

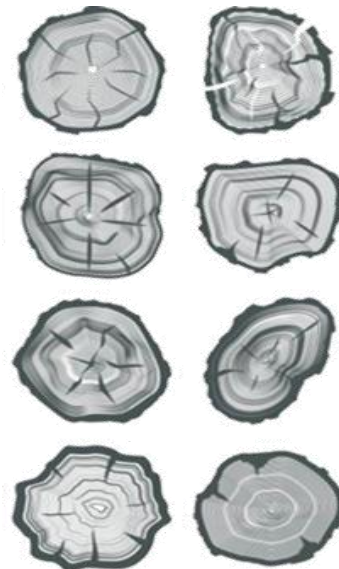
Clinical Support

A Case Example: How Neurobiology Empowers Counseling

Neurobiology provides a rich frame for counseling. Often, as with Chelsea, present day turmoil is superimposed over early life wounding. Chelsea began counseling focused her avoidance of someone at work. Chelsea had previously dated Zander but had to break it off after a year. Seeing him, especially when she was alone, was terrifying.

With Chelsea, the metaphor of tree rings helped. Metaphor, imagery and imagination are characteristics of the right hemisphere (RH) and gateway to the affective substrate of left hemisphere (LH) thought.

Thinking, self-talk, narratives, the stories of our lives - all this floats on a sea of emotion. We tend to feel the people and events are more real. But feelings have enormous power to shape the perception of the same 'reality' for better or worse.



Chelsea and I talked about how the tree rings in a cross-section of a log show where a storm from long ago impacted growth for several seasons. Connecting on a visual, emotive, creative RH level is as important as ascertaining a person's LH story, history and goals. A RH approach born of warmth, concern and empathy helps clients to identify deeper and potentially transformative dimensions of their inner life.

When encouraged, Chelsea shared how many past experiences—long before Zander—were similarly painful. Family dysfunction, abuse and neglect, once etched into the autonomic nervous system (ANS), translate into a baseline arousal level. Following emotional trauma, bodily reactivity tends to get stuck. Stories layer on top of one another like tree rings. **The answer is not in the story but in the living experience of the story that echo across the years.** Demystifying anxiety and depression through discussion of evolution and neurobiology can start to dislodge a person's runaway fear and backdrop of self-loathing and shame.

Asking clients about working at a deeper, background level is wise. "Listen to your body's signals as you think back". Even if focused on the latest agony, connecting to somatic tensions is critical. As Chelsea reflected on other times that her ANS was probably in alert mode, she told some stories about her father's explosive

temper as well as her mother's emotional invisibility due to drinking. Animals in dangerous contexts adjust, increase their vigilance, become primed to fight or flight. A shaky, dysregulated ANS is prone to locking in and defending against perceived immediate threats. Recent research suggests such states may stubbornly persist.

Counselors are trained to observe and reinforce clients as they make internal connections such as Chelsea demonstrated. Allan Schore, a leading researcher in the neurobiology and treatment of trauma, however, cautions counselors to pay more attention to facilitating clients to emotional regulation than insight or so-called "ah ha" moments. In other words, start with the direct emotional experience, and as much as possible, stay with this. Any natural 'ah ha's' should flow from this rather than such insights being the therapist's goal.

To tell a client what they can't quite see is 'to give them a fish'. To help as client to awaken to the somatic experience is to 'teach them to fish'.

Chelsea's recounted how her boyfriend Zander initially seemed super cool and enthusiastic about their budding relationship. He was handsome and "looked good on paper". But in time he became controlling and prone to both belittling her and also sulking. Founder of affective neuroscience, Jaak Panksepp identified *play* as one of mammals', primates' and humans' seven base affective systems. These potent, innate capacities have ancient origins and are located in the sub-cortex.

There can be room for blends of play-related humor, lightheartedness and *caring* (also one of the seven affective inheritances). After Chelsea tearfully described some of his dark side and mistreatment, her counselor quietly, smiling slightly, said, "And you let him get away?" Clients appreciate the delicate, precarious nature of an effort to cultivate emotional safety. They may sense when a counselor takes risks to express warmth, and alternatively when she reveals some protective cover and returns to a line of questions or asserts some expertise in place of remaining emotionally connected. When a comment misses the mark, slowing down and repairing any disconnections is key. Additionally, if authentic, counselors might want to share how they wondered after the previous session about some moment that transpired, perhaps a piece of dialog, or some measured, appropriate personal information.

A neurobiologically-informed counselor has curiosity for how the ANS shapes the conscious life of their clients. On the one hand, Chelsea's ex initially appeared to have qualities aligned with stability and predictability, and also play. Highly intelligent mammals and primates cultivate adult attachments that are safe and also enjoyable. Evolutionary benefits include both enhanced survival and procreation.

Proverbial orange flags, however, were ignored for subtle reasons. As the relationship with Zander deteriorated, Chelsea felt more “at home” in a world that ranged from placid to chaotic. Perhaps this helped her feel in sync with her nervous systems’ old, stuck response to her father’s raging when she was a child. Though she knew better (a typical LH claim), some unconscious (RH), implicit force acted like a foot on the brake, preventing her from more assertively setting boundaries or extricating herself from the relationship sooner. “Part of me...” (a common phrasing which potentially signals a lack of hemispheric integration) “...felt I deserved it”.

Push-pull dynamics, break-ups and reunions, are common manifestations of affective dysregulation. In fight-flight, there is emotional drives toward and away, respectively, from another. Also, the distressing stuck, stalemate position that Chelsea experienced at times reflects the addition of “freeze”.

Still another phase in threat detection with the shorthand “fold” or “faint” has gained scientific acceptance. Stemming from Stephen Porges’ work on the “polyvagal system”, fold/faint has important implications for counseling. This dimension of our neurobiology has the power to drop respiration, heart rate and blood pressure and cause fainting. Some animals employ it to play dead. This is believed to be modulated by a combination of the parasympathetic nervous system and other components of the polyvagal system collectively referred as the dorsal vagus. Chelsea expressed relief as we discussed the power of faint/fold in clinical depression and dissociation, recognizing some of these characteristics in her life as well. Mild levels of dissociation are more common than most realize and can contribute to inaction, and to people foregoing therapy for years despite intense suffering.

Ultimately the nervous system, according to Schore’s affect regulation theory and Porges’ polyvagal theory, is designed to orient children toward a caregiver. According to Schore, the mother (in general terms) co-experiences the child’s emotional life via right hemisphere to right hemisphere communication. When they are up-regulated (in play, agitation and fear states) or down-regulated (during sadness, boredom, listlessness), a mother-figure mitigates and brings about regulation. For this reason, the attachment component, “face”, has been added to fight-flight-faint-fold. As counselor’s we face our clients and verbally and nonverbally express our understanding and concern.

Clients who come to therapy “know” by way of their LH that they are bodily safe. The inner safety they seek is nuanced and complex and involves healthy attachment. Through a RH-based empathic connection, counselors can cultivate an ever deeper felt sense for the client’s inner life. This capacity is often labeled intuition, but much suggests there is much more at work and in play, including curiosity, imagination, risk-taking and creativity. In therapy, Chelsea began to feel free to zigzag, go off-script and in, as is common, got worse before she got better as she was freer to fully experience previously repressed material. She brought in photos, did drawings, and with my encouragement persisted. She walked me

through what it was like to be her as a child, teenager and fluidly in the present, in the chair facing me. Therapy for her became a place to confront tremendous pain at her own speed, and to develop freer, playful capacities.