

Resilience

Welcome



Resilience means being able to handle the challenges of life, small as well as big – especially when the going is hard.

It's useful in many situations. Resilience makes it easier to learn something new and to make good decisions. It also prevents stress and conflicts.

It naturally all takes place between people and in our own minds.

In this programme, you will find helpful facts about resilience for children, young people and adults. You will find useful information (both traditional and innovative) about thoughts, feelings and the brain, plus insight about bullying and how to overcome its effects, as well as interesting stories and some simple but relevant games to try out.

You can also find new inspiration for problem solving.

We hope you find it useful.

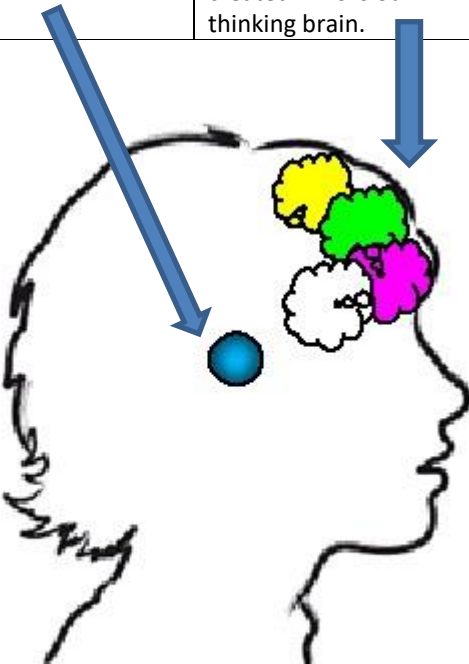
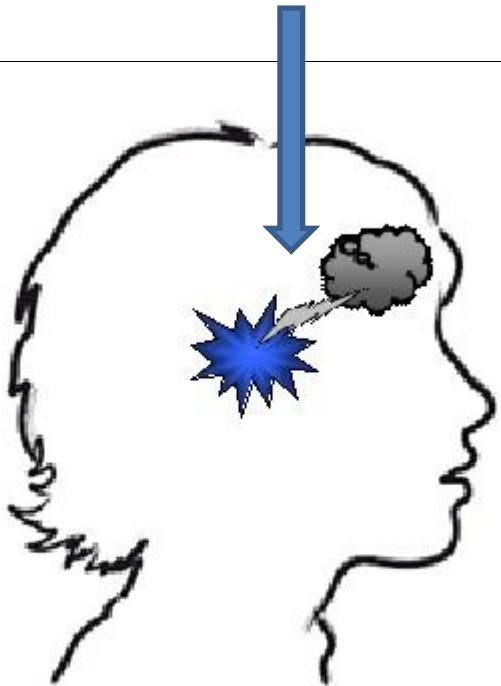
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Resilience and Praise

We wish for each other, especially for our children and young people, that life is happy and fulfilling, and that they can cope with the challenges they meet on the way. Resilience is about handling these life issues, big or small: challenges in relation to other people, in managing difficult tasks, in the ability to stick to a goal, and to resist potentially harmful temptations.

It all takes place between people and in our minds. Some of it concerns the relationship between two important parts of our brains: the **Thinking Brain** and the brain's **Alarm Centre**.

<p>At the centre of the brain is the brain's alarm centre, which checks on dangerous and uncomfortable situations.</p>	<p>In the frontal part of our brain, thoughts and positive feelings for other people are created. This is our thinking brain.</p>	<p>Insecurity and guilt activate the alarm centre. This turns down the thinking brain and it becomes difficult to think and to learn. Fear, anger and sadness can prevail and the body may become sick.</p>
		

Insecurity, bullying, scolding and feelings of guilt activate the brain's alarm centre. When the alarm centre is active the thinking brain turns down. Thoughts about mental and social "survival" dominate. You can become angry, frightened and sad. It becomes tough to reflect rationally and harder to learn something new. The only thing you learn, when you are in alarm mode, is to be vigilant in similar situations. You will not become resilient. On the contrary, you become more vulnerable.

On the other hand, if you are overprotected and never challenged, the alarm centre believes that everything is "dangerous" and you become vulnerable too.

There are limits to how resilient each of us can be in different life situations. All humans have a right to live within life conditions they are able to handle.

A resilient brain

Fortunately, the brain can be trained, so you can become more resilient. When the thinking brain and the alarm centre receive appropriate challenges – neither too big nor too small – the thinking brain can control the alarm centre in such a way that it doesn't become activated without reason. When you have coped with a difficult situation, the thinking brain sends a message to the alarm centre telling it that it was not so bad after all. Following this, you can encounter similar situations with greater peace of mind.

It is important to receive praise when we succeed in everyday life. It's even more important to be praised and encouraged when we practise something difficult. Self-esteem and self-confidence do not come by praise alone. Primarily, you develop self-esteem and confidence by discovering that you can handle challenges.

An upset child who is reassured by a calm and sympathetic adult learns that it is not "dangerous" to be in annoying situations. The child's alarm centre gradually learns to stay calm. The child's thinking brain learns to stay awake and thereby allows him or her to reflect rationally when a difficult situation must be resolved. If an upset child is met by an upset adult, the child's alarm centre is reinforced into believing that the situation is dangerous. This child develops cautiousness and vulnerability and will find it hard to reflect rationally when needed.

When an adult encounters an upset child, for instance if they are crying, naturally his or her own alarm feelings are awakened; for instance: "I feel sorry for the child". This is a perfectly good reason for comforting the child. However, problems will arise if the child learns that it is possible to get hold of sweets or something else they might want by manipulating the alarm centres in adults into feeling sorry. Resilience is also about being able to tolerate others' feelings as well as one's own without reacting blindly.

Resilience is also about being able to accept criticism without falling to pieces, and about developing a critical sense. When we replace scolding with considerate and respectful criticism, there's a good chance that the brain's alarm centre stays relatively calm and enables the thinking brain to use the critique to learn something important.

Cooperation

Children, young people and adults who are able to cooperate, certainly do so. Disruptive behaviour indicates powerlessness; here's how it can be prevented:

- Praise and reward desired behaviours. Also give credit when somebody practises difficult tasks, no matter what the initial success rate¹.
- Avoid scolding and punishment. Instead, ignore the undesirable conduct – unless you have to stop dangerous behaviour. Be calm and hold on! Any consequences should be mild (short timeouts and loss of privileges).
- Listen to the person's own ideas towards solutions. Then negotiate solutions that everybody can accept.
- Offer plenty of positive interaction, which can provide shared enjoyment.

For better or worse, we live in a highly diverse world. Resilience also means being able to cope with all the differences we encounter. Children and young people who, in home, day-care and at school experience that social and cultural diversity is exciting, are given favourable conditions to succeed in the adult world, in which the ability to work together with very different people is increasingly important.

It's vital to human resilience to be appreciated by others. It is a serious matter to be left out and treated as different. That's why bullying is very dangerous².

Practice makes perfect

Most of what we learn in life – as children and as adults – takes practice. Resilience involves learning the fun of practising and getting better at something. We want our children to be successful. The way to success is to learn the fun of practising. It's easy: Give children from a very early age appropriate challenges and duties, and praise them when they practice and test themselves in difficult situations³.

¹ See the stories about patience, on page 52.

² More about bullying and conflict, on page 68.

³ Further reading: A way to success, on page 6. Help someone else, on page 8.

A way to success

If you want a dream to come true, to solve a problem or to learn something new, it's a good, familiar idea to start with the easiest part and become better by moving step-by-step in the right direction.

Achieving a small success builds up fresh energy to work towards new and even bigger goals. It seems to be like climbing a steep hill – one step at a time. It's not always easy; sometimes you need to take one step back and two steps forward. If you keep practising and your goal is realistic, you will get there.



The following nine methods will improve your chances of success dramatically:

- 1) Establish a personal and realistic goal which will benefit you and others. Other people's ideas are less likely to work out quite as well as your own (but bear in mind that small children are not able to consciously frame their own goals).
- 2) Find out what you need to learn to achieve your goal and divide your approach into small parts so you can be quite sure of succeeding during the process – particularly if you are working with problem solving.
- 3) Talk to people with whom you feel safe:
 - a) Who can support you and make it easier for you to reach your goal?
 - b) What kind of support would you like to receive?
 - c) How often do you need support in order to reach your goal?
- 4) Be practical. Whether they're small or big, repeating your actions daily increases the chances of success tremendously. As a rule of thumb, it often takes 8-12 weeks of daily training to ingrain your new approach.
- 5) Work out the best way to calm your brain's alarm centre if you are about to lose control and direction. You can use your body to calm your brain's alarm centre⁴, thus making it easier to deal with your challenges. You can also choose to turn down the intensity of the challenges you've set yourself.
- 6) Be aware of situations that impede your efforts towards reaching your goal and be prepared to encounter obstacles.
- 7) Keep a diary:
 - a) Write, draw or tell a friend what it will mean to you when you reach your goal.
 - b) Write, draw or tell a friend about ideas that come up during the process.
 - c) Write, draw or tell a friend about three good things, big or small, that have happened each day.
 - d) Put yourself to the test, preferably every day: On a scale of 0- 10: to what extent am I on the right path towards my goal?
- 8) Make sure to reward yourself properly during the process. The greatest reward is to see the accomplishment of an action on the way towards reaching a goal. Both credit from others and what you give yourself are valuable. Even when you do not reach your goal, you need to give yourself credit for practising. Credit creates an open and learning brain condition that increases your determination to

⁴ Read more: how to calm down the brain's alarm centre, on page 25.

keep practising, so that you eventually will reach the goal even if the path may be hard along the way. However, be aware that both unrealistic and undeserved credit can be harmful. In fact there is a risk that this might lead to depression, so be honest with yourself.

- 9) Exercise – it creates mood-enhancing chemicals in the brain and makes it easier to learn something new⁵.

If you don't succeed

If a project fails, you need to go back and examine those nine methods to make any necessary adjustments. Lack of success is often caused by challenges being too small or too big, or by lack of practice. Or because you find yourself overwhelmed by the feeling that it's too hard, thus becoming traumatised all over again and paralysed by negative thoughts as you go round in circles. A helpful question to ask yourself when you struggle is: "What do I need to learn right now?" This may help you redirect your focus towards action instead of negative thoughts.

Finally, it is essential to counteract bullying, exclusion and violence – any of which may create obstacles⁶.

⁵ Read more about exercise, on page 34.

⁶ Read more: bullying and conflict, on page 68.

Help someone else

If you have serious problems it can be difficult to help yourself. You may need assistance and support. The guidelines below can be useful if you want to help someone who is having a hard time.

Limits of resilience

There's a limit to how resilient we can become in different areas of life. We all need an appropriate amount of challenges to develop resilience. However, if our boundaries are violated, the outcome can be destructive. Everybody has a right to live within conditions that match with their ability to cope.

As detailed above, positive cooperation can play a vital role in increasing one's limits of resilience.



- Praise should be simple but relevant, and given without any reservation. If praise is followed by a sentence starting with "but..." all focus will be on the implicit critique of this caveat. Praise the person for practising what is difficult⁷.
- Stay calm and react appropriately to undesirable behaviour (for example by a short timeout or removal of privileges). Make consequences mild and time-limited, but stand firm.

The role of a helper

The role of a helper is of course to provide knowledge, inspiration and encouragement – neither too little nor too much. For example, pick some information from this programme that may interest the other person. Make the knowledge more personal by using examples from their own life – perhaps by means of the small thought bubble games⁸.

It's important (especially in the beginning) to focus on activity that makes the person feel better in order to calm the brain's alarm centre and allow the thinking brain to work⁹. But don't expect too much. Be patient – the most important thing for a person with serious problems is to feel that somebody believes in, and is ready to continue to work towards, a better situation. With unconditional and patient encouragement it's possible for each and every person to get better – slightly or to a great extent – no matter what their previous history. Even when everything seems impossible it's still possible to stand firm: "I know it's hard – it's great that you keep working at it. I believe it will be better – so let's keep working!"

⁷ Find inspiration in the story about patience, on page 52.

⁸ Read more: mind games for all, on page 54.

⁹ Read more: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, on page 19.

If it fails

If a project fails, you need to go back and work out what needs to be adjusted according to the above premises and the basic rules mentioned in 'Resilience and Praise', page 3, and 'A Way to Success', page 6. Lack of success is often caused by challenges that are too small or too big, or by lack of practice. People who continuously react negatively are often facing too big challenges. The person may be overwhelmed by the feeling that it's too hard and becomes paralysed by negative thoughts going round in circles. A helpful question you can ask a person in a difficult situation is "What do you need to learn right now?" This can help the person to move their focus from thinking to acting – countering negative thoughts which lead nowhere.

Resilience and small children – even from before they are born

As parents, our biggest wish is that our children will have a good life right from the beginning. We also want them to develop resilience to handle the challenges they will meet during life.

It all starts during foetal development inside the mother's womb. Both stress and feel-good hormones from the mother have an impact on the development of the child's brain. The chances that the child's brain becomes resilient increase when the mother feels good during pregnancy. If the mother



is having a very hard time, there is a small risk that the child may become more vulnerable. This is probably a matter of how resilient or vulnerable the alarm centre of the brain becomes¹⁰.

When you are pregnant, you meet the same challenges in life as when you are not – in relationships, education, work and leisure time. Sometimes, being pregnant and giving birth is also a challenge. Taking care of yourself and each other during pregnancy matters to both mother and child.

The Resilience Programme has a wealth of knowledge and inspiration for helping you to take good care of yourself at all times, including in pregnancy. Just take a look around the website.

After being born, everything that happens around a child has an impact on their development. This goes for resilience as well. Here is an example:

Imagine an infant that lies on the changing table, screaming from the top of their lungs. Maybe it's because they're hungry or maybe it's because they need their nappy changed. Experienced from their point of view, everything in this situation is awful. When a child in that situation experiences has mum or dad to calmly comfort them, there is, in a way, a voice in the child's brain saying: "Well, this is apparently not as dangerous as I thought". The sensitivity of the child's alarm centre is turned down and the child becomes more resilient in coping with their emotions and body sensations.

On the other hand, if mum or dad gets agitated (e.g. cries or yells) because the child is screaming, the alarm centre in the child's brain reacts in a completely different way: "I myself feel bad - and this is apparently *really* bad, since they act out that way". The alarm is kind of "doubled up", i.e. the sensitivity of the child's alarm system is turned up. The child becomes less resilient and more vulnerable. You do not become resilient from yelling and parents' tears; you only become wary.

On our website at <http://myresilience.org/> you can find a lot of relevant knowledge and inspiring ways to help small children to become resilient.

¹⁰ Read more about the Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, on page 19.

Resilient communities

We are social beings who interact with each other, for better or worse, within our small communities – family, friends, work and leisure – and in our large communities – locally, nationally and globally.

Each of us is affected by the resilience or lack of resilience in our communities.

A resilient community is characterised by:

- Physical and psychological safety. This prevents chronic alarm situations¹¹.
- Freedom of speech and openness – preventing narrow worldviews in our heads¹².
- Good ways to handle disagreements and conflicts¹³. A wise man once said that democracy is a civilised way to disagree.
- A high degree of tolerance. Diversity is seen as strength, not as something dangerous or strange¹⁴.
- A high degree of equality. Societies with a high degree of economic equality perform better in every way than societies with massive inequality¹⁵.



If you are particularly interested in this subject, here is a book with exciting knowledge about resilient communities: *Handbook of Adult Resilience*, Reich, Zautra & Hall (Eds.). Guildford 2010.

¹¹ Read about the Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, on page 19.

¹² Read more: Attention – Spotlight of the Brain, on page 12.

¹³ Read more: bullying and conflict, on page 68.

¹⁴ Research by Richard Florida about tolerance.

¹⁵ Research by Wilkinson and Pickett about economic inequality.

Brain, Body and Mind

In this section you can explore how the brain works when we feel good, and when we feel bad. You can read about Attention, about the Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, and about the Teenage Brain, as well as about how your body is able to help your mind and how your mind is able to help your body.

The attention – spotlight of the brain

We think about something most of the time – big or small. The question is: Who is actually experiencing these thoughts? The answer is simple: *I* am.

Every human has an 'I' inside. What this 'I' constitutes is a complex question that we don't need to answer here. For now, it is enough for us to realise that we all have an 'I' that everybody recognises.

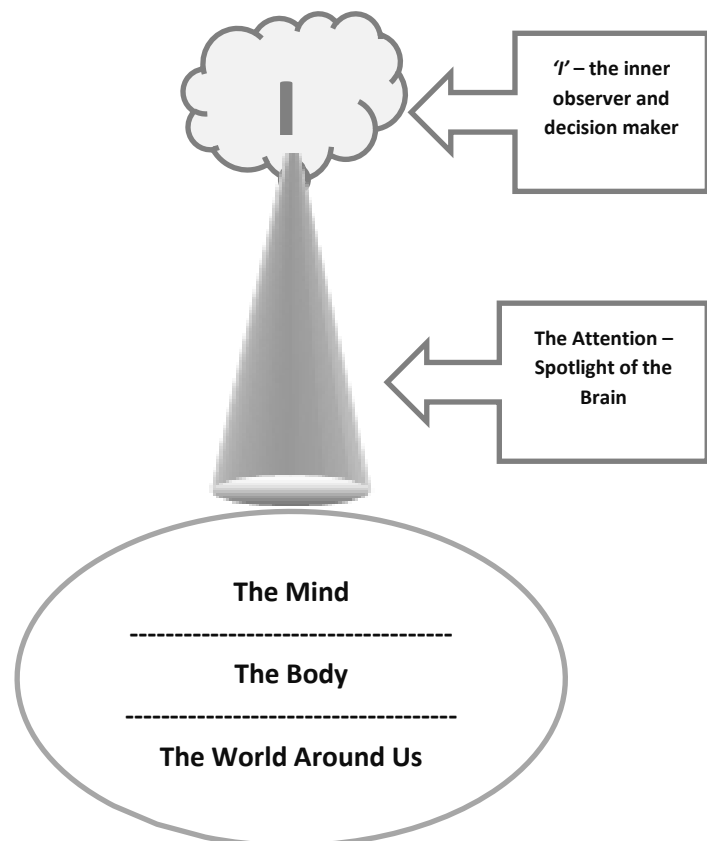
The 'I' experiences the world through attention. This attention is a kind of invisible spotlight that enables us to discover the world.

'Your world' consists of three parts:

- The world around you (people, nature, things), that you can see, hear, feel, smell and taste.
- The body – which you can feel.
- Thoughts and feelings that you experience inside your mind.

It is a bit like the spotlight on a stage: the spotlight highlights what is most important on stage at the moment.

The 'I' experience is what the attention highlights. The 'I' is the lightning operator. The attention is the spotlight, and the stage is the world around and inside us.



Attention and resilience

When you deal with small and big challenges in everyday life it's useful to be in control of your attention. This enables you to:

- Stay focused on tasks and thoughts that are important even though you are surrounded by distractions.
- Release yourself from thoughts and feelings which may be disruptive if you stay with them for too long.
- 'Scan' your external and internal world and discover exciting and important things.

Exercising your attention is therefore a good idea. It's also easily done¹⁶.

A mind-model of the world

From the first moment of your life, you build a mind-model of the world inside your brain. Take a look at an object in front of you and you will discover and experience the object in a second. Close your eyes and you are able to visualise the object even though you cannot see it. You have a mind-model of the object that you can experience as well. More than this, you can imagine things that do not exist in the real world.



Your entire world is inside your mind-model. Your relations to other people – values, rules and beliefs – are important parts of your internal model of the world. Even though we may think we share everything, different people have different mind-models of the world – for better and for worse.

You also experience 'who you are'. This is your self-image – your identity. Your image of yourself is a pattern of thoughts and feelings about yourself that you experience within yourself. A part of your self-image is constant, while other parts keep changing throughout life.

The mind-model is somehow like an inner computer and role-play game. The more varied knowledge and experiences you add and the more you play with your extraordinary mind-model, the more you master. If you remain curious and spend time with very different kinds of people it becomes easier to create an exciting and dynamic inner mind-model.

It's good to be critical but if you become too critical, your mind-model will shrink.

The brain constantly compares what it receives to what it already knows (the mind-model). It classifies what is important and what is not. Even what you read right now is compared to what is already in your mind-model.

¹⁶ Read more: Breathing, on page 32.

The invisible

Thoughts and feelings are invisible events inside of us that we all experience. Thoughts and feelings are important and practical. They can be lovely and exciting. They can also be tiring and unpleasant. Thoughts and feelings have consequences, especially when they are carried out via small or big actions.

Discovering invisible events is naturally harder than to discover what can be seen in the world. Therefore, it's not until the age of 3-5 years that children gradually realise that invisible events take place in their own and other people's heads – that is, they become able to think about their own and other people's thoughts and feelings. From this point it is a voyage of discovery throughout life to understand and use our thoughts and feelings to create joy and benefit for ourselves and other people.

Fortunately the invisibility gives us freedom to think whatever we want. At the same time, this invisibility makes it difficult to know what other people think. We may misunderstand and believe that another person is thinking of one thing, while he or she actually is thinking something else. Misunderstandings may cause conflicts. A few simple rules can prevent this:

- Slow down the pace of a conversation if there is a risk of misunderstanding and conflict. This allows time for all participants to think things over. Allow for pauses as well.
- Be curious to understand. Good questions could be:
 - 'Tell me some more about...'
 - 'Could this be because ... or is there a totally different reason...?'
 - 'What do you think we could do..., right now..., later...?'
 - 'Would it make any sense to you if we try to...?'

When you keep in mind that in a conflict the 'attacker' feels trapped and is actually trying to defend themselves, it's easier to avoid being trapped yourself into a defensive or aggressive position. Instead, keep neutral and thereby help to scale down the conflict¹⁷.

Who decides?

The 'I' can settle on thoughts and feelings from one second to another by shifting the focus of the attention to what the 'I' wants to think about – right now. The 'I' can eventually absorb itself into something exciting and delightful.

However, the 'I' is not always in control: important events in the inner or outer world may attract the focus of attention – even though the 'I' doesn't want them to:

- 'I' can get frightened if something seemingly dangerous happens, with or without reason.
- 'I' can feel unwell if an unpleasant feeling becomes overwhelming.
- The body or head can be aching so badly that 'I' can't think about anything else.

The 'I' holds one end of our attention and the events in the outer and inner world hold the other end. Every second throughout life we find ourselves in an ongoing game of who is in control of our attention – the 'I' or the events of the outer and inner world.

¹⁷ Read more: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, on page 19 and make the invisible visible, on page 56.

Your personal freedom has to do with your decisions towards events in your life. When YOU decide what you want to think about right NOW you are actually practising your ability to control your thoughts and feelings instead of the other way around.

Read more:

The story of the house of thoughts, på side 43

The story of a mind-train, på side 44

ADHD, på side 65

Self-Deception, på side 16

Breathing, på side 32

Everyday meditation - for children as well, på side 17

Self-deception

When thoughts and feelings attract attention, the 'I' merges with the thoughts¹⁸. Self-deception may arise if a pattern of thoughts and feelings takes completely power over the 'I'.

When you are caught by something that you feel is very important, all other thoughts and feelings may completely 'disappear'. In the same way, when the spotlight focuses on a small area of the stage, everything else 'disappears' because it's out in the dark. This can be a positive or a negative experience.

If you stay in this situation for too long there is a risk that everything you experience is interpreted exclusively from the limited 'bright spot' of thoughts you are imprisoned in. There is a risk that you become unable to see other perspectives.

Depression and eating disorders are examples of how a self-image can be completely distorted if you are caught in a fixed pattern of thoughts. Other people's comments regarding you are incomprehensible; you are caught in your own 'light' and other people's opinions about you are left out in the dark¹⁹.

People who feel that they have in truth 'seen the light' unfortunately stay in the dark (religiously, ideologically, politically, cultural or in scientific fundamentalism). It becomes hard for them to experience the world in any other way than the one they have become so strongly fixed upon.

The challenge of self-deception may arise if the alarm centre or the brain's 'reward factory' has gained too much power²⁰. Fear is a feeling that can grow to be dangerous– for you and for other people as well.

We all take on small innocent self-deceptions in everyday life. A serious self-deception – individually or collectively – can have destructive consequences.



¹⁸ Read more: the story of a mind-train, on page 44.

¹⁹ Read more: fear and shyness, on page 66, sadness, on page 73, eating disorders, on page 71.

²⁰ Read more: power: The Thinking brain and the Alarm Centre, on page 19, and the big reward factory, on page 45.

Everyday meditation – for children as well

Across the planet, meditation has been practised for thousands of years, often as a part of a spiritual or religious tradition. Leaving out this fact (with all due respect), meditation is simply a peaceful introverted way of practising attention.

Research has documented that the effects of meditation show up only after a short period of practising. People who meditate live longer and experience:

- A better overview of everyday life
- More energy
- Greater freedom from expectations
- Deeper compassion

People who practice meditation often cannot stop doing it, simply because it makes them feel so well.



Deep rest

Thoughts and feelings are extraordinary events, unavoidable and fundamental to our lives. At the same time they can be annoying. A simple explanation of the positive effects of meditation may be that this peaceful and resting state reduces the pressure on mind and body, and thereby facilitates the self-healing physiological processes in the mind and body. Meditation also reinforces the production of 'wellness drugs' in the body and mind.

People who practise meditation intensively are able to control autonomic body reactions (blood pressure, heart rate and so on) in situations of severe stress. Many top athletes use meditation/mental training.

Mindfulness is a modern kind of everyday meditation that has become quite widespread. Mindfulness is valuable in prevention and treatment of stress. Meditation can also help people who are caught in addiction. A drug addict who had learned to meditate said: "This is a better fix than heroin".

Several elements of the Resilience Programme can be experienced as everyday meditation without religion. For instance playing with the house of thoughts (page 43), the mind-train (page 44), mind-games (page 54), the attention – spotlight of the brain (page 12) and breathing (page 32).

Learn and read

If you want to go deeper into learning meditation, you can of course look for a course or read books. For example Professor David Fontana's straightforward book 'Learn to meditate' and Stephan Bodian's book 'Meditation for Dummies'. David Fontana has also written a book, together with psychologist Ingrid Slack, on meditation for children. It is a fine introduction to the subject and very useful for adults as well. The Institute of Noetic Sciences has published a very comprehensive source of research knowledge on meditation. Many good books on the topic of meditation and mindfulness exist and a variety of courses are offered in many countries.

Be aware that books as well as teachers may be part of a more or less defined 'school', in which the practice of meditation is mixed with beliefs and rituals from the cultural foundation of the specific 'school'. It is essential that you find a form of meditation that feels right for you, your temperament and your outlook on life.

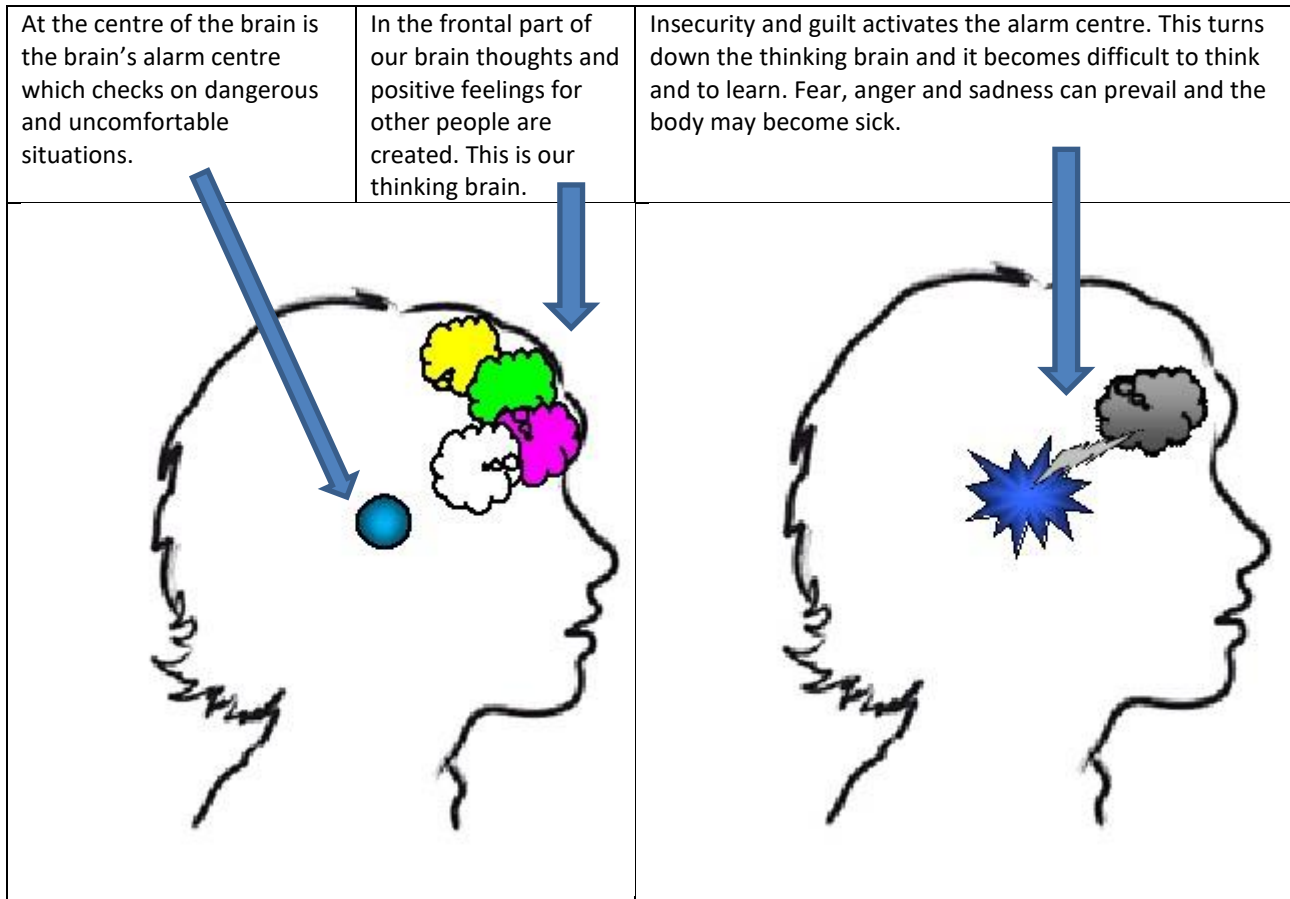
Mind-cleaning

Some people find it useful to meditate in company, while others are more comfortable practising meditation on their own. Neither of these choices is more right or wrong than the other. It's beneficial to practice meditation in more or less the same way every day – like a ritual. In the same way as teeth brushing is a daily hygiene ritual, meditation can be seen as a mental cleaning ritual for your mind.

Once an old teacher of meditation was asked: "How do I learn to meditate?". He answered: "Begin – and keep on doing it".

The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre

Here you can read about how your brain works when all is well and when things go wrong:



Hyper-sensitivity in the alarm centre of the brain

Unpleasant and dangerous situations can cause the alarm centre to be hyper-sensitive. This means that the next time you are in a situation that resembles the 'dangerous situation' the alarm centre may overreact with the result that you become afraid, angry or sad – perhaps without any reason at all. It becomes difficult to think rationally. Instead you react instinctively to 'survive' mentally and socially.

It's obviously good that the alarm centre by nature takes over when we are facing real danger. If your life is at risk there is no time to consider the pros or cons of taking action. You have to react promptly with fight or flight. However, it is not so desirable if the thinking brain turns down when there is no serious danger to you. An example is when you go blank in an exam situation, or when you panic about something that in fact is not dangerous at all. If your alarm centre has become over-sensitive it can be provoked just by thinking about the unpleasant situation. It's like riding a mind-train that is running way too fast²¹.

²¹ Read the story about a mind-train, page 44.

The only thing you learn when you are alarmed is to be on guard in similar situations. You don't become more resilient, but you are at risk of getting more vulnerable. Thoughts about your psychological and social survival will dominate your thinking. Vulnerability can be seen as anger, fear and sadness. If, on the other hand, you are over-protected and do not face any challenges, your alarm centre will believe that everything is 'dangerous', which makes you vulnerable as well.

Very unpleasant and dangerous situations (traumas, accidents and assaults) of course increase the risk of over-sensitising the alarm centre. Unfortunate micro-events (e.g. a horror film) can, by chance, also create permanent over-sensitivity in the alarm system.

The most frequent cause of imbalance in the alarm centre is insecurity in everyday life (micro-bullying), for example within family, in school or at work – and stress at a level that overloads the working memory and causes loss of perspective.

The invisible

Other people's thoughts are invisible. That's why we sometimes misunderstand another person and believe that he or she has bad intentions towards us. Such thoughts can trigger the alarm centre. If the other person is in an alarm state as well we have two alarmed brains fighting each other and/or fleeing from each other.



The resilient brain

Fortunately the brain can be trained to become resilient instead of becoming vulnerable. If the thinking brain and the alarm centre face appropriate challenges – neither too big nor too small – the thinking brain is able to control the alarm centre in a way that the alarm is not triggered without reason. The brain's working memory is trainable too, thus making it easier to cope with life²².

The human animal

Humans and animals have the alarm centre in common, whereas the thinking brain is solely human. When people get annoyed and argue we get more 'animal-like' because we turn up the volume of the alarm centre and turn down the volume of the thinking brain. This happens, for instance, if we feel personally affected by a critical or wounding remark.



It's easy to discover when you are about to fall into the 'alarm trap'. As soon as you experience feelings of alarm such as anger, irritation, hurt, fear or panic, you are on that path. Then it's easy to react with fight or flight – we use words (or violence) to defend ourselves or we flee:

²² Read more: resilience and praise, page 3.

- We walk away – or start doing something else to escape the feelings and the situation.
- We say nothing – we 'hide'.
- We explain it away – to others or to ourselves²³.
- We soothe our feelings artificially, for example with food, sugar or stimulants.

When we get 'animal-like' we really need to take care in order to escape the alarm trap. Many of the simple exercises on our website can help you, especially if practised enough to become an automatic reaction when difficult situations arise. Often just a small, simple, quiet and patient question can in fact help a person who is at the mercy of his or her emotions:

“Tell me, what is happening inside you right now?”

Describing how we feel inside activates the thinking part of the brain instantly... and we are already on the way out from being animal-like.

If a person is very emotional, reasonable arguments are rarely of any use, as the volume of the thinking brain is turned down. The only helpful things in that situation are: silence, care and protection – until things inside calm down inside and the thinking brain is again turned on.

Read more:

Examples of where we get trapped in the alarm centre, page 22.

Acute crisis – protect the alarm centre, page 24.

How to calm down the alarm centre, page 25.

A very good idea for children:

- Tell the child about the alarm centre of the brain – encourage the child to draw/build their own alarm centre as they imagine it in their mind.
- Talk about situations where the child's alarm centre switches on – for better or worse – and stimulate the child to come up with good things to do when it happens.

This gives the child an understanding of, and possible actions to take, regarding an important part of their inner system, namely the alarm centre.

²³ Read more: self-deception, page 16.

Examples of where we get trapped in the alarm centre.

Anxiety

Scared, vulnerable and uncertain, angry or inhibited people have a hyper-sensitive alarm centre which gradually needs to be calmed down. They need to develop resilience to their own and others' feelings²⁴.

Depression

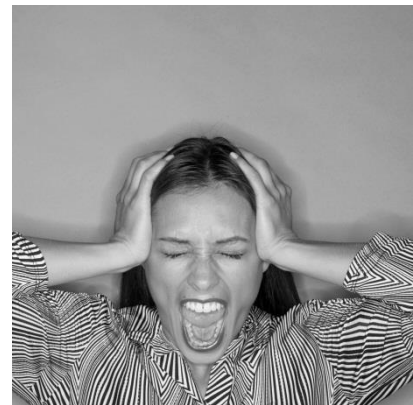
Depression, powerlessness, hopelessness: you can't find thoughts that work; you can't find the real you²⁵.

Dependence

For example, dependence on sugar, tobacco, alcohol and other stimulants, exercise and so on. This is caused by an imbalance in the alarm centre of the brain²⁶ and the reward factory²⁷. Unfortunately, research indicates that people who believe that stimulants do them good are at highest risk of affecting their brain²⁸.

Tolerating other people's feelings

If your alarm centre is hyper-sensitive you may have a hard time tolerating other people's feelings – perhaps especially the people that are closest to you. There is a risk that your own alarm centre takes over and then you automatically react – you get "afraid" of your loved one's feelings. For example, you might feel sad for your child or partner that they can't fully satisfy their needs. You risk "buying peace and quiet". The same thing can happen if you feel sorry for yourself. In the worst case scenario you get imprisoned by thoughts and feelings, and you are at the mercy of your feelings²⁹.



Violence

Serious fights and violence occur when you are trapped in the "fight-reaction" of the alarm centre. The brain is in a condition of a fight for (emotional) survival – the overview of the thinking brain is long gone.

ADHD

People with ADHD have a hard time controlling their attention, focusing "The Spotlight of the Brain". Big or small incidents – external or internal – keep catching their attention, which is then thrown in different directions, and everything is perceived as chaotic and confusing. It's like watching several movies at one time³⁰. Everything in the head gets chaotic, which provokes the alarm centre to start up.

²⁴ Read more: fear and shyness, page 66.

²⁵ Read more: sadness, page 73.

²⁶ Read more: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, page 19.

²⁷ Read more: the reward factory, page 45.

²⁸ Read more: the teenage brain, page 26.

²⁹ Read more: self-deception, page 16.

³⁰ Read more: attention and ADHD, page 65.

The body

Keeping balance in the alarm centre of the brain is important to ensure that the alarm only goes off in the right time and place. Imbalance can cause an unfortunate reaction from the body.

Chronic pain can be caused by a hyper-sensitised alarm centre. The impulses from the body that in ordinary circumstances are perceived as normal are now perceived by the brain as pain.

When the alarm centre is activated, the muscles of the body are tensed (ready for "fight/flight"). Tense muscles also constrict their own blood vessels a certain amount.

If the muscles are squeezing their own blood vessels for a long time (because of many "false alarms"), a slight lack of oxygen will occur within the muscles. This alone is harmless, but a hyper-sensitive alarm centre will perceive it as dangerous. New pain will occur and the alarm centre sends out new alarms – it is a vicious circle.

Symptoms of stress, high blood pressure or similar conditions may also be seen as reactions in the body which are caused by imbalance in the alarm centre.

PTSD

If you have been exposed to shocking events (disasters, accidents, violence, abuse), the brain's alarm system can be so hyper-sensitive that you get PTSD, which means Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. You are in alarm much of the time and may risk having all of the symptoms listed above.



Acute crisis – protecting the alarm centre

Very unpleasant and dangerous situations may over-sensitise the brain's alarm centre. Worst case scenario, you develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – with a high risk of decreasing your life opportunities.

Recent research implies that if, right after a traumatic incident, you spend a lot of the time thinking and talking about how terrible it was, there is a risk that the incident 'gets stuck' in the alarm centre. Also if you go to sleep within the first six hours after the incident, the alarm centre is more likely to remember the terrible incident – this is because experiences stick to our long term memory during sleep.

Research suggests that six very simple precautions during the first six hours after an acute crisis situation can decrease the risk of over-sensitising the brain's alarm centre and thereby reduce the risk of developing PTSD:

- Stay as far as possible in a safe place and with people who make you feel safe.
- Calming and caring touching helps.
- Pain relief (if injured).
- It's a good idea to talk about facts concerning what happened (relevant and coherent information); just be careful about thinking and talking about how awful it was.
- Take action – simple practical activities that direct your attention to something else.
- Don't go to sleep within the first six hours – and avoid sleeping medication.

Read the real life story: acute crisis, protecting the alarm centre, page 53.

How to calm the alarm centre

It's hard to think when you are alarmed. When the alarm centre flashes, the brain therefore needs to automatically start to calm itself. This is why it's a good idea to practise calming the alarm centre during 'peacetime', to make it an automatic reaction. Pick one or more of the following techniques and practise:

- Make physical distance from the situation, slow down, sit down, get out, exercise and get some fresh air.
- Talk to someone that you trust.
- Relax your muscles in the following order:
 - Tense your jaw muscles tight for 5-10 seconds and then relax. Take a couple of deep breaths.
 - Tense your muscles in arms and hands tight for 5-10 seconds and then relax. Take a couple of deep breaths.
 - Tense your abdominal muscles tight for 5-10 seconds and then relax. Take a couple of deep breaths.
 - Tense your muscles of legs and feet tight for 5-10 seconds and then relax. Take a couple of deep breaths.
- Read more about how to use your breath to calm down the alarm centre, page 32.
- Count to 10.
- Think about familiar situations in which you solved a similar problem or think about something else that is useful for you.
- Have a loud internal conversation: repeat a word or a phrase that's calming to you.

Read about some other possibilities:

- Wellness beads, page 47.
- Mind party, page 46.

How can you help someone else to calm down his or her alarm centre?

- Stay as calm as possible.
- Don't get into a discussion, but talk to the person in a calming way.
- Help the person to go through one or more of the techniques above.

The Teenage Brain

Research shows that the frontal part of the brain has not completely matured until the age of 20-22. This part of the brain is, among other things, responsible for predicting the consequences of your actions. The blue areas in the picture you see to the right are the areas of the brain which have matured the most.

The cells of the immature brain also become dependent on stimulants faster³¹.

So even though teenagers are on their way to adulthood, in body as well as mind, they still need the protection and support of adults in order to avoid getting involved in something they will bitterly regret later on in life.

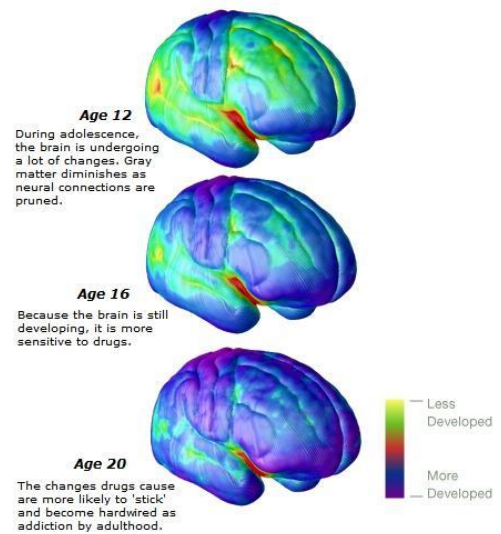
Love is also when adults in a proper way help teenagers making the right decisions for their lives – and this is actually something most teenagers wish adults to do.

It's well described by a 13-year-old boy who said: "Parents should be firm – you can't play ball up against a curtain".

It's best if groups of teenagers make these decisions in respectful collaboration with their parents and teachers. It's definitely not easy for a teenager or a parent to stand alone and do things differently from the majority of the group.

This is simply because social norms are some of the strongest forces in our lives - they are the 'rails' of our inner world model on which our thought-trains run (read: the story of a mind-train).

If we do not work together and make decisions as to how we want to live in collaboration with each other, social norms could develop in a completely different direction from what we really want for ourselves.



³¹ Read about toxin-free brains, page 27.

Toxin-free brains

New research indicates that the brain is probably more sensitive to stimulants than was previously believed.

If you really enjoy stimulants, experience no side effects and/or are a teenager, research shows that your brain is at a particularly high risk of damage.

A scanning technique of the brain (SPECT-scan) shows that alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and drugs impact on fundamental functions of the brain. A brain under the influence of stimulants looks like a Swiss cheese full of holes.



It's not a new idea that massive abuse destroys the brain. However, recent studies suggest that even a small consumption of stimulants can affect the brain, so that you function at a lower level than your potential. The effects are insidious – many people are under the impression that they function perfectly well with stimulants (tobacco, alcohol and so on) but neither they nor those around them have the opportunity of experiencing that they could function very much better without these chemical additives. It's very difficult to make a comparison unless you attempt to stay free of chemicals for some months.

Studies suggest that young people very quickly can get addicted to tobacco and stimulants because their brains have not fully matured yet. Researchers from Massachusetts Medical School in the USA have discovered that nicotine dependence in many cases begins with the very first cigarette. Some young people are already dependent after just a few days of smoking.

The same thing goes for other stimulants like alcohol or ecstasy. The teenage brain is still maturing and this might be the explanation for the fast development of dependence. An unfinished nervous system is particularly sensitive to chemical stimulants.

Consequently, it is most likely best if teenagers are completely free of toxins until the age of 20-22³².

³² Read more: facts about alcohol and tobacco, page 31.

Addiction – for better or worse

Addiction is when there is something that you cannot do without. Addiction can be positive and vital. For example, everybody is addicted to water, food and sleep. Some people experience a positive addiction to music, to reading good books or to going to the cinema. They would not do without it, while other people find these things completely unnecessary.

Addiction can be damaging too. Some stimulants (tobacco, alcohol and drugs) damage brain cells and the body and then the body needs to repair the cells.

It's very easy to determine whether you are addicted to something or not – for better or worse. You just ask yourself the question: Can I do without this? If the answer is no, you are addicted. Is that good or bad? This depends on whether you are addicted to something that is good for or damaging your body and brain.

Your brain can be damaged by stimulants without you even noticing it. It gets harder to learn and remember, and you experience more frequent mood changes. The brain's reward factory produces dopamine, which makes you excited. Drugs can increase the consumption of dopamine to such an extent that your dopamine storage is completely emptied and you become severely depressed.

If you experience that stimulants make you feel cool then you really need to take care. This is a sign that your brain is particularly sensitive and that the stimulant is already causing changes in your brain.

To start smoking is the fastest way to grow old. With a photograph of yourself and a specific computer programme you can take a look in to the future and see what you will look like. Try it here: www.aprilage.com.

This is how a teenage girl will look in the future as a smoker (left side of the picture), or as a non-smoker (right side of the picture).



Self-medication

Research indicates that some people get addicted because the drug that they use works like a medication.

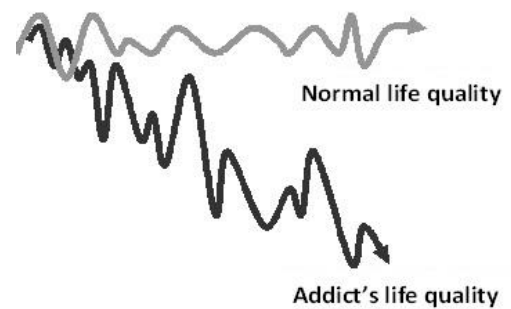
- GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid) is a neurotransmitter of the brain. Lack of GABA leads to chronic anxiety, anxiety and nervousness. Alcohol increases the amount of GABA in the brain and relieves the unpleasant feelings.
- Cocaine can be a chemical antidote to depression. Half of the patients who were treated in a cocaine detoxification clinic were found to have severe depression, which should have been treated – so they could have avoided becoming cocaine addicts.
- Heroin can alleviate chronic anger. Some addicts have reported that with heroin they felt for the first time psychologically normal and relaxed. It is obviously a pact with the Devil: A short-lived good feeling in return for a non-stop meltdown of one's life.

Chemical cheating

Stimulants (tobacco, alcohol, drugs) are chemicals that cheat the brain. Stimulants create hunger in the brain's alarm centre for more stimulants. The hunger is satisfied by saturating the brain with stimulants again. This is somehow experienced as comforting. In this way, the brain is cheated to believe that the stimulants provide a feeling of well-being, while the brain is gradually damaged³³.

The brain and body thus gradually deteriorate at the same time as it becomes more and more apparent in everyday life just how difficult it is to do without these stimulants.

The addicted person's life quality moves up and down, the main direction however being downwards because the brain and the body are damaged continuously over the years.



The brain's natural wellness chemicals are stronger than chemical stimulants. For example, molecule for molecule, endorphins are 300 times stronger than morphine; they also have no side effects. You can kick-start the production of endorphins and other wellness chemicals; your brain produces them when you sleep, exercise, relax and dream good dreams. Also when you do things that you like on your own and together with people you care for.

³³ Read more: the big reward-factory competition, page 45.

Recommendations for teenagers and adults close to them

Given advances in knowledge about the brain and stimulants, teenagers and the adults who look after them have to face up to and discuss challenges in relation to the appeal of the culture of partying.

It appears to be very important that teenage brains are completely free of toxins up until they reach adulthood (20-22 years), after which they of course must decide for themselves whether they want to risk damaging their brain cells.

Teenagers, singly or in groups, and all adults associated with them, need to work together to protect growing brains by making it cool to be non-toxic and by arranging different kinds of parties where the production of the brain's own stimulants are activated.

Manipulation of teenage brains makes money (for example the tobacco and alcohol industries, nightclubs, commercial industry, drug dealers). Brain cells are not able to discern whether a stimulant is legal or illegal, acceptable or forbidden. The cells are damaged by them all.

Adults who are addicted to stimulants may downplay the consequences of the abuse, as they – which is quite understandable – defend their inadvertent self-deception³⁴, perhaps formed when they were teenagers themselves.

Intervene immediately if a teenager starts smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol or taking drugs. The cells in the brain's reward system can change very fast and make the teenager addicted. The alteration of the cells in the reward system is chemical brain damage and it is therefore urgent to stop it.

Read more: control your desires, page 61.

³⁴ Read more: self-deception, page 16.

Facts about alcohol and tobacco

- Alcohol affects the body's ability to cope with stress.
- Alcohol affects the brain and the body's sleeping rhythm.
- Alcohol delays wound healing and reduce the immune system's protective functions.
- A small amount of red wine protects the heart. This is not due to the alcohol, but other ingredients in the red wine which have a protective effect.
- Alcohol is a carcinogenic substance.

Health damage caused by smoking does not affect adults only, but teenage smokers as well:

- Coughing, mucus and increased risk of colds, sore throats and pneumonia.
- Asthma.
- Poor physical shape.
- The lungs do not develop fully into adult size.
- Alteration of fats in the blood with increased risk of arteriosclerosis.

Teenage brains are very sensitive to nicotine and other stimulants:

- 90 % of all smokers began smoking before the age of 21.
- Most teenagers who have smoked 100 cigarettes or more want to quit smoking, but find it difficult.

Nicotine increases the risk for addiction to other substances:

- The risk for addiction to alcohol increases 3 times.
- The risk for addiction to marijuana increases 8 times.
- The risk for addiction to cocaine increases 22 times.
- Teenage smokers have an increased risk of being exposed to violence and unsafe sex.
- The risk of becoming a smoker is greatest when your friends smoke.

The Body Helps the Mind

Breathing

Here is a quick and discreet way to calm the brain's alarm centre when you need to reflect or relax completely inside your head:

Breathe deeply and calmly.

Of course this is easy because it's something that we can already understand. The difference is that you need to shift your attention and notice how you breathe. How the air comes in and out of your nose and how your chest and abdomen move when you breathe. It's the only thing you should do. When you continue to keep your attention on your breathing for a while, you get peace in your head and a pleasant feeling in your body.

While doing this, you will no doubt find that there are thoughts that try to grab your attention, again and again. The secret is to just let those thoughts fly past, perhaps as if they are leaves or thought bubbles wafting past in the wind, while you quietly move your attention to your breathing again and just notice the air going through the nose and the movements of your body.

Another way is to count to yourself while you breathe deeply and calmly:

Breathe in slowly while you count 1...2... Breathe out slowly while you count 1...2... 3... 4...

Deep and steady breathing calms the brain's alarm centre and it is also the world's simplest way to develop your powers of attention. Every time you decide to focus on your breathing you strengthen your powers of attention. Then it becomes easier to:

- Maintain concentration on tasks and thoughts that are important, even if there are distractions, whether in your surroundings or your mind.
- Free yourself from thoughts and feelings that are bad for you (and others) if you keep them inside for too long.
- Mentally scan the outer world and within your mind and discover what can be exciting and important.

Read more: the attention – spotlight of the brain, page 12.



Food

What you eat is converted into sugars, fats and proteins which are transported to your cells with the blood. 'Blood sugar' is simply the amount of sugar in your blood. If you eat and drink fast-acting sugars (sugar, sweets, biscuits, juice, fizzy drinks, white bread, pasta, alcohol), it makes your blood sugar fluctuate and you get a yoyo effect.



Fluctuating blood sugar gives you short-term energy but afterwards can cause hunger, fatigue, mood swings and even make you overweight, if you are pre-disposed toward this. The explanation is that when your blood sugar falls rapidly, the brain's alarm centre experiences mistakenly that your body needs food – you will be deceived into believing that you are hungry.

When the alarm centre is turned up, the thinking brain is turned down³⁵. The experience of hunger is paramount, and other thoughts are pushed aside. If you re-saturate yourself with fast-acting sugars, it starts all over again³⁶.

Eat small, frequent and slow meals of healthy food. It gives you stable blood sugar and sustained health. If you need to lose weight, eat protein rather than carbohydrates. If you like food, which most of us fortunately do, it's best to change your diet gradually. If you change your diet, it may take 1-3 weeks to get used to a new taste.

Hunger control

Controlling your sense of hunger can be gradually trained, just like other areas. It's not dangerous to do if you're overweight. Hunger disappears when you let it³⁷.

Awareness training can be a great help³⁸.

The following can be an inspiration too:

- Hunger is a room in the house of thoughts ... (Read: the story of the house of thoughts, page 43).
- Hunger is a mind-train running too fast ... (Read: the story of a mind-train, page 44).
- Hunger is a guest at the mind-party ... (Read: mind-party, page 46).

There are also indications that stress and lack of sleep increases the risk of obesity. Therefore, sleep and rest are vital³⁹.

³⁵ Read more: the thinking brain and the alarm centre, page 19.

³⁶ See also: the reward factory, page 45.

³⁷ Read more: construct a plan of practice, page 67, resilience and praise, page 3, a way to success, page 6, control your desires, page 61.

³⁸ Read more: the attention - spotlight of the brain, page 12.

³⁹ Read more: sleep and rest, page 35.

Exercise

Last but not least, it's equally important to develop your desire to exercise⁴⁰. If there is one activity in the world which is good for almost everything, it's exercise. Research shows that it helps with both mood and health, regardless whether you are healthy or ill.

- Nearly all diseases of the body can be prevented and alleviated with exercise.
- You live longer and better.
- Exercise kick-starts the production of well-being chemicals and painkillers in your brain and body, providing you with energy and greater resilience. It's the body's and the brain's own medicine, which is free and without side effects.
- When you exercise it becomes easier to learn and remember. Exercise assists the brain when it creates the small links (synapses) between brain cells which are necessary to create new memory-traces in the mind. This is the case all throughout life.



We know well that exercising can be easier said than done, but it is something we can change. Read more here: [a way to success, page 6](#); [help someone else, page 8](#).

⁴⁰ Read more: [exercise, page 34](#).

Sleep and rest

Extensive research has confirmed what we know to be true: it's easier to perform when you are well rested. It has for instance been shown how important this is for performance in school and at work. Lack of sleep increases the risk of obesity, while severe long-term sleep problems increase the risk of disease.

Sleep requirements decline with age; young children need many hours of sleep. Thereafter an amount of 6-8 hours of sleep is optimal for most people.

A rule of thumb is that you should feel rested when you get up in the morning.

Sleep problems can often be resolved with one or more of the following actions:

- Make sure you are tired before going to bed.
- Keep regular times for going to sleep and waking up.
- Your sleeping room should be dark, quiet and cool.
- Avoid stressful and arousing activities before bedtime and help your body and mind to relax⁴¹.
- Avoid stimulants before bedtime.
- Get plenty of fresh air and exercise during the day.
- As far as possible, make sure to solve the day's problems before you go to bed and thereby avoid worrying about it at night.
- If you cannot fall sleep, get up until you are tired.
- In situations of severe sleep problems, it may help to skip a night's sleep totally, in order to be tired enough the next night.



You have a biological clock inside the brain that affects your attention during the day. At regular intervals, around every two hours or so, your attention turns inward. You may lose your focus, daydream a little, and may become a little tired.

These quiet moments are important for your memory and for healing the daily wear and tear in your body and mind. Therefore when you feel the urge to rest, you should take it seriously. It then becomes easier to look after your health, avoid stress and errors, to keep your spirits high and your memory in good shape.

You need not necessarily go and lie down and rest. It's often enough to allow yourself to be somewhat quiet and introverted for a few minutes, then you are ready to take action again.

⁴¹ Read more: a dream place, page 40, breathing, page 32, everyday meditation, page 17.

Pleasure

Researchers are discovering that the feeling of pleasure is different from the feeling of fulfilling a need and being rewarded, and it involves activity in completely different areas of the brain.

You know the feeling of pleasure, for instance when you wake up in the morning after a good night's sleep, just before anything begins; you simply have a peaceful feeling without any thoughts or other activity. It is apparently a peaceful feeling that occurs when it's completely quiet inside, when there is no goal-oriented activity in the brain. This is easy to practise. See for instance the little mind-flying game on page 59.

Nature is wonderful; it has built a small molecule that helps with creating life, love and pleasure on several levels. This molecule is a hormone called oxytocin, or 'the love hormone':

- Oxytocin stimulates the woman's uterus to contract during birth and thereby helps us to be born into this world and to live.
- Oxytocin causes the milk to run in the mother's breast, thus giving the baby nourishment.
- Oxytocin facilitates the creation of a strong sense of belonging and a bonding between parents and the child in the very first days of life that lasts throughout life.
- Oxytocin is dancing around in the body when we fall in love.
- Oxytocin creates our sense of kindness and is an encouragement to act kindly.

Oxytocin may be stimulated by:

- Paying attention and being self-aware – getting a grip on your inner spotlight⁴².
- Being kind to oneself and to others. Oxytocin is in fact self-perpetuating; once you start, you will produce more of it, in yourself as well as in others.
- Physical activity, which directly stimulates the production of oxytocin and endorphins too.
- Nurturing and loving touch from a loved one, and/or safe and gentle massage from a professional masseur.



⁴² Read more: the attention - spotlight of the brain, page 12.

The Mind Helps the Body

The body and the mind naturally possess basic skills and mechanisms for self-healing. Otherwise we would not be alive. These mechanisms are constantly affected by thoughts and feelings for good and for bad.

The body can be damaged by negative thoughts and feelings (e.g. loneliness), and any unhealthy habits.

Thoughts can positively affect our body systems too. The study of this is called Mind-Body Medicine and includes a lot of new research. We know for instance that:



- Genes and neurotransmitters in our brain and body are activated within minutes or even seconds whenever thoughts and feelings change. The body simply translates our thoughts and feelings into its own chemical language at the cellular level (this is called epigenetics).
- Awareness training can be used to control pain, even severe pain.
- Chronic leg ulcers, where the patient suffers from poor circulation, heal twice as fast when he or she makes use of goal-directed thinking to move more warm blood to the wound (visualisation).
- A half hour's quarrel may slow down the healing of a wound by up to 24 hours.
- Wellness protects the body against the cold virus.
- Emotional peace improves the efficiency of a vaccination.
- High blood pressure can be lowered by learning deep, calm breathing.

A medical pain experiment

A medical pain experiment shows that thoughts can affect the brain and the body quickly and efficiently:

- A test person is told that the aim of the experiment is to assess the effect of various painkillers.
- He places his one hand in a bucket of ice cold water. It's not dangerous, but it is uncomfortable and it hurts.
- A thin tube is put into a vein in his other arm – for pain medication and blood sampling. A screen is set which ensures that he cannot see the tube.
- When it hurts a lot the doctor says, "Now I will give you the best pain medicine we have. It will help you very quickly."
- The doctor walks behind the screen to the tube – and does nothing!
- Shortly after, the test person says that he's now in less pain.
- The doctor takes a blood sample from the tube without the test person seeing it. The blood test shows that the body is now producing its own pain killers (endorphins).
- After a few minutes a drug that blocks endorphins is injected – without telling the test person about it. Immediately the pain starts again.



What happens in this trial?

A meaningful message from a trustworthy person acts directly on the test person's mind; it's like a button has been pressed in his body's own pharmacy. The body has translated thoughts into its own language at the cellular level.

It's also possible to be your own trusted person. You can teach yourself to press the button in your internal pharmacy. (Read more: page 39.)

The Body's Pharmacy

You can use your attention to open your body's own 'pharmacy' and deal with everyday pain. Your attention is used to discover the world – the world around you – and the feelings inside yourself, for example pain. The attention works like the spotlight on a stage, focusing on what is important⁴³.

Pain attracts attention

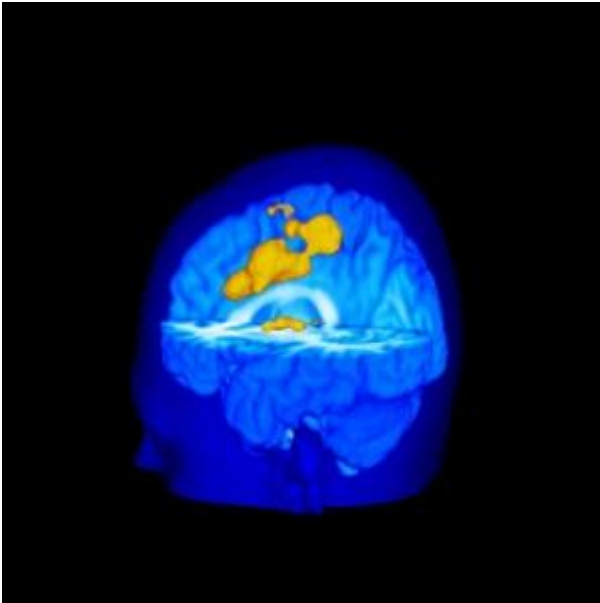
There will be a spotlight on the pain – if the pain is severe, that spotlight will be in high focus. Other thoughts and emotions sort of disappear. They are outside the spotlight (your attention), causing only the pain to be experienced. Just like on stage, when there is a strong spotlight on a small area, anything else seems to disappear into the darkness.

Pain must attract attention. Pain is an important signal that may require examination by a doctor in order not to overlook a disease. Pain can also be a sign of overload that requires changes in everyday life. Furthermore, at times it can be about something very simple such as a headache due to lack of water or fresh air.

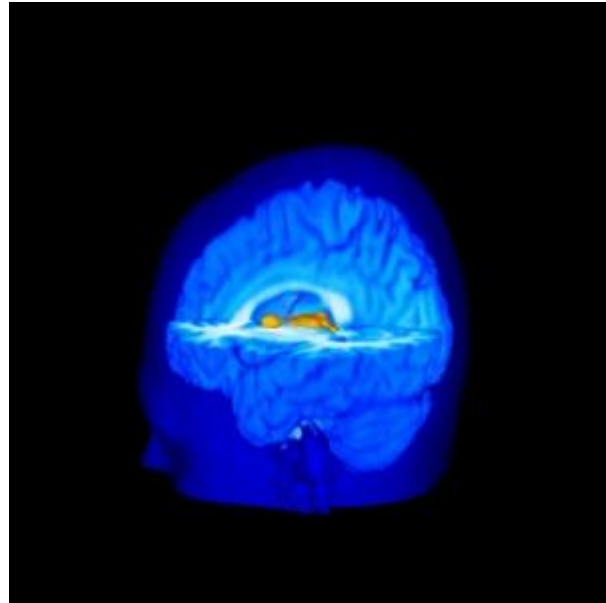
⁴³ Read more: the attention - the spotlight of the brain, page 12.

Train your attention and pain control

In the same way as the light operator controls the spotlight on the stage, you can train controlling your attention. When moving your focus of attention, you will experience what's happening besides the pain. The amazing thing is that once you learn to control your attention, the body's own pharmacy literally switches on by itself and the pain diminishes because endorphins and other painkillers are produced. Pictures from advanced brain scans show that the activity in the pain areas of the brain diminishes when you learn to trigger the body's own pharmacy:



When you are in pain there is activity in areas in the top and middle parts of the brain.



When the body's own pharmacy is working, the activity in the pain areas diminishes.

You can try the following three methods, using your thoughts and your attention to boost your body's pharmacy. Choose the method that suits you best. It might not work 100% the first time you try. It's like learning to ride a bike; you get better through practising.

- Use your imagination to create a refuge (place-of-dreams) inside yourself where you find peace and quiet and where everything is good. It should be a place that you arrange exactly the way you want. A place where you allow yourself to feel completely well in every way and where you have all options available to you, because you can use your imagination. When you move into your place-of-dreams, your body's pharmacy starts to work all by itself and makes you feel better. If the pain grabs your attention again, start over and move into the place-of-dreams once more.
- Move your attention to your breathing, and breathe calmly. Notice how the air goes in and out of your nose and how your body moves while breathing. It is the only thing you should focus on. When you continue to keep your attention on your breathing, your body's pharmacy starts working by itself and you will feel better. While doing this, you may find that the pain will try to grab your attention again. Quietly and calmly, focus your attention on your breathing again and notice the air in your nose and the breathing movements of your body.

- Imagine that you give the pain a colour and a shape, thus turning the pain into a sort of fantasy object. Play with changing that pain-object's colour, shape and size and move it around in such ways that you are able to change the pain in a way that it becomes weaker and weaker. You can also focus on making the pain-object 'colder' or 'warmer' or putting it aside at a place entirely outside your body in order to diminish the pain. Experiment and use what works best for you.

Pain and tension

Most everyday pain is caused by tension in the body (more details are in the section about the brain's alarm centre. Obviously it is a good idea to unravel the reasons behind these tensions as far as possible. Exercise and fresh air may also help. Try also to 'move the blood' – see page 42.

Move Your Blood

Hold a thermometer in one hand. A digital thermometer, where the sensor is located in the end of a cord, is best.

Keep imagining that you (or just your hand) are situated in a comfortable, warm place.

With practice you will be able to raise the temperature in your hand. The images you create in your brain directly affect the blood vessels in your hand and make them widen.

- A wound can heal twice as fast when you use your mind to move more warm blood to the wound. Try it yourself if you get a wound.
- Also, try to move more warm blood up your nose if you have a cold.
- If you have a pain somewhere, you can also reduce the pain by moving warmth to the place – or the opposite, namely cold. Try it out and discover what works best for you.
- If you burn yourself it will help if you imagine it to be cold.



Stories

The story about the House of Thoughts

In a sense we may say that our thoughts live inside our heads. Imagine that your thoughts live in a house with many rooms where you can wander around and discover them.

When you discover thoughts you are using the world's finest tool, your attention, which is a kind of spotlight. When you throw light on a thought, you spot it and discover it. Thereafter you can shift your attention and discover another thought.

The House of Thoughts has plenty of rooms. A number of exciting thoughts may live in one room. Perhaps some sad or anxious or angry thoughts live in another room and various happy thoughts live in a third room.

From The House of Thoughts, your thoughts can call you if they want to be discovered. This may be really exciting and good, but could be irritating too. Especially if the thoughts are annoying and they keep knocking all the time, trying to take over your attention.

In a situation where you have sad or anxious or angry thoughts that take over and force you into their room all the time, you might end up believing there are no exciting or happy thoughts to be found anywhere. That's not much fun.

However, this is not actually the case at all. All those happy and exciting thoughts are just waiting in other rooms in the House of Thoughts, waiting for you to discover them with your attention. Maybe there even are tools to be found in one room that could be used to fix some other thoughts in another room in the house. There may also be thoughts in a room which need to be left in peace, so they won't disturb you too much.

If you often go to explore The House of Thoughts with your attention, then it becomes easier to be in charge of your thoughts.



The Story of a mind-train

You probably know how your thoughts come in succession, one after the other. Thoughts are usually linked to one another, like a train with carriages that move together over time towards a destination.

Think of it like this. When 'I' go by a mind-train, 'I' am inside the 'carriages' while the train is moving. It can be hard to understand, nevertheless the 'I' merges completely with the thoughts while they are running. The 'I' and the present thought become one. This is not actually extraordinary at all, but perfectly natural.



If you, while thinking a specific thought, suddenly decide to think about something else, it's like changing to another train in order to go somewhere else. You can change your mind-train so fast that it can feel like magic.

When engaged with a certain mind-train, it can be difficult to realize that there may be other mind-trains on which you would rather be. If you have entered a wrong mind-train, which travels too fast, you may end up in a place where you do not want to be.

This is what happens when:

- There is something you cannot stop thinking about even though you would rather think about something else.
- There is something that you regret.
- There is something you want to change in your life, but find difficult to carry out.
- If you are unlucky enough to be in a state of self-deception⁴⁴.

For these reasons, it's a good idea to practise mind-flying⁴⁵ and enable yourself to change your mind-train whenever you want to.

⁴⁴ Read more, page 16.

⁴⁵ Read more, page 59.

The big reward-factory competition

The brain has a kind of reward-factory inside. The reward-factory makes you feel comfortable. It starts when you experience or receive something you feel in need of. The reward-factory is situated close to the brain's alarm centre⁴⁶.

The alarm centre starts up if you are very hungry, for instance, and will tell you that you need to find something to eat immediately.

When you have eaten, the alarm centre shuts down and the reward-factory starts up and makes you feel satisfied and comfortable.

The alarm centre and the reward-factory are not situated in the most intelligent part of the brain:

- Cheating the alarm centre to believe that you need something is quite easy and this sends you out looking for something that you don't really need.
- The reward-factory starts automatically when you have found what you were looking for.
- The brain therefore is easily persuaded into thinking that you were looking for something important – even though it's something that you really did not need.



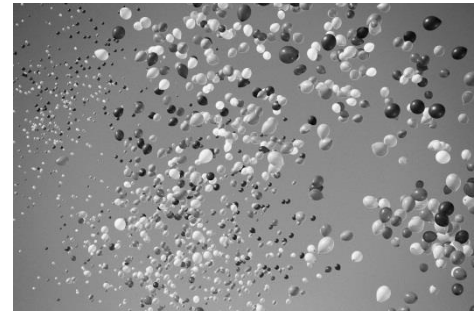
⁴⁶ Read more: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, page 19.

A refuge

Thoughts appear endlessly and sometimes this may well make you quite tired; you just want time off to completely relax your brain and not think about anything.

Imagine you create a completely private and safe refuge inside yourself, a place-of-dreams where you find peace and quiet and where everything is good. Inside your refuge you can legitimately organise everything exactly the way you want. You can allow yourself to feel completely well in every way and you have all options available to you, because you can use your imagination.

Inside your refuge you can be yourself, exactly the way you know you are deep inside, and who you would like to be in the future. In your refuge you have access to all the best in you, everything that feels right. It's always possible to move into your refuge for a shorter or longer time, whenever you want to or need it. You are also able to develop your refuge just the way you want to.



Mind party

Imagine having a party inside yourself where your guests are visiting thoughts. Some of these thought-guests might stay for a long time while others just drop in and out.

When you discover the arrival of a new thought-guest, you can welcome the guest just by saying a loud 'welcome' inside yourself.

It's your party, so you want to do your best to make it a good one.

Sometimes an unpleasant thought, that you have not invited, visits you. Try speaking kindly to this thought: 'Although I have not invited you, you are welcome as you obviously need to be here, so it's okay right now. I hope you feel better by being here, just look around. And please excuse me now, for I must also talk to my other guests too. Have a nice party.'

Our minds are designed in a way that the best thing to do, if unwanted thoughts and feelings get too much attention, is to leave them alone in a friendly way. Then they will find a way to get better.

If unpleasant thoughts and feelings get too much attention they might grow and become stronger than what's desirable.

Also, remember that you can always move into your refuge (page 46) and play with your breath (page 32).



Wellness beads

Peace around you and peace inside your body provides a feeling of inner freedom.

Close your eyes and imagine that you have a small wellness bead in every toe and every finger. The small beads rotate slowly, giving you the most comfortable warmth you can imagine.

Slowly let the beads wander upwards and when they reach your feet and hands, you let them merge together and become bigger beads. These again slowly migrate up through your legs and arms while they rotate and give you the most pleasant warmth and comfort you can imagine.

When the beads reach your body and your head they continue to rotate slowly and give you comfortable warmth, making you feel relaxed and free within.

When you are finished, you let the beads be invisible so they are ready to use the next time you want to.



The story of a wind

Once upon a time a boy and a girl happened to look into each other's eyes.

Each of them could see the pain in the other person's eyes. One night, they both went outside and looked out across the open country. A person came up to them and gave them courage. Then all three of them stood next to each other, took a deep breath and then shouted almost without a sound through the silence: 'THIS IS NOT THE WAY IT SHOULD BE!'



Still, their silent shout was so powerful that it raised a clear wind, and when the stars caressed the wind, it blew into the minds of the people making the fog disappear and the profound values that existed within them became clearer than ever before. And out of this, new ideas for many kinds of things appeared. And the people got up, stretched their bodies and became idea catchers who discovered new paths in the world as it was.

Because of that the children could each go in to their own bed and sleep peacefully. And every day the wind reminded everybody about the fact that it matters to be brave.

The story of a boy who shot down a thought

Once upon a time there was a boy. His mind was filled up by a thought so heavy that he almost couldn't live with it.

One day he took a deep breath and then slowly blew the heavy thought out through his mouth. As the heavy thought that used to fill him up now had gone away, he felt a peace in his body and became aware of the normal thoughts that he used to know and that used to be helpful to him.

However, the heavy thought remained in the air right in front of him and within just a few seconds the thought went back in to his mind once again and took up all the space, making him unable to see his own thoughts.

Over and over again he tried slowly and carefully to blow the thought out and away and each time he succeeded, but only for a short while.

Therefore, one day he shut his eyes trying to make the thought visible in the air in front of him. And using his gaze he shot his very special arrows at the thought. But to his surprise he realised that the thought immediately moved, avoiding the arrow. Still the boy knew that this was an important and dangerous hunt, which was something he knew a lot about, so he kept practising using his special arrows and saw that he got better and better.

After a while, he had become so much better that he actually hit the heavy thought. And instantly the thought transformed into a memory that he, without using his hands, was able to put in to his casket of memories with all the other good or bad memories that are a part of life. From time to time he opened the casket and looked at his memories without them getting dangerous. And the boy told his friends and family about the successful hunt and everyone could see that he had become his old self again, happy and free. And he became a big hunter and storyteller.

Real Life Stories

Anger

A.

Thoughts and feelings are invisible internal events that we experience all the time, but thoughts and feelings themselves don't determine how things turn out in life. What matters is how you react and act upon a thought and a feeling inside yourself, and in relation to the outside world.

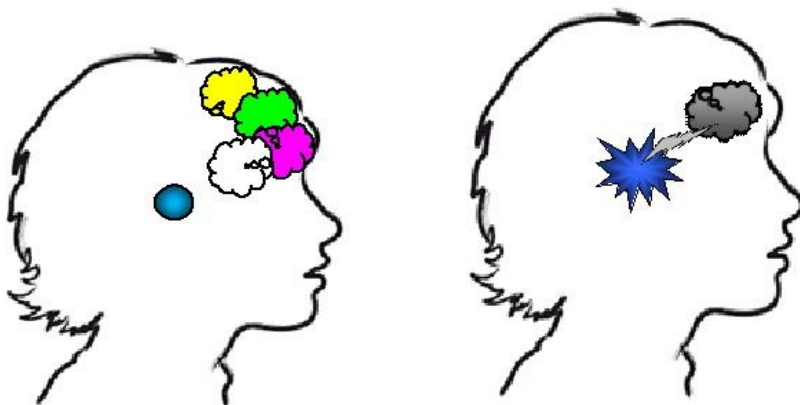
If you simply leave a thought or an emotion alone and do not involve yourself, it evaporates and disappears after a while and will be replaced by another thought or feeling, perhaps a similar one or maybe a completely different one.

An angry young man who has practised this 'let it be' technique, explains how it makes him feel free: "Now I no longer fell forced to act upon my anger the way I did before."

If you want to practise this 'let thoughts be' technique, you can use the mind-party (page 46) or some of the Mind Games (pages 54-64).

B.

A teacher is responsible for a special needs class of a group of boys who become angry and aggressive very easily. He explains to the boys how the thinking brain and the brain's alarm centre work⁴⁷. The teacher also prints out images of the thinking brain and the alarm centre in postcard size and laminates them.



Every time one of the boys becomes angry and aggressive the teacher (or the boy himself or one of the other boys) take out the image of the brain's alarm centre and says: "Right now you're in your alarm brain."

⁴⁷ Read more on page 19.

In a few minutes you will again be in your thinking brain... and then we can talk about what to do". While saying the last sentence, he holds up the image of the thinking brain in front of the picture of the brain's alarm centre.

Within a month, the conflicts in class were significantly reduced.

Fear

A.

After watching a sequence from a scary movie, a young teenager has become very afraid of going up to his room upstairs on the first floor.

A plan of action is made for him⁴⁸: Each day he should try to walk a bit up the stairs until he actually feel the fear in his body. Then he must stand still on the step he has reached and practise simple relaxation exercises while awaiting a feeling of complete wellness in the body again. He should not go further and no one should tempt or push him. Both would trigger the alarm centre⁴⁹. *He is the one who is in control!*

When the feeling of fear leaves him he should walk down. He has created a small success that gradually helps to calm the alarm system. The exercise is repeated at least once a day.

Within one month he went all the way up to the first floor again, feeling quite safe.

B.

A 10 year old boy had been afraid to go to school. His mother read the story of a mind-train to him.

His comment was: 'Is it true then that I could simply switch to another mind-train inside myself, and then no longer be afraid? - Well, then I will just do that.'

This turned out to be so helpful that he soon started going to school again.



A few months later his 10 years older sister becomes lovesick. She is very sad. Her younger brother asks her: "May I read you a story about a mind-train?" And guess what? She soon felt better.

⁴⁸ Read more: plan of practice, page 67.

⁴⁹ Read more: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre.

Being positive

A baby is removed at birth from her mother, who has a serious drug problem. The child returns to her home five years later when the mother is free from drugs and a family therapist is assigned to the family. The mother requests help in regards to the child's lack of attention when she speaks to her (she feels that the girl does not listen even though she 'screams and yells').

The family therapist records a 10-minute video from an everyday situation in the living room. The therapist analyses and edits the video. All malfunctioning communication is cut. Only 30 seconds are left and these are shown to the mother. In this sequence you only see the child's face, in slow motion:

In the very beginning you hear the mother's voice and the child immediately looks up at her mother. It's clear that the girl is very interested and wants to hear what the mother says.

The mother commented this video clip by saying: 'how lovely and happy she looks. Can you make me a photo from the video?' The therapist replies positively.

Two days later the mother calls and says that it is not necessary for her to have the photo – 'because now she looks like this all the time.'



Patience

A.

A teacher is determined to teach a mentally disabled girl breathing exercises⁵⁰ as a help for her to better take care of herself and to calm herself in difficult situations⁵¹.

They practise daily for 3 months. The girl still does not understand what it is all about. One month more and the girl understands the idea and begins to feel what it is.

After a total of six months of daily practice the girl uses deep breathing spontaneously for well-being and when she needs to calm himself.

Her teacher reflected that it's important to continue to practice what is crucial to learn (provided it can be learned) and not to be tempted too early by another offer in the 'educational supermarket'.

B.

It is late afternoon in a supermarket and we see a tired mother with a full trolley and a long queue ahead of her towards checkout. She has a very tired and grumpy small child who constantly says: 'Mum ... Mum ...'.

The mother gently touches the child's head and says quietly: 'I fully understand you are tired; it's good you are so patient, my dear'. The child calms down completely.

If the crying child had said, 'No, I'm not patient at all!' then a good response could for instance be: 'You don't feel patient right now, but that's ok. Let's practise it and find out how to grow patience within us.'

All people have patience inside and we need to practise in order to find out how patience works.



⁵⁰ Read more: help someone else, page 8, and breathing, page 32.

⁵¹ Read more: the brain's alarm centre, page 19, and how to calm the brain's alarm centre, page 25.

Acute crisis – protecting the brain’s alarm centre

(This story is quoted from an article on acute crisis intervention by psychologist Atle Dyregrov, head of the Centre for Crisis Psychology in Bergen, Norway [Monthly Review for General Practitioners 2011; 89 (11):783-92]).

A cable car (gondola) which carries people up and down from a 643m high mountain in Bergen had a technical error which meant that the line had to be manually operated from the base station via walkie-talkie communication. Due to a misunderstanding, the operator at the base station caused the gondola to depart from the upper station while the door was open.



The operator at the top station tried to throw himself into the gondola but was stuck between the gondola and a wall and was pressed against a window at the side. The powerful pressure caused the entire window and the man eventually to fall into the gondola. He was seriously injured and bled heavily.

It was a very shocking event for the children and adults already in the gondola. Simultaneously, the gondola swung violently back and forth with a large open section in the side towards the rocks 15-20m below. It took 20 minutes before they were safe.

Four days later, the psychologist spoke with four of the children (who were 9-15 years old) along with their two mothers. None of the children experienced flashbacks about the accident at this time, which is unusual after such an intense experience. During the conversation with the psychologist the children described what they had done after they came out of the gondola. One of them had suggested that after such a bad experience they ought to do something good. So they went straight home and looked at cartoons for some hours⁵².

⁵² Read more about things to do in the first six hours after an acute crisis, page 24.

Mind-Games for All

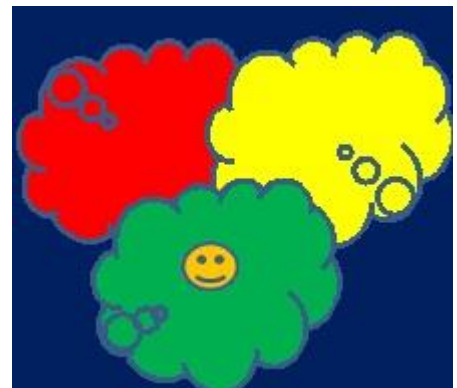
Spotlight

These small games illustrates how the 'I' and attention work. You need an ordinary torch. Start in normal light, but eventually you can play the game in a dark room. Turn on the torch and hold it in your hand along one side of your head like a headlamp.

Turn your head so the light points towards a specific point. Fix your eye and consequently your attention on this point. Hold the light, your eye and your attention on the point for a few seconds. Then turn your head, hands, light, eye and attention to another point in the room and fix your eye and attention on this new point for a few seconds.

It is the 'I' who determines the movements of the head and hand muscles, the direction of the light and direction of the eye line and attention, and the 'I' experiences instantly what the light and the attention puts the spotlight on. Right now, it is therefore YOU who decides what you experience. The 'I' is also capable of moving the attention to thoughts and feelings, experiencing those thoughts and feelings, and moving the attention to other thoughts and feelings:

Cut 'thought bubbles' out of paper in various sizes and colours. These symbolise significant and minor thoughts in 'happy' and 'sad' colours. You might want to write down examples on the thought bubbles – thoughts about the world or about yourself. Put down the bubbles on the table or hold them against your forehead, as if they were thoughts in your head.



Use the torch as a 'spotlight = attention' on your mind. Your hand in which you hold the light, symbolises the 'I', who can direct the light/focus towards a thought and move focus to another thought.

When 'I' (the hand) holds the attention (the torch) fixed it is similar to when you let your mind stick to a particular thought.

If you play in a dark room, it becomes very clear how there can be focus on one thought only, while other thoughts are left outside in 'darkness'. They do not really exist. We can think of no more than one thought at a time.

Continue playing by moving light and attention from one thought to another. Keep the light (and attention inside your head) fixed and concentrate on a particular thought for a while.

You decide

Sometimes it may be a good idea to hold on to specific thoughts for a long time. Other thoughts (disruptive ones) are better left alone. Instead, shift attention to other, constructive thoughts. You can take charge over your thoughts as an alternative to letting your thoughts determine your way.

Draw three thought bubbles. An optimistic thought, a neutral thought and a destructive thought.

Place a finger on one of the three thought bubbles and think of something related to this bubble. If the idea eludes you, just start over again.

Find a watch and notice:

- How long you are capable of sticking with one thought.
- How fast you can let go of a thought.
- How quickly you can switch from one thought to another and back again.

If you play this 'take-charge' game often you will become a master in controlling your thoughts.

It's fun also to play this game with two or three people together and follow how each person's finger moves on the bubbles, knowing that invisible things are going on inside their heads⁵³.

In between the game's three parts, tell each other about what occurred inside your mind along the way.



⁵³ Read more about the invisible, page 14.

Make the invisible visible

The idea behind this little game is to make our invisible thoughts visible and to practise a way of dialogue that makes us know more about each other and ourselves, thus preventing misunderstandings and conflicts. The game takes place in small groups (maximum of 4-5 persons in a group).



Draw/cut 8-10 thought bubbles out of paper (A5-A4 size).

Choose a "Thought Theme" for the exercise, which is relevant to the participants and write/draw the theme on a thought bubble. Themes could be, for example: friends, family, feelings (e.g. joy, anger etc.), violence, abuse, society, future and so on.

Put this thought bubble with the chosen theme in the middle of a table.

Each participant now uses 1-2 minutes to think about the theme –and to write key words or draw his or her thoughts on a blank thought bubble. This is Thinking Round 1. Everybody then presents simultaneously their thought bubbles around the theme bubble.

Participants take turns and describe (maximum one minute each) their thoughts around the theme. This is Talking Round 1. Afterwards the others are invited to ask questions:

- Tell us a bit more about....
- What do you think is the cause behind...?
- What do you think we can do ... right now ... later...?
- What would make sense for you to do...?

After this round every participant again uses 1-2 minutes to think about the theme, including what the others have talked about, and writes key words or draws his or her (new) thoughts on a new paper-thought bubble (Thinking Round 2). Everybody then simultaneously presents their thought bubbles by placing them on the table outside the first thought bubble circle.

Then run a 'Talking Round 2' in exactly the same way as the first round.

It's a good idea to invite participants to reflect briefly on the group's review of the theme as a whole and express how they felt during the exercise.

If you really want to practise this type of dialogue, it's recommended to repeat the game 1-2 times a week for 8-12 weeks with different themes that are relevant to the participants at that particular time.

Me

This is a solo game, or for one-one conversations.

You need three quite large (A5-A4) paper-thought bubbles.

Write on bubble 1 how you think others would describe you as a person as you are right now.

Then write on bubble 2, how you think you are as a person right now. Place bubble 2 behind bubble 1.

Then write on bubble 3, how you, deep inside, want to be as a person in the future. Place bubble 3 behind bubbles 1 and 2.

Talk to someone you trust about ways to achieve your own wishes (bubble 3) and where you are now (bubbles 1 and 2).



When positivity has gone

This roleplay is suited for 2-3 persons. Before starting, read: the attention – spotlight of the brain, page 12.

This game concerns a situation where you have serious personal problems that make it hard to think about anything else. You need 3-5 paper thought bubbles.

Write some key words or draw on a bubble about the problem.

Then write keywords or draw on a new bubble to explain how you thought about yourself before the problem grew this big.



After that you write down keywords or draw, again on a new bubble, how you want to think about yourself when the problem is resolved. Also write/draw on the same bubble about how you believe others will look at you when the problem is resolved.

Place bubbles 2 and 3 behind bubble 1, simply to illustrate how seriously challenging thoughts often overshadow more helpful ones completely. Have a brief conversation with each other in relation to how it feels to be in such a condition.

Now place bubbles 2 and 3 besides bubble 1 so they're visible. Think about and talk about how to practise focusing your attention to strengthen it gradually, thus improving your ability to hold on to thoughts that will help you further (bubbles 2 and 3) and preventing those thoughts from disappearing behind the challenging ones (bubble 1).

It may help to place the three thought bubbles in a place where you can look at them every day for a period of time.

There are many different examples of attention training to be found in the Resilience Programme. Look around and choose what makes sense for you.

Dilemma

This game suits 2-3 persons best. You will need a number of paper-thought bubbles.

Invent a character – a boy or a man. Imagine that you are able to read his thoughts.

1. One day, sitting alone, he starts thinking about what he would truly like to do later that day. It might be small everyday thoughts or it might be big ideas about something important in his life. Write down key words or draw his solitary thoughts on a bubble.

2. Another day he is together with his family or some friends. People will always affect each other, for better or worse, and now our boy/man thinks completely different thoughts compared to when he was on his own – these are actually thoughts that could make him do something that he might regret.



Write key words or draw his sociable thoughts on a new bubble.

Have a conversation in the group about his thought-dilemma and come up with ideas about how he can solve this dilemma.

Invent a new character – a girl or a woman.

1. One day she is all alone. She thinks about something which she is afraid to do, even though she knows it would be good for her to act. Write key words or draw on a bubble about her solitary thoughts.

2. The next day, she joins the company of a good friend who knows about her challenge. They have talked about it several times, but apparently it does not help just talking about it. It's a bit hard for the good friend, who wants to help.



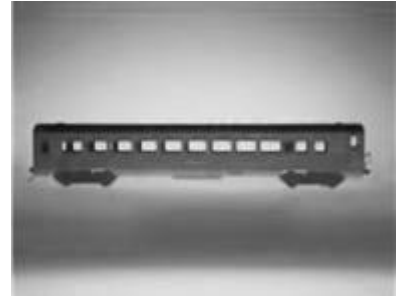
Write key words or draw on a new bubble the good friend's thoughts about the girl or woman and her difficult situation.

Have a conversation in the group about what a good friend can do to help in order to move forward from just talking and talking, which may not help that much.

If you have time, you can also invent a new character and a new situation and follow the format above.

Mind-flying

You can teach yourself how to fly out of a mind-train⁵⁴, even when it runs with you at full speed, and look at it from the outside. Then you are free to decide and jump onto another mind-train if you want.



It may sound strange and difficult but it may be easier than you think. Try this:

- Ask yourself loudly inside: "What am I thinking right now?" Then you may experience for a few seconds that you are sort of looking on your own thoughts from the outside. This allows you to decide whether you want to fly into the same thoughts again, or rather choose to go by another mind-train.
- Ask yourself loudly inside: "How do I feel inside right now?". And discover, for a few seconds, that the feeling you have inside is a singular event which you can observe and talk about.
- You can also take a little internal break, giving some time off to the endlessly running mind-trains. It's clever, but very simple. You just do it like this: Say loudly to yourself inside: "I wonder what kind of thought, the next thought coming to me, will be." Then wait and discover what happens inside of yourself. For a few seconds it may be completely quiet inside; it's like a break, where no mind-trains passes and brings you along.

When you practise, mind-flying you can become a very skilled manager of all your mind-trains.

As an adult, it is often a good idea to ask curious questions that rehearse a child's ability to change mind-trains:

- What are you thinking about?
- Could you think about it another way too?
- What do you think about the fact that you are thinking this way?
- What does your current way of thinking mean to you?

Questions like this develop the child's ability to reflect (to think about their own thinking).

⁵⁴ Read about mind-trains, page 44.

Three positives

Doctors and psychologists have for many years naturally been engaged in examining human challenges. Recently there has also been a growing interest to investigate what actually keeps us happy and healthy.

One example is "Positive Psychology", formulated in the late 1990s by Professor Martin Seligman. In collaboration with colleagues he investigated simple methods that everyone can use to enhance joy and happiness in life.

For example:

The experience of happiness rises if you, once a day, write down, draw or say three good things about yourself and your life, big or small.

It could be thoughts, experiences or actions.

You have to do it every day at the end of the day for at least a

month in order to feel the effect. The longer you keep it up, the better the effect.



Control your desires

It's fun to do what you want, but if you do it all the time, or exceed certain limits, it may become a problem. For example:

- If you spend all your money on impulse shopping.
- If you become violent when you get angry.
- If you are addicted to tobacco, alcohol, drugs, gambling, sugar etc.

Then it might be an idea to 'fitness-train' how to control your desires.

This is one method: here we use sweets as an example. However you can practise with any desire that might dominate your thinking too much. The only things you need are paper, pencil and your watch. This exercise is good because you decide yourself how quickly you want to be better!

Imagine not being able to leave a bag of sweets alone – your desire makes you want to eat all of them all one after the other.

- Place the bag on a piece of paper and write on the paper what time it is.
- Do not touch the bag for as long a time as possible.
- When you start eating the sweets, write again what time it is.
- Calculate how long time you were able to leave it (seconds, minutes, hours, days?).

Try the exercise again and again – and see whether you are able to improve gradually.

The paper should be located in a place where you notice it frequently.



Resilience and emotions

Resilience is trainable and practice increases your ability to tolerate both your own and others' emotions. It becomes easier to prevent 'panic' and over-reactions that influence you and others negatively. This means that it becomes less easy for other people's negative emotions to penetrate into your brain's alarm centre⁵⁵.

The more resilient you become, the more it is YOU who controls your own thoughts and feelings – subsequently other people's emotions will not control your inner life to a great extent. For example:

- Anger
- Fear
- Sadness and powerlessness
- Embarrassment and shyness
- Unnecessary dissatisfaction
- Self-pity



Here is a training plan proposal:

1. Make sure you know how your attention and alarm centre work (read: The Attention – Spotlight of the Brain, page 12, and The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, page 19) and when the alarm centre kicks off challenging emotions.
2. Practise body relaxation, using the exercises that work best for you, until you are able to do it automatically⁵⁶.
3. Make a practice plan consisting of situations from your everyday life which you know for sure will trigger alarm feelings to a degree that you can still keep control and balance inside by using the techniques you have practised (in Section 2).

Your alarm centre learns that you are the one in charge and it will gradually calm down. In this way you become more and more resilient and become able to gradually move yourself into situations that are more and more difficult⁵⁷.

⁵⁵ Read more: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, page 19.

⁵⁶ Read more: the body helps the mind, page 32.

⁵⁷ Read more: construct a plan of practice, page 67 and resilience and praise, page 3.

The class behaviour game

This simple game is inspired by an American game which was part of something developed for primary and secondary schools in Baltimore Public Schools in the early 1990s – the Classroom Prevention Program. The game 'Make the Invisible Visible' is inspired by this program too⁵⁸.

The Baltimore program has been thoroughly tested scientifically. Students were followed to 19 years of age. It was found that those sticking to the program managed significantly better in education and had significantly less risk of abuse⁵⁹.



The purpose of the game is to contribute to a good living and learning environment for both students and adults. Here are the rules:

Define (preferably together with the students) a specific behavioural goal to be achieved by the game. It may for instance be: less noise, proper language, less violence, more helpfulness, inclusion of everyone when playing or socialising and so on.

Decide upon a time frame for the game. It can be anything from 10 minutes up to days, even weeks.

Divide the class into 3-5 groups (depending on class size). The teacher decides who should be in which group, ensuring that the groups roughly possess equal chances to succeed in the game. Each group receives a number of points to start with (between 5 and 10).

When students demonstrate desired behaviour in sufficient quantity within a given time, they are rewarded additional points. When students demonstrate contrary behaviour, points are removed from the group. The teacher determines whether students themselves should be part of judging their own behaviour (and thus reward or remove points) or whether it is an adult decision (depending on the theme and students' maturity).

When the game is finished, the student group with most points is given an appropriate reward (tangible or intangible) that has been agreed upon in advance.

The game should be repeated at regular intervals, perhaps with new behavioural themes, new groups and gradually increasing demands.

⁵⁸ Read more: make the invisible visible, page 56.

⁵⁹ <http://evidencebasedprograms.org/1366-2/good-behavior-game>

Majority misunderstanding

Majority misunderstanding is a concept that deals with unconscious peer pressure. We are social beings, and therefore influenced by what we believe other people think and do.

Sometimes we might think that everyone else thinks and does something, whereas in reality only a few think and act that way. This is called a 'majority misunderstanding'.

For instance a teenager may think that many of his peers are drunk on weekends, but in reality very few may in fact be drunk.



In Denmark, there have been two large school projects about social bearing and majority misunderstandings: The Ringsted Study and The Aarhus Experiment. Both projects have demonstrated that this intervention significantly reduces smoking, alcohol and crime. It's easy to try it yourself. You simply ask two simple questions in a school class:

- How many of your peers do you believe do xxx currently?
- Do you do this currently?

When we analyse the answers, it often turns out that there is a significant difference between belief and reality. The results are used as a starting point for conversations about why we may well believe in something other than reality. It's an excellent source of guidance and inspiration.

Problem Solving

ADHD

It is a fact about every human being that the 'I' holds one end of the attention and the external reality holds the other end (See: attention - the spotlight of the brain, page 12).

If you suffer from ADHD the 'I' only has a weak hold on the attention and as the brain's working memory is too small the result is easily a feeling of 'overload'. The 'I' finds it difficult to keep the attention focused, to hang on and to choose. As a consequence it gets randomly drawn into big or small events. It may feel like several different movies running at the same time, with sequences continuously being cut as well. The feeling can also be as if you are forced to jump on to different 'mind-trains' every second, never letting you reach your destination. (Read: the story of a mind-train, page 44).

A person who has ADHD therefore experiences chaos and the 'alarm centre' is turned on most of the time, making them react with 'flight or fight' (read: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, page 19). This means that the ability to reflect and to learn becomes limited.

When you create peace around such a person and help them to calm down their body, you limit the amount of events that can draw the person's attention. The level of alertness decreases and they regain the ability to reflect and learn.

Addiction

Everything you find in the section about the Teenage Brain⁶⁰ and its subsections are relevant to addictions of any kind. Besides, of course, the story of the reward-factory⁶¹.

It's very helpful to explore the following sections if you deal with addiction as a problem: a way to success, page 28 and: help someone else, page 8.

It's also highly recommended to use the basic knowledge provided in the sections on: the attention - spotlight of the brain, page 12, and The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, page 19.

⁶⁰ Read more: the teenage brain, page 26-31.

⁶¹ Read more: the reward factory, page 45.

Acute Crisis – protect the Brains Alarm Centre

See page 24

Fear and shyness

If we lacked the ability to be afraid we simply would not be alive today. Fear is vital at the right time and place:

Imagine a situation like this: You're out on a large open plain n a really hot day. Suddenly you see a big lion leap from the grass some distance away. It runs at full speed towards you, jaws wide open. You spontaneously think: how funny - it looks happy to see me. This is wonderful...!



So it's important not just to be afraid when the situation demands it, but that you are capable of recalling being afraid. The next time you hear a lion roar in the distance you can easily take precautions in due time because you've learned what a lion's roar means. A useful belief is created: lions are dangerous and must be treated with caution.

HOWEVER, both children and adults may fear something for no reason. This happens when the brain's alarm system has been over-sensitised. Many things in the world may be subject to your fear without reason and limit your scope of life – e.g. spiders, earthworms, darkness, people in general and so on.⁶². Shyness is a kind of social phobia where nervousness and inhibition takes over when you are together with other people and where you do not feel completely comfortable.

Fear and shyness is like a track written into the memory of the alarm centre. This track can be modified and removed if required. The thinking brain is able to actually transform fear if it is activated little by little.

The brain's alarm centre and the body should gradually learn that YOU and your thinking brain are in charge and control. If the fear gets out of control, the thinking brain is consequently out of the game. The process should therefore be planned in detail to ensure that fear is evoked in appropriate doses only, in order to be sure that the thinking brain keeps control. The alarm centre then gradually learns that the situation is not dangerous as such. You can read about how this can be done here: construct a plan of practice, page 67⁶³.

⁶² Read more: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre.

⁶³ Read more: resilience and praise, page 3, a way to success, page 6, and help someone else, page 8.

Construct a plan of practice

A plan of practice consists of a series of real-life situations that evokes fear in small doses. The plan of practice has step-by-step escalation and thereby strengthens the links between the thinking brain and the brain's alarm centre. This technique is scientifically known as "cognitive exposure".

Talk with people you trust and use your imagination when you need to construct a plan of practice that suits your challenge.

When you, in small doses, provoke your fears in your plan of practice (or maybe just from inner visualisation) you must calm your body down. Fear is removed when your body is at peace. The body learns a new pattern, and the alarm centre learns to calm down⁶⁴.

The simplest way to calm your body is to practise deep relaxation breathing and keep doing it until you feel the fear becomes less and disappears (read more in the Breathing section). You can also practise how to move your attention to something other than the fearful thoughts (read more under: attention – spotlight of the brain).

It is essential that you stay with your relaxation practice until you feel comfortable and have a sense of small victory over the fear. If you provoke the fear too much, the thinking brain cannot control the alarm centre and your fear will increase. If it's the other way round and you flee or walk out of the situation too early, the alarm centre will just be confirmed in its cautiousness. Even severe fears can gradually be reduced by this simple technique⁶⁵.

⁶⁴ Read: body and mind, page 12.

⁶⁵ Read the real life story about fear, page 50.

Bullying and conflict

As a human being it is vital to feel appreciated by others. To be left out and treated as different is a very serious matter. Loneliness is the twin of bullying. That's why bullying is very dangerous.

Bullying takes place when insecurity exists between people. When experiencing insecurity, it becomes important to stick together. As a way to avoid being left out, it becomes important to act like those in the community you would rather be like. And when you are inside the community you have to ensure that you do not look or behave like those who are outside, otherwise you risk exclusion.

Compassion for others (empathy) is a thoughtful attitude that gets overshadowed when the alarm centre is activated and the thinking brain turned down⁶⁶. Thoughts about your own mental and social survival will dominate. An insecure environment may force you to care for yourself first and foremost. The consequence may be loss of empathic insight towards people outside the community, thus seeing them as objects. This can happen to all people, both children and adults. At worst we define other people as enemies. This psychological mechanism – the loss of compassion – is the same everywhere: in bullying at school, at work or at home. Even all the way to the extreme: full scale genocide.

An insecure community produces contempt rather than dignity. It can be violent, but usually contempt show up discreetly in everyday life's minor events.

Fear of exclusion stresses everyone in an unsafe community – those outside as well as those inside who are afraid of being excluded. It can control all actions. Insecurity creates both bullies and victims. Scolding and reproaching make it worse. Adults who berate and disparage others become role models for bullying.

Security is created through decisions

- Let all children and adults know what security, insecurity and bullying does to us.
- Be friendly and attentive, especially to people who have a tough time.
- Cultivate diversity actively in your community rather than sameness.
- Communities grow when we gather around discovery and learning something exciting.
- Never use derogatory language.
- Don't ever scold or blame others. In an insecure environment, all are victims and punishment and blame only makes it worse.
- Accept that it takes time to build confidence; it is okay to make mistakes and practise.

One way to increase positivity in the mind is to use the body – exercise! This creates feel-good mood chemicals in the brain. And if you urgently need to calm your alarm centre, you just breathe deeply and

⁶⁶ Read more: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, page 19.

slowly until you feel how inner peace fills your body and head. You can read more about this in the breathing section.

Resolving bullying conflicts

Research on bullying shows that scolding and punishment at best does not make a difference, at worst it makes the situation worse. In general it's crucial to take preventative action as described above.

In addition, acute and current situations must of course be resolved too. Agitated people need peace and understanding. This applies to bullied victims as well as bullies. It is a prerequisite for the brain's alarm centre to relax and for the person to calm down and reflect rationally again. Here are some useful phrases:

- I understand you are ... (sad, angry, upset and so on)
- What do you think about what has happened?
- It's good that you are ... (what you want from him or her).
- It's hard right now ... but it's good we are able to train ourselves and learn to ...

Peace

If an agitated person is scolded, an external peace can easily be created – that person may quieten down and start behaving. There is a chance, however, that fear is created in their alarm centre, which can make it harder than necessary to cope in the future.

A short time out being alone and away from a conflict situation will often help to calm the alarm centre. (It's very important to explain that a time out is not a punishment but rather a means to find peace of mind.) This applies to bullies as well as victims.

Learning simple techniques on how to soothe the alarm centre, thus be able to 'keep a cool head and a warm heart' can be a tremendous help. You can read more in the following sections: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre; how to calm the alarm centre; breathing.

Credit, reward and protection

When trying to help a child or groups of children to change their behaviour, you can use a points system. You should give an explanation in advance, and a warning before any sanctions:

- Give credit (specific, short and without reservation) on positive behaviour, even at minor events (and perhaps, to start with, rewards with points or something else).
- Ignore, remove points and remove privileges (time-limited) when behaviour is negative.

The Class Behaviour Game is very well suited to dealing with bullying in a group.

Protect children and young people physically and mentally from situations they cannot cope with. This applies to both victims and bullies. It may for example be a good idea for them to stay away from others for a while.

Rephrase negative events to be useful experiences and help them discover it's okay to learn and it's okay to practise. Make a plan of practice involving easy situations to start with and a little harder later on. That way the child understands the effectiveness of practice and gains a feeling of success from learning to control their alarm centre. They can also use a Smartphone for practising. You can read more in the following sections: resilience and praise; a way to success; help someone else.

Pattern breakers

A child who becomes better after a difficult period has learned something very important: problems can be solved! When a person gets unconditional support – 'I believe in you, and I mean it!' – and is given proper follow-up, positive changes will happen for most people. 'Pattern breakers' are people who have lived a thriving life in spite of very poor life conditions in childhood. They have one thing in common: one or more people around them have believed in the possibility for change and have never failed to offer their support.

More material

- Carolyn Webster-Stratton: *The Incredible Years - A troubleshooting guide for parents* (Policy Press 2009).
- Ross W. Greene: *Lost at school* (Scribner Book Company 2014). See more at www.livesinthebalance.org
- Ben Furman: *Kids Can* (Hans Reitzel 2005). See also <http://www.kidsskills.org>
- Raising Children Network from Australia

Obesity and Hunger

See page 33

Mental disorders

This website provides information on what we can do to take care of each other and ourselves and to develop greater resilience. It applies to everybody, including vulnerable people, and those who suffer from mental disorders. Some mental disorders are specifically mentioned in various sections at this website. You can also find lots of highly relevant factual knowledge on other sites about mental disorders.

Pain

See page39

Eating disorders

Eating disorders are caused by fear of losing control over one's weight.

This fear attracts the attention to such an extent that all other possible thoughts and feelings are left out of the attention's focus/spotlight. When the person is fully immersed in this irrefutable alarm experience, other thoughts and feelings are in 'darkness' and do not really exist⁶⁷.

Consequently, the 'I' melts right into this pattern of thoughts and feelings, leaving the person with no chance to think, feel or experience themselves in any other way. Even your physical mirror image can be interpreted within your brain in relation to this frozen pattern of fear⁶⁸.

The only (personal) logical line of action therefore becomes that of controlling the weight-fear by losing weight.

On this foundation, the following strategy makes sense:

- Be patient and build alliances with professional experts that you can trust.
- Do not challenge or criticise the person's self-image, but give neutral information about the 'I', attention and the alarm centre⁶⁹.
- Use exercises for body-well-being and attention training from this website as well as other sources that can support gradual control of the alarm centre⁷⁰.

⁶⁷ Read more: [The Attention - Spotlight of the Brain](#), page 12, and [The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre](#), page 19.

⁶⁸ Read more: [The Story of a Mind-Train](#).

⁶⁹ For example: [The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre](#), page 19, [Fear and Shyness](#), page 66, [The Story of the House of Thoughts](#), page 43, [The Story of a Mind-Train](#), page 44.

⁷⁰ Read more: [The Attention - Spotlight of the Brain](#), page 12, and [The Body helps the Mind](#), page 37.

- Build cautious plans of practice that can restore confidence to both food and body image⁷¹.

Learning disorders

It's difficult to learn if the challenges you meet are too big.

Challenges should of course suit your age and intelligence. We are born with different kinds of intelligence ('multiple intelligences') and there's a great diversity in where each of us is smartest. Someone may be super maths-smart, but find it hard to figure out how to relate to others ('people smart' – social intelligence). Another person might be smart at words and language, but is not very 'body-smart'. Some are fortunate to be born with a very big 'intelligence-pie' (super-intelligent), while others have been less fortunate and struggle to do many things.

It's fun to learn when you are challenged in a way that fits your intelligence. You experience becoming better and it gives you courage and desire to learn more.



If challenges become too big, and you are perhaps scolded or bullied, you lose your good spirit. Then the brain's alarm centre takes over and the thinking brain is turned down⁷² with the result that it becomes difficult even to use the intelligence you actually have and it becomes twice as hard to learn something new. It's a vicious circle.

If you practise what you are already good at, it becomes easier to learn difficult things, because the thinking brain opens up for new learning when you are happy and feel that it pays to practise.

Sleep and Rest

See page 35

⁷¹ Read more: [Fear](#), page 50, [Construct a Plan of Practice](#), page 67, and [Smartphone](#), page 69.

⁷² Read more: The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre, page 19.

Sadness

We all know the feeling of sadness. However, if it gets to be too much, perhaps even becomes depression, it's not good. Then you are caught in thoughts and feelings that you cannot escape⁷³.

If it's so bad that you get paralysed into inertia, you need other people's help in order to take action and break the vicious circle of negative thoughts that make you go round in circles⁷⁴. If reality is a depression, professional help is required.

A very simple and powerful thing to do is to get plenty of exercise and fresh air every day. It activates the body's own pharmacy and creates good mood-chemicals in the brain.

The frequency of depression found in adults and children has increased tremendously in the last 50 years. The explanation may be found in the way we learn to face challenges.

We develop self-esteem when we experience our ability to cope with life challenges. Optimism is about discovering how we solve problems.

Human problems and limitations must be acknowledged and we need support to practise and gradually get better.

From early age, challenges and problems must therefore be met in adequate doses. It counteracts low self-esteem.

If we encounter too big challenges too often, we become vulnerable and fearful and unable to cope. It eventually wears you out and may end in feelings of powerlessness and loss of faith and hope – depression. That said, if we never meet any challenges because of overprotection, we never develop resilience⁷⁵.



The boy's father tries - in the best sense, to be good to his boy and encourage him, but he in reality says....

You're lying, I do not believe you, I don't take what you say seriously, and you should be able to figure it out yourself.

He could instead say: I understand. Well you can practice. Do you want me to help?

Vitamins of Knowledge

The Resilience Programme is primarily designed to provide "vitamins of knowledge" – a moment, a few seconds or minutes – that you can blend into your everyday life situations without any further effort required.⁷⁶

⁷³ Read more: [Attention](#), page 12, [The Alarm Centre](#), page 19, [Alarm Examples](#), page 22, [The Mind-Train](#), page 44.

⁷⁴ Read more: [Help Someone Else](#), page 8.

⁷⁵ Read more: [Resilience and Praise](#), page 3.

⁷⁶ See for instance the real life stories about [Anger](#), page 49, and [Patience](#), page 52.

The programme can also be used for a 'Mind Training Course' for children and young people, parents and professionals. All adults will be able to explain and teach children and young people by using information from the programme. You can create a small or a large course depending on how much time you have. It can also be freely adjusted to what else you are doing. An ideal situation is if all adults living or working with a group of children attend a course together. Experience shows that many become curious even after a short introduction and then start exploring the website for exactly what they need.

The individual pages on the website can also be printed directly for educational use.

Useful sections to begin with

All items from the website can be used for training but experience shows that specific sections are useful to begin with:

- [Attention - Spotlight of the Brain](#), page 12, and [The Thinking Brain and the Alarm Centre](#), page 19, provide good basic knowledge. Combining these with stories, especially [The Story of the House of Thoughts](#), page 43, and [The Story of a Mind-Train](#), page 44, and some of the [small games](#), page 54, will give you a very good start, even with children as young as 6-7 years of age. It is obviously important to talk about personal experiences along the way and see them in relation to the knowledge you work with.
- The stories – or parts of the stories – can be used in many ways: for reading and storytelling; as inspiration to tell an entirely different story; kids can draw or build their own house of thoughts, and so on.
- The article [Resilience and Praise](#), page 3, is particularly suitable for printing and presentation before conversations where adults discuss issues related to the lives of children and young people – e.g. at parent meetings.
- When problems need to be solved, experience shows that it is good to start with the basic knowledge as discussed above. Use the guidelines in the sections [A Way to Success](#), page 6, and [Help Someone Else](#), page 8. A number of common and serious specific problems are discussed in the section on [Problem Solving](#), page 65.
- If you are working towards the development of a safe environment for being and learning in a group, it's natural to combine the basic knowledge above with the section on [Bullying](#), page 68. It's highly recommended to use [The Class Behaviour Game](#), page 63, for a period of time if problems are present.
- The entire section on the [Teenage Brain](#), page 26, is obviously particularly relevant to teens and their parents.