

Self Reflective Practices and PTSD

“The only way to change the emotional brain is through self-attending... self-reflective pathways...”
- Bessell van der Kolk: (2008 Hakomi conference)

The emotional brain governs our stress level, our capacity to recover from suffering in general and trauma in particular, our ability to relate to others, our self-esteem and confidence, and the degree of happiness and sense of fulfillment we experience in life.

The latest research in neuroscience is proving what has been known for ages – that the brain can and does change throughout life, and that we can use certain practices to ensure that our brain remains healthy enough to allow for optimum functioning of the mind, the body, and the nervous system even as we grow older...

Experience shapes and changes the brain... we know that now. Experiences that are repeated cause certain tendencies for thinking, perceiving, feeling, acting, reacting, and these can become habitual and automatic. Once on automatic, we no longer have to think about them... or have intention about them... they just occur. For something new to occur, we must bring these automatic tendencies into consciousness, and we must have the idea, the intention, the volition to do something different. It is possible, but it takes a little effort.

What researchers and therapists are learning about post traumatic stress is that an integrative mind-body approach using “self-reflective” practices seems to have the best chance of helping traumatized people to successfully recover from the effects of PTSD. Such an approach is also successful in helping any of us cultivate the kind of self-awareness that allows us to move past our old knee-jerk reactions and habitual behaviours that cause unnecessary suffering and limit our happiness and well-being.

Anything that has become habitual happens more and more effortlessly. This is how habits help us function. They take over many of the activities that don't require conscious thought so we don't have to waste energy on thinking about them. As long as they contribute to healthy functioning in our lives, there is no need to change them. When they start to interfere with healthy living, we need to take action to change our brain as well as our behaviours. And – good news - this is possible.

One practice that contributes to making these kind of changes is what we called *self-reflection*... the practice of quieting the mind, turning attention to one's own internal present moment experience, and simply noticing whatever is occurring one one's awareness, without judgement, without preference, without trying to change anything. Self-reflection can be cultivated as a daily practice that benefits our emotional health, our relationships, our personal effectiveness, and even our immune system. It is the practice of what we call “applied mindfulness”, which is simply attending to our present moment experience – sensory, thoughts, feelings, sensations, impulses, inner voices... whatever. Pause now, and just notice whatever is happening in this moment for you...

Mindful

Every day
I see or hear
something
that more or less
kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle
in the haystack
of light.
It was what I was born for -
to look, to listen,
to lose myself
inside this soft world -
to instruct myself
over and over
in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant -
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,
the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help
but grow wise
with such teachings
as these -
the untrimmable light
of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

— Mary Oliver