

Why Is It So Difficult For Me To Change?

by William Kirwan, Ph.D. and Bruce Narramore, Ph.D.

Have you ever asked yourself “Why is it so difficult for me to change?” “Why do I have such a hard time forgiving someone who hurt me years ago?” “Why do I have recurring problems and misunderstandings in my marriage or other relationships?” or “Why am I afraid of God?” or “Why does He seem so far away from me?” In short, have you ever wondered why you can’t feel closer to God or be more like Christ in this life? Or “Will I have to wait until I arrive in Heaven before I become a better person?” Vickie did.

A 32-year-old Christian mother of two, Vickie sought counseling because she was suicidally depressed and struggling in her Christian life. She found it impossible to believe God loved and forgave her and she frequently had a terrifying dream. In it, she died and arrived at heaven’s gate only to be sent away, condemned to hell.

Intellectually Vickie knew Christ had paid the penalty for her sins. But emotionally she couldn’t believe that wonderful truth applied to her. Deeply engrained self doubt kept triggering her awful dream. Vickie and her husband were also having problems in their marriage and it didn’t seem that their Christian faith was doing much to help. Here’s the background for their story.

The youngest of three children, Vickie’s childhood was difficult. Her father drank excessively and periodically stopped at a bar and returned home drunk after work. During those times he spoke cruelly to his daughter and occasionally slapped her in a fit of anger. As a teenager, when Vickie asked her father if she could go to the junior/senior prom, he shot back “Who would want to go with you?” He consistently beat her down emotionally.

Vickie’s mother was depressed and

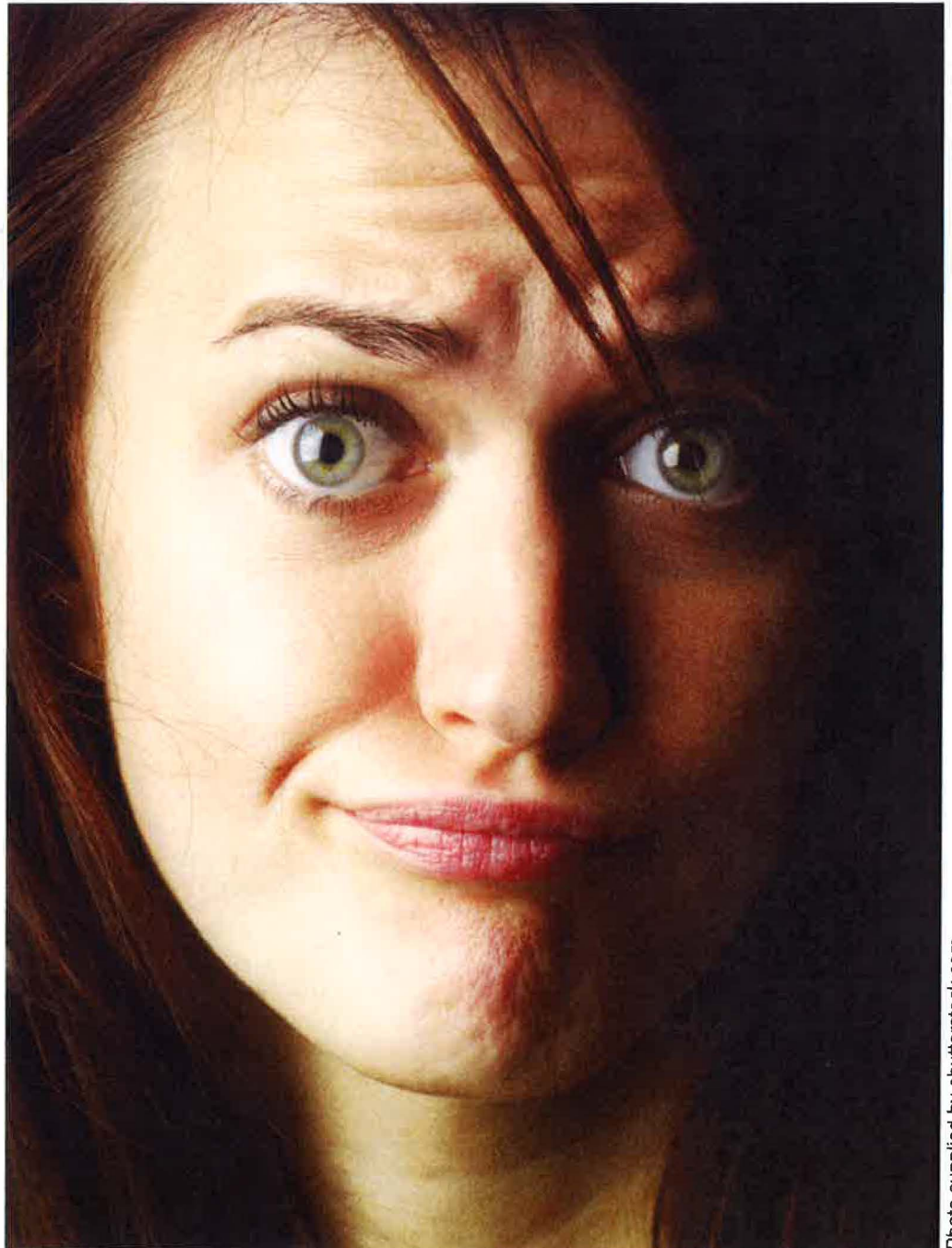


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on the receiving end of the same abuse Vickie was receiving from her father. As a result, she hardly connected emotionally with her daughter from the day Vickie was born. Lost in her own depression, Vickie's mother couldn't enjoy her newborn daughter. She didn't laugh, make loving eye contact, or hold her warmly. As a result, Vickie's childhood was filled with sadness, anger, and confusion.

Partly because she was born with a rather quiet temperament, but also to protect herself from the painful prob-

lems in her family, Vickie threw herself into her studies and school activities. She became a top student as well as quite a good athlete and people pleaser. She also tried to encourage her mother and she worked hard to keep herself at a safe distance from her father's angry tirades.

During middle adolescence Vickie became a Christian but her depression didn't go away. When she graduated from high school she was accepted into a university near her home where she met Frank, a committed Christian young man. Two years later they were married.

Vickie's depression worsened after her first child was born. Twelve months later their second little one arrived and the demands of childbirth and parenting began to overwhelm her. Frank wasn't able to help very much since he worked long hours attempting to become a partner in an international law firm. Vickie began resenting his 12-hour work days and in return, Frank resented her resentment! Although they loved each other, they were caught up in an increasingly destructive cycle.

Vickie and Frank received some pastoral counseling and a lot of advice from friends. They did everything they could think of to make their marriage better. They prayed together. They did a joint biblical study on marriage. They read good books on marriage. And they attended a couple of marriage and parenting seminars where they learned a lot about what they *should* be doing. But when they tried to implement the suggestions they couldn't follow through for long.

Like many couples, Frank and Vickie got their hopes up and vowed to make a fresh start after each seminar. But they soon fell back into their same old patterns. They were about to give up when they decided to give counseling one more try, and sought out an experienced professional Christian counselor. This time the results were different and long lasting. *This article is about the knowledge and experiences that finally enabled Frank and Vickie to change. They can help you change as well.*

Vickie was like many Christians who struggle with depression and anxiety and she and Frank were like many couples whose efforts to improve their marriages were meeting with limited success. Millions of Christian couples yearn for greater fulfillment and fewer conflicts in their marriages. Like Vickie, millions of women believe they are failures in their Christian lives. They are wracked by fears that God has abandoned them or is far, far away.

Unfortunately many Christians like Frank and Vickie, who have sought help by reading books or listening to sermons or seminar lectures, have been disappointed because it takes more than good information to change the problems they were facing.



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Fortunately, recent discoveries about how human beings grow emotionally, socially, and spiritually are providing a helpful roadmap for people struggling with life's inevitable challenges. This two part article will help you see how these discoveries by a group of scientific researchers are providing hope and help for struggling Christians like Frank and Vickie who seriously want to change.

New Hope and New Frontiers

During the early 1800's, tens of thousands of North American pioneers moved westward past the Appalachian mountains into little known territories. On horses and wagons, they struggled against hostile Indians protecting their lands, unbearable heat, pouring rain, snow, raging rivers, and nearly impassable mountains.



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Facing difficult challenges, they pressed on, discovering the Rocky Mountains, Yosemite, the Colorado River and Grand Canyon, and eventually the shores of the beautiful Pacific Ocean. What a time of excitement, wonder and revelation. Their journeys were long and slow but eventually they changed the world's understanding of much of our entire continent.

In the last twenty-five years another group of pioneers has been making equally exciting discoveries about a new frontier – a frontier inside our bodies. Using brain scanners and other sophisticated technologies instead of horses and com-

passes as their tools, this group of pioneers has mapped the very structures of the human brain. Comprised of neuroscientists, psychologists, and other professionals, these pioneers are making incredible discoveries about the functioning of our brains and how they shape our personalities and our social, emotional, and even our spiritual lives.

This group of explorers has developed an entirely new field of study called Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB). That label was chosen because of the close connections they were discovering between our interpersonal relationships and the development and functioning of the neurons in our brains.

They have learned that while our genetic makeups provide raw materials for the development of our brains, the quality of our earliest experiences with our mothers and

other caregivers also influence the way our brains grow and function. When we become adults those changes in our brains end up impacting our psychological adjustment and the way we eventually relate to others, even the way we feel about our relationship with God. Let's take

a look at those intriguing findings.

Your Incredible Social Brain

Not surprisingly, these scientific pioneers discovered our brains are incredibly complex. Isaac Asimov¹ put it well. "In man is a three-pound brain, which as far as we know is the most complex and orderly arrangement of matter in the universe." And Poet Emily Dickinson wrote:

*The Brain - is wider than the
Sky-*

*For - put them side by side-
The one the other will contain
With ease - and You - beside.*

We now know our adult brains have in the neighborhood of 100 billion neurons, its basic building block.



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Each neuron has between seven and ten thousand connections called synapses. These synapses connect our neurons with each other, creating some 2 million miles of neural pathways (Seigel 1999).

Think of it. You have 2 million miles of neural pathways running through your brain! No wonder human life can be so complex and no wonder the Psalmist declares "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (*Psalm 139:14 ESV*)

Brain researchers have also discovered the average 3 year old has approximately 1,000 trillion synapses, the connections that bind our neurons together. The number of those connections drops by about half by the time we are in our mid-twenties. But don't worry about losing 500 trillion neural connections! Neuroscientists call this "pruning." This is apparently what God intends. Under good early childhood conditions the connections that have been "pruned" out of our neural networks are ones we no longer need. It's much like trimming a fruit tree and eliminating excess branches so the tree will produce better fruit. In fact, this "pruning" simplifies our brain's functioning and enables it to be even more efficient!

Some brain pruning, however, isn't God's desire. When infants or young children experience traumas or problems in their relationships with their

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primary caregivers, excess “pruning” takes place, leaving certain areas of their brains malfunctioning. Problems in early life relationships literally interrupt and distort the growth of needed neural connections in our children’s brains!

This article will give you a brief overview of these recent findings and show how they can help Christians grow and also how you may need to rethink some of your long held beliefs about the Christian life.

Many Christians have serious misunderstandings of the ways sinful patterns and problems develop in our lives. We think we sin because Satan has suddenly tempted us out of the blue. We also fail to understand how God wants to work to bring growth in our lives. We think He will change us if only we pray and work hard enough. Both of these are false. Satan’s way of leading us into sin is far more tricky and complex than simply tempting us. And God’s way of helping us overcome our sin is different than what you may have been taught. Both the Bible and the recent findings about how our brains work challenge these two misunderstandings.

Rethinking the Christian Life

Consider our understanding of sin. What is the first thought that crosses your mind when you think of sin? For many, the word conjures up thoughts or memories about our own sins or sinful propensities. Few of us automatically think about how living in a sinful world or being sinned against by others helps create our problems or develop our spiritual, emotional, or relational difficulties. Neither do we reflect back on the quality of our relationships with our mothers and fathers and wonder if they are still influencing us and causing some of our struggles with negative or sinful patterns. The fact is, however, those earliest relationships are one of the single most important determiners of whether we grow up to be emotionally and relationally well adjusted or whether we have a batch of persistent relational, emotional, or

spiritual problems. Why is that?

We are Created for Relationships

God created the human race for relationships. He also created us so that others, particularly our parents, would make a very significant impact on the kinds of people we become when we grew up.

A British pediatrician named Donald Winnicott was one of the first to describe the incredible impact of the mother-baby relationship on the psychological and relational growth and adjustment of the child. He once made the odd statement, “There is no such thing as a baby.” (Winnicott²) Winnicott obviously knew there were such things as babies since he made his living taking care of them! What, then, was he trying to communicate?

Winnicott’s point was this: newborn infants don’t know they exist as separate people. They can’t look up and say “Hi Mom. Thanks Doc. Let’s get this show on the road.” For all practical purposes infants cannot survive unless they are connected to their mothers or mother substitutes. They only exist as part of a mother-baby unit. There is a mother-baby dyad, but there is no individual, autonomous baby.

babies tend to be anxious. When mothers are angry, their babies become frightened. And when mothers are depressed their babies tend to be depressed or withdraw into an emotional/relational cocoon for safety.

Babies are also not born with the ability to manage their emotions. If you don’t believe us, just refrain from feeding your infant son or failing to come a couple of times when he is crying for you. When you don’t respond, he will soon start losing control or crying angrily or uncontrollably. Babies simply cannot control their upset emotions by themselves. Their ability to express their emotions appropriately and to delay immediate gratification of their needs will only develop gradually as their mothers help settle their upset feelings within their mother-baby unit.

Here’s a way that helped us get our minds around this concept. Think of mothers and other infant caregivers as a little like household waste-baskets that have to contain dirty, messy, potentially upsetting stuff. When babies are upset because they are hungry or otherwise out of sorts, they lose control unless their mothers calmly contain their upsetting emotions a little like a trash can contains our junk.

The mothers’ calm manners, caring eyes, and gentle voices and touch soothe and relax their babies. After repeatedly having their mothers help contain their emotionally upsetting “waste,” fortunate babies gradually develop the ability to naturally regulate their own emotions. It’s almost like the mothers took the hot coals of their infants’ upset emotions, held them in their gloved hands until they cooled and were no longer overwhelming, then gave them back to their infants to handle them for themselves.

It is not, however, simply a matter of mothers containing their babies’ negative emotions. A similar process happens in reverse when either the baby or its mother is emotionally happy and alive. Sensing their mother’s happi-

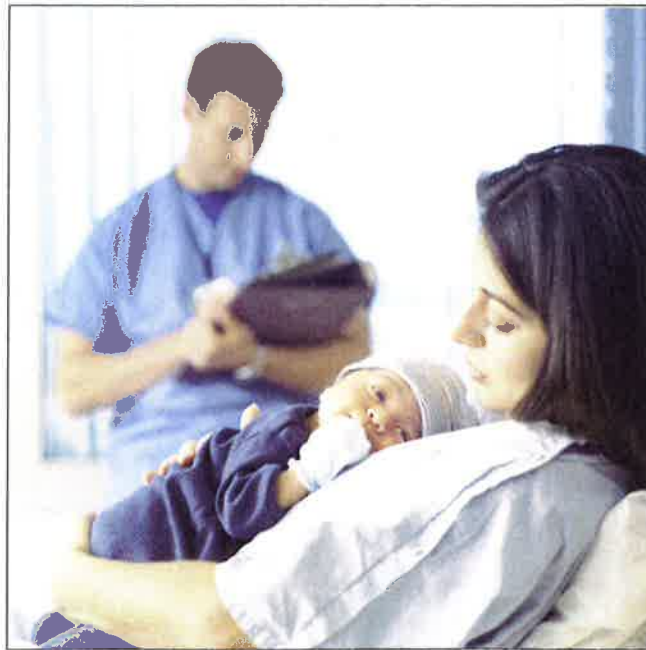


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Infants don’t even know they are physically or psychologically separate from their mothers. When mothers are calm, their babies tend to feel calm. When mothers are anxious, their



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ness, or seeing their mother respond to their excitement, babies come alive emotionally and develop a strong, healthy emotional connection with their mothers. They form kind of a wonderful mutual admiration society! Even when newborn babies show very little emotional responsiveness from the time they are born, really good mothers are able to gradually draw them out by their happy, loving, sensi-



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ive presence.

Although babies come into this world with different temperament styles, unless they have this kind of "good enough mothering" even children that seem to be born happy can

become depressed. Similarly, babies that are born calm can become anxious if their mothers are too preoccupied or anxious. Mothers don't need to be perfect, says Winnicott, but they need to be "good enough" to sense their baby's needs and meet them reasonably well.

We now know that a close, emotionally sensitive mother-infant bond is actually necessary to shape an infant's brain development in positive directions! Winnicott was right about babies needing "good enough mothers" and we will see why it's so important for Christians to understand the basics of this in order to know how to grow emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

Before discussing a little of that research, as Christian psychologists, we want to remind you of an assumption that undergirds our thinking about the relationship between our Christian faith and the discoveries of the sciences, including psychology. It is this. *All truth, wherever it is found, is ultimately God's truth. Satan is the father of lies. God is the author of truth.* Christian scholars are committed to accepting truth from any source as long as we are sure it is true.

That's why in a moment, when we discuss what a group of apparently non-Christian scientists discovered about the way early life experiences influence our brains' development, we don't want you to be surprised or put off. Remember that those non-Christian scientists learned any truths they have learned by observing what God had created. God expects us to use the knowledge and understanding of ourselves and the world He created whether it was discovered by Christians or non-Christians. It is all part of His truth.

Satan, of course, tries to hide and distort God's truth. And he uses inaccurate theories that conflict with the Bible to mislead and deceive us. But uninterpreted facts or truths are God's truths whether they are discovered by Christians or non-Christians. They are just as much God's truth as the contents of the Bible. The Bible is God's written revelation and the data scientists gather is from God's general or natural revelation. Both come from the hand of God. That's why we freely utilize scientific findings to bet-

ter understand ourselves, others, God's world, and sometimes even the message of scripture.

Babies Brains Have Mirrors

In the 1980's a group of Italian neuroscientists (Rizzolatti, Giacomo, 1992) conducted research³ on monkeys that led to important findings about the way our brains work. They also set in motion a much broader understanding of our emotional and spiritual lives almost by chance. As they were conducting their research, they discovered their monkeys had certain neurons firing which they later labeled "mirror neurons." They named them that because during the research the monkeys started watching the experimenters and sometimes doing exactly the same thing as the experimenters. In fact, they were "mirroring" the researchers so much that sometimes it looked like the monkeys must have been reading the researchers' minds!

The researchers' monkeys remind us of the two white rats in a cartoon about a psychologist doing research on rats by running them through a maze. When the rats found their way through the maze and pressed a lever, a pellet of food dropped down and rewarded them for their efforts. Upon completing their task, one rat looks up at the experimenter, turns to the other rat and says, "Now I think we've got him trained!"

Our researchers thought they were studying their monkeys' brains but it turned out to be the other way around. The monkeys were apparently reading the experimenter's minds! Here is the rest of the story.

The researchers were studying an area of the cortex of the brains of their monkeys by placing electrodes in the monkeys' brains. Then they recorded the brain activity of the monkeys. They began by observing their monkeys' brains as the monkeys picked up and ate a peanut. Then they decided to measure the monkeys' brain activity when the monkeys watched one of the researchers pick up and eat a peanut.

They discovered that the very same

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neurons fired in the monkeys' brains when they watched a human eat a peanut as when they ate a peanut for themselves! As the researchers observed more carefully, they saw that those specific neurons only fired when the movements made by the researchers were goal directed, like eating a peanut. When the researchers made random movements like waving their arms, the same neurons in the monkeys' brains didn't fire. Other neurons fired, but not the "mirror" neurons.

The fact that the neurons that fired in the monkeys' brains when they watched the researcher eat a peanut were the identical ones that fired when the monkey put a peanut in his mouth, is what led researchers to label those neurons "mirror neurons." The monkeys' neurons were mirroring what was going on in the experimenters' minds. To some degree, the monkeys apparently really were able to in some way read the experimenters' minds! That blew the researchers away and they are still trying to figure out how and why that happens.

Sin Comes Earlier Than You Think

What does this monkey research and the information we are learning

about in the relationship between children's brain development and the quality of their attachment to their primary caregivers have to do with the questions we posed at the beginning of this article? First, "Why are some of our problems in life so difficult to overcome?" Secondly, "Why am I struggling so much in my spiritual life?" And finally, "Will we have to wait until we get to Heaven before we become better people or can we make a lot of progress in the here and now?" Here are our answers.

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, not one person has been completely responsible for creating his or her own sinful patterns, reactions and imperfections. We are all victims to some degree! If this sounds like we are making excuses for all of society's problems, and are going to minimize the depth of sin, stay with us for a minute. We are actually saying just the opposite. In fact, the interaction of our earliest life experiences with the development and functioning of our brains helps us understand how deep sin is and how it becomes so firmly entrenched in our lives.

Jen, for example, was a young mother whose husband Scott was alcoholic. Even before their first child was born, Scott told Jen he didn't want her to breastfeed. Jen disagreed and let Scott know that breastfeeding

should be her decision, not his. After all, they were talking about Jen's breasts, not Scott's! But guess what? Scott didn't agree. He became angry, withdrew physically and emotionally from Jen and gave her an ultimatum, "Then you raise him by yourself until he's old enough to be weaned."

That threw Jen into such an emotional turmoil there was no way she could calmly and lovingly connect with her baby. She was too angry and depressed and preoccupied with her own struggles to stay focused on her baby's needs. Scott's weird reactions to Jen's breastfeeding were a big part of Jen's upset and were certain to impact their babies' development in unhealthy ways.

Fathers like Scott are unknowingly fulfilling a biblical truth found in the book of Deuteronomy "The sins of the fathers are visited to the third and the fourth generations!" (*Deuteronomy 5:9*). Since no fathers or mothers are perfectly attuned to our children's needs, and none of us are perfect parents, every child who has ever been born has been impacted by less than perfect parenting. And many people have been seriously injured by actual physical or sexual abuse, or abandonment through divorce, death, or lengthy separations.

Did you ever, for example, listen to your daughter or another child scolding her dolls while playing "house" or "school?" If so, we suspect she sounded a lot like you did when you scolded her! Or are you a perfectionistic parent whose children are under a lot of pressure because they are following in your anxious or perfectionistic path? If so, they are under needless pressure and will probably either become driven like you, or rebel and become precisely the opposite of what you want in order to get even. Those are just two of many ways we pass the results of our sinful patterns on to our children. Scott was doing the same thing but in an extremely tragic way!

We later learned why Scott was so upset by Jen's breastfeeding. Like many alcoholics, while attempting to deaden his pain by excessive drinking, Scott had become dependent on alcohol to relieve his deep seated unhappiness. He was turning to alcohol to temporarily make himself "feel all better." Much like a good mother says

“Mommy will kiss it and make it feel all better!” Scott was trying to force his wife to be his symbolic mother and “make it feel all better.”

Scott’s alcoholism showed that he was a dependent personality who needed someone or something to make him feel better. Apparently his mother didn’t do a good enough job soothing his “owies” when he was a little boy so he was still looking for someone to do that for him.

Unfortunately, like many men, he chose his wife for the job!

Jen didn’t realize Scott was looking for a substitute mother when they married. She thought he just needed a little extra comfort and encouragement. But when she became pregnant she began to see how deep his issues were. Scott wanted to be the emotional baby in the family. He wanted his wife to be his substitute mother and he couldn’t stand the slightest competition from his infant son!

Many single mothers, while being spared the burden of being married to a childish dependent adult like Scott, nevertheless have huge challenges that make it difficult for them to be emotionally available to their infants. Sometimes a family member or a close friend can temporarily relieve the burden, but even that isn’t always possible. That’s another reason babies’ fathers are so important. In order for babies to grow up emotionally and socially, God intends for them to have two parents. And while that isn’t always possible, the lack of

two healthy, mature parents does have an impact on the children whether we like it or not.

Sin Is In Your Brain

Psychologists have now discovered another reason it’s so difficult for many of us, including Christians, to live up to what we want to be. They have identified what they call “feeling beliefs.” These are beliefs embedded in our emotional right brains which, unlike our left brains, are not cognitive or intellectual brains. Our right brains are the source of our emotions while our left brains are the seat of our ability to reason and think logically. Researchers have also learned that to grow up healthily our left and right brains must be working together in a balance way.

When our left and right brains aren’t working together properly, we will probably develop one of two somewhat problematic personality traits. We may become hyper-rational, somewhat like computers, and excessively committed to our way of looking at life from a strictly logical perspective. Or we may be driven largely by our emotional right brains. Both of these extremes lead to personality and relational problems including difficulties in the way we experience and trust in God. Here is how that works.

The feeling beliefs from our right hemisphere are formed in the first two to three years of life, and establish our core feelings about our-

selves. They ask unspoken questions such as, “What am I like?,” “Am I loveable or unlovable?,” and “Am I valuable or worthless?” They also ask, “What are other important people such as my mother and father like?,” “Are they understanding, caring and affectionate or are they controlling, unloving and critical?” Other feeling beliefs are reflected in questions like: “Is the world a safe and secure place?,” “How do I connect with others?,” and “How do I maintain a connection once I start developing a relationship with another person?”

We don’t really think these thoughts because they aren’t actually thoughts. They are emotions triggered by the distorted functioning of our right brains. They were shaped at such an early age, sometimes even before we developed language, that they are automatic responses. They happen automatically and instantaneously whenever we meet or even think of another person or situation that reminds us of an earlier painful life experience or interpersonal encounter.

For example, if you were abused by a man, every time you meet or even think about a man, your brain automatically triggers a fear or shame response. And if you lost a parent by divorce or death, anyone who reminds you of that parent in anyway will probably trigger the

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LEFT BRAIN

- ◆ Logic
- ◆ Reasoning
- ◆ Analytical & linear thinking
- ◆ Language, math & numbers
- ◆ Detailed thinking

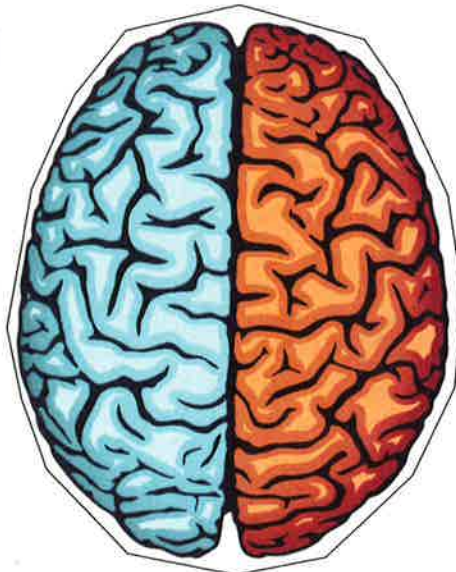


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RIGHT BRAIN

- ◆ Emotions
- ◆ Intuition
- ◆ Subjective & impressionistic
- ◆ Art & music appreciation
- ◆ Creative & global thinking

automatic fear that the new person will abandon you as well.

We even experience this kind of unspoken question in our relationship with God. For example, our left brain may think, "God loves me and forgives me." But our more deeply embedded emotional right brain automatically disagrees. "No," our right brain unconsciously protests, "God doesn't love you and forgive you. He would never forgive you." And it might go on to add, "God must think I am a complete failure.", or "God isn't trustable."

Even though our rational left brain knows Christ died for our sins, our emotional right brain continually challenges and "out-argues" our left brain. Unfortunately our right brains nearly always win these battles because they develop earlier than the left brain and their automatic responses are more deeply embedded and quickly triggered.

That's the reason it's one thing to know in our heads God loves us, but quite another to experience His love and forgiveness. It is also why we may feel God is distant or be afraid of Him or ashamed of ourselves in His presence. Our early life experiences, now embedded deeply in our brains, force us to believe things that conflict with what we know the Bible teaches and what we so badly want to experience in our relationship with God. That's also why some of our behaviors and beliefs are so difficult to alter.

The same process works in reverse when children have loving, kind, and sensitive parents. They find it relatively easy to experience God as loving and kind because that's the way His earthly representatives were.

As Ruth Narramore⁴ wrote in her poem "A Mother's Love,"

A mother's love is more like God's than any other kind.

In joyful suffering she bears her young, then bids him find

A waiting world made soft and warm—a place where love-bonds bind

The child more closely to her breast—secure in heart and mind.

A mother's love resembles God's in many artless ways.

In love beyond herself, she gives and serves through thankless days.

And faltering ones, her love supports—their shattered hopes to raise.

We take for granted far too much: Such love deserves our praise!

What's Next?

Now we have come full circle. Let's look briefly again at several questions we have posed and review our answers to them so far. In Part II, we will finish our discussion of these questions and show how you can apply our answers to help you grow and become the person God wants you to be.

1. Can I really make major changes in my life here on earth, or will I have to wait until I get to heaven?

Answer: You definitely can see major changes in your life here on earth. Please don't wait for heaven. You will miss out on so much and your family and friends will too.

2. Why is it taking me so long to change?

Answer: Because everyone who has ever lived on this earth except for Jesus Christ is less than perfect and has a propensity to sin as well as being sinned against and living in a fallen, sinful world. This combination of personal sin and being sinned against distorts the functioning of our brains to some degree. In turn, our malfunctioning brains shape our personality styles and adjustment. It takes considerable time to grow out of our problems because it takes time to change the physiology of our brains and also because it takes some very specific kinds of experiences to get our brains functioning properly again. But it can be done and it doesn't take forever!

3. What are the things we have to do in order to renew our minds and brains and solve our problems in this life?

Answer: Sorry, but that is the topic of Part II in the next

4. How should the research findings about the relationship between our brains' and our early childhood experiences cause us to rethink our understanding of the doctrine of sin (how our problems and sins develop) and the doctrine of sanctification (how God intends for us to grow and change)?

Answer: Many of us have a serious misunderstanding of how sin comes into our lives and how Satan influences us to sin. The Bible tells us Lucifer (Satan) was the first being to rebel against God (*Isaiah 14:12-17*) and that he followed his rebellion by tempting Adam and Eve to follow in his footsteps. Ever since that time every person born into this world has been impacted by sin. When we sin or do something foolish, some of us have a tendency to jokingly say, "The devil made me do it." But the devil typically doesn't suddenly "make us do it" by zapping us with a sinful thought or temptation out of the blue. Instead, since all of our brains are damaged to some degree they now automatically trigger sinful, maladjusted patterns and responses. Satan no longer has to go around tempting us with specific



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temptations. In fact, he can't, because he is neither omnipotent nor omniscient.

Unlike God, Satan cannot be in more than one place at one time and he doesn't know everything that is going on in the world. Sometimes we Christians assume that Satan, just like God, is omnipresent and omnipotent. But thankfully, he is not. He is a finite being who doesn't know everything. His rebellion, of course, has thrown the whole world into sin and by doing that, embedded sinful reaction tendencies into the brains of each of us. But Satan cannot supernaturally place his thoughts in our minds.

The Bible also tells us Satan is our tempter, but it does not tell us how he tempts us. We believe he tempts us by deceiving us and through the work of his cohort of fallen angels, and through the automatic responses built into our brains in early life.

The Bible also tells us God "is able to help us when we are being tempted" (*Hebrews 2:18*). But just as Satan does not tempt us by suddenly zapping us with a sinful thought, the Holy Spirit does not instantaneously fill us with the fruits of the spirit (*Ephesians 5:18*). Instead, the Holy Spirit testifies to what Christ has done for us by dying on the cross and making us His children (*Romans 8:16*). The Holy Spirit also enlightens us to understand the meaning of the scriptures.

Among other things, the scriptures tell us to resist and flee temptations (*James 4:7*). They also tell us "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" (*John 8:32*). Knowing the truth about ourselves and others includes understanding why and how we sin. That's why this brain research and our knowledge of the impact of early childhood relationships are so important. They help us understand how we got caught up in sinful patterns and difficult emotional and relational problems. They also explain what we can do to break out of those patterns, renew our minds and change some of the damage that has been inflicted on our brains in early childhood (*Romans 12:2*).

You probably haven't thought of yourself as having a damaged brain, or that brain damage is the cause of much of your sin. But it is. All of our brains have been damaged to some degree and aren't working as God intended. Some people experience brain damage with obvious results like mental retardation, epilepsy, and attention deficit disorder. A few inherit genetic defects causing illnesses like autism, hemophilia and Crohn's Disease. Most of us, however, have much more subtle forms of damage to our brains.

Subtle and unseen malfunctions of our brains impact our personalities and relationships even though we don't realize that is happening. It is those unseen malfunctions of our brains that we are discussing in this article.

The patterns initiated by Satan and set in motion when Adam and Eve sinned have now been passed down to every person who has ever lived! Satan uses those patterns to automatically trigger our sinful reactions and create emotional, spiritual and relational problems in our lives.

Twenty-five years of brain research no longer make it viable to understand sin as simply the result of our personal, conscious, willful choices. Instead, we now know sin develops to a very significant degree in response to our earliest life experiences, in relationships with our primary care givers and socializing agents. That is how sins of the fathers are passed from generation to generation and why they are so difficult to change. They are built into our brains.

5. What else is this research showing that can be helpful in our Christian lives?

Answer: It has demonstrated that the earliest forms of communication for infants, and the most important for our adjustment as adults, come from our emotion-generating right brains. Our logical left brains come on line later than our right brains. If either side of our brains are excessively dominant, we develop problems and maladaptive ways of being that are extremely difficult to change.

Unfortunately, many approaches to the Christian life and many types of Christian teachings primarily appeal to our logical left brains. That doesn't work because our emotionally-oriented right brains are more powerful. In order to understand how God intends for us to grow we must be aware that the deepest core of our being is not our rational left brains. It is our emotional/relational right brains. This may surprise you but it's true. That's the way God created us.

We will explore this further in the next issue of *Psychology for Living* when we look at the way Jesus appealed to people's emotional/relational right brains and at the Bible's description of Jesus' own rich emotional life. Then we will show how you can apply those insights to "renew your mind" and how the Bible and the recent findings about our brains give us specific guidance about how to do that. If you apply those principles they will change your life! †

¹Asimov, Isaac. In the game of energy and thermodynamics you can't even break even, *Smithsonian*, June 1970, 10.

²Winnicott, Donald (1964). *The child, the family, and the outside world*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books. (original work published 1947)

³Rizzolatti, Giacomo et al. (1992) *Experimental Brain Research* (Vol. 91, No. 1, pages 176-180 and No. 2, pages 593-609).

⁴Narramore, Ruth Elliott (2007). *Come*



**EVERY PERSON IS
WORTH UNDERSTANDING**