

SUMMARY YOU ARE NOT YOUR BRAIN

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Summary of “You Are Not Your Brain” by Jeffrey M. Schwartz and Rebecca Gladding

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Neuroscientists Jeffrey M. Schwartz and Rebecca Gladding challenge the neural wiring that creates these thoughts in an effort to equip readers for fighting them.

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You Are Not Defined by Your Brain

Our minds wander; it's just what they do. But sometimes, they seem to veer off the path into a dark wood, dragging us into places we really don't want to go. When this happens, we often feel helpless to reclaim our train of thought and instead allow ourselves to run off the rails in pursuit of it until our minds are a mess, our mood is ruined, and we find ourselves shaking and battling doubts. It happens to everyone. But wouldn't it be great if we could stop it? Schwartz posits that we can and that it's possible to cut off our negative thought patterns before they spiral into overthinking and anxiety. To illustrate this point, he provides an example of a patient he once helped.

Although he was a successful Broadway performer who was pretty much living his dream, this young man was firmly in the grip of his brain's negative self-talk and had internalized the message that he was worthless, untalented, and undeserving of any good fortune. As you might imagine, this led to the development of some significant problems in his career, including stage fright and an almost crippling fear of rejection that prevented him from trying out for new roles. With Schwartz' help, he was able to acknowledge that his fear stemmed from a traumatic experience in which he completely froze in an audition for a famous Broadway producer. Unable to move, perform, or even speak, he of course lost the audition and internalized this experience as being indicative of his own inherent failure.

This, in turn, led him to reject the truths about himself and his talents which should have been his focus. And instead of bolstering himself with positive reinforcement or reminders of his successes, he followed his brain's toxic lead and believed that his failures were what defined him. As you probably know from personal experience, many of us do the same and it can destroy our lives. But just like this young man, we aren't defined by our negative self-talk and we have the power to reclaim our minds from its clutches.

We're Just Wired That Way

Our brain's "programming" accounts for a large part of why we experience this suffering. It's also the reason we often indulge in toxic habits, even when we know they're bad for us, and why we feel our guilty pleasures are impossible to quit. This occurs because our unhealthy behaviors-- excess drinking, smoking, overeating, you name it-- are designed to provide us with instant gratification as a distraction from stressful feelings. And because our brains are highly programmable, when we engage in these behaviors and experience a sense of relief, we train our brains to associate those activities with happiness.

That's exactly what happened for one of the authors' other patients, a successful businessman who was under considerable stress because his success prompted everyone in his life to seek his advice on their problems. Weary from the constant sensation of carrying everyone else's problems, he began drinking a glass or two of wine every evening, just to take the edge off. Unfortunately, this led to him craving alcohol every time he was under stress, and then to craving it all the time even when he wasn't. And no matter what form your destructive habit takes, the same can happen to anyone when we try to force negative thoughts out of our brains by engaging in "stress habits." This keeps us hooked on temporary releases instead of pursuing genuine recovery and this creates its own cycle of toxicity. Because every time we indulge in these habits, we actually strengthen the negative feelings we experienced in the first place.

You Can Retrain Your Brain

So, if our brain's wiring is responsible for our toxic thought patterns, it might follow that we're just stuck like that with few resources for alleviating the discomfort. However, nothing could be further from the truth! We actually have a lot of hope for cultivating healthier thought patterns and that exists because of something called self-directed neuroplasticity. This is what enables us to literally re-train our brains by constructively focusing our attention and it works because neuroplasticity is our brain's ability to learn new tricks. Perhaps the best part about it is that it's a feature you can take control of, directing in such a way that your brain's neuroplasticity operates in your best interests. So, how do you get in the driver's seat?

You can start by focusing your attention on the things you value and the things that bring you positive feelings. Although that might sound like it's as fluffy and simple as being told to "think good thoughts," it's actually a much more involved process. Because when you actively direct your attention away from negative thoughts and train it onto something good, you're exposing your brain's deceptive messages for what they are: lies. So if, instead of thinking, "I'm worthless and unlovable," you think, "I am a valid person with friends and talents and people value my company because I'm kind and funny and compassionate," you train yourself to recognize the inherent fallacy of your negative self-talk. This will in turn help you to dismiss it and remind yourself that it doesn't accurately represent who you are.

The Four Step Method

If you're ready to dive in and start directing your brain's neuroplasticity, here's a simple method you can use to retrain your brain. These four steps will help you to dismantle the associations between your negative thoughts and toxic habits and they're centered around using your attention to practice the four R's: relabel, reframe, refocus, and revalue. However, you'll notice that at no point does this method advocate trying to stop your negative thoughts from occurring in the first place. Because it's pretty much impossible to try and prevent thoughts from arising-- and you'd waste a lot of energy in trying-- this method invites you to simply do something constructive with those thoughts once they show up.

By teaching your brain to instead focus your attention on things that are important to you, you'll actually be applying some pretty cool methods known as Hebb's Law and the quantum Zeno effect. Although you might never have heard of them before, these principles exist to help explain why we create both good and bad habits. For example, Hebb's Law posits that a new circuit is formed in your brain every time specific areas of the brain are activated by repeated engagement in a certain behavior. This could happen when you make a habit of breathing deeply to calm down every time you're under stress or when you have several glasses of wine in response to stress. The quantum Zeno effect functions as the reverse of this principle; it occurs when you focus your attention to pin down those activated areas of the brain and redirect them toward something else. So, let's dive in and learn about how we can rewire our brain's circuitry through practicing each of these four R's.

Relabel

Labels are powerful. You know that if you were ever bullied with a mean nickname in school because you learned firsthand that what we call something has a tremendous impact on how we view that thing. The same is true of attacking our brain's deceptive messages, and that's why the first step is to identify what they are and relabel them. Because let's say that you've just been going through life with these intrusive thoughts popping up at random and you take them at face value. If, for example, your brain says, "You're not talented," you respond by saying, "Yep, you're right, I'm not," and internalize that message as a part of your identity. Relabeling attacks that process on the frontlines by enabling you to turn it around before it ever has the opportunity to become part of your identity.

Here's how it works. Instead of letting your thoughts just spin through your mind, relabeling invites you to cultivate your awareness by taking mental notes of them and telling yourself what they are. This means that when you hear, "I'm not talented," you immediately think, "That's a lie" or "That's a fear" and stop it in its tracks. You can do this by practicing mindfulness. Similar to meditation, mindfulness is essentially the process of cultivating your self-awareness so that you stay in control of your brain. However, it is a process that's grounded in experience, so you'll take a few consistent stabs at it before you can start seeing results.

One great exercise for developing mindfulness is to find a place where you can be alone and feel at peace. Begin by concentrating on the sensation of breathing deeply in and out and, as you're doing so, take note of the thoughts that enter your mind. Without judging them or being angry that certain thoughts are arising, just acknowledge them and return your focus to your breathing. When you practice this consistently, you'll strengthen your ability to recognize thoughts as they enter your mind. Once you've gotten this step solidly under your belt, you can move on to the next stage: identifying the content of your negative thoughts and stopping them in

their tracks. Once you learn to do this, you can take control of your mind and cast these thoughts out.

Reframe

Relabeling is great, but on its own, it's not enough to kick your negative thoughts for good. That's why the next crucial step is reframing your perspective in relation to these thoughts. We have to do this because often, when our toxic thoughts arise, it feels like they're all-important or even that they deserve to control our day. This could be because they stem from worry and we're afraid to not worry about that stressful thing looming over us. This is, of course, foolish because the outcome of a situation won't change whether we worry about it or not, but it usually doesn't stop us from driving ourselves crazy anyway. And that's why we need reframing.

The benefits of altering our perspective can be seen through one example of a patient the authors helped. He often experienced intrusive thoughts which made him feel that if he didn't check certain things at a certain time, something bad would happen to someone he cared about. Although he understood that there was no logical basis for these thoughts, he still struggled with them and continued checking things because it was the only way to temporarily disconnect from his worry. As you might imagine, this habit easily held the power to dominate his life and he was still only able to discontinue it when he began relabelling the thoughts as "false foreign invaders."

Because that gave the thoughts a toxic, alien sort of sound and who would want to surrender control of their thoughts to an evil alien? By taking this first step, he was empowered to move on to the next step, which was reframing the thoughts through phrases like, "that's not me, it's just my brain." This helped him to understand that these negative thoughts weren't real. As deceptive illusions projected by his brain, they existed separately from him and thus, were not a part of his identity or anything that defined him. And when we can do this, we're able to establish barriers between the toxic thoughts and our identities, refusing to allow them to penetrate our minds and hurt us.

Refocus

Refocusing is the next vital step which helps us to retrain our attention. It's necessary because, if you're like me, you often struggle with taking your attention off the things which should matter and devoting it to the pursuit of your toxic thoughts. And because I don't consciously think of it that way, that's part of the problem. If I thought, "I'm choosing to avoid focusing on my work and think about this thing that worries me," I'd probably make more of an active effort to redirect my attention. But our brains frequently prevent us from noticing that and that's why we need to refocus. This step understands that, even with such constructive tools as relabeling and reframing, we may still struggle to avoid going down the rabbit hole of our negative thoughts.

To help with this process, refocusing invites us to identify some constructive, helpful behaviors so that we have a place to redirect our thoughts. It also suggests coming up with a list that we can constantly refer to because it's pretty tough to brainstorm creative solutions when we're in the middle of a negative thought spiral. Some potential activities might involve going for a "mindful walk" where we concentrate on our breathing and our steps as we tune in to the scenery around us; writing down our thoughts as they come to us in a mindfulness journal; channeling our nervous energy into a workout, or calling a friend we can trust to support us. It may even help you to have several potential activities so that you don't feel stuck in only one coping mechanism or find that doing one thing over and over isn't going to refocus your attention well enough.

And as you work towards refocusing, it's important to remember that this process isn't about preventing the negative thoughts from popping up in the first place or even about distracting yourself from them. Instead, it's about active management of your thoughts and your responses to them. Because when these thoughts arise, you're going to do something with them-- the question is just whether that action will be constructive or destructive. So, allow the toxic thoughts to come instead of attempting to repress them and

channel your mind towards healthy activities that will cause them to dissipate on their own.

Revalue

The final and perhaps most important step is to reclaim your image of yourself. Because although we might not be able to acknowledge it while it's happening, your brain's deceptive messages really do a number on your sense of self worth. And when we engage with these toxic thoughts long enough, over time they develop the power to completely distort your self-image. Revaluing is what encourages you to relinquish this pattern and cultivate healthy, self-loving thoughts. And while it might sound like an oversimplification, at its core, revaluing is a decision to view yourself and your life through a positive and compassionate mindset.

However, it doesn't happen overnight. It can only occur after following the previous three steps because once you learn to practice mindfulness and relabel, reframe, and refocus your toxic thoughts, you develop the power to redirect your mind towards positivity. This step also enables you to focus on self-care so that, in place of surrendering to your negative thoughts, you can make decisions from a secure and healthy place that invites you to consider first and foremost whether you're making choices that will be kind to you. One helpful starting place is to ask yourself if you would support the choices you make and the way you talk to yourself if it were a loved one instead of yourself. If you find that you would behave more lovingly towards someone else, then you have a little extra revaluing work to do!

Final Summary

We all encounter toxic intrusive thoughts at one point or another and it's very easy to let them rule our lives. But when we make a conscious effort to understand that these are only deceptive messages from our brain, we can accept that we are not our brains and we can cultivate a life independent of these thoughts. By practicing the Four Step method, we can take back control and re-train our brains to give ourselves a happier, healthier future.



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