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Change Your Story Change Your Brain by Dr. Linda Miles (review)

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Book Review

Change Your Story Change Your Brain

Dr. Linda Miles

69 pp

Xlibris Publishing

Living a good life is an important virtue for many people. Pathways to seeking a good life - one filled with peace, joy, gratitude, forgiveness, and contentment - regardless of one's circumstances are likely to vary and be somewhat individualized. Part of this is related to the fact that what resembles happiness and fulfillment for one person may be different than for another. Variability in what one desires is perfectly okay as each of us feels driven or motivated to pursue different interests, hobbies, vocations, lifestyles, and so forth. Yet, a part of the human experience is to seek and live a life well-lived. Mindfulness is one approach to help do just that.

Mindfulness is described as a mental state one achieves and experiences in the present moment by being aware of and accepting one's thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Mindfulness is a state in which people can observe what they are experiencing without judging themselves or their observations (Psychology Today, 2017). In other words, mindfulness makes room and allows for people to experience their positive and negative thoughts, emotions, and sensations without trying to repress or change them. It is a state in which people can observe and learn from that which they experience.

Mindfulness has gained the attention and interest of many scholars and society in the past 15 years. During this time, more information has come forth about its benefits and healing effects. More specifically, mindfulness can help reduce anxiety, stress, worry about the future, and chronic pain; treat and prevent depression; and lower blood pressure. Mindfulness can also improve a person's mental cognition and concentration, the brain's ability to process pain and emotions, emotional and mental self-regulation, sleep, coping responses when faced with difficult life events (i.e., cancer), and treat substance abuse, obsessive compulsive disorder, and heart disease (Forbes.com, 2016 ; Helpguide.org, n.d.; Huffington Post, 2013). Further, mindfulness can influence a person's attitude and sense of satisfaction.

Professionals interested in learning mindfulness and ways to practice it in their life or with the people they serve may find the book, "Change Your Story Change Your Brain" of value. Collectively, the book is composed of four sections pertaining to mindfulness: *Mindfulness as a Survival Strategy*, *The Mindfulness Mentality*, *Mindfulness as the Road to Recovery*, and *Mindfulness as a Path of Self-Discovery*. Within each section are three to four chapters. Each chapter covers a different concept related to mindfulness and is approached according to a specific format which includes an illustration of the NOW approach (i.e. **N**otice, **O**ppor-

tunities, and **W**ithin), a description of how the topic is related to the Path of Mindfulness, and a section referred to as Practice. Such a format makes the content easy to follow and apply. The book is relatively brief; therefore, the content covered in this review will consist of a chapter from each section to help illustrate some of the concepts discussed and to encourage professionals to consider learning more about mindfulness

The first section, *Mindfulness as a Survival Strategy*, has a chapter called Freedom from Mental Captivity: Lessons from a Concentration Camp Prisoner. This chapter opens with the story of psychotherapist, Viktor Frankl, who was a prisoner in a concentration camp during WWII (p. 6). In this chapter, similar to others, the author opens with a story, reference to a book, or some other meaningful illustration related to the chapter's focus. Viktor Frankl is mentioned because he experienced much devastation and loss while being a prisoner during WWII; yet, he found a way to not let his captors control his brain, thoughts, or emotions. Following this illustration, the author points out that all of us go through ups and down and difficult life events at some point in our lives. The reader is reminded that "it is not what happens to us but how we react to it" that is important (p.8). In the section entitled, NOW, the reader is asked to notice and reflect on what is taking place within oneself at this point-in-time and to not focus on the external environment. Next, as part of the opportunities stage, the reader is asked to explore if they view their difficulties as obstacles or opportunities. Finally, the author directs the reader to the within stage. This stage asks the reader to focus on the fact that "no one can influence how one feels, thinks, or experiences life without our permission" (p. 8). The third section, The Path of Mindfulness, talks about aligning oneself with a purpose greater than themselves, realizing that one can persevere and move beyond difficult life events, and introducing mindfulness as a means to help one work through them. The last section gives the reader a chance to practice mindfulness

The second section, *The Mindfulness Mentality*, has a chapter entitled, Freedom from Within: How Mindfulness Liberated Anne Franke. Similar to Viktor Frankl, Anne Franke experienced harsh and extremely difficult life events as a young girl before her death at the age of 15. Beginning at age 13, Anne journaled her experiences as a prisoner during WWI when Germany occupied Amsterdam. During this time, Anne came to realize life was short, nothing could be taken for granted and that happiness was an "inside job" and was to be cultivated within oneself. She learned at a young age that one must learn to live life the best they could as any day might be one's last. Related is the illustration of NOW. In

this section, the reader is enlightened about how Anne noticed her thoughts and reactions and was able to interact with them through writing. Her choice to write about the experiences she had became an opportunity to express her “thoughts, feelings, fears, and joys” rather than be held captive to them. Furthermore, the act of writing helped Anne look within herself and became a means to ground and soothe her despite the events taking place, externally. Following, *The Path to Mindfulness*, illustrates ways a person can use the knowledge gleaned from Anne Franke and practice being present in the midst of stressful life events by observing, making note of one’s present opportunities, and finding the ability within to practice mindfulness and soothe oneself. Finally, the Practice section helps the reader work on his or her breathing, cultivation of calmness, and be a part of the present moment despite potentially stressful life events.

The third section, *Mindfulness as the Road to Recovery*, has a chapter called, *Mental Suicide: The Danger of Grudges and How to Let Go*. Much of this chapter is about forgiveness and how mindfulness can help people learn to forgive. At the start, the book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is introduced to set the stage of forgiveness. Forgiveness is brought to the forefront in a brief illustration of a story between a girl named Scout and her father Atticus. The chosen illustration helps point out how reacting and lashing out rather than learning to forgive hurts oneself, although the initial desire is to do the exact opposite. The initial intent is to protect oneself. To better understand this concept, the section entitled NOW gives the reader an example where a person cannot stop “mentally berating or attacking” someone. As a result, the person is encouraged to explore the reason behind his or her reaction and why it is so strong. Next, the reader is reminded that when faced with such situations, people always have a choice in what they think, do, and in the choice of change. If this exercise is not sufficient, the reader is encouraged to look “within” to observe how being angry and riled up is affecting oneself (i.e., negativity, bitterness, toxic thoughts) (p. 46). Following, in the *Path of Mindfulness*, the author discusses using mindfulness as a means to help promote forgiveness and stresses it can be used to help us get a handle on our thoughts and feelings so a choice can be made to change them. Finally, as a part of the Practice section, two options are discussed. One is a visualization exercise pertaining to a person’s body being in knots. The idea being that when a person is tied up in knots, he or she is not relaxing or forgiving. Furthermore, one is uncomfortable and stressed. Through the release of these knots, one is able to relax, let go of pain and resentment, and find forgiveness. The other is the practice of changing one’s focus through a kindness meditation.

The fourth section, *Mindfulness as a Path of Self-Discovery*, has a chapter called *Using Mindfulness to Break the Chains of Mental Slavery*. This chapter opens with an illustration from the book, *The Invention of Wings*. This excerpt helps explain how people imprison themselves by their negative thoughts and feelings, even when everything else appears to be going well. The story brings to light the fact that people often imprison themselves and they remain that way until they decide to do something about it. The NOW technique encourages the reader to step back and reflect on one’s own situation and to examine ways he or she might hold themselves back. Once a person is aware of one’s tendencies,

s/he can choose to do something different. In essence, a person can choose to think, feel, and behave differently. The latter two sections focus on mindfulness and self-compassion. Of particular interest is the Practice section which focuses on the work of Dr. Kristen Neff, Associate Professor at University of Texas – Austin. In this section, the author discusses the importance of self-compassion and its three important ingredients: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

Professionals wanting to know more about how mindfulness can be practiced and used as a part of one’s life and/or in the lives of those they serve are encouraged to read this book. Mindfulness has many benefits to those who do it and can be practiced and integrated into one’s life in a number of ways. Of particular importance is the fact that anyone can learn mindfulness, and it may begin by setting aside only a few minutes per day. For those who make this choice, remarkable changes await, one of which is the positive effect it can have on one’s brain.

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