



UNF*CK YOUR BRAIN

**USING SCIENCE TO GET OVER
ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, ANGER,
FREAK-OUTS, AND TRIGGERS**

FAITH G. HARPER, PHD, LPC-S, ACS, ACN

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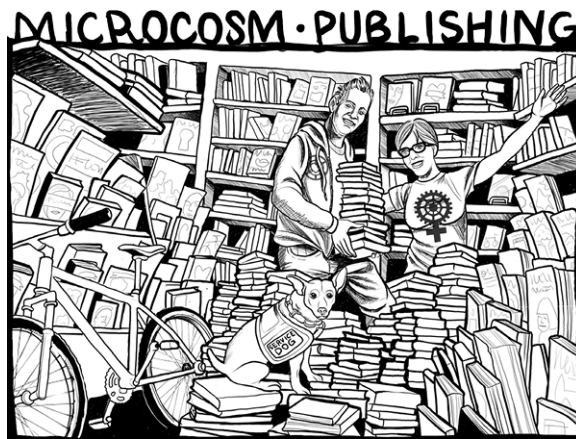
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Introduction

How do our brains get fucked up? Let us count the ways.

Anger, depression, anxiety, stress, traumatic grief, substance use, crazy-ass behavioral patterns, dumb-ass relationship choices.

Or as someone said to me recently... “Yeah, that’s just a typical Tuesday.”

So much of what we call mental illness is really a case of brain chemicals gone batshit. And most of this comes from the stressful and traumatic life events we cope with.

We used to hold our poor genes accountable for all the different ways we responded to an environment of stress and trauma. But recent research shows that only two to five percent of the diagnoses people struggle with come from a singular, faulty gene. So we know that the cause of trouble is waaaaaaaay more likely to be our environment and how we cope with it.

These things—anger, depression, the rest of it—are **adaptive strategies**. If you don't believe anything else I have to say, I hope you believe this part. These feelings are normal. We're wired for self-protection and survival, and that's exactly what your brain is doing when it's acting all fucked up.

Our behaviors are responses to the bullshit we have to deal with day in and day out. Our brains respond not just to big, life altering traumatic events but also to day to day toxic relationships and interactions...the small ways people push our buttons, violate our boundaries, and disrespect our need for safety. It's a hot mess combination of the two.

And THEN feeling fucked up becomes a vicious cycle. We feel weird and crazy for feeling weird and crazy. We feel like we are weak. Or broken. Or fundamentally flawed. And *that* is the most helpless feeling in the world. Fundamentally flawed means un-fixable. So why bother trying?

But what if you could understand where all of those thoughts and feelings are coming from? And understand how all the shit going on in your head came to be? What if it were actually entirely understandable? That means it might actually be **FIXABLE**.

This is important shit. We are way more likely to get better if we know why we are having a certain problem rather than just focusing on the symptoms. If we treat stress, anxiety, or depression, for example, without looking at some of the *causes* of the stress, anxiety, and depression, then we aren't doing everything we can to make things **ACTUALLY BETTER**.

It's like if you get a rash (bear with me, gross analogy, I know). You can treat the rash and maybe even make it go away, but if you don't figure out what you were allergic to? Continued issues with rashes are pretty likely.

Same with the brain. If you can understand better why you are doing the things you are doing, the getting better part gets way easier. And it doesn't have to be explained in a super-complicated fancy-pants way to make sense and be useful.

I'm a therapist. A licensed counselor with additional certifications in sexology, integrated life coaching, and clinical nutrition. I'm also a board supervisor and I teach classes all around the state. I'm a trauma-informed therapist, which means I do treat the trauma along with the rest. This does two things:

1. It means I'm actively avoided at parties
2. My clients seem to get way better, way faster than the clients of my colleagues who don't incorporate trauma work and awareness into their practice

I'm not being all self-congratulatory here. My clients do ALL the fucking work, I'm just the coach. I hold up the huge banner that says "Run this way, Forrest!" at the proper end zone.

I've been in the mental health field for enough decades now for you to say "*Damn, you're old,*" and I can tell you that our current understanding of trauma is fairly new. Several years ago I worked for a program that was the first in town to run trauma recovery groups. In those groups, I saw that focusing on working through trauma histories, rather than the labels we attached to them (depression, anxiety, addiction, etc.) helped people get better. Since that time I trained in several more trauma treatment modalities, and helped several agencies and programs move into using a trauma informed treatment model.

I'm currently working in private practice and my focus is on relationships and intimacy. Guess what the biggest issue I run into is? Trauma history. It rears its ugly head up everywhere. I found that when I explained everything that was going on in a way that was simple, my clients would say "Oh, shit! That makes sense!" This book exists because nobody else had smushed all that stuff together in a way that is simple and practical. And I have seen how understanding all this shit helps people figure out the getting better part way more quickly..

This may be bad for business, but I don't think everyone needs therapy. I hope everyone includes some kind of wellness work in their lives, but we each have to find the route that makes the most sense for us. Some people meditate, some people exercise, some people have a life coach, and some people see a therapist. Some people do something entirely different. It's all good.

Because, hey...you do you. Whatever that ends up being, I'm convinced that everything works better if you understand the why part. And the end-goal of the doing things differently, whatever that thing may be.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book is for the people who ask "But, *WHY?*" all the time. The people who annoyed the crap out of the adults around them when they were little kids by asking questions about how the world worked so they could understand their place in it. Because the *why* is REALLY NEEDFUL INFORMATION.

This book is for all the people who fucking HATE being told what to do by other people. Who just want the tools and the information that they need to figure out what to do for *themselves*. You may be figuring this shit out by yourself or with a rock-star therapist who knows better than to boss you around. Either way, you know you are in charge of your own fucking life when it comes down to it, because you are sure as hell responsible for all the consequences.

This book is for the people who are fucking tired of hearing or thinking that they are just crazy. Or stupid. Or lazy. Or “too sensitive.” Or just need to “get over” themselves. Who are tired of feeling bad, but even more tired of other people thinking they *enjoy* feeling bad. Like anyone would choose misery. Like they think you are just refusing to get better. Like you want to be miserable. Of fucking course you don’t. But you’ve been stuck, and with no idea why.

So this book is about the why you are miserable so you can do something about it.

WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN IN THIS BOOK?

So, ok. You’re thinking: *That’s all well and good, fancy doctor lady. How is this book going to help? What makes this book all kinds of special and different from the eleventy-billion other self-help books toppling off my bookshelves already? I’m skeptical as fuck right now.*

Word. You should be. My bookshelves are crammed full, too. I’ve probably read most everything you’ve read.

This book is different, for serious.

First up? I’m gonna lay some science on you. Not complex, dry, boring-as-a-box-of-rocks science, but “*Holy shit, that makes sense, how come no one ever explained it to me like that before???*” science. I found in my private practice that it DOESN’T take twelve years of college and two hundred thousand dollars of student loan debt to understand this shit. I can generally explain what you need to know about what’s going on with the brain in about five to ten minutes (or an equal number of written pages, as the case may be).

Second? I’m not gonna lay all this brain science shit on you and then say “Yeah, that’s fucked up...sucks to be you” and walk away. I’m going to go through a lot of advice that is actually practical and doable for getting better.

Not everyone has time for an *Eat, Pray, Love* type of retreat (and clearly, I'm not at all jealous or anything). Most of us have to get up every day, deal with real life, and try to figure out the getting better part during that process. Getting better doesn't mean you don't have to keep doing your own laundry. So we are going to DIY this shit like rock stars. Because you know what? The situation isn't hopeless. YOU aren't hopeless. GETTING BETTER HAPPENS. If you were a client at my office, we would be wrestling these demons back into submission together. This is the next best thing. And it's the shit that works.

Third? I'm going to go through a lot of the treatment options out there. I'm not against medication and Western care...BUT I do believe they belong in their proper place as one of many treatment options. Holistic care means the *whole fucking person*. And we have to build a plan that works for us. For example, my best line of defense is eating healthy, being forced to exercise now and then, taking herbal supplements, and embracing acupuncture, meditation, massage, and pedicures as part of my wellness regime. And I will fight anyone *to the pain* (yes, *Princess Bride* reference) over my belief that pedicures are therapeutic. For my son, it's football, weightlifting, grounding exercises, meditation, a highly structured school environment, neurofeedback, and a combo of both supplements and Western meds. We all have unique needs. Pedicures, strangely, are not on his list. So I will throw in a lot of options you maybe haven't heard about in order to help you create your own plan of attack.

And throughout the book there will be mini-exercises that will help you process the work that you are doing. It's not homework, you don't have to pass a final exam. But having ways to process all the stuff that may come up for you is important. I'm not about to have you carrying my book around with your entrails hanging out because it eviscerated you, FFS. Don't use it if you don't need it. But it's there if you do.

Take Action: Taking Your Own Temperature

How often in life have you genuinely been given permission to feel what you feel? Rarely to fucking never is my bet.

This book is all about working through the types of shit that get in the way of us having the lives we want and the sense of purpose and peace that we crave. The type of bullshit we call traumatic events. It's also for people with huge stress responses, anxiety, grief, anger, depression, and/or addictive behaviors—all the coping skills we develop to get through life without trying to end it.

And that makes for stressful reading. Some paragraph in here may end up sucker punching your ass because it hits a fundamental truth about your life and experience. And your brain isn't gonna be happy with those feels. Your brain may be all "Fuck this noise and toss that book."

Because we are generally told not to feel negative emotions. They are bad and to be avoided. And we're going to go further into why that is complete bullshit.

But in the meantime, it can be really helpful to tap into what you're feeling. Take your own temperature, so to speak. And have an action plan for if it gets too high. You are going to learn more exercises that you can incorporate later on in this book. But let's start with the simplest first.

Shut your eyes right now and notice:

- *What's going on in your body?*
- *What are you thinking? (It may not be actual thoughts but flashes of memory tapes playing.)*
- *What are you feeling in response to that? Name those emotions. Rate the severity of them.*
- *Now what do you notice is going on physically, in your body?*
- *And, seriously, what other shit are you dealing with in your everyday life that's either helping you cope or making it worse?*

This exercise might be really hard for you. Lots of people have no fucking clue how they feel. And that's OK, too. You've been trained to be disconnected from that. Told what you felt was wrong. That you weren't allowed.

So if you don't know...acknowledge that, too. You may find as you do this particular exercise over time, you will start connecting to what you feel again. Not knowing does NOT make you a self-help book drop-out. It's just more vital information about where you are right now.

All this exercise does is give you back your power to own what is going on inside you.

You have permission to feel what you feel.

Learning to reconnect with the reality of your experience will help you gather the resources you need to move forward. Because you deserve to. We should honor the past, we should remember it, and we should respect what it has taught us. But we don't have to keep living there. That house is crumbling and toxic and far too small to contain you. It doesn't support your present experience and it sure as fuck doesn't fit into your future goals.

**PART ONE:
THIS IS YOUR
BRAIN ON TRAUMA**



PART ONE: This Is Your Brain on Trauma

Chapter 1: How Our Brains Get Fucked

Short answer? Trauma.

This book is essentially all about **trauma**. And our traumatic responses, life bullshit, and other-people's dickitude that gets in the way of us kicking ass at life. It's also about how we create coping strategies that deal with this bullshit that fancy doctor people call anxiety, depression, addiction, anger, etc.

These strategies are essentially part of the whole complicated process of your brain responding after shit goes down in your life. The brain is really just trying to do its job by protecting you the best way it knows how. But the brain often ends up being a not-particularly-helpful asshole instead. It's like your friend that offers to beat the shit out of anyone who upsets you. Gratifying, but not helpful in the long run.

This book is also about **general life bullshittery and other-people's dickitude**. The shit that might not be traumatic, per se, but isn't making anything any easier. The ways we manage stuff that isn't full blown trauma...but sure as fuck isn't kittens, rainbows, and teddy bears. Like with trauma, the coping skills we create for THESE situations tend to be less and less useful over time and downright exhausting.

The good news is, no matter how long you've been stuck in this quicksand, you CAN rewire your response and unfuck your brain.

WHY IS MY BRAIN A BIG, HOT MESS?

We have a tendency to separate mental health from physical health. As if they don't affect each other in a *continuous fucking feedback loop*, or something.

Stuff we learn about the brain itself generally falls under the "physical health" category. Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors fall under the "mental health" category.

So where does this thinking and feeling fit in our body? Our mind seems to be this helium balloon floating over our heads at all times. We are holding

on to the string, maybe, but it isn't really part of us (though we are still held accountable for all of it).

That image of a disembodied brain isn't helpful. It doesn't make one bit of sense.

And what we actually know about the brain is this: it at least somewhat lives in our gut. Unique microorganisms reside there that communicate so consistently with our actual brains (through the gut-brain axis...an actual real thing) to the point that they are referred to as a second brain. One that plays a huge role in guiding our emotions. Ever had a gut reaction? Yeah, that's a real thing.

Which is to say, instead of being a thing that's barely tethered to us and gets us in trouble all the time, our mind actually lies deep in the middle of our body, acting as a control center, taking in tons of information, and making decisions before we are even aware that a decision needs to be made.

Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors come from HERE. They are rooted deep in our physical bodies, in how our brains perceive the world around us, based on past experiences and current information. So it might be the understatement of the decade to say that knowing what's going on in your brain and how all that shit works is HUGE. And when we totally get all that, we see that how we interact with the world around us is a completely normal response when we take into account brain functioning and our past experiences. If all is bopping along and the landing is smooth, we don't notice any problems. But when we have a rough landing? When brain-traffic control doesn't manage its shit properly, we see the effects:

- Freaking the fuck out
- Avoiding important shit we need to take care of
- Feeling pissed off all the time
- Being a dick to people we care about
- Putting shit in our bodies that we know isn't good for us
- Doing shit we know is dumb or pointless or destructive

None of these things are fucking helpful. But they all make sense.

As we navigate the world, nasty shit happens. The brain stores info about the nasty shit to try to avoid it in the future. Your brain has adapted to the circumstances in your life and started doing things to protect you, bless it. Sometimes these responses are helpful. Sometimes the responses become a bigger problem than the actual problem was. Your brain isn't TRYING to fuck you over (even though sometimes it totally does).

And even if you aren't dealing with a specific trauma? Adaptive coping strategies, bad habits, and funky behaviors all wire in similar ways. And research is showing that these issues are actually some of the easier ones to treat in therapy...if we address what's really going on, rather than just the symptoms.

I have found that one of the most helpful things I do as a therapist is explain what is going on inside the brain and how the work we are doing in therapy is designed to rewire our responses to certain situations.

The strategies we work on in therapy (and the strategies and skills people figure out for themselves) are designed to wire the brain back to processing information without triggering some kind of crazy overreaction. This overreaction is our brain's way of adapting and protecting us whenever it perceives a situation as a threat...so we are prepared to do whatever we need to do to stay alive. Battle brain ACTIVATE. Even if the "enemy" is just some rando next to you at the bookstore who has no idea they just triggered you.

If we can regain control, then we can respond to these perceived threats in the safest, most rational way possible.

Lemme explain what I mean by that.

BRAIN 101

So if any part of the book is complicated, it's this part. Because brains are pretty fucking complicated. But this part will only get as complicated as

absolutely necessary to explain the shit you are wanting to know about what's going on. So hang with me, we got this.

The prefrontal cortex (we'll call it the PFC), essentially the front part of your brain, is the part that is in charge of **executive functioning**, which includes problem-solving, goal-oriented behaviors, and managing social interactions according to expectations of what is "appropriate." Essentially, executive function is just straight up thinking.

It's sort of behind your forehead (which makes sense with the name, right?). This is the part of the brain that evolved the most recently, and is the part that makes us the most different from other species. This is the part of the brain that is in charge of receiving information from the world and managing our thoughts and actions accordingly.

The prefrontal cortex is also the part that takes the longest to develop as we grow up. It isn't at full capacity until we are in our mid-20s. That doesn't mean that it doesn't exist in children, adolescents, and young adults. And it sure as hell doesn't mean you have a free pass on doing stupid shit if you are younger. But it does mean all our brain wiring creates new and more complex communication networks—new pathways for communication—as we get older and wiser. And if it all goes well, the PFC continues to work better and better—a definite benefit of aging.

Hold on to that *if it all goes well* part for me, though.

So the prefrontal cortex is the part that is theoretically in charge.

And the prefrontal cortex is, understandably, highly connected to the rest of the brain. The ventral portion (which is just, you know, the *backside* of the PFC...the PFC booty, so to speak) is directly linked to an entirely different area of the brain...the part that stores emotions (more on that mess inna second). Additionally, the entire PFC receives feedback from the brainstem arousal systems (don't worry, more on that later, too).

So whatever information is being sent to the PFC from these other parts of the brain impacts that whole thinking thing. There is a region of the PFC

called the anterior cingulate cortex. The job of this region is to manage the dialogue between the PFC (think-y brain) and the limbic system (feely-y brain). The ACC manages the convo in the brain between what we know and what we feel...and then make suggestions on what we should do about the whole mess.

And our wiring in that area is fucking WEIRD. The brain cells here are called spindle neurons...they are long, leggy supermodels instead of short and bushy like they are everywhere else. These fuckers can haul some serious ass, to boot. They send signals way faster than the rest of the neurons, so you are hit up with an emotional response fast.

Why those and why there? Only humans and great apes have spindle neurons. A lot of scientists think that they are part of our evolution to higher cognition.

In order to think more, we have to feel more. And then take both into account when making decisions. Emotions are just as important for our survival as thoughts. And you are totally seeing where I am going with this already.

THE ASSHOLE AMYGDALA

So that middle-ish part of the brain that I mentioned? The part doing the tango with the PFC booty? That's the limbic system. This portion is buried a bit in the folds of the brain, behind the PFC. If the PFC does the thinking part, the limbic system does the emotions part. And a lot of that emotions part has to do with how we store memories.

The amygdala and the hippocampus are two key parts of the limbic system. Most of what we now know about how trauma affects the brain is tied into research about the amygdala. The amygdala's job is to relate memories to emotions. True dat. But, to be more specific, the amygdala has been found to only store a *specific* kind of memory, not all of them. The amygdala doesn't give a shit where you left your car keys. The amygdala's function is to manage *episodic-autobiographical memory* (EAM). Essentially this is

the storage of event-based knowledge. Times, locations, people. Not your great-aunt's banana pudding recipe. Your stories about the world and how it works. *The shit that happens to you.*

So why the fuck is this important? Episodic memories get stored in the hippocampus as our stories—our interpretation of events with our emotional responses attached to them. These are memories that are tied to serious emotional reactions. If something happened in your life that was really significant to you, the emotions tied to that memory become attached like cat hair or static cling. So when we have an emotional response in the future, the amygdala immediately pulls this EAM file in order to decide how to respond.

What fires together, wires together.

Say you got flowers. Flowers are excellent, right? Sure...if your past memories of getting flowers were happy ones. Maybe your partner gave you flowers once and then proposed. So when you're getting flowers in the future, seeing flowers, driving by a flower delivery truck? Nice feelings.

But say you got flowers when a loved one died...terribly and suddenly. Some nice person knew you were hurting and sent you flowers. But now even the smell of flowers may make you queasy.

The amygdala had turned the memory of flowers into an *actual mnemonic* for certain emotions. A mnemonic like ROY G BIV to remember the colors of the rainbow or "Every Good Boy Does Fine" to remember the note breakdown on a musical scale. Shit I've not been able to unlearn from grade school.

The amygdala's job is to make sure you don't forget things that are very important. Remembering important-good is awesome. Nobody bitches about nice memories. Constant memories of important-bad can sucketh muchly.

It sucks because the amygdala doesn't really discriminate super well, especially when it's trying to protect you. It ROY G BIVs your ass into

equating flowers with death. And then you're walking down the street on a spring day and smell the flowers blooming in your neighbor's garden. And suddenly you feel like you've lost your fucking mind, because even though your body is still in your neighbor's garden, your brain is back at your loved one's funeral.

FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR FREEZE...IT'S THE BRAINSTEM!

And that brings us to the last part of our brain convo, where we talk about one final part of the brain...the brainstem.

The brainstem is the very base of the brain (makes sense, right?). It is the first part of the brain to evolve into being, and the part that attaches to the vertebrae in our neck and back. You've seen how the brain looks like a bunched up mass of overcooked pasta, right? This is the part of the brain that is starting to untangle itself from the rest of the noodles, straighten out a bit, and transition into being your spinal cord.

The brainstem is our fundamental survival tool. While cardiac muscles regulate basic needs like the *breathing in and out* and the *heart going pump pump pump* all day long, the brainstem controls the rate, speed, and intensity. So it will ramp up for a panic attack, for example. Because PAYATTENTIONWEMIGHTBEDYINGFFS. You know, the important stuff.

Being alert, being conscious, being aware of our surroundings? Brainstem tasks.

So when the brainstem is saying "OW OW OW MOTHERFUCKER" or "Danger Will Robinson!" it is actually flooding the prefrontal cortex with a bunch of neurochemicals that change how the PFC operates.

The brainstem may be a basic bitch, but it is sure as hell in charge of a lot.

When the brainstem senses danger, the behavioral actions of the prefrontal cortex become FIGHT, FLIGHT, or FREEZE.

Fight is BEAT THEIR ASS BEFORE YOUR ASS GETS BEAT.

Flight is GET THE FUCK UP OUT OF HERE THIS ISN'T SAFE.

And Freeze is IF YOU PLAY POSSUM AND DON'T RESPOND AT ALL MAYBE ALL THIS WILL GO AWAY.

Don't get me wrong...these are essential survival tasks when something dangerous is going on. They are *crazy important* to our survival. This whole process is our emergency broadcast system, replete with electronic beeping in the background.

The prefrontal cortex takes in some outside information. The amygdala says I REMEMBER THAT! LAST TIME THAT SHIT HAPPENED, IT HURT! HURT SUCKS! And the brainstem tells the prefrontal cortex GET THE FUCK UP OUT OF THERE! WE DON'T LIKE TO HURT!

So we say "Peace out, threatening situation, gotta jet!" Or we fight back. Or we freeze up and play dead and hope the situation passes us over. All kinds of things can feel threatening...like a final exam or a bullshit work deadline. But those don't need a HOLY SHITBALLS IMMA GONNA BE A DINOSAUR SNACK response. Except the brainstem evolved to avoid being a dinosaur snack and NOT to deal with bullshit traffic and people who hit the heels of our feet with their shopping carts at the grocery store (though, you could totally argue the point that they are bigger shitheads than hungry dinosaurs).

SQUISH IT ALL TOGETHER? WE GOT STORYTELLING BRAINS

We all understand this to a certain extent, I think. The idea that human beings are storytellers, that is. But only to a certain extent. Because we don't really talk about the fact that this is an actual, evolutionary function. Partially because this is pretty new research, and also because it's kinda weird, when you think about it.

We don't just tell stories because we want to...we HAVE to. It's a biological human drive. In fact, we are so wired to tell stories that we even do it in our sleep. This is why we dream.

The brain has a default mode. Everything essentially has a default mode, right? Some sort of resting state. A light switch turned off is in default mode. When you turn on the light, you activate it.

When the brain is activated, it's to concentrate on some kind of outside input. A problem to solve, someone to attend to, something that needs to be done that requires focused, conscious concentration. The rest of the time, the brain is in default mode. Awake and aware, but generally resting.

Researchers have been able to map the brain in default mode...and here is where it gets really fucking interesting. The brain in default mode is the storytelling brain.

Our brain in resting state is when we story-tell. You've totally caught yourself doing this. You're driving home. Nothing you need to attend to, you know this route so well, you aren't really engaged. Storytelling mode **ACTIVATE**. You're telling yourself a story about what you are going to cook for dinner, or watch on TV, or the errands you have to run. These conversations aren't bullet pointed reminder lists...you actually walk through a story of your plan.

A storytelling brain is an excellent fucking thing most of the time.

- Stories are often rehearsals for life events, which makes them really fucking useful if we are getting ready to field test a new skill.
- Stories allow us to hold larger chunks of information than we could otherwise. The PFC is designed to hold about seven pieces of information (plus or minus two). We try to juggle more than that, we start dropping things off the list. Stories, however, help us hold tons more information because they create pathways for remembering far more than we could otherwise.