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Can We Really Change our Behaviour?

The top selling book in Australia at the moment is “The brain that changes itself”; which is all about how the brain can alter its structure. Up until a couple of years ago it was thought that the brain was set and we could not alter how it was configured. What we now know is that the brain is very plastic and is constantly remodeling itself. The key to changing how your brain is wired is to change how you use it.

The brain is made up of a series of neural connections, which are simply a group of brain cells that work together. Every action, feeling and thought has a specific neural connection that makes that action, feeling and thought possible. As I sit here typing this article a series of neural connections fire to make my fingers select the right keys in the right order. When we feel anger and act inappropriately it is once again due to the triggering of a set number of brain cells acting as a team.

Similarly, the way the brain stores information is that when we learn something new, say a word in French, a number of neurons are dedicated to that one piece of information and they are encoded with it. If you never revisit that word, over time those neurons split up and go off and fulfill other jobs. However if you regularly go over the word, that pattern will be re-enforced and the neural connection will be cemented down.

Think about when you were learning how to drive. If you started in a manual car chances are you would have been terrible – bunny hopping and crunching gears. The reason is that there was no neural pattern in your brain for driving; your brain simply wasn't set up for it. You would also notice that it took a lot of effort and concentration to drive. Now, reflect on the last time you drove home? Did you think about it? No, you just drove home. Why? Because the neural pattern of driving is so engrained you don't even have to think about it.

Strong neural patterns are like freeways in your brain, solid, deep, wide and easy to travel on. Weak neural patterns are like dirt roads narrow, shaky and difficult to travel down. It is simply easier for our brain to use the freeways and because of this they tend to direct the traffic down that route.

We are all born with certain talents and skills as well as a thinking style and an emotional bias. Some people are good at sports; some people are great at music; others are optimistic; some handle stress easily, while others fly off the handle when the slightest thing goes wrong. Think of these natural tendencies as freeways. Unfortunately humans tend to focus on the things they are good at and

shy away from things that they struggle with. If we take music lessons and we don't pick it up easily we will quit after a short period of time. All this does is reinforce our natural abilities or put another way, the freeways in our brain get all the traffic. The good news is that we can develop the dirt roads, it just takes time and effort.

Back to the driving analogy, driving starts out as a dirt road but with consistent practice and time it turns into a freeway. Neural plasticity does not only apply to motor skills. Studies have shown that pessimists (people who have a lot of freeways for negative thoughts) can alter their brain so that it begins to have a tendency for optimism. How did they do this? Normally when an event occurred they naturally thought a pessimist thought, however this time they recognised that thought, challenged it and then chose to think of it in an optimistic light. In other words they put a detour sign on their freeway and directed the traffic down the dirt road. After enough time of doing this, the dirt road starts to get wider, smoother and easier to drive on. In the meantime the freeways starts to break down and loose its structure.

Martin Seligman took children who had a natural style of pessimism. Each evening he got their parents to ask the children three questions:

- What did you do really well today?
- What did you really enjoy today?
- What are you looking forward to tomorrow?

Over a period to time they found that the children started to have a bias for optimism. They simply changed their dirt roads into freeways.

How do we do this?

- Choose a behaviour, belief or thinking style that you want to change.
- Start to recognize when you do this behaviour, belief or thinking style.
- Challenge it and introduce a new behaviour, belief or thinking style.
- Reinforce this pattern, over and over.

The difficulty with this is that it takes effort, but when was the last time that something worthwhile was easy?

For more information on Dr Adam Fraser as a keynote speaker or workshop facilitator, please visit www.o2speakers or www.dradamfraser.com.