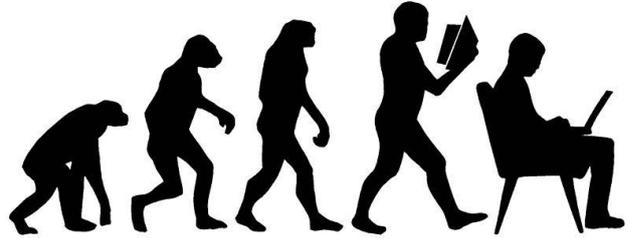


Chapter 3: Who We Are and How We Function

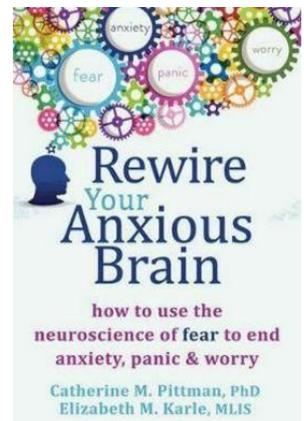
There are multiple attempts from different disciplines to bring to a common understanding of how we function as human beings. These also explore how we process thoughts and how the interaction between emotions and thoughts influence our behaviors and wellbeing. From clinical psychology and cognitive behavioral psychology to positive psychology, ancient wisdom and more recently, neuroscience and medicine, these and other perspectives have contributed to the discussion.



We have not evolved, we are continually evolving.
(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

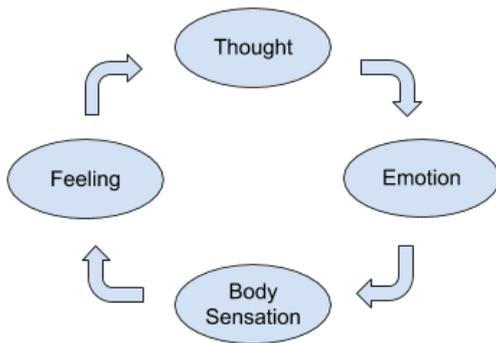
However, even with these attempts to understand the human condition and a myriad of programs derived from them, we continue to see a rise in mental health and wellbeing issues in our organizations and communities. We continue to see racism, sexism, bullying, conflict and war, which are clear indications that none of the theory and practical applications to date have had a wide enough reach to greatly reduce and heal the suffering and modern ailments due to our human condition. It is a contention of this book that part of this reality is a result of the dated way of understanding the body and mind as separate entities (Cartesian proposition, still present today in society).

Not only does our mental wellbeing affect our body, as has been well documented in longitudinal research projects in medicine, our body also impacts the way we respond to events of our environment. Through the advances of neuroscience, we can now quite confidently say that our body reacts to external stimuli -or triggers- and events before our rational mind can even process the information we perceive with our senses. This suggests that our reactions in times of stress are more likely to be based on primitive brain responses. This perspective is explained wonderfully in Catherine Pittman (PhD) & Elizabeth Karle's (2015) book, [Rewire your Anxious Brain: How to use the neuroscience of fear to end anxiety, panic & worry](#)". This is particularly the case when feelings of threat arise in response to body sensations.



For instance, when feeling cold or hurt, *-be it real or imagined*, the body will commonly react automatically before any thought arises. A key step to improving our mental wellbeing is, therefore, to learn to accept our reaction or response as a natural instinctive (primitive) response and consciously make efforts to reduce the anxiety caused by an unsettling, unexpected event.

When we are exposed to an unknown, uncertain, and/or stressful situation, our (primitive) brain initially responds through a sensation in the body. Our 'senses', such as sight, sound, smell, taste and touch are usually our first indicators of danger. These trigger a response such as pupil dilation, an increased heart rate and heightened awareness and focus, which prepares us for a flight, fight or freeze reaction. These reactions will vary depending on the situation. Unfortunately, this heightened preparedness, which saved our ancestors' lives -possibly daily in the past- is being played out every day for events that are unconsciously being perceived as 'serious' in our modern society.



The - Thought - Emotion - Body Sensation - Feeling - Thought Cycle. (Image: Dani Rius)

We may have a racing heart when we are about to give a speech in front of strangers, customers or even our colleagues, and sweat or feel tension during a business presentation or job interview. These physiological responses tend to reinforce our stressful thinking -or hallucination-type mental representations, which, in turn, can create a cycle of feedback from our body to our mind and back to our body. We then perceive our anxiety to be well justified because we feel the physiological effects of our fear. So, it becomes like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Unless we become aware of how our body reacts to triggers and how our thoughts reinforce the negative feelings, we are ill-equipped to interrupt the cycle and our

fearful thoughts are likely to escalate.

When our survival instinct is set in motion through a (perceived) threat picked up by one or more of our senses (in the case of public speaking above, for instance, by catching sight of an unfriendly face in the audience), it heavily influences how we respond physiologically. We react directly to negatively charged events as much as to negative emotions such as visceral fear. This instantly ignited fear turns into anxiety by merely using our thoughts which reinforce the drama.



Relaxation through mindfulness opens the mind *and* the body. (Image: Pixabay)

By mindfully assessing the situation, we can avoid making decisions clouded by negative emotions that arise from bodily sensations; and, instead, wait until we have neutralized our physiological reaction by clearing the mind until we have become more collected. In this way, we can give our brain more space to make a decision that is better thought through. Rather than accepting to respond based on knee-jerk reactions, it is worth learning to become a master of our thoughts and emotions through mindfulness practices to positively influence our bodily sensations and physical responses.

Once we have given our mind permission to relax and stay calm, we are more capable of assessing the situation from a broader perspective and consider the possible dynamics of cause and effect to assess our options and make a decision to respond as most appropriate to the situation. By consciously applying effort -for instance- to relax the muscles of our body or slow down the breath and avoid hyperventilating, we prepare the grounds to make wiser decisions, moment to moment. Fortunately, everybody can learn to do this more effectively by gradually training in more advanced mindfulness practices.

Quite advanced mindfulness practices were learned by a client of Dani 's and applied through daily practice. He was a manager who was relatively new to their role. He had never practiced mindfulness before yet soon realized their promising future if he learned to apply it effectively. A couple months into the program he reported being able to reduce his defensiveness to criticism against his decisions. This is because, through being more mindful, he was able to identify a pattern. When his ideas were "rejected" he would get into a defensive mode, shut down and therefore, stop listening. The mindfulness technique he learned enabled him to maintain his attention on his employees' remarks during a difficult meeting despite the criticism he perceived. Instead of becoming defensive on the inside as he admittedly would, he managed to empathize with his employees and, therefore, responded in a more constructive way.

Only after a few leadership mindset coaching interventions, he managed to incorporate mindfulness practices into his daily life so that he could always access it whenever he needed to prepare for difficult situations and keep calm. Fortunately, as he became more practiced, what he previously considered “difficult conversations” with his team members no longer felt that way. Conversations became less challenging as he learned to center himself quickly and effectively.

This is an example of the impact of mindfulness on preparing the foundation for managing the mindset necessary for leaders like this person to work effectively with their teams. It highlights the impact of using this foundation of mindful thinking in the development of more effective empathic skills of interpretation and appropriate response. Working in a consultancy capacity, clients have been able to utilize these more effective focused strategies to identify more subtle emotions in others, develop greater perspective-taking skills, and ponder over a range of appropriate responses and their potential outcome. Of most interest was the number of clients who interpreted social situations and responded to them in a reactionary way. Their realization of the impact of mindful empathy on their more successful social interactions was enlightening.

Our mind and body are clearly strongly linked and contribute to our overall ability to be socially intelligent and make socially intelligent decisions. This perspective is developed within Wayne’s belief of a more functional definition of social intelligence than the traditional understanding of intelligence itself from a purely cognitive skill. Wayne defines social intelligence through the assimilation of his own [work](#) on the nature and function of empathy and personal experience of mindfulness.

“Social intelligence is the speed, efficiency and effectiveness with which an organism adjusts to a new and/or complex social environment, using both mind and body within effective empathic communication”.

– Wayne Duncan

For us, as humans, within this definition “Social Intelligence” applies to a wide range of *environments* and how we interact with them. Environments are defined not just as the physical environment but also our social environment, especially our relationships with that environment and others within it. A key component is a realization that our interpretation and understanding of this environment is with both mind *and* body.

Whereas acquiring information with speed, efficiency and effectiveness, learning factual information, and using that knowledge, deriving understanding, reciting facts, and solving problems are traditionally defined as examples of intelligence, it is a narrow definition of intelligence focused on cognitive capacity only. The range of intelligences was widened through the work of Howard Gardner (2006) suggesting multiple intelligences such as musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. This wider definition acknowledged there were other ways to be intelligent. We the authors want to focus on the intrapersonal and social intelligence because of its importance in understanding ourselves and others and interacting in an intelligent manner.

Traditionally, verbal-linguistic, and logical-mathematical intelligences have been the focus of the education sector and structured the focus of learning outcomes. While this has been changing, we suggest not sufficiently to impact positively enough our mental health issues and societal challenges. Without diminishing the value of other ways to define intelligence, nor educational focus areas, the focus of the authors of this book is on the social intelligence that acknowledges the role of the mind (intrapersonal) *and* body in both interpreting and responding intelligently to others and in social situations.

The specific social intelligence we wish to focus on relies on two aspects of intelligence, *intra*-personal (*within ourselves*) and *inter*-personal (*between ourselves and others*). On one hand, with intrapersonal, it is the ability to be present, moment to moment, understanding more intimately the interactions between our body and mind, which enable us to choose how we respond (*as opposed to impulsively reacting*). On the other hand, interpersonal, our ability to interpret, understand and respond appropriately to others from both a mind (thoughts and emotions) and physical (body in action) perspective.



Our greatest achievements are not alone but when working with others. (Image: Pxfuel)

The importance of this book is not only at the personal level, but also emphasizes the importance of building a socially intelligent team or workforce. Our focus is on self-transcendence - from a focus on selfish individual needs or goals to one that harnesses the power of collaborative enterprise and community. It is our belief that our true strength as humans comes from the strength of our relationships.

Our greatest achievements will come, not from individual pursuit in isolation from others, but pursuit with others. To do this we need to be aware that seeking accomplishments with others cannot occur without understanding and managing ourselves, interpreting and understanding others and appropriately responding to them. We must understand that interpersonal communication and understanding cannot occur in isolation.

It does not involve the action of only one person. We need the effective collaboration of all.

Take the example of a *solopreneur*, an entrepreneur working on their own. This person needs to perform in a myriad of roles, from product development -and related research & development-, marketing and sales, finances, and IT. A *solopreneur* would agree that achieving their goals is much more difficult and demanding giving all these requirements. With a team it is possible not only split the tasks, but also feed on each other's abilities and strengths making the results greater than the sum of individual achievements.

For collaboration to be effective, those involved need to be skilled in empathic communication, which can be learned by gaining a deeper understanding of our own thought processes and developing our internal mental - or intrapersonal- skills and utilize them in empathic interaction with others. This requires practice and skill, not only thoughtful insight.

How we (Mal-)Function in the Context of Work

It is not sufficient, and becomes problematic, if only one person in a group has the skill to interpret others and respond appropriately. Confusion and misinterpretation soon develop, and time and effort are not only misused but the relationship and team culture are put at risk. Even if many employees within an organization have the set of skills to interpret others effectively and act with consideration to others, it only takes one employee to create issues and, in some cases, chaos. It is, therefore, essential that effective empathic communication is a focus of development for all staff within an organization. That is not to say that there are not any benefits in at least one member of the team having these skills; anything is better than nothing.

As our workplaces and lives become more complex, there is an even greater need to not only consider our own health and wellbeing, but also that of our employees and others. The mental health of our communities is being affected negatively partly through greater stressors put on our lives and, more significantly, by our

interpretation of those stressors and how we deal with them. It is not only appropriate, but imperative that businesses seek the tools and strategies to create healthy workplaces, not only physically healthy but also mentally.

We are also being encouraged to work more collaboratively, which for many creates another layer of interpersonal communication stress on top of existing work pressures. For those not educated in a system that encourages collaboration and teamwork, or for those not naturally socially interactive, this can be immensely challenging. We cannot expect everyone to be naturally inclined to relate easily to each other, let alone collaboratively. In fact, for many it is quite distressing. Let us see how our education system may have ill-equipped us for collaborative work.

Who we are As a Result of our Education

One source of insufficient spontaneous collaboration in the workplace, may lie in our past education and reward system we grew up with. Whilst collaboration, teamwork and community building activities are highly valued and praised in some schools and school sectors, this approach is not as pervasive as it should be in all schools. This is especially true for traditional highly formal individually focused education settings. Generally, as one moves to more structured, formal, learning environments the learning becomes less collaborative and more individually focused. Neither is collaboration a significant education focuses higher up educational levels toward and including tertiary study. At higher levels of education learning tends to become even more individually focused and rewarded. Many schools now, and many more historically, have failed to teach children to integrate their own production with other classmates to present a final product, which would be assessed by the team results. These skills build the foundation of collaborative enterprise. Far too many graduates of our education system have an individuality mindset and are personal outcome driven.

Historically, in the rare occasions that students worked as part of a project team, they were still assessed individually. There was little motivation to work completely collaboratively, or if they were given a collaborative project there was reward for maximizing your own outcomes from that collaboration. This often was at the expense of others and the collective outcome. It is not surprising, therefore, that the workforce within your business does not have employees previously ingrained skills for working in a collaborative environment with ease. These employees also put additional strain and challenge on those people who are more inclined toward collaborative working approaches.



Many classes and schools still resemble a focus on individual effort and reward as opposed to collaborative enterprise.
(Image: Needpix)

At this point we should also discuss conscious and subconscious thought within the workplace and its impact on yourself and the workforce. Within conscious thought, our *consciousness* or present *real time* thought is focused on whatever your mind chooses is most important such as sensory surprises. Surprises that could suggest danger or potential threat.

If we have developed the ability to focus our attention, we may also have the skill to ignore distractions that would normally take our attention away. Mindfulness can also help your ability to stay focused on thought you want rather than distraction.

More difficult concentrative tasks tend to focus our consciousness and easier tasks can allow our mind to wander, dream, stress and worry. Our consciousness responds to stimuli from our senses, (sight, sound, taste, touch and smell), it matches that stimuli with prior experience and knowledge as a first task to protect us from

harm (*feeling of multiple touches coming up arm, what is light and has multiple touches, spider, look confirm hairy multiple leg crawler, not good! Dispatch our other hand to remove the threat, recoil in fear, scream...*) This is all completed in a split second, some conscious, some reactionary. When response or preparation for a threat is not required. our consciousness can undertake any number of other tasks. It plans, seeks understanding, communicates, remembers, worries, predicts, calculates, as well as many other tasks, all the time retaining a link to our own image or identity.

Our conscious mind is constantly being bombarded by sensory information from our five senses: touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste. These are our *'known'* links to the world outside our range of awareness. Our conscious thinking is also influenced by other neural activities going on in our brain. A thought or feeling



A shock or surprise from our senses focuses our mind on that event for a brief time and as a result can distract us from thought-induced anxiety or rumination. (Image: Pxhere)

comes into our mind seemingly from nowhere (*our subconscious*). There are literally billions of these unconscious neural connections and associations (thought processes) going on all the time. It is the role of our conscious mind to zoom in on the most important of these for our own survival and success at any point of time. For example, our attention is focused on talking to the bank teller *until a gun is pulled by a robber*. Our interest goes to exploring the attic and looking at old photos, *until we get a crawly feeling on our neck*. Or our conversation with a client is trusting and open *until an inkling makes us question his motives*.

Our love of others, fear of things, and attitudes towards others result from our inner sense, an often-unconscious interpretation informed by our senses, body, mind, and *feelings*. How does this matter? Well, we must acknowledge that only a portion of our thought is conscious and that our conscious thought is deeply influenced by deeper unconscious neural processes, or deeper awareness.

Conscious thought processes, those thoughts that we 'have an awareness of' are those thoughts that come into our mind. However, there is also a huge amount of neural processes going on at a level we are unaware of because they remain inaccessible, trapped in our *subconscious*. Processes that cannot normally be accessed conscious rational thoughts are hidden from us unless we learn to access our deeper awareness of our mind and body. This neural activity both conscious and subconscious is molded by our makeup and experience, both nature and nurture. Like creating a piece of clay artwork, some of the artwork is a result of the nature of the clay content, water content, influence of gravity, and some is our own nurturing of the shape and form. We are both the product of where we come from, how we have been structured as an organism and the environmental influences on that form. How does this relate to you? It is mindfulness that opens the mind to body sensations in a new way, creating a healthier mind-body relationship.



Much like clay pottery, our mind is created from both the characteristics of the clay (*nature*) and the skillful hands of the sculptor (*nurture*). (Image: Pxfuel)