

## Empathy & the Brain

“Is the universe friendly?”

Albert Einstein, on what is the most important question.

Have you ever had an issue in your life that you found yourself thinking about more than you wanted to? Maybe even obsessively?

Join the club. As if it isn't painful enough to have the reality of whatever it is in your life, to keep mentally going over it again and again, unbidden, can feel like torment. And yet this can be how the mind attempts to process very painful situations – keeping the left hemisphere analytical part of the brain engaged in reliving, analyzing, speculating – for the millionth time. Seeking some way to find the agency or control, or just understanding, that might afford relief.

Alas, much as we might wish to just “turn it off,” the brain doesn't always comply. Endlessly repeating the story to others doesn't always help either – especially if the well-meaning other tries to help by giving advice or commiserating.

There is however an approach that can produce astonishingly positive and effective results – not only with perseverance, but with anxiety in many forms. And that approach is *empathy*: deep and caring curiosity about another's feelings and needs.

Dr. Daniel Siegel defines empathy as “the capacity to sense the internal mental state of another person, not just to attune to their state of mind. Attunement is important, but the middle prefrontal cortex also moves us from this resonance and feeling-with to the more complex perceptual capacity to ‘see’ from another's point of view: we sense the other's intentions and imagine what an event means in his or her mind.”

Why is the experience of empathy so powerful? Fascinatingly, fMRI scans now reveal that the amygdala, the small neuronal cluster within the limbic system that plays such a large role in the regulation of anxiety, is calmed by the accurate naming of experience. The right hemisphere and its amygdala can “build a nest of reassuring neurons.”

In *Being a Brain-Wise Therapist*, therapist and author Bonnie Badenoch explains: “We are constantly shaping each others' brains through our interactions. Let's say that someone frowns at me for no reason I can discern. Circuits in my brain containing the experience of my father being critical flare into activity, affecting my body-brain-mind in a powerful way (momentary brain change), further strengthening those circuits containing the old memory (long-lasting brain change). A caring friend puts her hand gently on my arm when I am upset. My body-brain-mind resonates with the warmth and calmness she brings to me (momentary brain change), while my middle prefrontal region is empowered to

establish new soothing connections to my amygdala (long-lasting change). At every moment, we are engaged in this brain-to-brain creative dance. As we begin to bring resonance into our lives, it can transform them completely. Empathy is healing because according to the research resonance – moments of pure, shared emotional experience – changes the brain more than anything else.”

But safe and loving connection with other beings is not the only way to access the power of empathy. Remarkably, connection with our own “compassionate inner witness” can be equally powerful. This compassionate inner witness might be a sense of a kind inner presence, or a visual image of kind eyes, or whatever form works for us. Whatever it takes, the more we practice developing our sense of our own compassionate inner witness, the more it can be a true and powerful ally in our lives, such that “compassion for self and others sprouts like wildflowers in spring.”