

Brainbased Psychotherapy in a Nutshell

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All psychological functions (perception, memory, feeling, thinking and behaviour) are made possible, because of your brain. Your brain is the organ, that offers you the possibility to react on events in the outside world and inside world. The idea that we don't react on things themselves but on the perceptions that our brain makes, was already known by the ancient Roman Stoic Epictetus. In his book *Encheiridion* he writes: It is not things themselves, that disturbs us, but our perception of them. Epictetus taught us 2000 years ago, that our emotional reactions are the results of the perceptions our brains make. Perceptions of the outside world and perceptions of our inner world.

Brain based psychotherapy shares this age-old philosophical insight, but follows in its theoretical vision the results of modern neuroscientific research. Psychotherapy has its roots in the writings of 19th century neurologists and psychiatrists, but exchanged their neuroscientific vision in an early phase for a pure psychological vision. The neuroscientific basis of human behaviour was almost completely ignored. Brain based psychotherapy sees this as a historical error, and has its theory in the results of modern brain science.

Your brain is the organ that gives you the possibility to have all the experiences that you have. It makes it possible to create pictures of the world, and to secure these in a data pool. It even has the possibility to independently create pictures, without being led by the outside world. While you are at home listening to music, you can dream about a journey you are willing to make, and let your brain travel in an imaginary world. Your brain offers the possibility to express your experiences in words, images, sounds, which can be recorded in books, paintings, or music. Your brain enables you to experience emotions; to feel joy, sorrow, love. Your brain is the organ that at last guides your behaviour. It ensures that you drive with your bike or car to work, and handle all kinds of hindrances. You can't do anything without a brain, and there wasn't even a you without it. The Dutch neuroscientist Dick Swaab states this bravely in the title of his book: *You are your brain*.

There is some kind of division of labour in your brain. There are parts that are especially active in the achievement of specific tasks. Speech is made possible because of a centre (the area of Broca), that is localised in the middle left. For sight there is a part necessary that is localised in the back of your brain: the visual cortex. Your emotional life is the result of amongst others the limbic system, neural networks in the midbrain. Although there is some specialisation, all parts of the brain work together. That cooperation is possible because of many nerve connections in your brain: the neural networks. Nerve cells can connect with each other, and can communicate with each other. You can imagine this neural network as a highway system; all kind of information is transmitted from one part of the brain to another. This process is an unconscious activity. Your brain does its work without consulting you. But it gives you the possibility to be partly conscious of its actions. These brain messages (physical sensations, images, thoughts, emotions) can on their turn be utilized by your brain. Your brain is a layered brain. It can transform stimuli from the outside world into brain messages, and it can examine these. Even correct them. This is the result of what we call self-consciousness or self-control, two capacities that we use in brainbased psychotherapy.

Let me give an illustration of this. Suppose you awake in the middle of the night because your phone rings. Your brain will immediately give some messages. Maybe 'there is something wrong!' You feel an uncomfortable restlessness and all kind of thoughts go through your head. All kind of horror scenarios as: an accident, my boss who wants to fire me.... When you answer the phone, you discover that someone phoned the wrong number. There was a false alarm in your brain. Your brain can immediately correct it.

We often suppose, that we control our brain. We think that we choose our perceptions and thoughts. This is a mistake, and it assumes that we are completely rational beings that control our brain. Our brain is in control, and it resembles an automatic pilot that quickly guides our reactions. The brain starts a reaction before we even know it does. Sometimes you already feel fear, while you don't know what started this signal. In a way you leech on to your brain. Your brain reacts, and you can examine if it the right reaction.

Why do people have a brain? Do you have a brain to make homework, or to live a happy life? Twice the answer is No. The main goal of your brain is survival. The brain wants to help you to survive all kinds of obstacles and threats, and to lengthen life. Not to live for ever, of course. But long enough to create new life. That seems to be the mission of life. We live to pass life on. In your brain there is a survival strength. That seems to be the logic of life. And while you live, you can make the circumstances of life as agreeable as possible; for you and other people. Life is more liveable when you are in a safe environment, know that your stomach is filled tomorrow, and feel protected by other people.

When your brain helps to fulfil its goal to help survive, it functions rationally. It does the things it's meant to do. But your brain also can function wrongly. It can be a source of disturbing thoughts, cramping feelings and it can let you do unhealthy things. In that case your brain functions irrational. An irrationally functioning brain is an important matrix for what we nowadays call psychological disturbances. In brain based psychotherapy we assume, that these are the result of wrong brain messages. That is the bad news. The good news is, that your brain can correct itself. We call this capacity neuroplasticity. Your brain has the potential to trace faults in the neural networks and to correct them. Sometimes you need the brain assistance of another brain for this job: the brain of your brainbased psychotherapist.

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