Daniel Siegel has accomplished a feat that no brain scientist has before or since: A working definition that answers the question "What is mind?" The importance of coming to some kind of clarity about what the mind is, even as a starting place from which to assess and advance research, can not be underestimated.

His definition is simple:

Mind is a regulatory process that can be monitored, measured, observed and modified.
In an extensive interview with Dr. Siegel, he shared the process of coming up with this definition of "mind."

I am trained as a scientist in both biological sciences and chemistry, and also in narrative sciences, the study of how we create meaning in our lives and our sense of identity of who we are. I'm also a scientist in studying relationships and how they are involved in well-being. I'm trained through the National Mental Health Institute in studying attachments. In addition to all of that, I'm also a physician. I'm a health care provider and specifically a psychiatrist for adults, adolescents, and children.

As a psychiatrist, what I found was that the systems used to categorize states of mental illness didn't really make a coherent picture of how to understand people when they became ill. It was quite frustrating to not have an overarching, conceptual framework to understand wellness or lack of wellness. Over twenty years ago, I began by thinking deeply about the nature of well-being and what it might be.

What I discovered was that the fields of mental health, psychiatry, psychology, social work, nursing, occupational therapy, and educational therapy, didn't have a definition of the mind. We didn't even have a definition of mental health. Over the course of the last nine years, I have asked almost 90,000 officials from every discipline of mental health around the globe if they ever had even one lecture about what the mind is or if they ever had a lecture defining what mental health is. Well over 95% of professionals in the field of mental health don't have a definition of the mind or mental health. I personally felt this was a crisis because after all, if we are mental health practitioners, what is it we are practicing?

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The group was about to dissolve. I took myself for a walk and thought there must be some kind of phrasing that can serve as a working definition of the mind. I came up with a definition that 100% of the academics agreed on. This definition revolutionized what we could do as parents, as mental health professionals, as teachers. The definition helped us to understand how to make the mind stronger; how the mind is working well and when it is not working well, and it actually gives you a place to begin to deepen the discussion even with people in various sciences as well as practitioners, and even philosophers.
Mindsight is a kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds. It helps us to be aware of our mental processes without being swept away by them, enables us to get ourselves off the autopilot of ingrained behaviors and habitual responses, and moves us beyond the reactive emotional loops we all have a tendency to get trapped in.

Consider the difference between speaking or thinking, "I am sad" and "I feel sad." Similar as those two statements may seem, there is actually a profound difference between them. "I am sad," is a kind of self-definition and a very limiting one. "I feel sad," suggests the ability to recognize and acknowledge a feeling without being consumed by it. The focusing skills that are a part of mindsight make it possible to distinguish between the feeling over the identity, accept the present moment of that feeling, let it go, and then transform it.

Mindsight acts as a very special lens that gives us the capacity to perceive the mind with greater clarity than ever before. This lens is something that virtually everyone can develop, and once we have it we can dive deeply into the mental sea inside, exploring our own inner lives. A uniquely human ability, mindsight allows us to examine closely in great detail and depth, the process by which we think, feel, and behave. It also allows us to reshape and redirect our inner experiences so that we have more freedom of choice in our everyday actions, more power to create the future, to become the author of our own story. Mindsight is the basic skill that underlies everything we mean when we speak of having social and emotional intelligence.

We now know from the findings of neuroscience research that the mental and emotional changes we can create through cultivation of the skill of mindsight are transformational at the very physical level of the brain. By developing the ability to focus our attention on our internal world, we pick up a "scalpel" we can use to resculpt our neural pathways, stimulating the growth of areas that are crucial to mental health.

But change never just happens; it's something we have to work at. Though the ability to navigate the inner sea...
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How do we develop the ability to perceive a thought – not just have one – and to know it as an activity of our minds so that we are not taken over by it? How can we be receptive to the mind’s riches and not just reactive to its reflexes? How can we direct our thoughts and feelings rather than be driven by them? And how can we know the minds of others so that we can truly understand “where they are coming from” and can respond more effectively and compassionately? The ability to look within and perceive the mind and to reflect on our experiences is essential to our well-being, can help us build social and emotional brainpower, move our lives from disorder to well-being, and help us create satisfying relationships filled with connection and compassion.

In our individual lives, mindsight offers us the opportunity to explore the subjective essence of who we are, to create a life of deeper meaning with a richer and more comprehensible internal world. We are better able to balance our emotions and achieve an internal equilibrium that enables us to cope with the small and large stresses of our lives. Through the ability to focus our attention, mindsight also helps the body and brain achieve homeostasis – the internal balance, coordination, and adaptiveness that forms the core of health. Mindsight also improves our relationships with our friends, colleagues, spouses, and children, but most importantly, the relationship we have with our own selves.

Creating well-being – in our mental life, in our close relationships, and even in our bodies – is a learnable skill. When we exercise mindsight, we actually change the physical structure of the brain. Developing the lens that enables us to see the mind more clearly stimulates the brain to grow important new connections. This revelation is based on one of the most exciting scientific discoveries of the last twenty years: How we focus our attention shapes the structure of the brain. Neuroscience supports the idea that developing the reflective skills of mindsight activates the very circuits that create resilience and well-being and that underlie empathy and compassion as well.

Well-being emerges when we create connections in our lives and help the brain achieve and maintain integration, a process by which separate elements are linked together into a working whole.

Integration is at the heart of how we connect to one another in healthy ways, honoring one another’s differences while keeping our line of communication wide open. It is also important for releasing the creativity that emerges when the left and right sides of the brain are functioning together.

Integration enables us to be flexible and free; the lack of such connections promotes a life that is either rigid or chaotic; stuck and dull on the one hand or explosive and unpredictable on the other. Integration comes with a sense
of vitality and without it we can become imprisoned in behavioral ruts – anxiety and depression, greed, obsession, and addiction. With mindsight, we can alter the way the mind functions and move our lives towards integration and away from the extremes of rigidity or chaos, and are able to focus our mind in ways that literally integrate the brain and move it towards resilience and health.

Being mindful, having mindful awareness, is often defined as a way of intentionally paying attention to the present moment without being swept up by judgments. Practiced in the East and the West, in ancient times and in modern societies, mindful awareness techniques help people move towards well-being by training the mind to focus on moment-to-moment experience. Oftentimes people hear the word mindfulness and think “religion,” but the reality is that focusing our attention in this way is a biological process that promotes health – as a form of brain hygiene – not a religion. Various religions may encourage this health-promoting practice, but learning the skill of mindful awareness is simply a way of cultivating what we have defined as the integration of consciousness.

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The brain changes physically in response to experience, and new mental skills can be acquired with intentional effort, with focused awareness and concentration. Experience activates neural firing, which in turn leads to the production of proteins that enable new connections to be made among neurons, in the process called neuroplasticity. Besides focused attention, other factors include aerobic exercise, novelty, and emotional arousal.

We learn more effectively when we are physically active. Novelty, or exposing ourselves to new ideas and experiences, promotes the growth of new connections among existing neurons and seems to stimulate the growth of myelin, the fatty sheath that speeds nerve transmission. Novelty can even stimulate the growth of new neurons – a finding that took a long time to win acceptance in the scientific community. Neuroplasticity can be activated by attention alone, or when we participate in an activity that is important and meaningful to us, but if we are not engaged emotionally and the experience is less memorable, the structure of the brain is less likely to change.

Dissolving fixed mental perceptions created along the brain’s firing patterns and reinforced relationally within our cultural practices is no simple accomplishment. Our relationships engrain our early perceptual patterns and deepen the ways we come to see the world and believe our inner narrative. Without an internal education that teaches us to pause and reflect, we may tend to live on automatic and succumb to these cultural and cortical influences that push us toward isolation. Part of our challenge in achieving well-being is to develop enough mindsight to clear us of these restrictive definitions of ourselves.

The ultimate outcome of integration, being considerate and concerned with the larger world becomes a fundamental shift in our way of living.

In a lengthy interview with Dr. Daniel Siegel, SuperConsciousness Editor-in-Chief Danielle Graham discussed the many implications for the human experience as a whole as a whole when we utilize Mindscope. Here is an excerpt from that discussion:

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art of the reflective practice, ironically, is that it makes our senses stronger and bodily well-being clearer, and increases empathy towards others, which then strengthens our connections to people in our lives. We become more open in a loving and wonderfully exciting new way. In fact the real definition of self becomes we, and all of a sudden we begin to think that there is hope for the planet. We begin to realize this is our collective home. There is real hope to turn things around.

I am incredibly optimistic that with reflective practices there is hope for our species. We have to understand the brain so that we can grasp how non-integrated thinking puts us at risk for planetary destruction, but also to harness the power of our creativity to turn it all around and turn this into a much more integrated home in which we live.

When we understand how our social networks interconnect in that intimate way, we realize the potential is huge. The ultimate outcome of integration is compassion. When we talk about integration within the context of personal health, we are also talking about implications for cultural evolution. In that way, health becomes a secular essence that all people have a right to receive, and we can all work to bring that healthy state of integration to the world.

Dr. Daniel Siegel’s work can be followed at http://drdansiegel.com/

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