

Brain-heart Coherence

Observe a super chef, a great artist, or a top musician at work. Their skills and talents no doubt come from their brains. But I believe their joyful immersion and focus come from their hearts. Think of the people we encounter daily, our hairdresser, our neighborhood store owner, our children's teacher, etc. Some of them make you enjoy interacting with them. Some of them you try to avoid if you can. What makes the difference? There are two kinds of people. One kind operates from a heart-felt love system and the other operates from a heart-felt fear system. Most of us actually operate from both systems.

The human heart is the size of a fist and weighs about 10 ounces. It pumps blood that carries oxygen and nutrients to the parts of our body. We know it is the most vital organ in our body, but we seldom think beyond its basic function.

Recent research, however, tells us that the heart possesses a level of intelligence. It plays a more important role in our mental, emotional and physical processes than previously thought. "The heart is a sensory organ and acts as a sophisticated information encoding and processing center that enables it to learn, remember and make independent functional decisions." - Rollin McCraty, Director of Research, HeartMath Institute.

The HeartMath Research Center in California has documented the physiology of emotions, heart-brain interaction. They identified a specific link between our emotional states and our heart rhythms. When we have negative emotions such as fear and anger, our heart rhythms become erratic and disorganized. In contrast, positive emotions produce highly ordered, coherent patterns. HeartMath researchers refer to this as heart coherence.

There are two systems operating in our heart. The fear system and the love system. The fear system comes from our ego. It is defensive, selfish, imbalanced, angry and distrustful. The love system is open, balanced, trusting and loving. We live mostly out of fear due to unpleasant memories and hurtful experiences. We have established a set of behaviors that have become automatic. These are called habits. A habit is defined as a settled or regular tendency that is hard to give up. Our brain, as a pattern-recognition system, operates on repeated thoughts, emotions, attitudes and behavior. We function mostly out of our defensive self.

On the opposite end, when we function out of unconditional love, our open and simple mind (heart) can easily be manipulated and bullied by the selfish, defensive and angry individual.

This is where the brain-heart coherence comes in. I think of this approach as contemplation - meditation (prayer and chanting) coherence. We use our heads to think, then we let our hearts guide. It is not easy to break our set habits of negative thoughts, self doubt, distrust and accumulated anger. It takes a consistent intent to break away from the old habits and establish a new pattern of feelings.

Personally, I found that when I shift my focus and attention from my head to my heart, the non-stop negative chatter subsides. (At least for a while.) This short break gives me a moment to breathe and self-regulate. (We mentioned self regulation in Emotional Intelligence.)

The HeartMath Institute has offered a Heart Lock-in Technique.

1. Focus your attention in the area of the heart. Imagine your breath flowing in and out of the chest area.
2. Activate feelings of appreciation, care, compassion and gratitude.
3. Radiate that renewing feeling to yourself and others.

Focus → activate → radiate

The institute further states that practicing the state of coherence will "create a cascade of neural and biochemical events that benefit the entire body- especially our mental and emotional stability."

As we care for and guide our young children, it is important that we first practice and establish our own brain-heart coherence. Then we can teach our children to live happy, balanced lives.

Information on brain-heart coherence comes from "The Rise of Collective Compassion" conference, March 18-20, 2022.

An old Cherokee chief told his grandson "the Tale of the Two Wolves". He said, "There are two wolves who live inside us. One good and the other bad.

The bad one is fear, anger, jealousy, regret, guilt... everything that made us feel bad.

The good one is love, joy, peace, hope, kindness, forgiveness, truth and everything that made us feel good.

The grandson asked, "Which wolf won the war?"

"The one you feed," said the chief.

A Cherokee legend.