
Mental Health Wisdom



Developing
Understanding & Empathy

Antony Simpson

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Mental Health Wisdom Book Website:
www.mentalhealthwisdombook.com

Author's Blog: www.antonymsimpson.com

This book is for:

All those affected by mental illness. The 25%.

**All those who care about someone who has experienced or has
a mental illness. The 75%.**

Everyone.

**Dedicated to all those who have lost their lives due
to mental illness.**

**Dedicated to all those affected by another person's
suicide.**

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Forward

I deal with mental health every day. Whether that's my own, someone else's or both. Whether we realise it or not, we all do.

I'm an Alcohol Specialist Nurse by profession. Many of the patients that I see use alcohol to self-medicate the symptoms of an underlying mental illness. The problem with this coping strategy is that self-medication isn't selective. You numb everything, the good as well as the bad. That is without mentioning the other impacts that alcohol has on physical health and their lives. It's like trying to cure a disease by drinking a poison that will ultimately be fatal.

After battling with highs, lows and mixed mood states through my teenage years and early adulthood, I was diagnosed with Cyclothymia (a form of bipolar) at the age of twenty-nine.

In my professional and personal life, I've learned a lot about mental health and illness. This book has been years in the making. I am proud to share my knowledge and experiences with you in this book.

This book is deliberately titled *Mental Health Wisdom* rather than *Mental Health Knowledge*. Wisdom is taking the lessons learned from knowledge and life experiences and applying them in a meaningful way to your life.

There are three parts to this book. In Part 1 - Understanding, I share knowledge I've learned about mental health and illness.

In Part 2 - Empathy Through Lived Experience, I share my experiences of mental health and illness.

In Part 3 - Life Hacks, I share ways to improve your mental health, as well as ways to prevent and manage mental illness.

These life hacks are intentionally short, only giving you the absolutely essential information. Apply these in the way you think will be most helpful in your life.

By gaining knowledge, learning from my experiences and implementing the life hacks you will become mental health *wise*.

Emergency Help

If you are in a mental illness crisis, I **strongly** encourage you to access crisis support. A mental illness crisis usually involves:

- Thinking about or planning suicide.
- Self-harm.
- Thinking about or having taken an overdose.
- Feeling completely overwhelmed.
- Severe mood swings.
- Strong and sometimes uncontrollable impulses.
- Hallucinations - visual, audio or tactile.
- Losing touch with reality.
- Psychosis.

In the UK crisis support is available by attending your nearest Accident & Emergency Department. There you can speak to a mental health specialist. They are experts in dealing with mental illnesses and *will* be able to help you.

Remember that thoughts, moods and impulses fluctuate and change. What you think and how you feel now, will not always be how you think and feel.

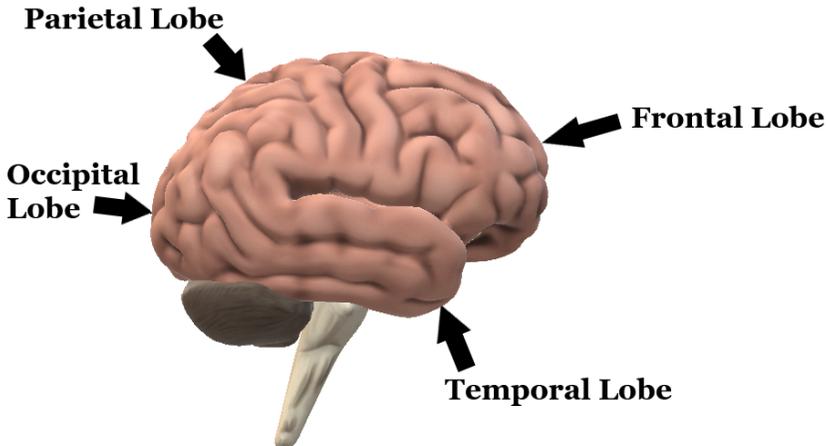
Part 1 - Understanding

Mechanics of the Mind

I'm fascinated by how the brain functions. That written, I am neither a Neurologist nor a Neuroscientist. Neuroscience as a field of study is in its infancy. However we have identified parts of the brain, how neurons communicate and specific chemicals that make us think, feel and behave in the ways in which we do.

The Parts of the Brain

The brain is split into different parts called lobes:



The frontal lobe deals with logical thinking and reasoning. It enables us to develop plans and solve problems. It gives us the ability to predict and imagine outcomes of events before doing them. There's never been a chocolate made that tastes like vomit. Why? Because we can imagine that it wouldn't taste good.

A vital role of this ability to predict and imagine outcomes is empathy. To be able to imagine how others think and feel.

The frontal lobe is also associated with speech, voluntary movement, personality and behaviours linked into the reward pathway. It has the highest numbers of dopamine-sensitive neurons. See more about dopamine and the reward pathway under The Chemical Players section of this chapter.

The parietal lobe deals with interpreting and processing sensory information from our five senses (sight, smell, touch, taste & sound). It also gives us the ability to calculate sums in our head.

The occipital lobe mostly focuses on interpreting and processing visual information. What we see. The colours, light, movement, distance and depth perception. It also helps us to read and understand what we read.

The temporal lobe deals with memory (although the frontal lobe, parietal and occipital lobe all also have a role in the creation, processing and recall of memories), hearing, understanding what we hear, speech, recognising people and emotional responses.

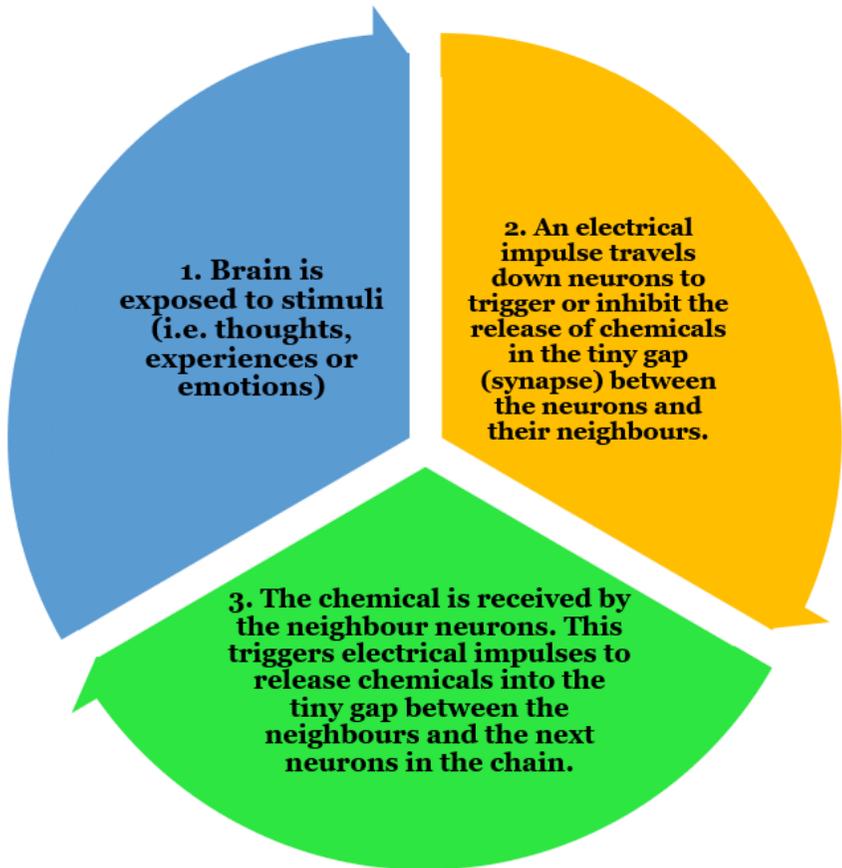
The limbic system is responsible for all of our emotions. It sits mostly in the temporal lobe. It is sometimes called our emotional brain or reptilian brain. It is responsible for the reward pathway, being alert for danger, stress, the Fight, Flight or Freeze Response (see more below), sex, love and caring. All the systems for survival of the individual and survival of the species (including procreation and raising children). It is also responsible for a range of automatic functions such as breathing, keeping our heart beating, regulation of the sleep

cycle, the release of hormones and many other involuntary functions. All of these lobes work together. On a cellular level, neurons are found in all of the lobes of the brain. They work together to create our consciousness and enable the automatic functions of our body. Let's explore these neurons in more detail.

How Neurons Communicate

It is estimated that there are around a hundred billion neurons in the human brain. Give or take a few billion. No one has ever sat and counted every neuron. Not that we can blame anyone with the numbers involved. Just imagine being given that job! I wouldn't want to be *that* person.

Neurons communicate through electrical impulses and chemicals. Here is the process of neuron communication:



1. Brain is exposed to stimuli (i.e. thoughts, experiences or emotions).

2. An electrical impulse travels down neurons to trigger or inhibit the release of chemicals in the tiny gap (synapse) between the neurons and their neighbours.

3. The chemical is received by the neighbouring neurons. This

triggers electrical impulses to release chemicals into the tiny gap between the neighbours and the next neurons in the chain.

Neurons communicate between each other super-fast. Each neuron is thought to fire chemicals or signals 5-50 times every second. That's a minimum of 18,000 signals every hour, per neuron (of which there are billions). That means at any one time there are zillions of signals being transmitted around your brain.

Understanding the chemicals transmitted between the neurons are essential to understanding the mechanics of the mind, along with how they influence mental health and mental illness. Let's look at the chemical players.

The Chemical Players

All of these chemicals are neurotransmitters, meaning that they transmit messages between the neurons as explained above. Here are our chemical players:

Serotonin - The happiness chemical. Makes you feel happy and content. It is made in the brain.

Dopamine - The motivation chemical. It not only motivates you, but makes you feel good. It is made in the brain.

Dopamine motivates you to seek out things you need for your individual and species survival. Such as food, water and sex. It does this by operating a reward pathway. When your brain gets whatever the dopamine has motivated you to seek out, it stimulates the release of more dopamine across the lobes of the brain. This dopamine makes you feel *really* good. This rewards the behaviour and makes you more likely to repeat it.

Never underestimate just *how good* dopamine can make you

feel. Dopamine and its reward pathway are thought to be the physiological cause of addictions to substances, ultimately destructive behaviours (such as gambling or over eating) and even the high you get following a good session of exercise at the gym.

Noradrenaline - The alert for danger chemical. This chemical is made in the two adrenal glands that are located at the top of each kidney. Along with Cortisol it gets your body ready to Fight, Flight or Freeze.

Cortisol - The stress hormone. This chemical is made in the two adrenal glands that are located at the top of each kidney. Along with Noradrenaline it gets your body ready to Fight, Flight or Freeze.

The Fight, Flight or Freeze Response

The fight, flight or freeze response is your brain and body's reaction to a threat or perceived threat. Your body has a number of responses in the Fight, Flight or Freeze response mode:

- Pupils dilate to take in more visual information.
- The production of saliva stops.
- Makes the bronchi in the lungs bigger so that more oxygen can be inhaled.
- Makes the heart beat faster to get more oxygen to where it is needed quicker.
- Increases glucose levels in the blood so that cells have the extra energy required.
- Decreases activity in the stomach, pancreas, intestines and bladder by reducing blood flow to these organs, as

none of these organs or systems are required for the immediate in-the-moment survival.

The entire fight, flight or freeze response is about getting your body ready to fight the threat or perceived threat, run from the threat or perceived threat (flight) or freeze in indecision. The freeze response is like a rabbit freezing in the headlights of a car.

This response worked great when humans weren't the dominant form of life and when we had predators that wished to kill and eat us. However it isn't as useful today.

Today this response kicks in too often, in everyday events that aren't a threat to our survival. Some examples of modern-day events that our brain perceives as threats and activates our Fight, Flight or Freeze response include:

- Being under pressure by a tight deadline at work.
- Public speaking.
- Sitting in a traffic jam.
- Getting a car parking ticket.
- Financial difficulties or job insecurity.
- Our own critical inner voice criticising us (see Part 2 - Empathy Through Lived Experience section of this book, chapter Ruminating & Critical Inner Voice for more information).
- Social conflict - including arguments and heated discussions.
- Sitting exams.
- Organising a big social occasion - such as a wedding.
- Job interviews.

- Unexpected knocks on a door, unexpected notifications or messages on our phones.
- The News.
- Horror and psychological thriller films.
- People's comments on social media posts.

The list could go on and on. What's interesting is that your brain only needs to perceive a threat for the fight, flight or freeze response to activate. Even if you quickly realise that it isn't a threat and reassure your mind, it's too late. Your neurons have already activated the response.

Looking at the examples above trying to fight, running away from or freezing in these situations would be completely unhelpful at best and at worst illegal and morally wrong.

I'm thinking about you trying to fight people interviewing you. I would safely bet that if you did this, you would not get the job. Unless you were applying to be a champion boxer, but even then, they probably wouldn't appreciate you assaulting them when they'd invited you in for a little chat.

Another interesting consideration is that your brain doesn't know if the threat is right in front of you or a thousand miles away.

Let's take the example of reading the news. If you read about a volcano erupting, killing people and severely burning others, it is likely that your fight, flight or freeze response will activate. Even though the volcano might be thousands of miles away, in a country that you have never been to, so there is absolutely no threat to you, your brain still responds.

Merely thinking about something can activate the response. Your response might have been triggered just by reading the example above. Check in with how you feel physically, mentally and emotionally to see if this was the case.

Back to the last of our chemical players...

Oxytocin - The love and caring hormone. It makes you bond with partners, want to have sex with them, get attached to offspring and enables empathy. It is made in the brain.

Everything as Fact

Your brain is like a sponge, meaning that everything it sees, smells, touches, tastes and hears your brain accepts as fact. Even when you consciously know something is a lie, unconsciously your brain takes it as a fact. It is a survival mechanism, there are no lies in nature. Lies are a very human concept. That is why we need supportive relationships.

Abuse in relationships whether that be physical, verbal or both can change the structures and functioning of your brain. Ever heard that saying - if you hear something enough, you'll start to believe it? It couldn't be truer.

The Brain in Anxiety

In someone with anxiety their brain will have low levels of serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin. They will have high levels of noradrenaline and cortisol. Knowing this helps the symptoms of anxiety make sense. Symptoms including:

- Being on edge.
- Feelings of fear and impending doom.
- Chest pain and heart palpitations.
- Sweating.

- Nausea (feeling sick).
- Overreacting to perceived threats.
- Panic attacks.

Anxiety often comes from indecision and is often irrational. Someone with anxiety will feel overwhelmed and often freeze in response to the fight, flight or freeze responses. A good way to reduce anxiety is to make a decision. First identify triggers for your anxiety. Then decide how you will deal with these triggers.

For example, say you are anxious about losing your job and what that will mean for you and your family. The best way to deal with this is to accept that losing your job is a possibility. But recognise that there are things that you can do to make this less likely (such as meeting your targets at work, having good relationships with your work colleagues, etc.).

Some circumstances are beyond your control. Say your employer is making cut backs. You can't control whom the company decides to make redundant. You can still do all the things listed above, but this doesn't guarantee that it won't be you who is made redundant. When it comes down to it - you have to either accept that there is a possibility you could lose your job and choose to stay where you are; or accept that the job insecurity is too much for you to accept and choose to start looking for other employment opportunities.

The Brain in Depression

In someone with depression their brain will have low levels of serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin. They will have high levels of noradrenaline and cortisol. Knowing this helps the symptoms of depression make sense. Symptoms including:

- Tiredness and exhaustion.
- Difficulty in getting to sleep or staying asleep.
- Loss of pleasure in life and in doing activities previously enjoyed.
- Low motivation to do anything.
- Reduced appetite with or without weight loss.
- Weight gain caused by poor diet.
- Slowed thinking, speaking or difficulty in concentrating.
- Angry outbursts, feeling constantly frustrated or irritable.

Both anxiety and depression have the same effect on the brain. It isn't no wonder that people often have mixed episodes containing symptoms of both anxiety and depression together.

The Brain with Suicidal Thinking

It is estimated that around 1 in 5 people (20% of the population) will have suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives. But why do they get these thoughts? What's going on in the brain? Let me explain.

High levels of cortisol caused by chronic stress is extremely damaging to your brain. High levels of cortisol over a prolonged period can disrupt communication between neurons, kill neurons and even cause shrinking of the brain. The brain knows it must lower the levels of cortisol and suicidal thoughts aim to do just that.

When a person decides that they are going to commit suicide, their levels of cortisol instantly begin to drop. This is because they no longer need to worry or be stressed about the things that they are, as they won't be around to have to deal with any

of their problems.

The brain knows that high levels of cortisol is damaging to it, so suicidal thoughts are about the brain encouraging a decision to be made that begins to lower cortisol levels.

Of course the brain doesn't *really* want the person to commit suicide, it's just about lowering cortisol levels. The brain has lots of strategies to prevent people acting on their suicidal ideation. You can read more about suicide in Part 2 - Empathy Through Lived Experience, The 'S' Word - Suicide chapter of this book.

A Quick Note on Thiamine

The human brain has a brain-to-body mass of just 2%, yet requires 20% of the total energy created from food to operate normally. Thiamine (Vitamin B1) is used to convert carbohydrates into glucose so it can be used by the neurons in the brain as energy. Thiamine is essential for normal brain functioning.

Foods that contain good amounts of Thiamine include: asparagus, brown rice, cereals, eggs, fish, green peas, lean pork chops, oranges, seaweed, spinach, sunflower seeds, tofu, and yeast to name a few.

Thiamine is poorly absorbed in the human digestive system and we can only store small amounts in the liver for a relatively short period of time. This means that we need to eat lots of Thiamine on a regular basis in order to maintain good brain functioning.

Survival, Reproduction & Evolution

Our brain and our body are fundamentally designed for survival and reproduction. Unfortunately being happy and mentally healthy are not essential to survival and reproduction.

There is no specific time frame that evolution takes to happen. However evolution can take thousands, if not, tens of thousands of years to occur. Now just think how much life has changed for humans in the last couple of hundred years.

Our brain hasn't had a chance to change to better suit modern life. With the pressures of modern life, it's no wonder that many people suffer with mental illnesses.

The descriptions above have been simplified to make Neuroscience more accessible. It is based on current knowledge and current theories. This means that in the future, as we develop our understanding of Neuroscience, some of the above might be proven incorrect or we may come to think of things differently than described as above. This is unavoidable and to be expected.

END OF SAMPLE.

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