early years, which for most of us is our parents and the closest family members until that circle expands when we start school or pre-school. As I also pointed out before, in a lot of cultures we as parents and other influential people and institutions such as religions use fear as a strong influencer of our behaviour. This is mostly only a mild form of fear. They say things like, “If you don’t do what I want you to do, then……something negative will happen.” You could be grounded, miss out on dessert or some other punishment, which unfortunately does create some aspects of fear in the individual and if that happens a lot early on in life then fear and aggression later can become an undercurrent of how you see the world.

Humans are social animals and so language and dialogue are key components to developing social relationships, but it can also cause a lot of pain and anguish. When I referred to the Dialogue Model (See Below) in a previous blog, I indicated the role fear and anger plays in conversations or dialogue we have with each other.
When we think of bullying at an early age at school, it’s usually someone who is trying to dominate someone else and it can play out a number of ways from them teasing a person or saying negative things. Underneath it though, the bully often comes with that undercurrent of fear and acts out on it through aggression and wanting to dominate others. Often no one says anything to them, because they themselves are fearful, so nothing happens. Or if it happens to a boy, often the parents will tell their son to toughen up or not take it seriously.

If we use the Dialogue Model to illustrate how these interactions play out. First you have the bully who is having the conversation from the Violence red section, which is outside the Pool of Shared Meaning, where good helpful dialogue takes place. Now the child being bullied sees and hears what the bully says verbally and also sees their actions and facial expressions. They tell themselves a story, now dependent on what their undercurrent is, they too could go to Violence and verbally snap something back and suddenly you have an argument between 2 people in red brain, which is likely to escalate and certainly won’t be enhancing the relationship they develop.

If the bullied child on the other hand is fearful of the bully, they will try to go to the Silent side of the model, where they try to ignore being teased and just stay silent hoping it will go away. Others may be hearing this and sometimes laughing at the bullied child if the taunts are humorous. Both parties hear and see this, and this is how some bullying behaviour is actually facilitated by the group. The bully gets a Dopamine reward because he is entertaining people and they have responded in a positive way to the behaviour.

The bullied on the other hand sees people laughing at him and tells himself another story. What do you think that story would be? Very likely not a good one for developing a healthy self-image. They could start to question whether the group likes them or accepts them or not. How they interpret this is now a crucial moment, because how it then makes the person feel and then act has the ability to have a long-lasting effect.

If, however, the bullied person learns the skills to stay in the Blue pool and in Blue Brain, through facilitated conversations this can be a calibration process for the group and the bully. If I was facilitating this, we would ask all the kids if anything happened today that they didn’t feel good about? As the teacher or facilitator, it’s about “creating safety” for the kids to say
something. There are several ways to do it, but it is important that you are focusing on creating the safe place to have conversations from the students first day at school. The key is to make it routine and habitual to do it, so when asked, all the students get used to and comfortable to have these conversations and help them unpack some of the “fear” undercurrents they have formed.

Having these conversations daily and early on should help in a few ways.

1. The children calibrate behaviour with each other.
2. They feel less fearful having these conversations.
3. They become more skilled at having these conversations.
4. Hopefully if they deal with issues sooner they can form better relationships with each other.

The thing about bullying behaviour, is that it is dominance behaviour and once you understand this then we can help our children deal with it a lot better. Below is an excellent link to a video that illustrates it better and quicker than I can put into words.

Although Brooks Gibbs is doing a role play here, in the first half as the bullied person he is exhibiting a combination of silence and violence responses to the bully, which shows some defensive comments and also some with a bit more of an aggressive tone. The second time around it is a calm person being careful with what they say and doing it in a way that could actually enhance conversation and that is where not having a Fight or Flight undercurrent is the key. If schools are deliberate about creating opportunities to reduce that undercurrent and set things up correctly it can do a lot for the outcomes and the relationships, they form.

It can help create resilience through habitual practice, also giving the children courage (really creating the safety is doing that) to have conversations about behaviour they don’t like. This gives them that sense of having some control and is good for their personal development. The more they talk in that context, the more they are likely to talk outside the classroom as many have not formed poor relationships because the issues are dealt with before it becomes issues.

Naturally this is just some small strategies to begin with, but it is vitally important that it starts being considered for use at school level and as early as possible. A lot comes back to which neurons are wired and fired together. We want the thought patterns being developed to be more positive and schools and parents can do more if they know what is happening in the children’s heads and how they can facilitate structured interactions better.
In the first 3 instalments of Full Mental Jacket, I covered off on Red Brain/ Blue Brain and understanding how fear and anger affects the undercurrent of us as a person. I covered how the body, unconscious and conscious thoughts along with our emotions pretty much makes up the "self." While I did also cover the dialogue model and how we think when we have conversations, I think it is important to focus today how we can create patterns of thoughts by our inner dialogue.

In the Dialogue Model there is the step after See and Hear Something, which is You tell yourself a story. The story you tell yourself will determine the next step which is Feel. Then based on how we “Feel” will determine how we Act or in some instances don’t Act.
Our interactions with others and the relationships we form and avoid are determined by this. The see and hear part is really out of our control. People can do and say nasty and hurtful things to us, but the rest is actually within our control. The story we tell ourselves when we are very young is based on the undercurrent and habit-forming thought patterns we have developed mostly on an unconscious level, but then as we come into contact with others more and more often we bring this pattern with us and it affects our interactions and relationships with those people.

We will never be friends with every person we meet, and we will have some biases, beliefs and views on the world that will differ with others, but the internal story we can shape in a way that works for us rather than one that hurts us. If my internal dialogue was “that bad things always happen to me” or “that I know I’m not good enough” then how I Feel is likely to be negative and this affects how I Act. In the Dialogue Model if I come into contact with someone and they seem confident and I am having this kind of internal dialogue where I don’t feel good about myself, it’s very likely I am going to be more on the “Silence” side and won’t really want to interact. Some people from the outside might say I was “Shy” but I could just be too scared to interact, so I will avoid those interactions and ultimately, I am then less likely to form good relationships with those people. Fast forward to high school and now I could be the outcast who has never really made any good friends because I don’t put myself in a position where I feel comfortable interacting with a wide mix of people.

One thing we all need is to be accepted. No one wants to be rejected, so we dress a certain way, we talk a certain way and we usually interact with people who are more like us, so we can feel part of the group. We are “creating safety” in the Dialogue Model by doing a mental risk assessment of our interactions and weighing up whether there is a chance of rejection if I even go and talk to that good-looking girl or guy? That undercurrent, the habits you have formed, and any hint of Fear will have a direct effect on what story you tell yourself and then how you feel and act.

This is why it is so important for us to be helping our children and adults with understanding this process and also how we learn and sometimes how to “unlearn” habits to help us thrive. Tony Robbins said in one of his seminars that basically the human body will replace every cell in the body within a couple of years, so we actually aren’t the same people we were 2 years ago, but we maintain memories and can still relive painful episodes in our life, because we have developed habits that reinvent the “Self” we have developed. Dr. Joe Dispenza explains how we need to break the habit of being ourselves, by thinking differently.

The key is to do things differently and for young children, it’s up to parents and schools to provide the opportunities to develop skills, knowledge and relationships in a better way, before those habits become negative. For adults, it’s about understanding why they have certain thought patterns and working out strategies to break that wiring and firing together of those neurons and then creating different neural connections. It really is about being aware of your thought patterns and filling your head with as much knowledge of techniques or strategies that can help you think in a different way. Even just changing the scenery by doing a nature walk or play golf can help break patterns of negative thoughts, but as Joe says, it needs to be body and mind. It is way more effective to be focusing on both if you are having negative thoughts or are feeling depressed. In the next instalment we will cover off on some of those techniques now we know how we think, learn and interact.
Each human experience is unique, even identical twins don’t have exactly the same path. However, there are general patterns of how we psychologically deal with certain situations.

Many years ago, I read John Douglas’ book Mindhunter. He was the FBI agent who was probably the father of serial killer profiling. In the book he covers off certain risk factors that with some degree of certainty was what the killer would have experienced in their childhood.

These included being most likely to be a male and usually had a single parent and that parent was most likely the mother and that mother would usually be extremely strict on the child. She more than likely also shamed and humiliated that child. That child would then act out violently towards animals because they weren’t able to defend themselves against the mother.
There are obviously many other factors that ultimately leads someone to want to kill multiple people. But the point is there are risk factors that can lead to a lot of our mental health issues and so the key is to try to limit the risk factors but at the same time we need to try to include as many of the success factors as we can and include those in our schools and at home.

That said not every child has a loving home or can be protected from bad things happening. Life simply is not fair and so when someone does end up depressed or suffering from mental health issues it is important that we utilise a number of strategies that helps address that thought patterns that has brought them to that point.

Just medicating someone is not enough because it does not address the root causes. There are various therapies, theories and strategies and I am not aligned specifically to one. I am of the view that different ones can work for different people, but the key is to get the person talking about it or at least be looking for ways to improve their situation. When someone gives up then it is a much more difficult, if not impossible prospect.

There is a lot more awareness initiatives such as RUOK day, but we need to address creating the safety to initiate these conversations with those we think could be at risk.

We actually need to show more bravery to have those conversations. As I have stated in previous blogs we need to develop that skill in our children, but we as adults too often feel fear of offending our friends, brothers and sisters by bringing up our genuine concerns. We need to take a look at ourselves and genuinely ask if we are worried about someone.

My view is better to do something than do nothing and then live with that regret. Courage comes in many forms but ultimately it is doing something when there is a feeling of fear when doing it. Suspecting a friend is at risk of suicide is a tough subject to bring up. So sometimes
we simply accept when someone says they are ok but often it requires deeper conversations to get them to talk at that level.

Here are a couple of basic strategies you can ask them to do to make you feel more comfortable that they aren’t hiding what is really going on. I mentioned a Thoughts Diary in a previous post and highly suggest this as a starting point. You must emphasize that they need to be honest with themselves while doing the diary for 7 days.

All they need to do is carry a pen and notebook with them and record date and time when they have what they think is a negative thought about anything and put a single line about the thoughts subject.

That is all they need to do. The purpose is to get them to do analysis work which uses a different part of the brain and this can help breaking previous thought patterns. It also shows how much negative thoughts are popping into their heads and gives great insight about the content of their thoughts.

Next step is to ask them questions about what they saw in the thoughts diary and if there were any aha moments. Asking them these questions does a couple of things.

1. It gets them to reflect again and this is a Blue Brain experience which keeps Red Brain at bay.

2. It shows you care and this enhances developing the safety for them to open up more. This is what they mean when they say develop rapport. The only difference is I’m giving you ways to do it.

From there it is important to keep asking questions like a coach would ask them what they can do rather than offer advice which we all like to give. Unfortunately, if they feel any hint of judgement then it invokes a defensive response which takes them back to Silence or Violence in the Dialogue Model.
Chapter 6: You are the Director.

When I was doing injury management work with people suffering from PTSD I could really see how an event they experience can affect someone in such a negative way, which is understandable. However, when it gets tricky is when you see how the memory of that event continues to have that effect on the person and as I previously mentioned, that thought pattern can be disastrous.

When I was doing counselling sessions with these individuals it was important to get them to acknowledge that what they initially experienced was something real, and that can’t change, but the way they “manage” that event now is not so real. I get them thinking about the event as they remember it, but I get them to think of the memory as a movie scene and they are the director, so they can make changes to it as they see fit.

The intent was to get those different neurons wiring and firing together and making small changes to the pattern of thoughts they have been stuck on. We then discuss what they could have done differently or better or maybe change the scenery a little or even include a different character. Basically, anything to change those neurons helps, and this is done by changing the focus, even get them to put a funny spin on it, make changes to it as the director would. Why I hear you ask…..because they can. We can think our way out of these thought patterns.

Once we understand how this process works to get us into negative patterns of thought we can focus on the same process to get us into better patterns of thought. This is why habits or addictions like smoking are best beaten by replacing it with something else while someone tries to give up. It alters the persons focus from not having the cigarette and what thoughts that
brings up, to focusing on something new, which does alter the wiring and firing of the initial reaction.

In the counselling sessions I would get them to “practice” being the Director and alter the memory of that event as many times as they could as homework between sessions. on top of that I would ask them to think about what they wanted at the end of the therapy. I get them to focus on a future state, which you would know from past blogs is a Blue Brain experience for them.

Getting them to practice the changing of the memory does a couple of things, it shows them they have more control over the memory and their own thoughts. It also shows them that it is actually themselves that is causing the issues they are experiencing. By starting with the end in mind, they also have a goal and as I said before it changes their focus. What you focus on is what you get more of. If they continued to focus on the memory of the event it would have continued to be an issue until they did something to break that wiring and firing of the same neurons every time they had that thought.
Chapter 7: Directing our children.

In the last instalment I covered how I would help my clients in counseling by becoming a Director of their own thoughts and thought patterns to help them get out of patterns that were doing them harm.

In my view we can use a similar approach, but a more structured and proactive one to help our children as they are developing. It is obviously important for parents to understand the basics of what has been covered in the previous instalments. With some of that knowledge they really can help prevent some negative patterns from forming, and with better knowledge they can actually focus on how they and their children can direct the thoughts they want to form.

Understanding how a child develops thoughts and how it is hardwired into patterns, which form moods, then personalities and beliefs. We can actively put good thought habits in place by questioning them better around how they feel and what they are thinking.

The key on this is them knowing they have conscious control over how they react even when things don’t go their way. I think a lot of parents don’t have these kinds of discussions and they don’t give much thought to ‘planning’ what they would like their children to learn from them, so it just happens by osmosis and we hope they turn out OK.

I recently went to my 30-year school reunion, so it has been a while since I was in school other than my tertiary studies, but I don’t recall anyone really teaching us anything about how we think and how we become the people we end up being.
In my Police days and my HR roles I see so much wasted potential in so many people who are stuck and it plays out in them being, bitter and quite nasty people to be around. They have poor relationships at work and at home and they generally make others around them miserable too.

Photo by Jason Appleton on Pexels.com

Structural coupling is when someone comes in the room and brings energy or takes it away from others in the room. We need to help our children to not end up being the energy takers. There are certain skills that can help with dealing with problems. As Dr. Stebbins says in his book the Stress Surfer, if you have a problem you can do something about then it requires problem solving but if it’s something you can’t do anything about then it requires coping skills.

Knowing how you learn and think and feeling comfortable to have conversations and asking for help when you are feeling down are important skills we should be teaching them at home and in schools. As parents and educators, we should be actively looking at the research and consistently look at life skills as well as the rest of the curriculum. Long term studies should be used to try to find what strategies may impact on creating more resilient, more confident and capable adults for the future.

Examples like the Stanford Marshmallow experiment conducted in the 70’s where young children were offered a marshmallow, but if they delayed eating it for a certain period they could get a second one. In a nutshell they found years later that those who were able to delay the gratification of eating the marshmallow the longest appeared to be more successful at life in general and they had much higher activity in the pre-frontal cortex, which correlates with the Blue Brain activity I covered off in a previous blog.
The point being that there is some skills and strategies we can explore further and look at influencing the children at an earlier age in a structured way, while we consider how they learn how they interact and how they develop relationships.

Below is a link which explains the Stanford Marshmallow experiment.

When we think about how we learn and are taught to fit in with others we can see how sometimes those methods can be destructive, because ultimately, we have an "inner voice" which is largely unconscious and non-verbal, so it comes out in how we "feel". I have covered off in previous posts how we think, learn and make decisions with our body a lot more based on how we feel and not use our "logical" brain like we might expect we do.

In a previous post I cover off how we often use "fear" (usually of punishment) to get citizens and family members to comply with certain rules for a number of reasons. In various societies over many generations we use shame, humiliation and guilt to teach people to either conform, fit in and become compliant citizens. In Japan, death is considered better than shaming your family. This is instilled in a growing child as they are taught the rules of that society and rightly or wrongly they have a high suicide rate as a result.

Let's cover off on guilt and shame very briefly. One of the easiest explained definitions I can recall is this: Shame = "I am bad". While Guilt = "I did something bad." The reason these emotions exist is ultimately to help us fit in and develop relationships. Guilt in particular is linked to our interpersonal relationships and as we grow up we are calibrating to know and understand what is acceptable, and not acceptable behaviour? This shapes what we say or do and also what we don't say or do.

When we think of how we learn to feel guilty, it's based on where we live and the key influencers in our lives, especially in our early childhood. The notion of "I did something bad" comes from those key influencers giving feedback, sometimes verbal sometimes through punishment, and this shapes some behaviour that we wouldn't do again because of the fear of that reaction. We learn a lot of rules along the way. Ever hear, "Children should be seen and
not heard?” These are ways we are shaped to behave. We are told that you can’t always tell someone the truth, because we don’t want to offend them. In Australian and British culture, we are taught to be polite, to have manners and not be rude. In other cultures, they may not be taught this politeness and then when people have different rules that they grew up with it can create issues when we expect someone to act a certain way and they don’t.

This post is not about these societal differences but to illustrate how the society we are brought up in and the parents or early caregivers you are exposed to can have lasting effects on how guilt and shame can shape our lives. Shame, guilt and embarrassment are all quite closely related, and it usually involves the presence of others, it is there for the social aspects of our lives and mostly in a healthy way to be able to fit and develop meaningful relationships with others. It can however also start a downward spiral if the person is not able to deal with deep shame.

In previous posts I write about getting stuck in negative thought patterns and if we get stuck in a pattern of shame, we start to convince ourselves and tell ourselves, "I am bad." This type of thought pattern can be destructive because unlike, "I did something bad" we can easily believe that we can’t change being bad and we can start to feel worthless. If we get picked on about our clothes for example and people laugh at us and humiliate us in front of others we start to look at ourselves as worthless and not up to where others are, and our internal dialogue come back into play. Those "unconscious thoughts" quickly turn into internal dialogue that reinforces that we are useless, and we start to listen to the internal dialogue.

When you feel shamed and humiliated, it is difficult to share that experience with anyone because generally you are feeling ashamed and telling anyone can make you feel more ashamed, so most people internalise it and keep it silent. After a while they can feel ashamed of feeling ashamed, which creates even further internal dialogue and with social media these days other people can send stuff online to humiliate you even further. If the person is already vulnerable, then it can lead to destructive behaviour including suicide.
Often with people struggling with certain mental health issues, their reactions can make them feel more shamed and this can worsen their condition such as depression. I worked with a police officer suffering from PTSD and he was more concerned with how humiliated he felt because he was crying a lot because of the PTSD and this was not what he saw as what was expected from him as a man and as a police officer. He found that thought much worse to deal with because in his head it questioned the persona of himself that he identified himself with.

To help him with this a lot of work was done on getting him to realise that he was experiencing an illness like any physical one which affected the way he was feeling and the way he was thinking. I don’t mean to compare mental illness with having a bad cold, but to illustrate a point, when you have a bad cold where the physical symptoms are a sore throat, runny nose, coughing etc, this all affects our general mood and we don’t feel that great and in this case physical symptoms leads to some psychological distress and with mental health it can do the same. The key is calling on resilience and being able to work through using strategies that slowly break those thought patterns and change the neurons that fire and wire together.

As parents it is important to really think about how we reprimand and teach our children and it is important to focus on nurturing them in positive ways. Barbara Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina has found that positive emotions, like trust, curiosity, confidence and inspiration broaden the mind and help us build psychological, social and physical skills. While there will be times where the old methods of raising your child by using punishment will be used it is important that we think about how we use shame and humiliation.

This has ramifications for schools as well. I did my primary school years in South Africa and the teachers would put up everyone’s results in order highest to lowest. I was lucky I was a reasonably good student and now that I reflect back, it would have been extremely humiliating for those who had not done so well. It would be bad enough that you didn’t do well but then to have it made public, can’t be that helpful. I guess the rationale is to “motivate” them to do better, but ultimately in that type of scenario there will always be people at the bottom of that list and it is important to think differently to change some this.

Why don’t schools promote each class as being a team and getting each one of their students to want to help their classmates and develop each other. It can be explained that just like a sporting team, not everyone is great at batting in cricket or bowling or fielding, but we can all do our bit and contribute to the team. High performing teams learn from each other, work together push each other and also develop good psychological safety, where they can talk to each other and have good conversations and dialogue about each other’s behaviour in a constructive way rather than one that makes someone feel ashamed. If it is structured in such a way that students learn to do this well and actually are taught they aren’t against each other that their whole class and the school would benefit from them all doing well, then it’s a massive win/win. But, we must resist the urge to give everyone a ribbon for turning up, because life is not fair, and they will need to deal with some disappointment while also developing overall resilience.

I honestly believe that if you have less structural components at school and at home that would result in shame and humiliation then that can only be a positive thing. If you received feedback done in the right way with the right intent even if it is negative the person can start to get that calibration with their peers and get a much better understanding of what is "healthy" interaction and then dialogue can also develop, which increases those relationships.
If children can have opportunities to raise issues daily about anyone else in their classes' behaviours and it is facilitated well by the teachers, it helps build their confidence, increases that calibration and improves relationships, which is a great outcome. If teachers then implemented strategies that also fostered team work from them all, where they would focus on helping each other, this also helps relationships build and develops a less selfish culture. Long term this means that they have support from the class and teacher and they are developing skills that make them more resilient and less likely to "shy" away from crucial conversations when they are required.

As mentioned above throw in some strategies which foster positive emotions, like trust, curiosity, confidence and inspiration to broaden the mind which help us build psychological, social and physical skill then we are on a much stronger road to developing intelligent, socially good and highly resilient people who actually work as a team and take care of each other. I would like to think this would lead to less health (physical and psychological) issues, better school retention and ideally less criminal activity and reduced suicide.
Chapter 9: Breaking the Pattern.

In order to break the pattern of repeated negative thoughts, we must stop the neurons in our brains from wiring and firing together in the same way. There are many different ways to do this, but it is important to understand that when we have a thought, certain neurons fire and when we repeat that thought the same neurons fire. When they repeatedly fire over and over, then these neurons wire together and create a “shortcut” which means it becomes easier and easier to fire together. This is how we create habits and is why habits can be difficult to break.

As children we can unconsciously create thought patterns that we don’t even realise. We can create thought patterns that we consider is our personality. Someone very shy or highly anxious may have an underlying thought pattern which they developed which involves an undercurrent associated with fear, of embarrassment or humiliation which I covered off in my previous post. This may have stemmed from the parents and it became a habitual thought pattern, now they look at the world from that point of view and when they are in social situations they “feel” uneasy. They then avoid those situations and this process keeps repeating itself and the same neurons wire and fire together when they are in that situation.

A single event can also create a pattern of thought. This is how PTSD can come about, where a person can experience an extreme event and the memory of that event becomes what they focus on. They will replay that event over and over in their heads and again the same neurons wire and fire together until they can automatically think of the same memory. They can also
ruminate over what might have happened and this process if repeated multiple times can trigger the same fight or flight responses which can be destructive.

The key to “breaking” that cycle is to change the neurons firing that have wired together. There are many ways to do that. I mentioned using a thoughts diary in a previous post, which helps interrupt the thought continuing like it normally would, as it forces the person to use the analytical part of the brain, so it forces more blood back up into the brain rather than into the muscles to get ready for fight or flight. Over time I usually get them to add layers to that activity, so instead of just recording whether they had a negative or positive thought I get them to describe the thought a bit more, again the purpose is to reduce the times of those same neurons firing and wiring together.

The next step is to then start “doing” something else when they catch themselves having those thoughts, so I get them to practice an activity, it can be anything really, but I use a “centering” activity. They have to stop and think about their posture, so they must focus on trying to lengthen their body by standing up straight, head as high as it can go, pin the shoulders back so they open their chest and then focus on deep slow breathes for 10 seconds. This again uses different neurons and helps interrupt the wiring and firing of the destructive thought pattern. Naturally they can do some other activity, but ideally, we want to do something that makes them stop, think and then do something else. It is good to have them develop a positive thought and physical habit which they can use at any time that the negative thoughts pop into their heads.

In a previous post I write about being the Director of your own thoughts. With PTSD I also get the person to “freeze frame” the thoughts and play around with the thought in their heads and make some changes to it. This process causes them to not just interrupt the thought, but it forces them to use the imaginative side of the brain, which steers them away from any fight or flight amygdala generated thoughts. It also forces the blood again to pump back up into this large portion of the brain away from the muscles.
Another way they can break the cycle is to think of their unconscious as a character or person. I tell them to give it a name, something friendly. I call mine LJ and I will have conscious internal dialogue where I consciously tell it what I want it to do and what I don’t want it to do. A few years back I would have horrible mental images just pop into my head at random times and it would set off a fear response, where the hairs on the back of my neck or arms would stand up. In this case I started to really talk to LJ that I didn’t want those thoughts to come in. I would do that every time it happened for a couple of weeks and I noticed slowly but surely it got less and less and now it hardly happens.

If we can think our way into situations we can definitely think our way out of them. The key is to understand how thoughts work and how they cause us to “feel.” I won’t go over old ground but if you want to know more about that check out my previous posts they are all listed below. Once we know how thoughts work and how habits and thought patterns form, we can reverse engineer them to work for us in a more positive way. There is certainly a strong push for “Positive Psychology” approach and while I think is a good place to start, sometimes you can’t just think positively, you actually need to deal with the habitual thought first by making changes as I suggested above and this can slowly be replaced with more positive psychology including affirmations.

Another technique to help someone going through tough thought patterns is to get them to do something for someone else, like volunteering. This again is what I call a Blue Brain experience because it causes them to focus outside of themselves rather than focus on the negative thoughts and negative feelings it brings with it. Once you focus on wanting to help others it activates the frontal cortex which is associated with the social aspects of us as humans, which again helps with the interruptions.
Also doing something physical and changing scenery are all other strategies to help with this process. Mindfulness and meditation are other techniques which helps change our focus and replace it with something more positive. This also changes our brain waves, which helps with relaxing and slowing things down. There are many ways to make these changes, but if you know how you think and what these strategies need to do to be effective, which is to stop the wiring and firing of those neurons and replace with something else, then you will be more likely to get results.
Chapter 10: Taking Control

In my previous posts in the Full Mental Jacket series I explain how we passively take information in when we are very young and how our thoughts and body intertwine to create a “feeling”. I also cover off on patterns of thought and gave some strategies on how to break these patterns by doing certain things that stop certain neurons wiring and firing together.

All those things are important, but the most important is when someone has the intent to change what is happening to them. The saying goes, “we get more of what we focus on.” So, if that is true why do we “choose” to focus on the negative? Sure, the unconscious is always scanning for anything that could be a threat and if it detects even a hint of it, then it starts our fight or flight response. But when there is no visible threat and the threat is in our thoughts, then you would think we could easily choose to not focus on the negative. Unfortunately, we don’t and when we start that red brain response and it makes us feel fearful or ashamed or sad, we can get addicted to the chemicals that these responses illicit, especially if we have formed a habit of this type of thinking. This then brings repeated physical responses and that is how we can crave the response even though it is not good for us.

No matter how you look at it, destructive thought patterns creates destructive physical responses, and this can lead to very dark places in the persons head. The keys are focus and intent. Firstly, if we are not constantly focussing on the negative things happening, then we already can change which parts of the brain is being activated. That is why focusing on something like gratitude can help. By focusing on something or someone that you are grateful
for, means you are focusing on something good and when we think of those things it does not
stimulate the amygdala, it activates different parts of the brain. By being intent on where you
focus becomes a key first step to moving from a dark place.

The reason things like the book “the secret” and goal setting works is because it is an intent.
Once you decide you don’t want to be in that dark place. The focus needs to be to the future,
because looking to the future uses that positive blue brain psychology and keeps you from
focusing on the fear, sadness or anxiety. In my last post I write about naming and talking to
your unconscious mind, in this instance when you have intent and you know what you want to
happen, you can start to control that unconscious mind by planning what you want the end
game to be. Once you decide to change things you can focus on setting goals for yourself and
put together an action plan. The action plan needs to be activities based on helping with the
changes, like the thoughts diary, or exercise, or volunteering to help someone else. They all
need to be based around reducing the current destructive thought pattern and replacing it with
healthier activities and thoughts. It is important to not be using drugs or alcohol, which only
band aid the problem.

Taking control is easier that we might think. When you know where you want to go, and you
plan for it and you put together that action plan, the key is to then start the activities and use
the activities to interrupt when the bad thoughts come. Slowly but surely things will start to
change. You will notice less negative thoughts in that thoughts diary and they will last less and
less. Just like the destructive thoughts can form a pattern, so can the positive thoughts, we just
need to practice them in a deliberate way. Remember you get more of what you focus on, so
focus on the things you want to come into your life. Again, you can plan for those things and put actions in place to make things happen. You really are the driver of your thoughts.

One of the hardest things to deal with is the death of someone close to you. Nothing will ever replace that person and it is best to have a time to grieve and then celebrate the life they lived and the time you got to spend with them, which is why they are close to you, but in this instance again it is important to try to focus to the future and ask your unconscious some questions that is positively framed, as it pushes the focus to a positive space. Questions like, “what would that person want me to do with my life?” If that person was close to you, they would want the best for you and to go on and do great things, not feel sorry for them to the point that you don’t take care of yourself or leave the house.

We are all human and bad things will happen in our lives, that is guaranteed. We will all get sad, feel scared and have various other emotions that comes with being human, but we can dust ourselves off and move forward with intent no matter what life throws at us. Make sure you also keep in contact with friends and family because we can all help each other get through tough times. I’m hopeful these blogs can be used to get us thinking of how we can help each other more, be involved more and just try different things, because there are many ways to the top of the mountain, try things, something just might work for you.

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Clint Adams is a former Police Officer who has a Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology, Post Graduate Qualifications in Rehabilitation Counselling and Business Management. He has a Blog and Podcasts on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. Below are all the instalments in the Full Mental Jacket Series Blog:
Instalment 1: Understanding Fear & Anger

Instalment 2: The Brain & Counselling

Instalment 3: Creating Resilience

Instalment 4: The Inner Story
https://clintadams21.wordpress.com/2018/10/02/full-mental-jacket-4-the-inner-story/

Instalment 5: Creating Safety

Instalment 6: You Are The Director

Instalment 7: Directing Your Children

Instalment 8: Shame & Guilt

Instalment 9: Breaking the pattern

Instalment 10: Taking Control