VISTA PSYCHOLOGICAL & COUNSELING CENTRE

F O C U S

WINTER 2017

Right Brain/Left Brain, Right?

If you're like me, you learned that about 90% of people are right-handed and much of the reason is genetic. And that's true, although it remains a mystery why our genetic evolution led to so many more righties than lefties. But for certain tasks, handedness can be "overcome." For example, right-handed kids learning to play tennis, golf, or baseball can become successful hitting from "the other side." It may be more a matter of how they are taught and what gets reinforced than about a hard-wired preference for one hand or the other. According to new research, the idea of people being "left-brained" or "right-brained" may also be less fixed than we'd once thought. According to conventional wisdom, people tend to have a personality, thinking style, or way of doing things that is either right-brained or left-brained. Those who are right-brained are supposed to be intuitive and creative free thinkers. They are "qualitative," big picture thinkers who experience the world in terms that are descriptive or subjective. For example, "The skies are gray and menacing; I wonder if it's going to rain?" Meanwhile, left-brained people tend to be more quantitative and analytical. They pay attention to details and are ruled by logic. Their view of the weather is more likely, "The forecast said there was only a 30% chance of rain but those cumulonimbus clouds will probably bring thunder as well as rain." A popular book first published in 1979, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain,* extends this concept. It suggests that regardless of how your brain is wired, getting in touch with your "right brain" will help you see—and draw—things differently. These notions of "left and right brain-ness" are widespread and widely accepted. But they may also be wrong. There is truth to the idea that some brain functions reside more on one side of the brain than the other. We know this in part from what is lost when a stroke affects a particular part of the brain. For example, it has long been thought that, in most people, control of language resides in the left side of the brain. And there are areas of the right half of the brain that control movement of the left arm and leg (and vice versa). Damage to the front part of the brain is linked with reduced motivation, difficulty planning, and impaired creativity. Meanwhile, the back of the brain (the occipital cortex) integrates visual information from the eye. Damage to this area can cause partial or complete blindness. These are just a few example of how certain parts of the brain appear responsible for specific functions. So, location does matter. However, there has been little or no evidence supporting a residence in one area of the brain for personality traits such as creativity or a tendency toward the rational rather than the intuitive. In fact, if you performed a CT scan, MRI scan, or even an autopsy on the brain of a mathematician and compared it to the brain of an artist, it's unlikely you'd find much difference. And if you did the same for 1,000 mathematicians and artists, it's unlikely that any clear pattern of difference in brain structure would emerge. So is the idea of "thinking with the left side of you brain" a myth? Maybe. But, the lack of proof does not prove the opposite. For people living thousands of years ago, an inability to prove the earth was round did not prove the earth was flat! But, the evidence discounting the left/right brain concept is accumulating. According to a 2013 study from the University of Utah, brain scans demonstrate that similar on both sides of the brain regardless of one's personality. They looked at the brain scans of more than 1,000 young people between the ages of 7 and 29 and divided different areas of the brain into 7,000 regions to determine whether one side of the brain was more active or connected than the other side. No evidence of "sidedness" was found. The authors concluded that the notion of some people being more left-brained or right-brained is more a figure of speech than an anatomically accurate description. If you've always thought of yourself as a "numbers person" or a creative sort, this research doesn't change anything. But it's probably inaccurate to link these traits to one side of your brain. We still don't know a lot about what determines individual personality; but it seems unlikely that it's the dominance of one side of the brain or the other that matters.

Source: Harvard Health Blog: https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/right-branleft-brain-right-2017082512222

A Healthy Dose of Friendship

Want to be both happy and healthy as you age? Cultivate strong friendships. That's the conclusion of two studies by a Michigan State University researcher involving almost 280,000 people. While many studies have shown that close family relationships enhance health and well-being, the impact of friendship has been less clear. In the first study, William Chopik, an assistant professor of psychology, analyzed multi-country interview data from 271,000 people ranging in age from 15 to 99. He found that throughout the lifespan, people who said they highly valued their relationships with family and friends were both happier and healthier. Among older adults, though, good relationships with friends were better predictors of happiness and good health. Chopik then looked at data from a study of 7500 adults over 50 in the US, which included more detailed questions. Here, too, the impact of friendship was strong: When friends were a source of support, people were happier. But those who said their friendships were sources of strain had more chronic illnesses over a six-year period. "Keeping a few good friends around can make a world of difference for our health and well-being," Chopik said. "It's smart to invest in the friendships that make you happiest."

Source: Mindful, October 2017, Volume 5, Number 4, p 16 mindful.org

Research gathered from Greater Good Science Ctr. At UC Berkley, Ctr. For Healthy Minds at U of Wisconsin-Madison, Ctr. for Mindfulness at UMass Medical School, and American Mindfulness Research Association.

Night Owl Genes

Some people, no matter what they do, simply cannot fall asleep until the wee hours—and do not feel rested unless they get up much later than most of us. These night owls may have a common form of insomnia called delayed sleep phase disorder (DSPD), which studies have suggested is at least partly heritable. Now researchers at the Rockefeller University and their colleagues have uncovered a genetic mutation that could elucidate what causes these often awkward sleep schedules. Of course, DSPD is not a problem for everyone who has it: if you work as a bartender or a musician, you might never seek a diagnosis or treatment, says lead study author Alina Patke, a sleep researcher at Rockefeller, who self-identifies as a night owl but does not have the mutation. Yet for others, especially college students or office workers, the condition can be torture. The new study centered on a 46-year-old female subject with lifelog sleep problems "Typically she would go to bed a 2 or 3 am, sometimes as late as 5 or 6am," Patke says. The woman lived under observation for 14 days in a room with no clocks or windows. Not only did she produce the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin five to seven hours later than a typical person in similar previous studies, but her sleep was also oddly fragmented, sometimes coming in short naps. When the team analyzed her DNA, they found a mutation in a gene called Cry1 that also showed up in her family members who reported sleep problems. This gene encodes a protein that is known to suppress the action of the core circadian clock proteins CLOCK and BMAL, which activate a wide variety of genes—including some related to wakefulness—during the day. The mutation caused the deletion of a portion of the CRY1 protein's tail, making it even more effective at suppressing CLOCK and BMAL. The team sifted through a genetic database and found 39 other people with the mutation. Most of them also had relatively late bedtimes and wake-up hours. Daniel Kripke, a psychiatrist who has studied sleep and a professor emeritus at the University of California, San Diego, who was not involved in the work, points out that studies that scan large groups of people for links between a particular trait and a genetic variant have found no connection between this mutation and DSPD. Still, he says, the new paper presents convincing evidence that it could be behind some cases of the disorder.

Source: Scientific American, September 2017, Volume 317, Number 3, p21.

Six Ingredients to an Effective Time-Out

What is time-out? Parents disagree. In a recent study, Andrew Riley and colleagues surveyed over 400 parents of one-to-ten-year-olds and found that more than three quarters of them used time-out—but their motivations and implementation varied a great deal. Some use it when they can't stand their children crying or squabbling anymore—when, in other words, it's the parent who needs a break. Others take it to furiously punitive extreme: "Stop pounding the table or I'll never let you leave your room!" Still other parents frame it as a time for the child to settle down. In may cases, the time-out is a last resort, when other measures have failed; sometimes, it's the go-to response to any rule-breaking behavior. Thus, it's not surprising that time-out is a source of mixed feelings and misunderstanding. A 2014 study by Amy Drayton and colleagues found that time-out guidance on the Internet, including from respected sources, was mostly incomplete or inaccurate. In a recent research review, Anil Chacko and colleagues found that half of parents of kids who would most likely benefit from time-out training either didn't attend or dropped out. In another recent study, Drayton and colleagues found that only 2 out of 58 moms with children 2 to 12-years-old described time-out in a way consistent with the science behind it: "removal of the child from a reinforcing environment to decrease undesired behavior" (more on this below). Instead, they found half of moms believed the purpose of time-out was to "think" or "calm down. These findings might explain why some parent—not to mention their kids!—are frustrated with time-outs. Part of the problem, as this research suggests, is that parents aren't considering time-outs in the context of other measures to encourage prosocial behavior or emotional regulation.

Effective time-outs need a well-thought-out plan and commitment to consistency. Parents decide in advance what behaviors meet time-out criteria and talk about it with kids outside of time-out. So what can parents do to make time-out effective? In the same study, Riley and colleagues compiled six key ingredients from research on time-out. **Use time-out in conjunction with time-in.** Time-in is the experience kids have that makes it more likely that they'll continue doing what they're doing—positive reinforcement. Examples of positive reinforcement are attention praise, and access to privileges when kids do the opposite of what usually gets them in time-out. Riley and colleagues explain that "time-in…is essential to effectiveness, and (time-out) is only recommended in combination with positive reinforcement strategies." in contrast time-out has little or, better yet, not positive reinforcement—it's time-out *from* positive reinforcement. An abundance of positive interactions and experiences is the aim for making time-in distinct from time-out. Investing in time-in minimizes the need for time-out. **Make time-out immediate and consistent.** Time-outs are effective when they immediately and consistently follow a behavior. What does that look like? For example, if in one moment a kid hits the family dog then an effective time-out follows in the next moment—rather than five minutes later—every time it happens and without multiple warnings. **Make it boring.** Time-out is a boring time located away from fun or attention. Anything entertaining and engaging—toys, games, parents' unintentional negative attention—is removed from the setting. **Set a timer and make it brief.** Time-out of a set time as short as two minutes is effective; longer durations usually don't work any better, especially for younger kids. Parents in the study by Riley and colleagues whose time-outs were of a set duration reported more effective time-outs than parents who did not. **You decide when it's over.** Parents, not kids, end time-outs. Riley and colleagues found that parents who required their kids to be calm before the end of time-out reported more effective time-outs than parents who did not have this requirement. **Have a back-up plan.** Riley and colleagues note that because kids may try to leave time-out before parents tell them it's over, parents should be ready with a plan B. They recommend returning kids back to time-out or taking away privileges as a consequence. Parents in Riley and colleagues' study who told their kids to go back to time-out if they left early reported more effective time-outs than parents who did not follow through. Let's take an example: hitting the family dog. Immediately and consistently, you should calmly and authoritatively say, "Time-out for hitting," and direct the kid to a quiet, boring location away from others and toys. Be ready to pull out plan B just in case. After two minutes, say, "Your time-out is over." At that point, the kid returns to time-in with positive reinforcement: "I really like how you're being gentle with Fido!" Analyze time-in, to ensure that it's filled with positive attention and experiences when kids are following rules. Apart from time-out, scrutinize the circumstances that precede and follow a behavior that contribute to the problem and adjust them in light of the kids' developmental expectations.

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Stress, Depression and the Holidays: Tips for Coping

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past. **Acknowledge your feelings.** If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season. **Reach out.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others is also a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships. **Be realistic.** The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. For example, if your adult children can't come home to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videos. **Set aside differences.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion and be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too. **Stick to a budget.** Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Then stick to your budget. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Try these alternatives: donate to a charity in someone's name; give homemade gifts or; start a family gift exchange. **Plan ahead.** Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list. That'll help prevent last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup. **Learn to say no.** Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time. **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Try these suggestions: have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks; get plenty of sleep and; incorporate regular physical activity into each day. **Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm. Some options may include: taking a walk at night and stargazing; listening to soothing music; getting a massage or; reading a book. **Seek professional help if your need it.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

Source: http;//mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20047544