

MODULE 5: THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS AND BELIEFS

LESSON 4: BREATH AND THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF CHANGE

We are a bunch of tangled threads of habits. Habits of beliefs, thought, feelings and behaviours. We have already explored how these habits are formed, what influences them and how the body-mind system keeps them alive through neural networks.

Breathwork reveals to us the essence of our nature beyond habit and gives us the opportunity to create new habits or neural pathways that support conscious awareness, freedom, and growth. It supports us to live from a deeper, more authentic place and to contribute to the world from that place.

To summarise what we have established thus far:

- There are many factors that create belief systems
- Some beliefs support us while others do not
- We are conscious of certain beliefs, but many are subconscious
- Beliefs inform our thinking, feeling and behaviour patterns which eventually become habits that are ingrained in the system.
- Habits are neural pathways or grooves in our body mind systems
- This can show up in the form of anxiety, chronic stress, physical tension patterns and dysfunctional breathing patterns. They also show up when we are 'triggered' or have an unconscious reaction to something.

From the latest advances in neuroscience, we now understand that these neural pathways are not cast in stone. The brain and body are plastic and can be shaped and morphed by creating new neural pathways. This is essentially what the process of growth and change is about.

You will know from your own journey that while this is possible, it is also not easy. It is a process that requires patience and perseverance.

Through my work in the field of healing, growth and personal transformation, I have noticed a universal pattern or process of change that we typically go through. This model is also helpful when understanding where your clients are at.

This model is called 'The Neurobiology of Change' or the 7 Steps of Change.

- 1) **Excuses.** We are usually motivated to make a change in our lives when we feel dissatisfied, uncomfortable, or concerned about our lives. We are still at the point of wanting to alleviate our symptoms of anxiety, fatigue, we want to lose weight, make more money, be more productive. Basically, we want something to change but we want to feel better quickly. So, we opt for quick fix solutions that give us temporary relief. At this point we are usually 'unconsciously incompetent' at the new skill that is required. We do not know that we do not know. We are not aware of the underlying beliefs that are driving our behaviour. We avoid any attempt to go deeper and will typically find excuses not to disrupt the status quo. We fight with ourselves for not doing what we think we should be doing and an inner battle rages. In other words, the desire to change exists but constructs the obstacles in the form of excuses. We stay in a state of comfortable misery because it's what we know and requires less energy.

- 2) **Blocks:** We may be able to move past step 1 through our own mental effort or from pressure around us and begin to muster up the energy to make some changes, but we come up against some big obstacles that seem to be 'out of our hands'. Life keeps getting in the way – the tyre bursts, we get stuck in traffic, a friend needs our help, there is a crisis at work. A block is just a cleverly disguised excuse that we pin on someone or something else. It seems like 'life's way of preventing the change' and relieves us of the responsibility of making the change.

This makes sense from a quantum physics perspective where physical objects, thoughts and emotions are merely waves of energy vibrating at different

frequencies. Fear and subconscious belief systems resonate at frequencies that will draw the experiences and situations with a similar vibration. In other words, we attract what we fear. Like attracts like, and so the cycle gets perpetuated. This is where many of us halt the process of closing the gap and the old, entrenched neural circuitry takes over as the operating system. Behaviour and body trigger emotion, which feed thoughts, which in turn reinforce the belief systems. The old tired rusty wheel keeps turning.

- 3) **Awareness:** This is the major crossroad on the path that will determine whether the change will be made. At this point, there is an opportunity to create an inward shift that arises from the ownership and acceptance of the old pattern. There is a recognition of the belief system, habits, and patterns, and what has given rise to them. There is also a deep acknowledgement of the fear. We become 'consciously incompetent' at the new skill. In other words, we are aware that we do not have the new skill in place.

At this juncture, as the white flag is raised, an alignment occurs between the desire to change and our most deeply held authentic value systems. The shift is made from being motivated to being inspired. There is a willingness to stand at the top of the cliff and get a bird's eye view of this undiscovered interior territory and ask the questions: What got me here? What is my greatest fear? What will this change really mean? Where does this desire to change come from? What's the alternative? What will I give up or lose as I make this change? Is this choice in alignment with my most deeply held values? This is the first choice point. Courage, acceptance, self-compassion, and support are required as preparation for the further journey inward.

- 4) **Taking Action:** As we begin to close the gap, we arrive at the point where our intention aligns with our internal state and value system. There is a real and genuine attempt to take the action steps of change. As the new skill set is being learned, neurons begin to spark up different connections and a new neural circuitry is

created in the frontal lobe of the brain, the seat of choice and self-awareness. This is usually experienced as quite exhilarating, but sometimes scary as new territory is being discovered.

We can relate to the giddy exhilaration we felt when we did our very first breathwork sessions. It is easy and natural to want to retreat to what is familiar, and it is important to be vigilant and mindful of how and when the old behaviour shows up. And guaranteed the old behaviour will creep in as soon as the guard is dropped, and we might find ourselves at step 1 or 2 again. "This is taking too long", "This is too hard", "It's not working" is what we will say to ourselves. This is a normal part of the process. Remember that the new pattern has just been fired up, but the old circuitry is still deeply entrenched.

The challenge is that the new skill needs to be practised for the new pathway to be entrenched. We constantly crave that same feeling of thrill and exhilaration and new experiences that feeds the adrenaline addiction. The more familiar an experience becomes the more boring and dull it feels. The trick in creating new energy-supporting habits is getting over the part that is boring and mundane until it becomes habituated. Like learning any new skill, it requires daily practice, consistency, and patience. Initially, it demands effort and requires energy. We need to constantly affirm the inspired and deep commitment to ourselves and gather the support, encouragement and guidance of those who we trust and who have our best interest at heart, whether that is a friend, coach or mentor.

- 5) **Crossroads:** All these baby steps on the path of change lead us to another crossroads or major choice point. The new habit has been formed but the old circuits and the old 'self' feels threatened and begins its fight for survival. The new circuitry is being entrenched through the new thoughts, feelings and actions. The cells are no longer receiving their fix of 'feel bad' hormones and will begin to pick fights with the new self. If we engage these battles, the conscious brain and the old subconscious brain will begin a full-scale war.

Remember that the subconscious mind is the stop house of habits and is an energy saving mechanism so when we are mentally and physically exhausted it will be easier to default to old patterns. It feels easier at this point to throw in the towel than to continue.

Be aware that this is not a linear process, rather, it is akin to walking a labyrinth. As we head toward the centre, we can feel as if we are moving away from it. It's easy to feel despondent and default back to the old circuitry. The key to entrenching the new pathway is to maintain an open awareness and to keep catching the old behaviour and gently guide ourselves back. Once again, courage, support and realignment with value systems and compassion for yourself are required here.

- 6) **Practice:** The process of change requires perseverance, practice and commitment to self. We are becoming consciously competent. More than all that, it requires patience and support. Practically speaking, I find that making time to plan helps us to create a loose structure and support to make the changes easier. I also find the idea of 'habit stacking', described by SJ Scott in his book *Habit Stacking* quite useful and interesting. Basically, this is about stitching the new habit onto a habit that is already there. In other words, you are piggy backing off a neural pathway you have already created to save yourself from creating a new one. For example, you would like to take a Vitamin supplement, but you always forget. You could use something that is already a habit as a reminder to take it, for example, after brushing your teeth.

'Nerves that fire together wire together', so the more the skill, habits, behaviour, feelings and emotions are practised, the more deeply the neural pathways will be entrenched. In response, new receptors become switched on and primed on the surface of the cells and the physical body begins to transform.

7) **The Shift:** Now we have become unconsciously competent. The new neural pathways have become deeply embedded and the new habit is permanent. The entire body-mind system has become rewired to create a new habit or way of living and being. This is the 'new normal'. The software of the subconscious mind has been reprogrammed. While the old programme will probably rear its head every now and again, it passes quickly as the new default programme sets in. This, however, requires constant awareness and vigilance. By now, the skill of mindfulness has become more finely tuned.

Give some thought to the habits of thoughts, feelings and behaviour that might be depleting your energy system. Is there one small thing that you could work on reprogramming? Go through the 7 steps. Where do you think you are?

Studies are showing that it takes about 55 days of daily practice to create a new habit. Experts in the field of sports science suggests we need 2 000 repeated actions to embed the pathway. How many breathing sessions in this? We may not know for sure, the process is layered, but what we do know for sure, is that change is possible. We must just remember why we are doing it in the first place. Our ability to grow, adapt and change is what makes being human amazing and wonderful.

The breath is a fundamental tool and guide in the process of growth and change and is a powerful way to navigate through the above steps in three key ways. It supports:

- 1) **Self-Awareness** through breath awareness. When we train ourselves to become aware of the breath, we become more aware of our bodies, our feelings, emotions and thoughts. We cultivate a deep relationship with our inner witness and develop the ability to observe what we are experiencing without getting tangled in it. We become less reactive and more responsive.

- 2) **Self-Regulation.** Once we have expanded our awareness, we can then use the breath to self-regulate by breathing into the feelings, sensations, and tension points.

We can consciously breathe in a way that supports more relaxation, more energy and more openness by using the principles of breathing. When we can breathe in a way that reflects openness, and freedom and trust, we spark up the new neural pathways and build a new body-mind habit. The more conscious breathing skills we have in our toolkit, the more we can call on them in every situation in our lives and use it for whatever it is we are needing.

- 3) **Self-Transformation.** A deep dive conscious connected breathing session gives us the opportunity to access and work through old tension patterns and belief systems which will reveal themselves. We are given the opportunity through the breath to release and integrate them. In one session can have a visceral experience of the peace, power and purity that is our true nature.

Exercise:

Do this exercise with your trusted breathing partner/ friend:

1. Write down a new habit or way of being that you would like to practice and integrate into your life
2. What is the behaviour pattern that you find yourself defaulting to?
3. What are the emotions, thoughts and behaviours that are associated with the old pattern?
4. Can you identify the core belief system that lies at the core of the old pattern?
6. Write down the new belief you would like to programme and the associated thoughts, emotions, and physical state. Now choose an image or symbol, a colour, a scent, and music that you associate with this new way of being.
7. Share this with your partner as you allow yourself to be led into a conscious connected breathing session.
8. Commit to a 40-day daily breathing practice (any one that you choose) that will reinforce this new pattern using the same visuals, music, scent etc.
9. Make a pact with your partner to check in on you at least once a week to act as a support.