



Growing through times of change

Week 6 - Understanding our triune brain



St Paul's
LUTHERAN CHURCH BOX HILL

The human brain is extraordinarily complex.

There is still so much about the brain that remains outside of human understanding and knowledge. Yet there are some basic understandings about the brain that can be of great benefit in our day-to-day lives.

We are constantly receiving messages from our brain guiding our behaviours, thoughts and emotions

however it has been stated that by far the majority

of our thoughts and decisions are repeated day after day. They have now become a default rather than a choice. This is ok when it comes to routine aspects of life but *in times of change and challenge, it's vitally important that we develop the skill of psychological flexibility* (brain fitness) which is the ability to grow and stretch our brain in ways that can help us cope with the demands that we face in new and creative ways.

Our brain has 3 main parts – each with their own location, characteristics, and purpose:

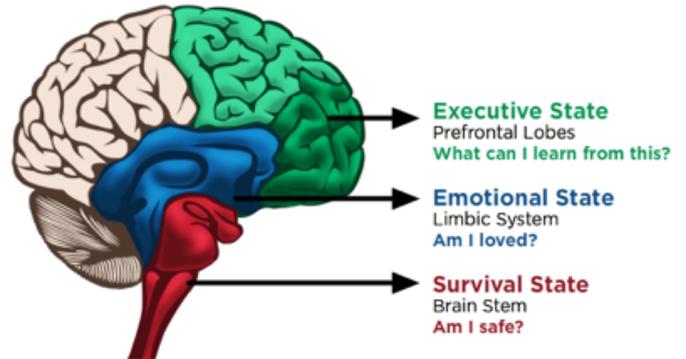
- *The brain stem* sits at the base of our brain and is connected to our spine. Its job is to control the flow of messages between the brain and the rest of the body, and control all of our basic body functions. Its key role is survival and to send messages about what may be affecting our physical wellbeing in any way.
- *The limbic system* sits in the middle of our brain. Its job is to negotiate emotional and relationship aspects of life and is largely involved with the formation of memories. Its key role is to manage our social and emotional wellbeing and send messages regarding anything of significance that may be affecting us emotionally.

Both the brain stem and the limbic system operate outside of consciousness. Therefore the messages that they send in the form of physical responses and feelings, can affect us without our awareness.

- *The cortex/prefrontal cortex*, sits at the top of the brain. Its job is to carry out executive functions such as problem solving, goal setting, decision making and moderating social behaviour. Its key role is to enable us to function at a conscious level. The messages we receive from the pre-frontal cortex are recognised as thoughts and mental processes.

The awareness of these 3 parts has led to it being known as The Triune Brain. These 3 parts, while separate are also highly interconnected and interdependent. As soon as one part of the brain is activated, the other two parts will inevitably be involved. They relate continuously to monitor and maintain all aspects of our wellbeing. It is extremely helpful to develop the skill of noticing from which part of our brain specific messages are coming and how they are communicating to each other.

The reactions from the physical and emotional brain that occur before thought will automatically be prioritised as being most important. This is often a good thing and can be highly self-protective and allow me to respond to those things of greatest significance. Yet there are times when prioritising my physical and emotional messages and their automatic response is not helpful.



If I have a more important competing priority than that of my body or emotions, I need to be able to choose to over-ride them. The strength of my intention to override these messages must be strong and must be able, at some level to get at least one other part of my brain on board. If I am not practiced at over-riding what my body and emotions are telling me I am likely to give in to them, align my thoughts to them and default to old familiar patterns.

Many of the difficulties and issues we face stem from having practiced interpreting messages in a certain way without bringing awareness to them. Our brains have become rigid. We remain unaware of the messages that our brain is sending or how our thinking brain is making sense of them. We fail to notice, question or challenge which can lead to highly detrimental impacts on our wellbeing.

Anxiety is an example of this. Anxiety occurs when my limbic system has picked up a signal that involuntarily registers threat to my system. This may be triggered by something in the real world or simply by a thought. *Anxiety is always a perceived threat – not a real one.* It's a false alarm. If it's a real threat, then I'm experiencing fear and my reaction is more likely to be justified. But my survival/limbic brain can't tell the difference between genuine threat and a false alarm.

Without awareness, a message is sent immediately to my brainstem to release adrenalin which prepares my body to manage the threat. Everything in my system is uncomfortably 'on'. My prefrontal cortex reacts to whatever it links the threat to from the past, reinforces the threat and encourages my body and emotions to ramp up as if the threat is genuine. It will take intentional all-of-brain focus to manage the upheaval that I am experiencing.

An all-of-brain approach involves noticing the messages from all three parts of the brain and choosing to respond to them differently. I need to tell my body, emotions and thoughts that they are safe instead of focusing on the perceived threat. As I alter my response from threat to safety each part of my brain begins to communicate in such a way that increases calm and a greater capacity to manage my distress.

My ability to observe, evaluate and moderate the messages from the different parts of my brain and alter the way they speak to each other can help change my experience.

In other difficult times the pattern is the same. Something occurs in my body, emotions or thoughts which immediately triggers a response from the other parts of my brain. If I am not aware and unable to intervene, I get caught in the trap of repeating what has always occurred in the past.

But the amazing, freeing reality is that I can change this. That through awareness and a desire to break old patterns, I can seek a place of pause, notice the messages I'm receiving and alter how I respond to them. It takes intention and effort and practice, but my wondrous brain is always open to change and growth.

If I am able to tap into the messages from my triune brain, I am enhancing my ability to stop defaulting and make intentional choices toward wellbeing in every moment.

Your brain is completely unique to you. You are the expert of your own self and experience. For you to be able to utilise the best of your brain requires tapping into that expertise. It requires you coming to know the patterns of your own body, emotions and thoughts, listening to what they are telling you and helping them work together to be the very best version of yourself.