

Chapter 2. The Mind Versus The Brain

While the bulk of this book will focus upon management of feelings and trauma, as well as the enhancement of connectedness, I would like to start with a broader perspective on the working of the mind. Specifically, this section will initially visit the interaction between our minds and our brains, then review the various elementary functions of the mind. We will then look at one perspective on the structure of personality, and an important distinction, between coping skills and defenses. Finally, we will ask what constitutes mental health, and review some models and assorted principles of healing which you may find useful.

What would you say if you were asked to identify the most basic components or elements of the universe? Take a minute to play with this if you are philosophically inclined. From my perspective, matter and consciousness are the two most basic components of life. Matter is the physical stuff of life, the often tangible but sometimes invisible realm of bodies, rocks, air, atoms, electrons etc., impacted by physical energy. Consciousness is something entirely different. It is more ethereal, less tangible, yet obvious and self evident. Some would say that it can be reduced to, and is dependent upon matter, that is, that consciousness and the mind are entirely dependent upon the existence of a functional brain. Others would say that consciousness can exist independently of matter, in the form of spirits, God, or communal consciousness. This is an important debate which has profound implications and many offshoots, spawning a variety of religious and philosophical beliefs, and all too many wars.

For our immediate purpose, i.e., improving emotional satisfaction and recovering from psychological maladies, the contrast between matter and consciousness is manifested in the difference between the brain and the mind. The brain is the physical home of the mind, guided by the evolving young principles of neuroscience. The mind on the other hand is a system of consciousness, which is delicate and vulnerable, incredible in its own complexity, and comprised of its own elements. Just as the brain is composed of lobes, neurons, and other structures, as well as electrical, chemical, and circulatory operations, the mind is composed of thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations and perceptions, identity, etc. Any comprehensive understanding or effective approach to psychological functioning must include both core elements of the psyche, the mind and the brain, as well as the interaction between them.

And what of this interaction? Some, particularly my psychiatrist colleagues if they are working off of a traditional medical model, perceive the mind primarily as a manifestation of the brain, with the various elements and maladies of the mind being reduced to elements, functions, and dysfunctions of the brain. I believe that this approach is useful, but insufficient. Certainly the mind is dependent upon the healthy functioning of the brain. Genetic strengths and impairments, brain injuries, healthy versus poor nutrition, medication and drugs, and other physical entities which impact the brain have a huge impact upon the functioning of the mind. But this is a two way street, and some are prone to ignore the opposing lane of traffic. I refer to them as biological reductionists, those who emphasize the impact of the brain upon the mind, without giving due respect to the influence of the mind upon

the brain, or stated differently, the impact of alterations of one's consciousness upon the physical structure and function of the brain. Those who reduce mind to matter are prone to simplistically attribute psychological problems to "chemical imbalances," which, in the absence of further explanation, implies that such maladies are primarily, or even solely, physical in nature, and therefore must be managed by a primarily physical intervention, such as medication. Again, I am not suggesting that medication is unhelpful, or that a psychiatric approach is unnecessary. While I tend not to recommend medication for mild conditions, I often refer to my psychiatric colleagues as these same conditions approach more severe proportions. It is quite difficult to convince a profoundly depressed client to even get out of bed in the morning in the absence of antidepressant medication, and the management of a manic episode, or a florid psychotic episode, is typically an exercise in helplessness in the absence of appropriate medication. With that being said, however, I believe that it is misleading to attribute such conditions solely to chemical imbalances. I believe that it is more helpful to view the mind and the brain as parallel interacting systems, each of which is heavily influenced by the other. Yes, introducing medication into the brain will influence and often improve the functioning of the mind. But it is also abundantly evident that changing your ways of thinking, and changing your behaviors, influences the functioning of the brain. I believe that it is both more accurate, and more effective for psychological healing, to portray the mind and brain as mutually dependent parallel systems, rather than describing them hierarchically, as a mind dependent upon the brain, but not vice versa. The disadvantage of the biological reductionist focus upon chemical imbalance is that it misleads some clients into believing that medication is necessary, or worse still, sufficient, for recovery, because psychological maladies are purely the result of physical, biological problems. Such a viewpoint can invite overreliance on medication, while neglecting potential changes in thinking and behavior which can also empower changes in symptoms. And while medication alone can often reduce symptoms, such symptoms often return in the absence of medication, unless there has also been a fundamental change in thinking, behavior, and consciousness. Yes, a chemical imbalance in the brain can and often does exist, at a neurotransmitter level, and may be the physical result of genetic problems, injury, poor nutrition, drug abuse, or other physical conditions. But a disruption in the delicate balance of neurotransmitters may also result from the impact of emotional trauma, consistent negative thinking, or a variety of other states of mind originating in consciousness. And more to the point, the resolution of such trauma, a move toward more positive or constructive thinking, and other changes in perspective, attitude, relationships, and behaviors will not only improve the functioning of the mind, but will have a positive impact at the neurotransmitter level in the brain. The mind and brain are parallel systems, which each influence the other system, so that changes on either level are reflected on both levels. Therefore, when looking at your psychological status, it is important to consider what interventions are likely to be necessary, and which are sufficient, both at the physical level of the brain, and the conscious component of the mind. Such deliberation will help you determine whether it is best for you to intervene at one or the other, or both levels, which in turn will lead you to either a psychiatrist, a psychotherapist, or both.

