

# Don't Be Callous

**How the “be nice” principles can rewire your brain & make you a more patient, caring provider.**

BY TIM DIETZ, MA, LPC

**O**ften when I travel and do presentations to first-response organizations, I talk about the need to take care of ourselves and each other because the folks outside of our culture have no idea what we do for a living. As a matter of fact, the majority of the population we protect would rather not know what we do. Yes, they are interested when we rescue someone from a structure fire, pull a dog out of a well, revive a choking child in a restaurant, or deliver a baby on the engine ramp. This “heroic” stuff is media fodder. But that is not what I did every shift.

When I was first hired, my fire station was across the street from a large senior-citizen community. Every shift, my crew would go out into this neighborhood because someone had called 911 and said they hadn't seen mom or dad in a week and wanted us to go check on them. We would respond, typically force a door, and find mom or dad laying on the tile of the kitchen floor where they had been several days peeing and pooping and spinning without the ability to get up by themselves. My crew would assess for injury, and either facilitate transportation to a hospital, or more common, pick them up, clean them up and put them to bed or in their favorite chair.\* We did this sometimes several times a shift. (\*Certainly, we would try to get them into the social services network, where people could routinely check on them, or get a hold of family to discuss the need for different living options, etc.)

I also remember one January receiving a 1 a.m. dispatch for a smoke-detector check. It was a frigid cold—below 20 degrees outside. When we entered the living room, we saw where the parents had thrown a twin mattress in the corner and put their three young children under a single wool blanket to conserve body heat. They couldn't afford their gas bill, and their gas had been turned off. The children had blue lips and blue fingernails; they were literally freezing to death. In the next room, the parents were watching a new big-screen TV with 200 cable channels. That was more important than heating the house for their kids. The smoke detector had been chirping and interrupting their movie.

Usually the moral of these experiences is if the majority of the population is ignorant about what is happening in their community, who do we talk about this stuff with? I got tired of cleaning pee and poop off the elderly, and tired of seeing children—or others—mistreated or abused. We have to use each other as resources! However, another side of these experiences is they can cause one to become calloused. I learned I had a choice. It was my decision as to what kind of day I was going to have. And the more I practiced that choice, the easier it became to be nice! You can rewire your brain!

## **The Brain's Plasticity**

Research has shown that the brain can rewire itself...or have plasticity. You've certainly been taught that frequent training creates muscle memory. It's the same with the brain. Frequent purposeful thoughts create memory pathways.

The decision to change the way you think about things and begin a pattern of new thoughts/reactions can actually change your brain's neurochemistry and structure. Research from the University of Alabama at Birmingham is suggesting that changing the way we think can create new neurons. These "adult-born" neurons weave into existing brain networks creating new memories/behaviors and modifying older ones.

One of the key aspects of neural plasticity is called neural Darwinism, or "neural pruning," which means that any neuron that isn't "fired-and-wired" into a network is likely to be extinguished. Research suggests that newborn neurons play a role in expediting this process by "winning out" in a survival-of-the-fittest type of neuronal battle against their more elderly counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

As an example: If you go to work looking for things that are wrong, what are you going to find? I don't care what organization you work for, if that's all you are looking for, eventually you will find something wrong. And if that's what you're doing every time you go to work, your brain recognizes the pattern, wires neurons for the thought/behavior, wants efficiency, heads down your "find crap that's wrong" memory pathway, and begins to help you find crap that's wrong! It's easy to do, given our brain has a "default" to look for things wrong to aid in our survival. However, this does not create a healthy, fun work environment. If I change that pattern of thought into looking into the positive aspects of my career and what I got to do for a living, eventually the "looking for crap that's wrong" neurons will be culled out.

This brings me to Chief Brunacini's concept of "Be Nice." We all thought: What a simple, but doable way to help Mrs. Smith. But really, what a genius strategy to make the fire service a more livable, healthy work place. At one point in my career, I became tired of the mundane (in my mind) calls for service, the ridiculous (in my mind) politics, and was on a path to become caloused. I didn't like that! I had to change my thinking. What worked for me was thinking that every time my apparatus turned a wheel, I had an opportunity to make a positive impact on someone's life. If I was called to pick Mrs. Smith up for the umpteenth time, she was going to get a smile from me—maybe the only smile she had received that week. I really began to focus on treating people the way I would want my loved ones treated— to be nice! My brain began to rewire itself to look for these opportunities, and shazam, my job became the best gig in the world again.

## **10 Fundamentals of Neuroplasticity & How We Can Use Them in the Fire Service to Be Nice**

*(Based on principles of Dr. Michael Merzenich<sup>2</sup>)*

1. *Change is mostly limited to those situations the brain is in the mood for. If you are engaged and motivated to change your thinking, e.g., "I am looking for opportunities to make a positive impact in someone's life and to be nice," the brain releases neurochemicals necessary to enable the brain to change.*
2. *The harder you try, and the more you're motivated, the better the potential outcome, and the bigger the brain change. If you're really focused on helping people and being nice, the change you experience will be greater.*
3. *What actually changes in the brain are the strengths of the connections of neurons that are engaged together. The more we practice being nice, the more connections are changed and made to include all elements of the experience (sensory info, movement, cognitive patterns). This makes being nice easier over time.*
4. *Learning-driven changes in connections increase cell-to-*

cell cooperation. Making continued cognitive decisions to be nice increases "nice" behavior patterns.

5. *The brain also strengthens its connections between teams of neurons representing separate moments of successive things.* Practicing being nice allows the brain to predict what happens next and have a continuous "associative flow."
6. *Initial changes are temporary.* The brain records the effort to be nice, then determines whether it should make the change permanent or not. Once the brain judges being nice as a good thing, the change becomes permanent.
7. *The brain can be changed by internal mental rehearsal in the same manner as through interactions in the external world.* Just the thoughts of being nice to people have the ability to create change in the brain.
8. *Memory guides and controls most learning.* As we practice being nice, the brain takes note, remembers best attempts, and makes incremental adjustments to make being nice easier.
9. *Every moment of learning provides a moment of opportunity.* Every time we practice being nice, those thoughts/behaviors strengthen. It also weakens or culls those neurons that are irrelevant or interfere with being nice, (neural Darwinism).
10. *Brain plasticity is a two-way street.* You have to "use it or lose it."

**BS**

## References

1. Bergland, Christopher. "How do Neuroplasticity and Neurogenesis rewire your brain?" <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/201702/how-do-neuroplasticity-and-neurogenesis-rewire-your-brain>. Posted Feb 06, 2017
2. Merzenich, Michael. "Soft-Wired: How the New Science of Brain Plasticity can change your life."



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