

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?

			
Unintegrated Adversity	Dyadic Dysregulation	Posttraumatic Repetition	Emotional Flooding
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!	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.	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..	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.

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!

The Integrated Nine Middle Prefrontal Cortex Functions

(Child, Adolescent and Adult Goals, Activities and Skills) by Dr Ken McGill, LMFT, CSAT

Do you ever wonder what it would look like if a Child or Adolescent had their Adult Parent/Caregiver deliver to them specific, value-laden behaviors during each of their psychosocial phases of development, to enhance the functioning of their brain, mind and their relationships, resulting in a good Triangle of Well-Being, on their way to cultivating good Interpersonal Neurobiology?

If you're an Adolescent, do you think it would be helpful to be given a "map" that could assist you to focus your energy on what matters now in your life journey and to prepare you with insights and ideas that could help you launch well into the next stage of your life?

Or, if you're an Adult, and life circumstances cause you to emotionally lose it or blow your stack, would it be helpful to be given pointers that could assist you to not only regain your composure, but also help you determine what you might need to give to yourself based on the "age range of your emotional regression episode?"

Based on the research of Dr. Bryson and Dr. Siegel, I've created a chart loaded with information to convey how the nine functions of your middle prefrontal cortex could support a Parent or Caregiver to give assistance and guidance to their child or adolescent during these critical phases of their development.

When we think of our Children, we think of goals that we have for them, so most of the information in the Child's column is goal-oriented that a Parent or Caregiver will want to focus on delivering to them. When we think of Adolescents, we not only think of goals for them, but we'd love for them to be engaged in activities to gain confidence, competence and proficiency, so most of the information in their column focuses on activity. When Adolescents grow into Adulthood and become Partners and eventually Parents, we think of their life experience rewarding them with age-appropriate wisdom and **skill**, so most of the information in the Adult column focuses on skill development. Taken together, if the executive, higher order part of our brain and mind focuses attention on appropriate goals, activities and skills then more than likely you're setting yourself up to produce and experience some good if not great outcomes!

So what you'll find in **each column** (the Child column, the Adolescent column or the Adult column) are suggestions regarding how the nine functions of the middle prefrontal cortex could help each age range to develop "whole brain" strategies to be successful in that particular stage of their life.

Equally, what you'll find in **each of the nine rows** (if you read left-to-right) are insights regarding how that particular function of your middle prefrontal cortex could assist you to focus on developmental tasks that are critical over the course of one's life.

Finally, as mentioned above, when adversity, dysregulation, traumatic recall or emotional flooding threaten or actually hijacks your ability to function as a Healthy Adult, Healthy Adolescent or as a Contented Child, then I suggest you read your rows **in reverse**(from right-to-left) to recall what activity you'll want to engage in (listed primarily in the Adolescent squares) and what goal you'll want to recall (listed primarily in the Child squares) that will hopefully halt, then help you to course-correct from the emotionally regressed episode you may be experiencing.

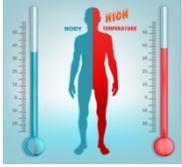
Since we're talking Integration, I encourage you to think about how the application of the nine middle prefrontal cortex functions as written in the Integrated Chart could help you to see the other side of the Wheel of Awareness, as you endeavor to see a whole and more complete picture of your current situation.

Thanks for allowing me to give you my insights as gleaned from the wonderful work of Dr. Bryson and Dr. Siegel, as we think about the development of your Children in this important part of your house!

Questions for the Integrated Nine Middle Prefrontal Cortex Functions (Child, Adolescent and Adult Goals, Activities and Skills)

1. From the Wheel of Awareness, what events or experiences located on the 10:00, 11:00, 12:00 or 1:00 o'clock position on the Wheel are creating a problem for you and causing you distress? What exactly is the problem?
2. As you look at the other side of the Wheel of Awareness, in addition to the Integrated Nine Middle Prefrontal Cortex functions, is there anything that comes to mind that you'd like to integrate or develop that you've discovered that could help you to solve your current problem? What is it?
3. When you think of blessing and setting goals for your Children (or Grandchildren), which of the listed suggestions would you like to develop in their life?
4. When you think of blessing and seeing your Adolescent involved in an activity that would assist them to develop competencies, which of the listed suggestions would you like to help develop in their life?
5. As an Adult or Parent, what goals, activity or skills would you like to develop for yourself, in your effort to love, bless and develop skills that will help you as a person and as a Parent or Caregiver?
6. What practical strategies come to mind that you will integrate and practice regularly so you're able to regulate your body and mind (Walk, stretch, exercise, Yoga, meditation, journal, etc.)?
7. If you've noticed that you've experienced one too many Emotional Regression episodes (or any of the Ego Defenses), what will you focus your attention on in the chart to cease this activity?
8. Revisit the "12 Steps to Changing your Mind with Interpersonal Neurobiology". Which of the Losing strategies will you eliminate and of the Winning strategies will you integrate?
9. Revisit the "Changing your Mind in the River of Integration." Which of the Psychological/Theological strategies will you integrate to help your Child, Adolescent or Adult?

The Integrated Nine Middle Prefrontal Cortex Functions (Child, Adolescent and Adult Goals, Activities and Skills)

mPFC Area	Child (Birth to 12)	Adolescent (Age 13 – 17)	Adult (Age 18+)
<p>1. Body Regulation</p> 	<p>For children, Body regulation begins with the creation of a Secure bond and Attachment. Safety, nurturing words and responsive behaviors convey love. Your goal is to create an environment where calm, connection and stability helps your child to feel soothed, which will be internalized and repeated by them as they learn this skill from you.</p>	<p>Breathing, walking or exercising are activities that help you to discharge energy and remain calm. Going on “automatic pilot” and allowing your emotions to reactively hijack your cognitions will take you to a non-productive state of mind. You’re encouraged to investigate your emotions and arousal, to determine which of your values will help you to engage in helpful/intentional behavior.</p>	<p>“S.I.F.T-ing” your mind is a reflective practice to determine your sensations, images, feelings and thoughts. Others benefit too when you take ownership by taking a “time-in” to engage in this mindful activity, which helps you develop the skills of insight, flexibility, receptivity, empathy and compassion. Regulation creates openness/possibility.</p>
<p>2. Attuned Communication</p> 	<p>It’s never too early to identify and integrate Healthy Adult mode thinking and behaviors, based on smart values that help you to feel good about yourself and maintain internal peace. Practicing inclusive values that help you to establish secure and respectful connections, even when others have different values/beliefs is your goal.</p>	<p>Identifying, adopting and practicing values that help you to be aware, mindful, open, honest, kind, inclusive, empathetic and compassionate, in addition to being in touch with your thoughts and feelings is important! Creating and maintaining an “internal working model” that is flexible and open to change is an ongoing activity that will serve you best in the upcoming seasons of your life.</p>	<p>Attuned communication is protected by a state of mind where memories from the past may intersect with current thoughts, feelings and behaviors, but are carefully monitored for their positive and negative potential. Skill is acquired when accidental or intentional ruptures are repaired by integrating values that respect differences but also impart love.</p>
<p>3. Emotional Balance</p> 	<p>Caregivers who create environments where love, dialogue, encouragement, support, understanding, validation and connection are experienced tend to be successful in achieving their goal of facilitating emotional balance in their children. Modeling these values with your children helps you and them to avoid or eliminate chaotic and rigid extremes that are associated with emotional and dyadic dysregulation.</p>	<p>Adolescents who take daily “time-ins” to “S.I.F.T” their mind are engaging in activities that promote awareness and insight. The payoff for the practice of these middle prefrontal cortex behaviors is the ability to “decipher then decide” what intentional actions they’ll implement when strong and unpleasant emotions are felt. Empowerment occurs when thoughtful choices and healthy responses “cortically override” any reactive emotion that threatens to derail them!</p>	<p>By deciphering then deciding what response you’ll implement when strong emotion is felt means you’re developing skills to create productive and desired outcomes that are focused, inclusive, curative and balanced. Equally, you’ll reduce the frequency, intensity and number of “emotional hijacking episodes” connected to traumatic memories from your distant past or to current circumstances when pain is felt.</p>

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<p>4. Response Flexibility</p> 	<p>Drs. Bryson and Siegel encourage parents to develop family environments that evidence flexibility, adaptiveness, coherence, (useful) energy and stability (“FACES”). The demonstration of these characteristics helps both hemispheres of the brain to develop and function so that intentional, responsive and predictable behavior occurs instead of maladaptive schemas/mode behaviors.</p>	<p>Engaging in activity that brings awareness to feelings of fear, anger, shame or loneliness to be “cortically overridden” (versus allowing your feelings to catapult you into impulsive or regretful behavior) is critical and will determine your success at creating and maintaining a functional “Window of Tolerance.” A larger window coupled with increased reflection provides a greater range of options/responses from which to choose.</p>	<p>Practicing Agape-oriented values that are mutually beneficial and delivered when options, solutions and reasonable and respectful responses are needed is a reflection of a focused brain that wants to achieve and enjoy good interpersonal neurobiology with others! Thoughtful and intentional responses reflect skill, flexibility and they cultivate attunement and compassionate connections.</p>
<p>5. Fear Modulation</p> 	<p>The last thing any parent wants to expose their child to is behavior that creates Disorganized attachments (Come here!/Go away!), in addition to Maladaptive Schemas/Schema Modes (Defective, Mistrust, Failure). It’s good to know that even with painful pasts, we’re able to “reparent” ourselves to develop “Earned” Secure Attachments!</p>	<p>Identifying who I am and how I’m going to live my life are critical issues in the life of an adolescent, especially when you’ve been exposed to bad, ugly or traumatic life-experiences. Identifying and living by values that make sense to you is a great way to use your energy instead of hiding behind ego defenses and getting lost in the same old familiar places dictated by unexamined fear.</p>	<p>It’s the Healthy Adult part of us that comes to the assistance of the fearful and Vulnerable Child part of us to integrate safety versus abuse, listening versus ignoring, true help versus a “habit” of escape, and encouragement to modulate our fear. When the narrow window of fear is opened by Adult responses, we’re able to see the Open Plane of Possibilities.</p>
<p>6. Insight</p> 	<p>Dr. Bryson quotes Dr. Siegel’s definition of Mindsight: “<i>Understanding our own mind as well as understanding the mind of another.</i>” Helping your children to develop the skill of mindsight (insight) occurs when we help them to interpret and make sense of their body sensations, images from their memories or current events, and their thoughts and feelings. It’s great to see them using their mPFC!</p>	<p><i>When current emotions or experiences threaten to “hijack” your mind and take you to personal or interpersonal places that are not good for you, what goals, values, skills or “Healthy Adult” processes could you draw upon to refocus your energy, mind and actions?</i> Hopefully, you’re “uploading” values that help you to feel grounded, think intentionally and behave morally and empathetically; <i>Anything coming to mind?</i></p>	<p>Paying attention (to your body, mind and uploaded values) so you’re able to act intentionally is living in the moment with awareness and skill. Focusing your attention on your “internal map of deliberate behavior” keeps you centered in the River of Integration (versus the sandbars of Chaos, Rigidity or Regret). Repeating these mental processes keeps your focus on neurobiological goals.</p>

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<p>7. Empathy</p> 	<p>Children need to see their parents model Agape-oriented values in their behavior with others. Observing behavior that treats others with love, respect, esteem and worth not only “uploads” Healthy Adult behavior that is safe and makes sense to them, but it also increases the likelihood it will be repeated due to the neural connections that are “firing and wiring in” these very valuable values!</p>	<p>Empathy, Sympathy and Compassion are values to be encoded into your long-term memory, in light of the developmental phase you’re in (<i>Identity vs. Role Confusion</i>), or phase you’re about to enter (<i>Intimacy vs. Isolation</i>) or the emotionally-regressed phase (adolescent) you’ve lapsed into. Dr. Bryson encourages you to “Monitor (sense) and Modify (shape)” your behavior so you’ll create and enjoy dyadic/mutual regulation.</p>	<p>Larger Windows of Tolerance coupled with mental processing tools (like Cooking with C.O.A.L. - Curious, Open, Accepting and Loving) leads to communication that is integrative, focused and inclusive (versus exclusive) of others. These skills help a person to see what others see, feel what others feel, imagine what it’s like to be them and understand what life is like for them.</p>
<p>8. Morality</p> 	<p>Children thrive when parents identify and demonstrate values that facilitate growth that is appropriate for their phase of development. Infants need safety, security and hope, Toddlers need support while Preschoolers could use encouragement and Elementary-aged kids could use validation with their achievements. <i>What do your kids need?</i></p>	<p><i>Who am I and How shall I live</i> are questions to ask yourself not just in this phase of your life but hopefully each day for the remainder of your life. Answering these questions and producing behavior congruent with them will depend upon the values and virtues that you deem important, integrate and become proficient with. I encourage you to live an examined life...you’ll enjoy the benefits!</p>	<p>The timely practice of values/virtues (awareness, responsibility, negotiation collaboration seasoned with Empathy) produce repair in your relationships when there’s been a rupture. They’ll also help you to create and maintain space in your mind for ideas, additional options and possibilities that not only help repair but could facilitate healing and thriving!</p>
<p>9. Intuition</p> 	<p>Children, who are very instinctual, have innate drives that cause them to engage in “proximity seeking behavior.” According to Dr. Siegel, this behavior prompts caregivers to move toward and connect with them, resulting in behavior that helps them to feel soothed, secure and safe. Affirming your child’s intuition validates their ability to hear and trust their own biological messages.</p>	<p>Adolescence is a beautiful time to listen to your body, which is full of messages for you to explore and affirm. Coupled with your values, your intuition will inspire you to examine your ideas, concepts, people and opportunities, and if you’re listening carefully, will guide you to make thoughtful decisions that are mutually beneficial for you and others. Enjoy the mental maps you create with your mind, energy and your intuition!</p>	<p>Listening to our “gut knowledge” that we sense in our body keeps us safe, validates our feelings, informs our decisions and prompts us to act. Integrating insight and truth derived from our self-messages may mean we have unfinished business we need to tend to, and more than likely, we’ll feel wiser and peaceful when our job is done. <i>Is there anything that needs your focus?</i></p>