

You Are Not Your Brain

by Jeffrey Schwartz, MD,
and Rebecca Gladding, MD

"I'm not good enough. She's going to leave me. I am going to mess up this presentation. They're going to think I am an idiot and not hire me..."

■ At one point or another, we have all experienced these types of self-defeating thoughts. Known as deceptive brain messages, these kinds of thoughts can take over our lives and cause us to do things we do not want to do. Perhaps our response has been to feel lethargic, manically check our email, eat too much or indulge in another unhealthy repetitive act. When we continually respond to negative internal messages in the same unhelpful ways, we unwittingly end up reinforcing them. The more we do this, the more our brains form repetitive, automatic habits that can take over our lives and prevent us from being the people we want to be.

How does this happen? The answer lies in how the brain responds to the environment and our actions. Based on our and other leading scientists' research, we have realized that the more you focus on something, the more strongly that act gets wired into your brain in automatic, unconscious ways. If our actions are positive and healthy, all is fine. But how many of us respond to negative thoughts with healthy, helpful actions? How about when we are stressed? In more cases than not, we end up repetitively mulling over the negative thoughts (a form of focusing) or doing something that gets rid of the stress for a few moments, like having a drink or eating our favorite snack. Although seemingly harmless in the short term, engaging in over-thinking and repetitive actions can lead to detrimental long-term consequences, such as excessively consuming food or alcohol, distancing from loved ones and more.

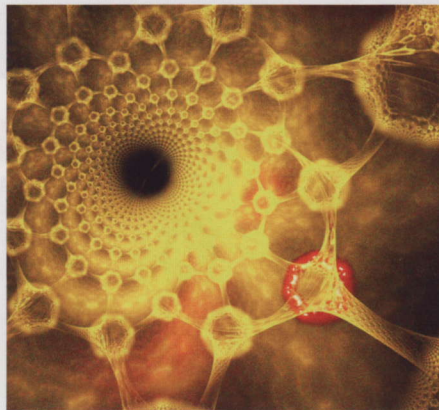
The key ingredient in whether you respond to negative messages in healthy or unhealthy ways is based on how you focus your attention and what you actually do once the thought or impulse arises. To change the strength of a pathway in your brain you need to keep focusing on or doing the same thing over and over. This is the only way to change which pathway is chosen in a specific situation. Over time, those pathways that are used the most—for example, what you do every time you are feeling stressed—become the preferred ones in the brain, and often become associated with specific situations or needs (such as momentarily decreasing anxiety).

So when you take deceptive brain mes-

sages at face value and respond in the same manner to them over and over, your brain will make that response the preferred one—even if it isn't good for you. This is because several biological principles are working together to cause brain centers to "team up" to wire those habits into the brain. Once your brain is wired in a certain way, it becomes very difficult to spontaneously stop engaging in the habits that have formed.

How do you change this scenario? The power lies in focusing. If, instead of giving into those deceptive, erroneous messages, you chose to resist acting on these messages and refocus your attention on healthy behaviors, you can actually rewire your brain and create a new, positive association between your self, thoughts and actions. The critical component is your ability to recognize those deceptive brain messages when they arise and to refocus your attention on healthy actions. By doing so, you actually rewire your brain in healthy, positive ways that increase your sense of self and pave the way for more positive associations between thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions.

These scientific realities essentially mean



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that you have the ability, within reason, to shape how your brain works and how you automatically respond to things when you are stressed.

There are many ways you can learn how to recognize the deceptive thoughts and unhealthy actions. Our book, *You Are Not Your Brain*, provides a four-step method which combines the centuries-old approach to mindfulness with other powerful concepts to help people truly see that they are not the sum total of the negative, inaccurate thoughts and impulses running around in their heads. In short, they come to realize that they are not their impulse-laden, short-term-gratification-seeking brains. Rather, they are caring people who are deserving of a life free of these unwanted, inaccurate intruders.

THE FOUR STEPS

- 1. RELABEL.** Identify deceptive brain messages and the uncomfortable sensations; call them what they really are.
- 2. REFRAME.** Change your perception of the importance of the destructive brain messages; say why these thoughts, urges, and impulses keep bothering you. ("It's not me, it's just my brain.")
- 3. REFOCUS.** Direct your attention toward an activity or mental process that is wholesome and productive—even while the false and deceptive urges, thoughts, impulses and sensations are still present and bothering you.
- 4. REVALUE.** Clearly see the thoughts, urges and impulses for what they are: sensations caused by deceptive brain messages that are not true and that have little to no value.

Armed with the Four Steps and knowledge that attention and focus are what changes the brain, you can learn how to make your brain work for rather than against you—thereby changing your habits and perception of yourself in positive ways for life. ☺

Jeffrey Schwartz is author of The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force and Brain Lock: Free Yourself from Obsessive-Compulsive Behavior. He created the first mindfulness-based treatment program for people with OCD.

Rebecca Gladding is an attending psychiatrist at UCLA and was featured in A&E's critically acclaimed series Obsessed. She is an expert in deceptive brain messages, mindfulness and the Four Steps.