

Setting Your Body Free: An Information Revolution

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Why does bad news make us sad? Why does getting a raise make us want to celebrate? Not many people have thought about these questions. They seem too simple, yet in a way they are deeply mysterious.

In fact, the right answer can set your body free, while the wrong answer can prove to be an inescapable trap.

Right now, brain science can tell us part of the story. When someone tells you a piece of bad news ("Your bank account has been cleared out"), a different style of brain chemistry is activated from when you hear good news ("Congratulations, you got the job"). It isn't possible to have an emotion of any kind without various neurotransmitters and other so-called messenger molecules that turn words into brain activity.

Brain researchers have been so excited by this discovery—that the brain "lights up" with every new experience—that only a few people have said: "Wait, you didn't hit on the answer. You made the mystery harder to solve."

And here's why: How did mere words turn into chemicals? Information streams into your body every second. Not just "You got the job" or "Your bank account is empty," but all the sights and sounds of the world. You cannot see or hear anything without the brain being activated at the chemical and electrical levels. Yet no one has the faintest idea how that magical transformation occurs. There's enormous potential here for both good and bad. One person who gets bad news becomes devastatingly depressed while another quickly bounces back. One person becomes manic with good news and starts acting with irrational exuberance (think of the famous line from the movie *Titanic*: "I'm king of the world!") while another person takes good news in stride.

Clearly you would be much better off if you had some control over the beneficial information that could transform your brain into a powerful resource for your own growth.

Recently some breakthroughs have occurred to indicate that the power to transform ourselves is quite real. Chemistry doesn't lie, and ultimately every cell in your body does only one thing: turn information and energy into chemistry. Feelings of joy, happiness and love cause levels of dopamine, serotonin, opiates and oxytocin to go up. These chemicals happen to be antidepressants and enhance self esteem, but they are also immuno-modulators, which means they fine-tune the activity of the immune system

which protects you from infections and illnesses like cancer.

Recently, the hormone oxytocin has been found to be associated with pleasurable feelings and emotional bonding which in turn enhances self-regulation and self-repair at a cellular level in the body. That is the dance of life, whether you're talking about a one-celled amoeba or a creature as complex as Mozart, Einstein or you and me.

The first breakthrough concerns those lifestyle changes we all promise to adopt tomorrow: exercise, meditation and improved diet. Dr. Dean Ornish and colleagues discovered that heart disease can be reversed by a diligent program of improved lifestyle. But now they've discovered that the same lifestyle changes alter the expression of up to 500 genes, and these genes aren't simply beneficial to your heart. They are involved in major disorders and symptoms like diabetes, obesity, inflammation and cancer.

What this breakthrough tells us is that your genes are processing information all the time. They are as fluid in their expression as the brain. Give them "good" information and you will be much better off than if you give them "bad" information.

The second breakthrough is also genetic. At the end of each strand of DNA, there's a chemical cap called a telomere that is like a period capping this sentence. Long telomeres form firm caps and are associated with youth. Short or frayed telomeres are associated with aging and cancer. The same lifestyle changes now appear to strengthen telomeres.

What this breakthrough tells us is that the very structure of genes can be changed by an invisible influence like meditation and stress management.

The third breakthrough concerns the flexibility of the brain. It used to be thought that we were born with a fixed number of brain cells that decrease with time and trauma. (I'm sure you've all heard the public health warning that every alcoholic drink kills millions of brain cells that can't be replaced) Along with this notion of fixed brain cells came the belief that the brain cannot heal itself. But neither idea is true.

Present research has shown that the brain, like every other organ, has stem cells that can turn into new neurons as needed. Also, the brain is quite capable of remarkable healing, as shown in the vastly improved recovery of stroke patients. Finally, by forming new connections throughout life, we imprint our brains with neural pathways that allow new skills to be learned: that's why you can teach yourself French at any age, or take up tightrope walking.

This last breakthrough, known as neural plasticity, tells us that the brain is incredibly adaptable to new experiences. In fact, it changes with each new beginning.

If you take all these disparate findings, it becomes possible to reinvent your body, and the first step is to set it free from fixed ideas. Feed your body with new information and energy of the right kind. Those lifestyle changes are a good start. So is the following meditation:

Sit still with your eyes closed in a quiet place that is free of distractions. Place your attention on your heart, and as you breathe, see a gentle light going in and out of your heart. Do this for a few minutes until you are comfortable with the process. Now with each in-breath, let the light remain in your heart. With each out-breath, see your heart expand as a field of light. Each time you breathe, gently let the heart expand more. When you feel your heart light filling your whole body, be present with that feeling for five minutes.

As you do this simple heart meditation, you will be nourishing every cell with a gentle flow of peace and calm. Feel the stress melt away as your body relaxes. If you want, you can introduce a reassuring thought: I am loved, I am safe, I belong. Any positive intention will do. The effect of an intention is to alter the flow of information that enters every cell. Thus the reinvention of the body turns out to be natural, easy and subtly powerful. Your body is the sum of all the information you have put into it since birth. Once you know that the stream of information is under your control, what better way to set your body free?

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