

THE BODY AND THE MIND WORK TOGETHER: Changing Old Patterns And Encouraging The Growth Of New Ones Through Psychodrama

I became very excited when I read Norman Doidge's book, "The Brain That Changes Itself", Viking Penguin, USA, 2007. It lent support for much of what I see and know works in psychodrama, and became the inspiration for my experimental workshop at the BPA conference in London, July 2011.

Work done by Doidge and colleagues reveals that the nerve cells in our brains and nervous systems are "plastic". This is a term used by scientists and researchers in related or allied disciplines and refers to the fluidity or malleability of the brain. The brain learns to learn. I thought that was amazing.

Merzenich (Doidge, *Op. cit.*) argued "*by practising a new skill under the right conditions* (italics mine) can change hundreds of millions and possibly billions of the connections between the nerve cells in our brain maps". When we enact a scene in psychodrama, the 'as if' it were happening becomes real. The brain map goes into action. As in psychodrama, there is no time or gender in the world of the brain map; it's simply the here and now. Imagine then when we enact something new; when we say something or do something that was not said or done previously, a new set of connections form. New roles and new role relationships develop expanding the cultural atom. The operational links (the role relationships) form new role clusters and at the same time new neural pathways are forged in the brain. If the protagonist is deeply connected with self, the flow of thought, feeling and action deepens the role. When there is a catharsis of abreaction like this, there is also a catharsis of integration and the 'feel good' chemical, dopamine is released and reinforces the reward. It could be relief for example. Have you noticed people sighing during a drama, or doing other visible things like breathing or relaxing the body?

New experiences can trigger new responses and can either inhibit or excite the neurons. This idea made me think about the sociometric concept of warm up in relation to spontaneity. Moreno maintained that unless there was an adequate warm up to an activity, for example, swimming, eating, sleeping or writing, there would not be a full expression of the role, so warm up is essential for any act to be complete. (Moreno, Psychodrama, Vol. 1, 1946, 1985 edition).

According to Doidge et al, "the brain naturally wants to organize itself topographically so that it can function in a way that is useful to us". Many brain maps work together by spatially grouping together events that happen together. I've always thought that psychodrama is a very organic process. When we set a scene we are preparing the optimal conditions for new developments or healing. Psychodrama production techniques such as doubling, mirroring and role reversal pave the way for a new set of connections to take place, not only within our psyche but also (so it seems) in the brain.

In my conference workshop, I used the mirror technique in the action component of the session. The ability to see things clearly is often the first step

for new thoughts and new actions to emerge. “A memory can only be as clear as its original signal” (Doidge, *Op. cit.*) so we might conclude that naming something is important. This can happen in the mirror technique. The protagonist comes outside of the drama, sees the whole scenario, and then describes what they actually see. They have the opportunity to clearly see ‘what is’ in front of them. Sometimes the director will need to coach the protagonist to bring their attention to such things as body language, spatial location of auxiliaries or words. A director needs to take care that the protagonist doesn’t interpret what they see but stays with the actual real life event. Once something is seen in this clear way the protagonist is more able to deal with it because of a refinement of perception. My view is that the neuronal pathways also refine. As neuroscientist Carla Shatz says, “Neurons that fire together, wire together” (Doidge, *Ibid.*). At the moment of clear seeing a new perspective occurs, and in that moment a new neuronal pathway is formed and the old might instantly drop away. Paying close attention (by focusing) for example allows long-term “plastic change”. “The brain learns to learn when it is ‘on’.” (Doidge, *Ibid.*). The ability to be in the here and now is essential for such change to take effect and for healthy functioning. Multiple warm ups generally do not assist cohesion so by slowing down the action, taking time to bring the protagonist out into the mirror position to see and experience aids their spontaneity. The final part of the mirror technique is when the director takes the protagonist to a further dimension by asking them what they experience after they have seen themselves and the others in the scene. Here the person often gets in touch with whether they like something or not, sees how things really are, they may feel compassion for themselves and can initiate a new direction for themselves in the drama. A new perception has taken place and a new experience follows.

Merzenich, (Doidge, *Ibid.*) points out “ a nucleus can only be activated once a critical period of development has passed when something important, surprising or novel occurs, or, if we make the effort to pay close attention”. Once again the ability to focus becomes prime. Whilst the mirror technique aids this process, it is clear that spontaneity in general plays an integral role in the process of change and development. The physical activities of the psychodrama assist in bringing us to a place where something new can happen with old scenarios. Action brings ‘talk’ to life. New pathways are forged; new relationships develop, both within our self and with others. The body and the mind work together, changing old patterns and encouraging the growth of new ones through psychodrama. The development of new roles can mean the development of new neuronal pathways. You don’t need to be a protagonist in your own drama for this to happen, you can develop new roles and have new experiences by being an auxiliary for a protagonist, role taking and role-playing all grist for the mill and changing the mind.

Sue Daniel

suedan@netspace.net.au

Original article published in the BPS newsletter, TELE, 2014