

INTRODUCTION

Diving into the Sea Inside

WITHIN EACH OF US there is an internal mental world—what I have come to think of as the sea inside—that is a wonderfully rich place, filled with thoughts and feelings, memories and dreams, hopes and wishes. Of course it can also be a turbulent place, where we experience the dark side of all those wonderful feelings and thoughts—fears, sorrows, dreads, regrets, nightmares. When this inner sea seems to crash in on us, threatening to drag us down below to the dark depths, it can make us feel as if we are drowning. Who among us has not at one time or another felt overwhelmed by the sensations from within our own minds? Sometimes these feelings are just a passing thing—a bad day at work, a fight with someone we love, an attack of nerves about a test we have to take or a presentation we have to give, or just an inexplicable case of the blues for a day or two. But sometimes they seem to be something much more intractable, so much part of the very essence of who we are that it may not even occur to us that we can change them. This is where the skill that I have called “mindsight” comes in, for mindsight, once mastered, is a truly transformational tool. Mindsight has the potential to free us from patterns of mind that are getting in the way of living our lives to the fullest.

WHAT IS MINDSIGHT?

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. It lets us “name and tame” the emotions we are experiencing, rather than being overwhelmed by them. Consider the difference between saying “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 part of mindfulness make it possible to see what is inside, to accept it, and in the accepting to let it go, and, finally, to transform it.

You can also think of mindfulness 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 and those of others. A uniquely human ability, mindfulness allows us to examine closely, in detail and in depth, the processes by which we think, feel, and behave. And it 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. Another way to put it is that mindfulness is the basic skill that underlies everything we mean when we speak of having social and emotional intelligence.

Interestingly enough, we now know from the findings of neuroscience that the mental and emotional changes we can create through cultivation of the skill of mindfulness are transformational at the very physical level of the brain. By developing the ability to focus our attention on our internal world, we are picking up a “scalpel” we can use to resculpt our neural pathways, stimulating the growth of areas of the brain that are crucial to mental health. I will talk a lot about this in the chapters that follow because I believe that a basic understanding of how the brain works helps people see how much potential there is for change.

But change never just happens. It’s something we have to work at. Though the ability to navigate the inner sea of our minds—to have mindfulness—is our birthright, and some of us, for reasons that will become clear later, have a lot more of it than others, it does not come automatically, any more than being born with muscles makes

us athletes. The scientific reality is that we need certain experiences to develop this essential human capacity. I like to say that parents and other caregivers offer us our first swimming lessons in that inner sea, and if we've been fortunate enough to have nurturing relationships early in life, we've developed the basics of mindsight on which we can build. But even if such early support was lacking, there are specific activities and experiences that can nurture mindsight throughout the lifespan. As you will see, mindsight is a form of expertise that can be honed in each of us, whatever our early history.

When I first began to explore the nature of the mind professionally, there was no term in our everyday language that captured the way we perceive our thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, beliefs, attitudes, hopes, dreams, and fantasies. Of course, these activities of the mind fill our day-to-day lives—we don't need to learn a skill in order to experience them. But how do we actually 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 truly understand “where they are coming from” and can respond more effectively and compassionately? When I was a young psychiatrist, there weren't many readily accessible scientific or even clinical terms to describe the whole of this ability. To be able to help my patients, I coined the term *mindsight* so that together we could discuss this important ability that allows us to see and shape the inner workings of our own minds.

Our first five senses allow us to perceive the outside world—to hear a bird's song or a snake's warning rattle, to make our way down a busy street or smell the warming earth of spring. What has been called our sixth sense allows us to perceive our internal bodily states—the quickly beating heart that signals fear or excitement, the sensation of butterflies in our stomach, the pain that demands our attention. Mindsight, our ability to look within and perceive the mind, to reflect on our experience, is every bit as essential to our well-being. Mindsight is our seventh sense.

As I hope to show you in this book, this essential skill can help us build social and emotional brainpower, move our lives from disorder

to well-being, and create satisfying relationships filled with connection and compassion. Business and government leaders have told me that understanding how the mind functions in groups has helped them be more effective and enabled their organizations to become more productive. Clinicians in medicine and mental health have said that mindsight has changed the way they approach their patients, and that putting the mind at the heart of their healing work has helped them create novel and useful interventions. Teachers introduced to mindsight have learned to “teach with the brain in mind” and are reaching and teaching their students in deeper and more lasting ways.

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 understandable internal world. With mindsight we are better able to balance our emotions, achieving an internal equilibrium that enables us to cope with the small and large stresses of our lives. Through our ability to focus attention, mindsight also helps the body and brain achieve homeostasis—the internal balance, coordination, and adaptiveness that forms the core of health. Finally, mindsight can improve our relationships with our friends, colleagues, spouses, and children—and even the relationship we have with our own selves.

A NEW APPROACH TO WELL-BEING

Everything that follows rests on three fundamental principles. The first is that mindsight can be cultivated through very practical steps. This means that creating well-being—in our mental life, in our close relationships, and even in our bodies—is a learnable skill. Each chapter of this book explores these skills, from basic to advanced, for navigating the sea inside.

Second, as mentioned above, when we develop the skill of 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. Neuroscience has also definitively shown that we can grow these new connections throughout our lives, not just in childhood. The short *Minding the Brain* sections interspersed throughout part 1 are a traveler's guide to this new territory.

The third principle is at the heart of my work as a psychotherapist, educator, and scientist. Well-being emerges when we create connections in our lives—when we learn to use mindsight to help the brain achieve and maintain *integration*, a process by which separate elements are linked together into a working whole. I know this may sound both unfamiliar and abstract at first, but I hope you'll soon find that it is a natural and useful way of thinking about our lives. For example, integration is at the heart of how we connect to one another in healthy ways, honoring one another's differences while keeping our lines of communication wide open. Linking separate entities to one another—integration—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. With the connecting freedom of integration comes a sense of vitality and the ease of well-being. Without integration we can become imprisoned in behavioral ruts—*anxiety and depression, greed, obsession, and addiction.*

By acquiring mindsight skills, we can alter the way the mind functions and move our lives toward integration, away from these extremes of chaos or rigidity. With mindsight we are able to focus our mind in ways that literally integrate the brain and move it toward resilience and health.

MINDSIGHT MISUNDERSTOOD

It's wonderful to receive an email from an audience member or patient who says, "My whole view of reality has changed." But not everyone new to mindsight gets it right away. Some people are concerned that it's just another way to become more self-absorbed—

a form of navel-gazing, of becoming preoccupied with “reflection” instead of living fully. Perhaps you’ve also read some of the recent research (or the ancient wisdom) that tells us that happiness depends on “getting out of yourself.” Does mindfulness turn us away from this greater good? While it is true that being self-obsessed decreases happiness, mindfulness actually frees you to become less self-absorbed, not more. When we are not taken over by our thoughts and feelings, we can become clearer in our own internal world as well as more receptive to the inner world of another. Scientific studies support this idea, revealing that individuals with more mindfulness skills show more interest and empathy toward others. Research has also clearly shown that mindfulness supports not only internal and interpersonal well-being but also greater effectiveness and achievement in school and work.

Another quite poignant concern about mindfulness came up one day when I was talking with a group of teachers. “How can you ask us to have children reflect on their own minds?” one teacher said to me. “Isn’t that opening a Pandora’s box?” Recall that when Pandora’s box was opened, all the troubles of humanity flew out. Is this how we imagine our inner lives or the inner lives of our children? In my own experience, a great transformation begins when we look at our minds with curiosity and respect rather than fear and avoidance. Inviting our thoughts and feelings into awareness allows us to learn from them rather than be driven by them. We can calm them without ignoring them; we can hear their wisdom without being terrified by their screaming voices. And as you will see in some of the stories in this book, even surprisingly young children can develop the ability to pause and make choices about how to act when they are more aware of their impulses.

HOW DO WE CULTIVATE MINDSIGHT?

Mindsight is not an all-or-nothing ability, something you either have or don’t have. As a form of expertise, mindfulness can be developed when we put in effort, time, and practice.

Most people come into the world with the brain potential to develop mindfulness, but the neural circuits that underlie it need expe-

riences to develop properly. For some—such as those with autism and related neurological conditions—the neural circuits of mindsight may not develop well even with the best caregiving. In most children, however, the ability to see the mind develops through everyday interactions with others, especially through attentive communication with parents and caregivers. When adults are in tune with a child, when they reflect back to the child an accurate picture of his internal world, he comes to sense his own mind with clarity. This is the foundation of mindsight. Neuroscientists are now identifying the circuits of the brain that participate in this intimate dance and exploring how a caregiver's attunement to the child's internal world stimulates the development of those neural circuits.

If parents are unresponsive, distant, or confusing in their responses, however, their lack of attunement means that they cannot reflect back to the child an accurate picture of the child's inner world. In this case, research suggests, the child's mindsight lens may become cloudy or distorted. The child may then be able to see only part of the sea inside, or see it dimly. Or the child may develop a lens that sees well but is fragile, easily disrupted by stress and intense emotions.

The good news is that whatever our early history, it is never too late to stimulate the growth of the neural fibers that enable mindsight to flourish. You'll soon meet a ninety-two-year-old man who was able to overcome a painful and twisted childhood to emerge a mindsight maven. Here we see living evidence for another exciting discovery of modern neuroscience: that the brain never stops growing in response to experience. And this is true for people with happy childhoods, too. Even if we had positive relationships with our caregivers and parents early on—and even if we write books on the subject—we can continue as long as we live to keep developing our vital seventh sense and promoting the connections and integration that are at the heart of well-being.

We'll begin our journey in part 1 by exploring situations in which the vital skills of mindsight are absent. These stories reveal how seeing the mind clearly and being able to alter how it functions are essential elements in the path toward well-being. Part 1 is the more the-

oretical section of the book, where I explain the basic concepts, give readers an introduction to brain science, and offer working definitions of the mind and mental health. Since I know that my readers will come from a wide variety of backgrounds and interests, I realize that some of you may want to skim or even skip much of that material in order to move directly to part 2. In part 2, we'll dive deeply into stories from my practice that illustrate the steps involved in developing the skills of mindsight. This is the section of the book in which I share the knowledge and practical skills that will help people understand how to shape their own minds toward health. At the very end of the book is an appendix outlining the fundamental concepts and a set of endnotes with the scientific resources supporting these ideas.

Our exploration of mindsight begins with the story of a family that changed my own life and my entire approach to psychotherapy. Looking for ways to help them inspired me to search for new answers to some painful questions about what happens when mindsight is lost. It also led to my search for the techniques that can enable us to reclaim and recreate mindsight in ourselves, our children, and our communities. I hope you'll join me on this journey into the inner sea. Within those depths awaits a vast world of possibility.