

Relationships Are Our Best Medicine **Brad J Kammer, MA, MFT, SEP**

At this time of year, we have the good fortune to attend graduation ceremonies where highly educated, successful adults give moving speeches encouraging young graduates to seek out the gifts that this life has to offer. Along the way, they will warn them, there will be pitfalls and dangers, but that these challenges will make them stronger. They will encourage these young adults to become whole people – not simply students – and to seek out learning beyond the classroom.

And yet, for their entire lives, all we've stressed to these young people is "left brain" learning within the classroom. What is left-brain learning? It's what we all experienced for 12 long years (or for some even longer) – the never-ending learning of mathematics, science, English, history, social studies, etc. It's about facts, details, dates, plans, organization, theory, and probabilities. It's about A's, test scores, SATs, and not failing out of school. It's about preparing young adults to learn the skills necessary to take their place in American society, as capable, productive adults in pursuit of the American Dream.

The funny thing is that when you talk with people about their childhoods, what they mostly remember are not the facts learned in math and science classes, but the people that influenced them, and the lessons they learned through their relationships – with families, friends, trusted adults and loved ones; and from these lessons, the skills that allow them to be successful adults. This is the learning of the right-brain, having to do with relationships, attachment, empathy, feeling, creativity, art, and body-based learning through sports, dance, and of course, love, romance, and sexuality.

Over the past 20 years, thanks to the emergence of incredible brain imaging technology, we can now map the brain and body like never before. This emerging field of neuroscience shows us that the regulators of our minds and bodies are embedded in our relationships, in right-brain to right-brain interactions. Coined *Interpersonal Neurobiology*, this subset within neuroscience stresses the interactions between mind, body, and relationships. Surprisingly to some, what researchers in this field are finding is that the emphasis of left-brain learning over right-brain learning proves not to be the best course for human evolution.

Research suggests that in terms of health and healing, social support is more powerful than anything besides genetics. And when there is an absence of appropriate social interactions, substitutions are made in the form of such things as food, alcohol, drugs, sex, TV, computer and video games. Meanwhile, chronic stress builds in the nervous system which leads to a host of symptoms and chronic disorders. There is plenty of information showing us that isolation and lack of social engagement can make us sick. And yet, we live in a world where we retreat more and more, creating alternate realities and identities on digital screens, whispering messages of loves through text taps, and flirting with emoticons. Contrary to what

we may believe, these forms of engagement are not bringing us closer together nor are they triggering the hard-wired mechanisms in our brain and bodies that are required for supporting health and well-being.

Some years ago, Oxytocin, the “love” chemical, was discovered in the brain. Scientists observed that this chemical was released in our bodies during time of social connection including romantic encounters, bonding rituals between parents and their children, and during labor and birth. Interestingly, as they examined this neurochemical, they realized that not only does Oxytocin coordinate social behavior with health, it also reduces fear and anxiety, is analgesic (blocks pain), and anti-inflammatory (aids in healing). Maybe this accounts for why children run to their parents when they fall off their bikes and scrape their knees – maybe their mother’s embrace actually triggers pain-reducing, healing mechanisms in the skin. Maybe this is why being with friends and family during tragedy can help us stay balanced and sane. Maybe this is also why for millennia, people have gone to individuals within their community to receive support – whether these individuals emphasize the mind (therapists), the body (doctors), or the spiritual (religious and tribal leaders).

So, those commencement speakers are correct in teaching young adults that with the proper support and guidance, our challenges do make us stronger and more resilient. The flip side, however, is that without the proper support, our challenges create distress. What this means is that despite the longstanding values of our rugged individualistic culture, we fundamentally need one another to survive, to grow, and to thrive. We need relationships. We know that infants and young children would not survive without attachment to secure caregivers. But even as adults, we still need secure attachments to thrive. We can examine brain images of individuals looking at pictures of loved ones and see that areas having to do with pleasure and neural-integration light up, while areas of stress and pain grow dim.

An informative research study from Stanford was done with 50 women diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. They followed two groups of women – one consisted of women who joined cancer support groups and the other were women who did not join any support groups. The results demonstrated that the women who joined a support group lived twice as long as the women who did not join a support group. Not only that, those women who joined a support group also reported a higher quality of living, including 50% less pain than those not in a support group.

Safety translates to biology, meaning that if we trigger states of well-being through personal connection, we can promote both physical and psychological health. Ultimately, health is about integration, about the balance of right-brain with left-brain learning, and when our minds, bodies and relationships are all interacting without undue conflict or disconnect, we feel better, and our lives go better. Armed with this knowledge, we can learn new ways of interacting with others that shift relationships in a positive direction, and thus enable improvements in our physical and psychological well-being.

As one great commencement speaker encouraged: "Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant." Beyond the walls of our academic institutions, of our exclusively left-brain learning, exists important knowledge to be received – there it is, in a long talk with a friend, a warm hand on our back, a needed hug, a loving connection, a moment of contact with a child, or supporting a fellow human being through difficult times. These are the moments that teach us what science now proves, that being in relationship with others is good medicine.

If you work in the helping profession, are an educator, or simply a parent wanting to learn more about how to better support your children, a workshop on Interpersonal Neurobiology will be held at the Art Therapy of the Redwoods in Redwood Valley on July 8. For more information, please visit www.body-mindtherapy.com or call (707) 462 2133. This workshop will be co-facilitated by Brad Kammer, Psychotherapist and Mendocino College Instructor, and Linda Chapman, Art Therapist and Educator.