

# Why Is It So Difficult For Me To

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In Part I of this article, September 2013 ([http://www.ncfliving.org/index\\_emot\\_personality.php](http://www.ncfliving.org/index_emot_personality.php)), we posed questions like “Why do so many Christians struggle excessively in our Christian lives?” “Why do we have such a hard time forgiving people who hurt us years ago?” “Why do I have recurring problems in my marriage and other relationships?” “Why don’t I feel closer to God?” and “Why do I sometimes feel so guilty, ashamed, or afraid of God?”

Often Christians have assumed we can resolve these and other long standing problems on a strictly spiritual basis. You may have even been taught that all you should need to do is study God’s word, confess your sins, pray, or have some kind of rededication, special spiritual experience, or “second work of grace” and you will be fine. But that’s not the way God made us. Uniquely spiritual disciplines and experiences are extremely important aspects of the way God works in our lives, but they are only some of His ways. Since God created us as psychological-spiritual, relational and physical beings, we have to take these sources of our problems into account as well. If we don’t, we are like physicians trying to help patients they have misdiagnosed. Their treatment simply doesn’t work.

Part One discussed the findings from a new field of study called Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB). Researchers in this field have made incredible discoveries about the way our brains develop and function and how they influence our personalities and our social, emotional and even our spiritual adjustment. These findings are changing the face of psychology and the field of counseling and have important implications for how Christians understand biblical doctrines like sin and sanctification. In this second part of “Why Is It So Difficult For Me To Change?” we will begin with a brief review of a few of those

# Change?

PART TWO

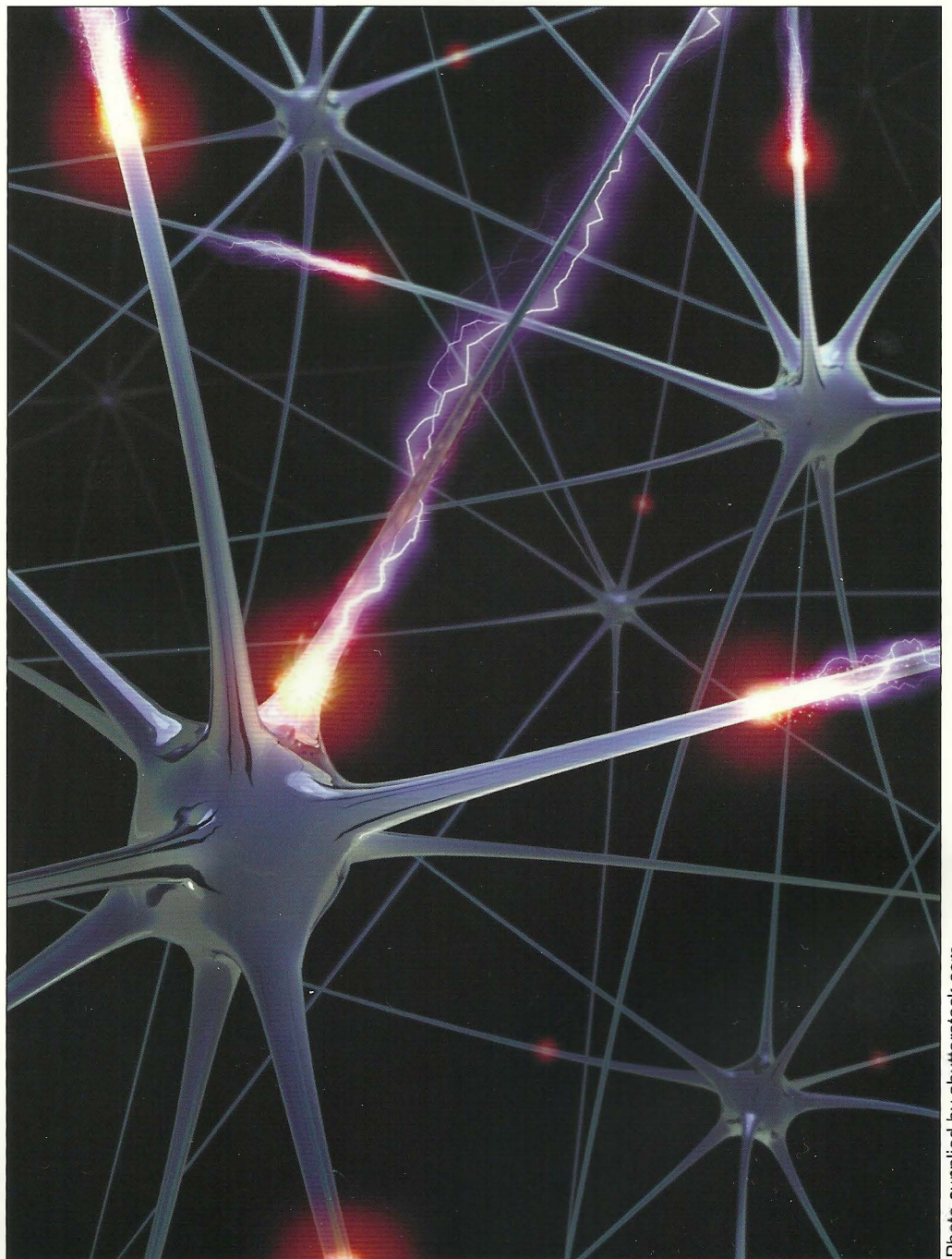


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## LEFT BRAIN

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

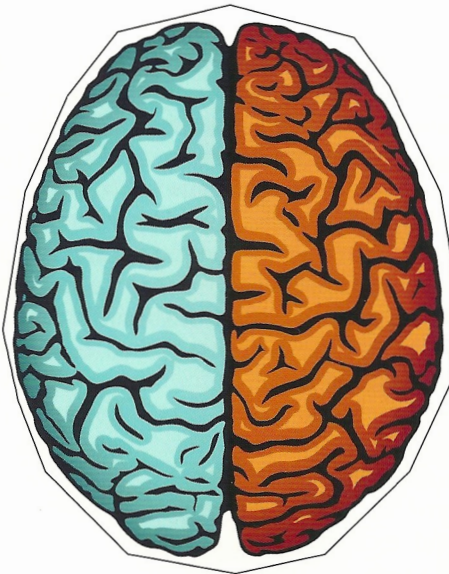


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## RIGHT BRAIN

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

important findings. Then we will show how you can use those insights to overcome long standing problems and move further down the road to becoming the person God intends for you to be.

### **Our Brains Are Incredibly Complex.**

The Bible tells us we are fearfully and wonderfully made (*Psalms 139:14*). Scientists have recently learned that our adult brains have approximately 100 billion neurons with between seven and ten thousand connections with other neurons, creating some 2 million miles of pathways inside our little three-pound brains (*Siegel 1999*)<sup>1</sup>. Think of that! If you were so microscopically small that you could travel inside your brain you could take a two million mile trip on your neurons! Now that's "fearfully and wonderfully made!"

### **Our Brains Are Social.**

God created us to be born into families, live with others, and have rich social lives (*Genesis 2:18-25*). Interpersonal Neurobiology research has now shown that although our genetic makeups provide the raw material for the development of our brains at birth, our earliest relationships with our mothers and other caregivers actually shape the way our billions of neurons connect with each other, including which ones

flourish and which ones atrophy and die. The failure of our brains to develop properly can cause any problem imaginable since our brains are responsible for processing every single aspect of our lives, even our ability to feel loved by God and safe and valued by Him!

### **Sin Travels In Families.**

The Bible tells us "the sins of the fathers are visited to the third and the fourth generation" (*Deuteronomy 5:9*). How true that is. Both healthy and unhealthy traits can be transmitted through genetic inheritance, the types of brain malfunctions we briefly discussed in Part One, or the overall ways our parents rear and train us, including dysfunctional family dynamics.

### **Your Right Brain Rules!**

Our right brains, the seat of our emotions, intuition and subjective impressions, come online earlier than our logical, analytical left brains. In fact, babies and their mothers initially don't communicate with words or reason at all. They communicate by emotions that are expressed through facial smiles or frowns, soothing or upsetting sounds, gentle or rough holding, and by mothers coming when needed, or leaving their babies crying alone for long periods. These experiences give infants and toddlers wordless messages like, "I am

loveable (or unloveable)," "I must be a good person (or a bad person)," "I am valuable (or not valuable)," "I am worthwhile (or worthless)," "My mother and other people are kind (or unkind)," and "The world is a safe (or dangerous) place."

Mental health professionals call these

**CHANGE**, continued on the next page ►

## PSYCHOLOGY FOR LIVING

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wordless messages feeling beliefs because for at least the first year or two of life, babies have no words or concepts to express them. Even after our rational left brains begin to function, our deep seated right brain feeling beliefs don't easily give way to logic. Since they were established so very early, they are more deeply rooted than our rational thinking. If these early feeling beliefs are largely positive we tend to have a positive outlook on life, feel comfortable with others, and are able to handle even very difficult situations because deep down we believe we are loved and capable of coping. But when our feeling beliefs are excessively negative, even though we may be given a thousand left brain messages that we are loveable, or that God loves and forgives us, our more deeply rooted right brains silently cry out things like, "Oh no you aren't. If they really knew you they wouldn't be saying that," "Who would ever love you?" or "God wouldn't really forgive you!"



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### The Devil Made You Do It, But How?

We all know Satan was the first being to rebel against God (*Isaiah 14:12-17*) and that he tempts us to do the same. Sometimes when we sin or do something foolish, we even jokingly say, "The devil made me do it," implying that Satan supernaturally zapped us out of the blue with a sinful thought or temptation. But Satan can't do that because unlike God, he is neither

omnipresent nor omnipotent. He is strong and deceitful and has a cohort of fallen angels to help him but he can't be everywhere at once, he isn't all-powerful, and he cannot supernaturally place thoughts in our minds.

Satan is ultimately behind all of our problems. He convinced Adam and Eve to sin which set in motion the generational causes of problems that now impact everyone's brains and bind us into unhealthy patterns of thinking, feeling and reacting. He seems to largely use our fallen environment and brain malfunctions that are rooted in our earliest life relationships to make us susceptible to all types of temptations and difficulties.

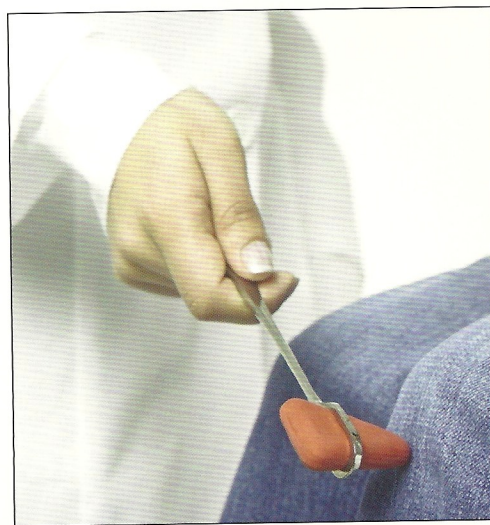


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### Much Sin is Not a Conscious Choice.

When we tie all of this together, we come to two important realizations. First, since our feeling beliefs are established so early in our first years of life, we are not consciously aware of how much they control and determine our adult feelings and behaviors. That means that many of our sins and problems of adjustment aren't things we consciously and purposely choose to do. We can't turn them on and off like a water faucet by the simple exercise of our wills. They are as automatic as the patellar reflex that happens when a physician strikes us just below the knee with his little hammer. No matter how determined we are to not let our leg jump, we still cannot prevent it. It is automatic!

Second, we can understand why many strongly committed Christians with a good knowledge of the Bible

haven't been able to apply the knowledge they already have to change their lives, feelings and behaviors. Their struggles are so deeply rooted in improper brain development or in the feeling beliefs of their right brains, that even wonderful biblical truths are not enough to change them by themselves.

### Jesus Understands Our Brains!

Fortunately the Bible speaks to ways of effecting changes in even those deep and difficult areas of our lives. Unfortunately, however, we have often overlooked them because we have focused so much on the content of the scriptures and Jesus' teachings that we have failed to notice some extremely important aspects of his style of teaching and his way of relating to others. If we look behind the cognitive content of Jesus' words to the nature of his interpersonal relationships and teaching methods, we see that he knew precisely how to reach the deep levels of our brains long before the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology was ever conceived! That's no surprise, of course, since he's the one who created our brains! So let's take a look.

To begin with, Jesus was highly relational. He was an incredible teacher, leader and discipler but he didn't primarily spend his time imparting cognitive, left brain information. Instead, he spent most of his three years of ministry building his life into twelve disciples, living and traveling with them day by day. He communicated deep, life-changing truths to His disciples but he did it primarily through his loving relationships and daily experiences with them. As he neared the end of his earthly life, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment that summed up how they were to live. "Love one another as I have loved you" (*John 13:34*). Love, the quality Jesus embodied throughout his life, was to be the key to the effectiveness of the disciples' lives and ministries. That's because it is love, not words, that reaches us at the deepest level.

It wasn't only Jesus' life of love that touched people at a deep emotional level. His teachings were filled with profound truths and his methods of teaching through stories and word pictures engaged his hearers' emotional right brains. As theologian Kenneth Bailey emphasized, Jesus was a

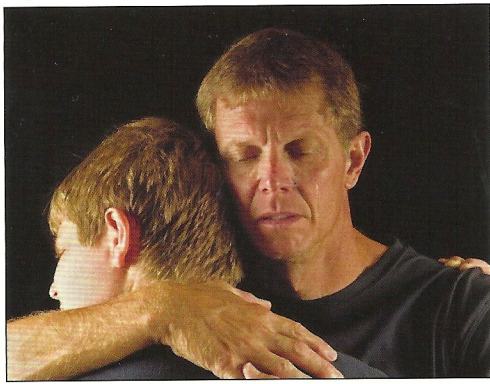


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“metaphorical theologian”<sup>2</sup>, meaning that he primarily communicated through parables, stories, pictures and allegories (Bailey, 2008). He spoke about seeds falling on good or poor soil, birds of the air, and lilies of the field. The parable of the Good Samaritan in *Luke 10:25-37* is a great example.

Jesus was tested by a specialist in Jewish law who asked him, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus could have given him the answer but instead he responded with questions of His own: “What is written in the Law?” “How do you read it?”

The man replied with the right cognitive answer. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said, “You are correct.” But the legal specialist wasn’t satisfied. He wanted a precise description of who he ought to love, so he asked, “Who is my neighbor?” He was used to debating intellectually, honing precise arguments, and using his left brain. He was apparently more interested in the logical argument than he was in the kind of person he ought to be. But Jesus gave him more than he bargained for and took the conversation in an entirely different direction.

He told of a man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, a journey of about seventeen downhill miles on a crooked road that many of his hearers had taken. It was a rocky, desert road with many places where robbers could hide, waiting for an unsuspecting traveler to pass by. Sure enough, Jesus painted a word picture of some thugs robbing the man and leaving him half dead. A priest and a Levite, both respected religious leaders, walked around the man on the other side of the road and didn’t stop to help. But a

Samaritan, a member of a group despised by the priests and Levites because their Jewish ancestors had intermarried with non Jews and didn’t follow all of the Jewish laws, had compassion on the wounded man. He stopped, put the man on his donkey, and took him to the nearest inn where he bandaged his wounds and gave the innkeeper money to take care of him.

Notice how this story brought Jesus’ listeners right into the drama at an emotional level. It was no longer an intellectual debate by a couple of lawyers. Jesus’ hearers would have known each of the characters in this story and they would have identified with one or more of the them. Don’t you, even 2,000 years later? Perhaps you see yourself as the wounded man that others have mistreated or ignored. Or perhaps you realize that at times you have been like the religious leaders who ignored the poor man. Or maybe you have identified with the robbers or the innkeeper. But one way or another, nearly everyone enters the story. If we identify with the victim we probably feel gratitude. If we identify with the uncaring religious leaders we may feel guilt, anxiety or shame. And if we identify with the Good Samaritan, we probably feel good and grateful that we have been able to reach out and help others. But wherever we see ourselves in the story, if we aren’t too left-brained, we first engage at our emotional, right brain level. Then, once we are engaged, our left brains kick in and start analyzing what we are feeling

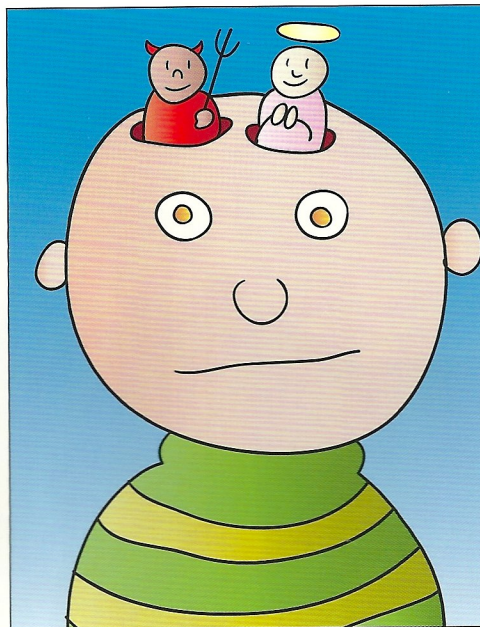


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and experiencing and trying to understand the full meaning of the parable.

At the close of the parable, when the lawyer finally gives the right answer, Jesus simply says, “You go, and do likewise.” No more debate. No more logical arguments. No more fine points of the law. Just go and be like Jesus, reaching out to others across racial, economic and social lines. How powerful!

The same is true of the story of the prodigal in *Luke 15*. Which of us haven’t identified with the prodigal leaving home and wasting his inheritance? Or with the father waiting hopefully for his wayward son to return? Or with the older brother who was jealous when his father welcomed his prodigal brother home and threw a party for him. These characters usually trigger deep emotions in our right brains. Then we use the left hemisphere of our brains to deduce, “God the Heavenly Father loves and accepts rebels and sinners, therefore he must love and accept me as I respond to His love in Christ.” That’s the way our left and right brains should work together, and metaphors and stories help us do that. In fact, Allan Schore<sup>3</sup> one of the main scholars writing on the functioning of the brain today, points out that metaphors are the perfect vehicle to actually stimulate our brains to grow in ways that increase their effective functioning and the integration of our right brain feelings and our left brain thoughts!

### Preaching, Teaching and Mentoring For the Whole Brain.

The findings of brain research and the way Jesus lived and taught have important implications for Christian maturity, preaching, discipleship and counseling. In order to grow as God intended, every Christian needs a balance of experience and knowledge, that is, a balance of right and left brain functioning. If you think about it, nearly all church services begin with a portion of the time devoted to singing, praise and active participation in worship. Those experiences touch our right brains. Once they are over, however, some speakers go into a largely cognitive/teaching/left brain mode. If that is excessive, the service loses much of its potential power because it fails to keep the right

**CHANGE**, continued on the next page ►

brain sufficiently engaged.

We have all sat under teachers or ministers who had a terrific mastery of a subject but presented it in such a boring, factual manner that we could hardly stay awake. That's because our right brains were ignored. Left brain approaches to life and problem-solving can be helpful when we are facing a normal life decision that simply calls for more information. Selecting a college major, a profession, entering a business deal, or getting a wise new perspective on a problem respond well to relevant information. But they don't touch us nearly as deeply as empathic teaching that uses metaphors, stories and parables that engage both our right and left brains.

The same is true of individual and small group discipleship. Solid biblical teaching and study is essential. However, it is within safe and caring relationships that allow people to share their personal life stories, needs and struggles, that our right brain is accessed. Once that happens, the knowledge of scripture can come alive in a deeper and more life-transforming way.

Nearly everything we have said so far in Part Two can be applied to all people who want to grow in their spiritual, emotional, or relational lives. But if you or one you love is struggling with long standing, deeply rooted problems, you may need to seek out a counselor, preferably a Christian, who can help you find healing with those issues. To help you select that kind of therapist and understand more about the process of depth psychotherapy, we will now look at five key dynamics that make good therapy effective.

### **What Makes Counseling Work?**

The lessons from Scripture and Interpersonal Neurobiology both point to several important experiences that people with longstanding struggles need in order to grow. First, the counselor has to provide a safe, "tuned in" relationship for the counselee, much like infants need from their mothers during the first few years of life. When you remember that mothers and infants don't communicate by words, but by emotional attunement, you see why this is so important. A counselor

intending to help you primarily through advice and more knowledge most likely will not be nearly as helpful as one who will do what we call "depth therapy" that accesses your early life experiences and a wide range of your emotions. Greater understanding can be helpful, but it usually needs to follow a rather extended time of developing a safe, "tuned in" working relationship with a counselor.

Second, as counsees feel safe enough in their relationship with a counselor, they must go into the pain they suffered in early life. Although the recalled pain may be horrible, it is bearable because of the counselor's safe presence, active listening, soothing looks and reassuring tone of voice. This allows counsees to see the wide-ranging impact of negative experiences on their lives, including the way they now relate to their family members, friends, co-workers, and even God.

Third, as counsees get in touch with their long ago pain, they usually feel a mix of sadness, fear, guilt, or shame. They almost universally feel angry as well. Re-experiencing that anger in a safe relationship with the counselor gives them an opportunity to learn experientially that it is OK to be angry when you have been hurt. In fact, it is abnormal not to feel angry. Jesus experienced righteous anger and so should we. Of course we shouldn't strike out at others in anger, but we must allow ourselves to feel it, learn to sit with it, and explore what pain it is hiding or where it came from. As long as we try to avoid it, it will stay underground and keep causing problems like depression, temper outbursts, relation-

al struggles or even physical symptoms like headaches, ulcers and constant fatigue. Good therapists know how to help counsees release and resolve anger a little bit at a time, much like slowly releasing built-up pressure in a pressure cooker.

Fourth, at some point counsees must go through a process of grieving the impact of their negative life experiences. Although grieving is painful, it allows them to admit that some things in their past will never change. For example, they will probably never have the kind of relationship they wanted with their mother or father. They won't be able to restore a long ago broken marriage or lost friend or job possibilities. Or they may need to give up the false belief that if they can only find a new and better mate or job, everything is going to be fine. All of those are "fixes" to fill an inner void or to have the good parent they never had, but they won't work. They are like drugs that dull the pain but never solve the real problem. Accepting and grieving our losses is much like mourning the loss of a loved one through death or separation. Only gradually do we feel sufficiently good about ourselves and confident about our future without them to fully accept the finality of it. Once we do, we can move ahead with our lives.

Fifth, as effective counselors stay emotionally tuned in, their clients increasingly develop the ability to put words to their deepest feelings. This helps connect their right brain emotional experiences with their left brain logic. In turn, this helps them communicate with others without



either losing control of their emotions, repressing them, or withdrawing. It also helps overcome depression, excessive worry, shame, guilt and anger, and usually improves their interpersonal relationships.

Everyone's experience in counseling is a little different, but for longstanding problems and struggles, these five steps are typically at the core of lasting change. In fact, we now have evidence that therapies that include these steps can actually lead to the brain rewiring itself. Sixty years ago medical professionals taught that damaged brain and central nervous system tissue could not be repaired because it didn't generate new tissue growth. Now we know differently. Under the right conditions, including those of a good relationship with a depth counselor, our brains can actually grow new dendrites that form new connections between neurons! The malfunctioning development that began because of problems with one's earliest caregivers and environment can be gradually rebuilt and reconnected through a long-term healthy relationship with a wise and sensitive therapist!

### A Look Ahead.

There is so much helpful information on ways our brains impact our spiritual, emotional and relational functioning that we had to leave out some other very practical implications of the recent findings of Interpersonal Neurobiology in the first two parts of this series. Consequently we are extending this series into a third part. In the next issue of *Psychology For Living* we will show you how you can use metaphors and the disciplines of prayer and Christian meditation to help you continue growing in your Christian life. Stay tuned to see how those biblical disciplines can actually help change your brain! ☩

## Mothers' Peer Relationships Can Impact Their Adolescent Children's Relationships

Common knowledge teaches that parental behavior acts as a model and is an important influence on children's behavior. Children's studies have shown that the impact of adult modeling on the behavior of children depends on many factors, such as whether the behavior is rewarded, whether the adult model is highly

esteemed, whether the behavior is practiced, and whether children were taught to take the perspective of others (empathy). Research also demonstrated that learned behavior did not necessarily generalize to other environments and that children needed to practice what they learned across environments to improve demonstration of the new behavior.

Recently, research was conducted at the University of Missouri using moms and adolescent children. This effort was undertaken to expand the knowledge of adolescent development as previous research focused primarily on elementary-aged children. This work entitled, "Association of mothers' friendship quality with adolescents' friendship quality and emotional adjustment," will be published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. Mothers and their 10-17 year-old children were polled to measure their perceived negative and positive friendship qualities. The "results showed that positive friendship qualities were not always imitated by adolescents; however, negative and antagonistic relationship characteristics exhibited by mothers were much more likely to be mimicked by the youth studied."<sup>1</sup> The fact of the adolescent's increased tendency to



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imitate the negative modeling has implications for parenting our teens. The co-author Gary C. Glick, doctoral candidate at MU, acknowledged the importance of parental training of their teens with regard to relationships: model positive friendship qualities and when things are difficult parents should talk with their children about how to act with their friends, but more specifically, how **not** to act."<sup>2</sup> The wisdom of *Deuteronomy 6:6-7* can be seen through the research "and these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." ☩

<sup>1</sup>Sossoman, J. (2013). Mothers' relationships can influence adolescent children's relationships, MU study finds. *News Bureau University of Missouri*, 30. Retrieved from

<http://munews.missouri.edu/news-releases/2013/1105-mothers%E2%80%99-relationships-can-influence-adolescent-children%E2%80%99s-relationships-mu-study-finds/>

<sup>2</sup>ibid

<sup>1</sup>Siegel, D. (1999). *The developing mind: Toward a neurobiology of interpersonal experience*. New York: Guilford Press.

<sup>2</sup>Bailey, Kenneth (2008). *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academia.

<sup>3</sup>Schore, Allan "The Science of the Art of Psychotherapy." All Day Workshop. Ben Franklin Institute. Summit For Clinical Excellence, San Diego. October 2009. Lecture.