

TMFRS

LET'S MAKE SENSE OF YER STUPID FUCKING BRAIN

TIPS for Working WITH Trauma Brain

And no longer fighting a neuro-battle you'll always lose

Fall 2021

How to help yer damn Self

Hey friend! Glad you're here, it means you're a real motherfucker looking to make the changes, not just listen to the asshole talking at you.

I'm happy you're here and super impressed by anyone who signs up for what I actively advertise as being painful, shitty work practices. You do have to go THROUGH it to get to the other side, when it comes to trauma brain and emotional memories... but, you know, most folks will choose not to.

So fuckin' good for you.

You're tired of the way things have been and serious about changing your brain, huh? Rock Lobster.

Let's cut my creative shit, and start talking about PRACTICAL ways to use this brain processing priority information, right now.

So, first of all, I think it's helpful to start *noticing* when your head is in a mismatching processing space, versus what you're actually trying to accomplish that day. We need to notice and name the sensations that signal to you, "Yeah, there's no point in trying to grind ahead right now, this just isn't going to work until I work my way through the lower level brain activities."

Save yourself the strain and struggle, give yourself a break, and let your brain do what it needs to do, so you can get to the prefrontal cortex control center again.

1) Noticing "stop" signals

I'm sure everyone will have their own red lights - mentally and physically. But for starters, let's talk about some of the ones I've identified and given names.

Dense emotions

So, we know that emotional experiences are going to be processed pretty early on the list. Our body and brain use emotions to communicate, telling each other how they think we should respond physically and cognitively to details in our lives. Which means they're something our brain is going to pay a lot of attention to, and our body isn't going to "let go of" until the message has been received.

Now, clearly if you're sad, you're going to be too engulfed in grief to focus functionally. If you're angry or agitated, your mental activities are going to be hard to direct and reactive. Things like that.

But, what about the mystery emotion days?

Because sometimes I hit a point where I have a lot of feelings going on... but they aren't necessarily discernable from one another. They're what I consider a dense ball of feelings, which collectively are like a bowling ball burning through my gut. And they're going to take time to tease apart.

If you ever hit a place where your body is FEELING, in the way of about 20 FEELINGS all at once... well, you're probably going to need to take a pause, relax, do a lot of exercising, some gentle "flow activities." Things like that. You also might want to spark a particular emotion with a particular sensory stimulus to start opening and untying those knots. And be ready for all the transient, semi-processed experiential memories and narrative cognitions that come with.

Cognitive hotspots

Another common issue for me is my inability to redirect energy fully from an obsessive “pressure point.” Sometimes my head is way too wrapped up in one event or another, plus all the swirling details that surround it. I can’t make a solid decision or I’m second-guessing a prior one. My head feels hot and under pressure in one area, like someone is scrambling some of my brain cells or electrocuting them with a car battery. Maybe I’m having conversations with myself or “at” an imaginary companion who I’m upset with.

It feels like a hard, yet fluttery, yet pushy area in my head when this happens. Everything else on the planet will be frustrating, overwhelming, or disinteresting. My thoughts will be distracted no matter what I do, and my ability to concentrate on the task before me will be “N/A.”

Stop what you’re doing, think what you need to think, release your thoughts and decide how you’re going to contextualize hard memories. It’s not going to stop just because you’re sitting in front of a computer or showed up to your kid’s birthday party. Worst case scenario, you’ll wind up being a reactive disaster. Best case scenario, you’ll get a case of...

“Wall brain.”

Now, do you know those times when you have the opposite of a cognitive hotspot? You just have a cognitive blank slate?

Nothing is happening? No programs are feeling operable? You’re in a fog so dense that you can’t see a single detail?

And as a result... you can just be left alone to stare blankly ahead at a plant, a TV screen, or a white wall, and feel perfectly content? Anything beyond that is impossible to interact with anyways, your brain is off in some special sensory deprivation chamber where it can’t be bothered.

Yeah, well, good luck forcing an end to that one. SOMETIMES, a huge stress bump can knock my head into functioning in one direction again. Most of the time, nah. There are too many lower level processing behaviors taking place, my head can’t take any new data in, and retrieving any old information is like wandering through a pitch black labyrinth after you haven’t slept for a week.

Wall brain. Take a break. Do nothing. And let your brain process whatever it’s backlogged with, and try again tomorrow.

Intrusive thoughts

Hey, here's one you might actually be able to handle right away. So that's nice. Slightly different from cognitive hotspots, which I see as portions of neural networks getting stickily activated - is Intrusive Thoughts. Which, for me, are more like singular data points that spring up to the top of the deck for no apparent reason.

So, I might be working and repeatedly have a thought "You need to go to the store today."

Yeah, brain, I know... I have eight hours to do that and I'd like to first concentrate on... "But you need to go to the store today."

And I just can't seem to put that thought to rest. It may not be a massive one, but it is enough to completely break my focus on whatever I'm trying to do. And redirecting your energy again is very draining.

The best action to take? Well... take action. Just do the fucking thing you need to do, if it's an easy fix.

Alternatively, indulge your brain in the *idea* of taking action. You know what your head can't do? It can't determine reality from its own thoughts. So, go ahead. Walk through the process of going to the store. Tell your head it already happened by imagining it.

If that's STILL not working... sometimes I like to double-down on the intrusive thought. "Okay, you want me to know that I need to go to the store? Let's acknowledge it. I need to go to the store, to the store, to the store, to the store."

And I just repeat it until, frankly, my head is really fucking bored and agitated by itself. Does this work for everyone? No clue. Find out and let me know.

Nervous system deregulation

You know enough about this one by now. If you're sympathetically overactivated, you'll feel wired and ready to run. If you're parasympathetically activated, you'll feel like eating and sitting on your ass.

As survival responses, they'll both block your ability to use your logical, human brain. And the best way to deal with either?

Well, use any grounding techniques that might acutely work for you.

And, at the root of it, this means you probably want to give your reigning autonomic nervous system the opposite of what they're both asking for.

Calm your sympathetic response with long, deep breathing and trying to pull your energy out of your head and extremities, into your core.

Activate your system despite the parasympathetic signals to shut down with gentle activity and trying to access "exciting" data in your head.

If neither of those tricks work, you might need to reinstate some healthy "balance" for a few days - getting out and exercising, mixed with reflecting and resting - to reset the system. Don't beat yourself up. Don't take on extra stress. Don't treat yourself poorly or fill your body with chemicals. Just give it time to unwind and reach a state of homeostasis.

Exhaustion

The signal that probably needs no explanation... Sometimes you'll just feel flat-out exhausted in the face of running your brain dry of energy, which has a way of also zapping your physical reserve.

If "wall brain" doesn't even begin to explain how you're feeling - if you literally can't hold your head up straight or concentrate enough to see clearly - yeah, there's no point in trying to get higher level work accomplished. Clearly.

You've just run out of power supply and backup power supply at this point. The only option is to stop everything. Hard reset on the system. Go into isolation, shut out extra stimulation, and let your head catch up with whatever is bogging it down. Feed yourself. Feel yourself. And find ways to go to sleep on a semi-regulated schedule.

If you overdo it, you might end up trapped in a depressive land.

So be sure you're still finding balance between resting and regulating your hormones on a 24 hour schedule. As in, don't sleep all day and eat all night. Keep some sense of normalcy, but put no pressure on yourself until you start re-energizing again.

Super! So there are some signs of your brain being disobedient thanks to processing problems. Notice them. Name them. And don't gnaw on yourself if they're taking place. Just take them as signs of mental hooliganry that's meant to be for your own good, even if it doesn't feel that way right now.

Next up, let's talk about some easy brain processing-friendly activities. I'd recommend you do these not only when you hit a cognitive wall... but every day. We have inefficient brains with poor organization, and that means we need a lot of extra care on a routine basis to keep things functioning right.

2. Processing activities

Walking

You know what I'm always going to tell you first... go outside and move. Your system just doesn't process things as effectively if you're standing still. Especially if you feel stuck in a "holding pattern," where you WANT to be doing something different but can't viably make progress right now. Tell your brain you're working on it, you're moving ahead... by literally moving ahead. Go on walks. Jog. Hike.

Like I always say, the bilateral movement of your feet (left-right-left-right) works a bit like EMDR if you concentrate on it. You can feel your body, alive and well, to send "I'm okay" signals to your brain. You can engage new senses by being out of the ugly, cold, franchised human world. You can cut out some social strain by turning off your motherfucking phone and considering yourself "off the grid to pay attention to your own shit."

Do this. I WILL continue to say it in every episode, probably. So let's stop my nagging and get you nodding along, agreeing that this is the goddamn closest thing we have to a golden ticket when it comes to cognitive and emotional health, nervous system regulation, and energetic balance.

Cleaning

Another popular processing activity for brains that need some background activity to do their thing is cleaning and organizing. It's cathartic. You can see an immediate difference from your actions. It's a low-level physical activity that doesn't take much thinking power. And you can do it in a place that feels safe and secure, while also getting some extra energy and frustration out of your body.

Go ahead, externalize some of your emotions to scrubbing the fuck out of the bathroom. Rage vacuum. Ruminant-organize your closet. Spite-donate old clothes to charity. Or, beautify some ugly recent events by finally hanging up those pictures or planting those glass bud vases.

Make a physical change in your world. Get some physical energy out of your system. And give your brain a safe, non-committal activity to catalyze the processing of some less safe-feeling data.

Driving

I guess this one goes hand in hand with “get outside and run around, point number one.” There’s something about movement that’s really healthy for brains. Even if it’s movement via vehicle. You still feel like you’re exiting one condition and taking action to find a better place to be. You also get the benefit of new stimulation. That means new things to think about and freedom from default brain programs that are probably regularly activated from details in your daily environment, just via repeat dual activations of “I see this lamp, while I’m thinking about this person royally fucking me.”

Plus, driving is another one of those half-automatic behaviors that we can find a “flow” in. You’re not 100% tuned into the driving activities. But you’re engaged ENOUGH that your head won’t feel completely overwhelmed and sucked under (hopefully) by whatever it’s trying to figure out.

The caveat to this being, please don’t go driving if you’re prone to full dissociation. You’ll end up lost, having no idea how you got there, or in an accident. Driving is a motherfucker’s best friend for processing, but not if they’re going to have memory blackouts and survival system takeovers that lead them to dangerous situations.

In that case... Can someone you know take you for a drive? Can they say nothing while you just think and look out the window? Try that.

Creativity

So this one is challenging, because our brains are fundamentally not so capable of creativity when they’re ignited by lower level issues. If you’re in a survival state, for instance, you’re really not going to care so much about the quality of this color or the way it bounces off that texture. I don’t think the human brain is too concerned with beauty when it’s thrashing in the face of anticipated demise.

BUT, if you can find a way to pull your emotions into your creative pursuits, you might be able to get some powerful processing done. If you can explore your feeling space in your chest while you doodle, paint, or tangibly manipulate physical materials... this is a nice way for your head to find harmony.

Maybe you just need a timeout to draw for the sake of the texture of the paper as it meets pen. Maybe memorializing someone or something or a time that you miss in a creative medium will bring up some unsettled thoughts and feelings about it.

Either way, creativity is helpful because by definition, it's looking at data points with a different perspective, right? Creativity is out of the box thinking. And that might be exactly what you need to reassess an old event, to see it more clearly, or to see the larger trends that it relates to.

Kickstart a creative practice, and maybe your head will have a different framework for whatever is hanging you up.

Talking

You know, this one I go back and forth on. The issue for me being, we're prone to codependency, so I hate suggesting that you "offload" your mental activities to someone else, in a way. That IS the point of asking for advice or having close life companions, to some extent, isn't it? "Can I borrow YOUR prefrontal cortex, because mine isn't sure what it thinks or how to manage this reaction?"

But, at the root of it... sometimes this IS what we need. An outside perspective to make our dizzy brains trapped on the inside of the issue see straight.

Another reason talking is so helpful is because it literally brings up your word memories and feeling memories at the same time, and forces you to mesh them. You can't tell someone what's bothering you unless you find the language for it. And that, alone, is a huge portion of our trauma struggle. Putting full narratives to the half-experiential memories we're hanging on to.

So, yeah... continually relying on someone else to "talk it out," isn't something I recommend, because it puts a lot of pressure on the other person instead of teaching you self-sufficiency. And that creates codependency, learned helplessness, anxious attachments and obsessions. I speak from experience.

BUT occasionally turning to a trusted friend - someone who you would WANT LIFE ADVICE FROM, BASED ON THEIR OWN SUCCESS (let me make sure that's stated out loud) - can be

really useful for leading your brain through difficult processing activities without losing realistic perspective.

When in doubt, talk to yourself. Say it out loud. Pretend you're talking to someone else. Record it. And cheat the whole codependency trap, while still getting the benefits of auditory processing.

3. DON'T

So now that we've covered some ideas for taking care of a lagging lower-level brain.... I need to tell you some other caveats for operating an effective brain each day.

Here are things you definitely DO NOT want to do, if you would like to feel cognitively clean and directable on a daily basis. Let's make this work easier on your prefrontal cortex, what do you say?

DON'T engage with triggering people

I wish this didn't need to be said, but our fawning and sense of social obligation is strong. Many of us don't realize... we have a choice in who we interact with each day. You DON'T HAVE to keep anyone around or keep engaging with folks who fuck your head.

In fact, I would recommend you do not. Cut the fat. Do it as soon as possible. It's your right. It's your brain. And your brain becomes your life.

Want to keep things active in the human-centered brain? Then keep people who light up your survival and emotional systems far, far away. Your brain and body WILL react automatically. You might be able to sequester the reaction - which is great practice, for sure. BUT it will also come at a large energetic cost, reducing the fuel you have for whatever your actual goal was.

Furthermore, just because you stunted the nervous system reaction... doesn't mean they aren't going to put cognitive moles in your head. Like moths, eating holes into your thoughts, even days and weeks after the encounter.

Just don't bother. If you can go no contact with folks who leave you feeling confused, on edge, self-doubting, or just foggy... do it.

DON'T put bad information in your head

So, in line with those mental silkworms that other people can insert in your brain... be sure you're not shitting up your cognitive system on your own, and then wondering why it feels hard to control.

And by that, I mean, you might want to be more discerning about what you put into your head. To the degree that you aren't conversing with people who flippantly say upsetting, anxious things. You aren't talking to people who offer bad advice or opinions, because... well, look at them. Do they SEEM like they should be offering THEIR brain instructions to anyone? You aren't putting on shitty television programming in the background, because you get a kick out of the chaos and misinformation. You aren't diving into news articles and media posts about negative events.

Be careful about what you put in your head. Because once it's in there, it's in there, linking with other shitty information and forcing you to reorganize the whole neural network, bringing up other memories you don't want and doomsdaying information. And it will remain there, possibly unconsciously skewing all your thoughts and emotions from here on out... until you can rewire it out.

So, you know. Go ahead and don't make your head work harder than it needs to. Don't consume information just for the hell of it when you have plenty of other - more important and applicable - data to work out.

DON'T open unneeded programs

VERY similar to the last point... Besides sticking bad thoughts into your head with novel information you never needed... Make sure you aren't disturbing yourself regularly or contributing to the ADHD effect trauma has on the brain.

If you start your day by opening your phone and flipping through social media, the news app, or your email... You're probably doing yourself a massive disservice. IMMEDIATELY, you're transitioning from a fresh, clean, directable, energy-filled brain... to a tainted, topically scattered, potentially emotionally upset, and now running a bunch of background processes to eat up your mental energy brain.

Think of it this way. You wake up. You have a big important task to do - say, writing a podcast episode. The first thing you do is scroll through instagram for a while, sending your cognitive energy in a hundred directions during the first 3 minutes of being awake as you look at ALLLLL

your interests and hates, strewn out haphazardly before you. Maybe you see an upsetting news article or an acquaintance spewing some hate. Maybe you open a message from a friend telling you some real shit about an ex. Whatever it is.

Now go back to working on that big important task you never even got started. And put your full energy into it. Focus completely and get it done in a timely manner.

Oh, wait, you can't? Because you opened a bunch of survival, emotional, and experiential brain processing activities, and now you're just trying to ignore them in the aftermath? Alternating between lighting up THIS neural network and creating new synapses with trying to engage THAT huge, creative, integrative neural network and reconsolidating THOSE thoughts into one story?

Well hmmm... I wonder why that's unnecessarily difficult. It's because you opened a bunch of unnecessary mental and emotional tasks, and assumed they'd just *poof* close themselves when it was time to concentrate.

Doesn't work that way. Hello energy drain that probably prevents you from getting anything done while you beat yourself up with frustration that somehow your shitty ex is STILL ruining your life and self-esteem.

Like I said, be discerning about what you engage with. There's a huge opportunity cost to everything you activate in your own head - the inability to engage what you're actually trying to do AND the strengthening of pathways you don't even want to keep.

DON'T get into emotional stimuli

Again, building on the last point. You know, maybe don't start looking at old photos or listening to songs from your breakup in 2013 if you want to use your human brain today.

Emotional memories and experiential recollections will always trump your logical brain - or, at least wildly pollute your thoughts. So do you a favor. Don't elicit your own emotions at inopportune moments.

This also includes not THINKING about emotional topics or topics related to emotional topics, because they WILL create a visceral response. If you feel an energy shift start to happen, immediately stop what you're doing and try to navigate back to neutral ground. Again, thinking about what you NEED to get done might help. It could give you the little stress boost that your neurons need to get back in activation order.

Unprocessed emotions and human logic are enemies. Put yourself somewhere untainted by the vibrations of old feelings if you want the highest level of reason and attentional direction. Take a trip to somewhere new if you have a deeply integrative and analytical task to complete. Changes of scenery are great for having directable thoughts. Just don't get stuck in emotional reverberations and wonder why your head is fuzzy afterwards.

DON'T use dissociative or depressing substances

Ya know, things that probably shouldn't need to be said... but if you're a substance abuser like me, these points actually need to be stated out loud. My brain is addictive and it will convince me of lies if I don't keep a firm grip on my supervisory Self concept.

If you want access to your prefrontal cortex, logical, integrative, contextualized, true-to-life-so-far, human brain, please don't imbibe. In pretty much anything.

Obviously, dissociative drugs will help you disconnect from your own self-acknowledging brain compartments. You can just float away from wherever you are on the planet. Which, yeah, actually can be useful sometimes... but when you look back at whatever work you completed, you'll feel like only a portion of your brain was actually working on the final product. Trust me. I have a lot of podcast episodes where only one portion of my personality showed up that day.

Depressing substances will shut down your access to most areas of your head, except the emotional center, that is. So, drink tonight and enjoy the grieving, self-hating, mournful walk down memory lane tomorrow. Or just the fog of feeling de-energized, mentally inaccessible, and likely a bit more socially anxious as you re-analyze everything you maybe fucked up last night.

And even stimulants, which, yes, are often used to boost attention... can have the unfortunate effect of just boosting your anxiety, obsession, and nervous system activity. I think we've all had the experience of a cup of coffee helping, two cups of coffee increasing our agitation, and three cups of coffee making us have an irrationally sweaty panic attack. Or, if you're me, triple those numbers.

Point is, all of these substance effects are moving in the exact wrong direction from what you're aiming for. AND craving them will also degrade your prefrontal cortex's management capacities.

So, just don't do it. Or, at least don't wonder why life is harder when you're not sober.

Wrap Up

And, there you have it. Tips, tricks, and exercises for keeping your human brain - including your top-down, autobiographical Self - in control.

The major takeaway?

Hopefully that with daily practices you can better feel and comprehend what your head is TRYING to do. And then come up with ways to work with it. As well as creating boundaries around what you WON'T do to sabotage the effort.

Let me tell you, this episode is near and dear to my heart because it's what I've had to learn as an over-whelmed student, podcaster, and multiple other job haver with zero life stability. You know how you get that amount accomplished each day? Carefully. With a lot of attention to how your brain functions, in order to get through dense week after dense week.

And that's why I feel inclined to also tell you...

Top tip? Please stop with the social media and screen time as soon as you wake up, or before you try to accomplish anything meaningful. It seriously is a trigger factory, even if those triggers are just opening scattered or sticky thought programs. Help your head help the rest of your head. Stop igniting it with erroneous garbage.

I put all my shit on zero notifications and I use airplane mode a lot. I'm bad at being social these days, because socializing is always the opposite of a good thing for keeping my brain efficient. In the days that I'm more connective, I'm less restrained by meeting work demands. And that's not too often.

SO, not to say that the hermit life is a good one. But being off your motherfucking phone is a great way to rapidly regain 75% of your mental control in the course of about two weeks. Give your lower brain processes nowhere to hide, and you'll get them worked out shockingly fast. Want to MAINTAIN a clean brain? Well, be socially and screentime discerning.

They're a complex trauma brain's worst enemy.

That's it! Hope this helps you now and forever. If I get new tips I'll holler them out. And thanks again for being here, making changes, and caring about the legacy of your stupid fucking brain.

Cheers Fucker.