

## Changing your Mind with the Wheel of Awareness (adapted by Dr. Ken McGill)

(This is a post in the *Choosing Change* series inspired by the work of Dr. Tina Bryson, USC)

The Wheel of Awareness is a tool developed by Dr. Dan Siegel and Dr. Tina Bryson that among other things, helps us realize two important truths regarding how our mind operates and processes information. The first truth appears on this side of the handout, and you'll find the second truth on the opposite side of this sheet.





Here's the first truth: The experience of troubling, traumatic or "triggering" events in our life could cause mental and/or emotional dysregulation within us, which diminishes our ability to "see the larger picture" beyond the scope and range of the particular stressor that's currently bothering us.

These dysregulating stressors, which are embedded in our life-experiences (and described in the table below), create a type of "mental tunnel vision," where our ability to focus elsewhere (like on solutions) becomes seriously impeded. When in this mental state, we may report feeling trapped, stuck, or frustrated because we "can't think about or focus on anything else."

If the dysregulating events listed below were located on the outer rim of a wheel (hence the "Wheel of Awareness"), and you were situated in the middle or "hub" of the wheel, where the only thing you could focus on was the distressful event(s) itself, then, as depicted in the picture below, your awareness, focus, attention, perspective and viewpoints could become limited to the data and stimuli that are currently dominating your mind.

This focused "attention on affliction" is problematic in that it limits your ability to see beyond your current set of circumstances. This means your ability to render self-care to yourself, or, be open to alternative ways of viewing and integrating information, or, your ability to imagine and brainstorm possibilities with others, or, your ability to work with others to create and develop win-win strategies could be delayed, interrupted, or worse yet, lost!

Which events (there could be more!) are creating distress and threatening your ability to see the larger picture?

			
<p><b>Unintegrated Adversity</b></p>	<p><b>Dyadic Dysregulation</b></p>	<p><b>Posttraumatic Repetition</b></p>	<p><b>Emotional Flooding</b></p>
<p>Distress occurs when hurtful experiences do not receive a therapeutic response in a timely manner. Denial, Dismissal or other Ego Defenses are culprits that interrupt the safe and caring expression of behavior that could help you feel better, which is when actions like this are needed the most!</p>	<p>Distress occurs due to the presence and continuation of conflict in your relationship(s). These episodes "emotionally hijack" you, which means your energy will be misspent and intimacy needs that beg to be addressed will be ignored until a recommitment to safe and boundaried behavior is practiced by all.</p>	<p>Distress occurs because current episodes of conflict could trigger traumatic memories from your past. This type of conflict triggers "fight, flight and freeze" responses and emotional regression, which results in child-like reactions vs. intentional behaviors delivered by the adult part of you..</p>	<p>Distress occurs when emotions like guilt, fear, shame, pain, humiliation, grief, rage, sorrow or hopelessness threaten our ability to feel reassured, safe and grounded. Emotional balance in your brain and body is stymied because the "downstairs" emotions are not being helped by our "upstairs" cognitions.</p>

### Important Point # 1

Distress limits our vision, focus and awareness on the Wheel of Awareness to about 130° of the 360° circle. That means there's about 260° left in the circle that remains unnoticed. Are you willing to look at the remaining part of the wheel, which could be of great assistance to you?



### Important Point # 2

Focusing on the remaining part of the Wheel of Awareness is about 4 – 5 deep breaths away. However, you'll need to psychologically (and in some cases, literally) stand up and turn around to change your point of view. After you've done this take a look at the other side.

**Important Point # 3**

The other 260° of the Wheel of Awareness invites you to view and use the 9 “functions” of your Middle Prefrontal Cortex. This part of your brain helps you to see options, possibilities and solutions.

**Important Point # 4**

Integrate and practice the 9 Middle Prefrontal Cortex functions to regain calm, refocus your thoughts and make collaborative decisions to experience repaired connections and good outcomes!



**Body Regulation**

Regaining calm is the first and most important gift for you to experience in your brain and body. You cannot be anxious (or dysregulated or distressed) when you're relaxed, so practicing activities like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, aerobic exercise or even walking will help you to discharge pent up energy that interrupts your ability to focus.

**Attuned Communication**

When you've regained your calm, pull back to the hub of the wheel and focus your attention only on strategies that help you to “stay in your lane” verbally as you speak to others. Using words, tones and processes that demonstrate you're “cooking with C.O.A.L.” (being curious, open, accepting and loving) helps you to create safety, respect and to facilitate understanding.

**Emotional Balance**

Shifting your vision from the spokes on the wheel that end in dysregulation to the other spokes where your attention is focused on practicing behaviors that create regulation and attunement means you've made a cognitive shift called a “cortical override” with your emotions. The override succeeds because higher-brain strategies are used to constrict lower-brain reactivity.

**Response Flexibility**

When regulation, attunement and balance are experienced in your brain and body, typically more “spokes” (where your focus is on options, solutions and possibilities) begin to appear on your Wheel of Awareness. Taking the cognitive “road less traveled” invites you to explore, look at, consider and integrate viewpoints that are far beyond your current pain or distress.

**Fear Modulation**

Developing awareness of what possibilities could or do exist at the end of the other spokes on the Wheel of Awareness doesn't mean you're ignoring your fear. Not at all. But it does mean that you've chosen to integrate other information and resources that permit you to envision a different and possibly positive (versus fearful) outcome as the adult part of you helps yourself!

**Insight**

Insight that yields perspective, solutions and possibilities is achieved by taking regularly scheduled “Time-Ins,” per Dr. Bryson. These moments, created by silence and prayer (and other spiritual disciplines) help you to reflect, deliberate and be intentional as you “S.I.F.T.” your mind (that is, paying attention to your Sensations, Images, Feelings and Thoughts).

**Empathy**

Practicing and becoming proficient with the 9 Middle Prefrontal Cortex functions means you're getting better at recognizing there's more than one way to look at people and life circumstances. Your insight, helped by your Intuition and by the Values you've elected to live by (Morality), will assist you to deliver the appropriate Empathetic response at the right time.

**Morality**

Aspiring, then living a moral life reflects which values, virtues, ethics, mores and principles matter to you, to be demonstrated in concrete and measurable action(s) at any given moment. Morality, whether intuited or learned, “re-minds” us that we've uploaded therapeutic options that exists on our Wheel of Awareness, ready to help us come to our own and others assistance.

**Intuition**

And with Intuition we've come full circle on the Wheel of Awareness, as this unique part of your Middle Prefrontal Cortex, aided by knowledge that comes from listening to your body, helps you to discern then focus your attention to “take the next right step” toward the part of the rim that results in experiences marked by co-regulation, collaboration and cohesion!