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The latest brain science suggests that the ancient wisdom is literally true: Honing your higher mental faculties can actually change your brain and help you tame your moods. BY JOSEPH HOOPER

Only a self-admitted odd bodkin like Daniel J. Siegel could come up with a book like Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation (Bantam), a synthesis of mainstream psychology, Buddhist-influenced meditation training, and cutting-edge neurobiology. Siegel, 52, a psychiatry professor at UCLA with a private psychotherapy practice in West L.A., is the rare shrink—maybe the only shrink—who will ask patients to make a fist to model their brains so he can point and describe what’s going on in there. Siegel has been tracing brain-behavior connections for his entire career, and early on he came up with the concept of mindsight—our ability to check in with our own sense of self, which ultimately enables us to connect with others. Five years ago, he discovered research showing that meditation can thicken the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that largely regulates our moods, responses, and sense of well-being. Eureka! Now Siegel had proof that we can direct the development of our own brains, and a nifty tool—“follow-the-breath” meditation—to improve our mindsight. The idea for his new book was born: By regularly focusing on our inner lives, be it through meditation or just by calmly taking stock of our experiences, both good and bad, we can direct our brains to develop in healthy ways. And by sharpening our mindsight, we can “see” past everyday dissatisfaction as well as the more profound emotional problems, such as clinical depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder, that bring patients to Siegel’s office every day. We asked Siegel to explore his theories with us and got a crash course in what he calls “brain brushing” in the bargain.

ELLE: One of your messages is that if we can see how our brains make us who we are, whatever the neurochemistry of it, we may not need a script every time we feel our life is falling apart.

DS: I believe medications can be helpful—but however, we can now empower people to know that the way they focus their attention can change the firing of, and ultimately the structure of, their brains.

ELLE: Why is it important to develop mindsight?

DS: Our hot buttons can get pressed by other people or by conditions such as being hungry and sleepy, and then our prefrontal cortex can be temporarily disabled. Things go kind of haywire. You “flip out,” and areas in the brain beneath the prefrontal cortex have a field day. Survival reflexes like fight-or-flight kick in, and you do things to people—your friends, your kids—that you’d never do otherwise. For any of us, it helps to know why we lost our minds.

ELLE: You write that mindsight isn’t the same as mindfulness.

DS: Mindsight is the ability to monitor the mind’s internal flow, but it’s also the capacity to modify it toward an integrated state. It looks at relationships and brain mechanisms. It embraces mindfulness but takes it to a different realm.

ELLE: You say that when we’re depressed, we’re running on low mental energy and processing the same information over and over again. When we feel overwhelmed by thoughts or emotions, it’s too much energy and information—chaos. The job of the integrated person—whose right and left brain hemispheres are in sync, whose higher-order brain centers aren’t being overpowered by the lower, instinctual ones—is to find the happy middle ground.

DS: Yes, emotional rigidity and chaos are on opposite ends of the spectrum, and they’re both examples of impaired integration. Once you can monitor your internal world, you can move the flow of energy and information toward an integrated state.

ELLE: Give us the short course on making our mindsight 20/20.

DS: Note the times in your life when you feel really stuck or overwhelmed with a flood of thoughts or emotions or memories. See if you can tell when there’s rigidity or chaos—that’s the starting point. Then there are things we can do every day, what I call “brushing the brain,” just like we brush our teeth. Do a basic breath-awareness exercise for two or three minutes. Then review what your five senses are telling you: What am I seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, feeling on my skin? Then invite the sixth sense in: What is your body telling you, your heart, your intestines, your muscles? And then the seventh sense, mental activities: What thoughts, memories, feelings do you have right now? What intentions do you have for the day? And finally, the eighth sense: How do I feel connected to others or to the world at large? This is a way to keep the brain clear of all the muck that gets stuck there.

DEVELOP THE GRATITUDE ATTITUDE
List three things that you’re grateful for or three events that have gone well over the past week can significantly increase your level of happiness for about a month, make you more optimistic, and improve your physical health.