

Mindfulness and Taking in the Good:

Using Neuroplasticity To Weave Resources Into the Brain and the Self

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Topics

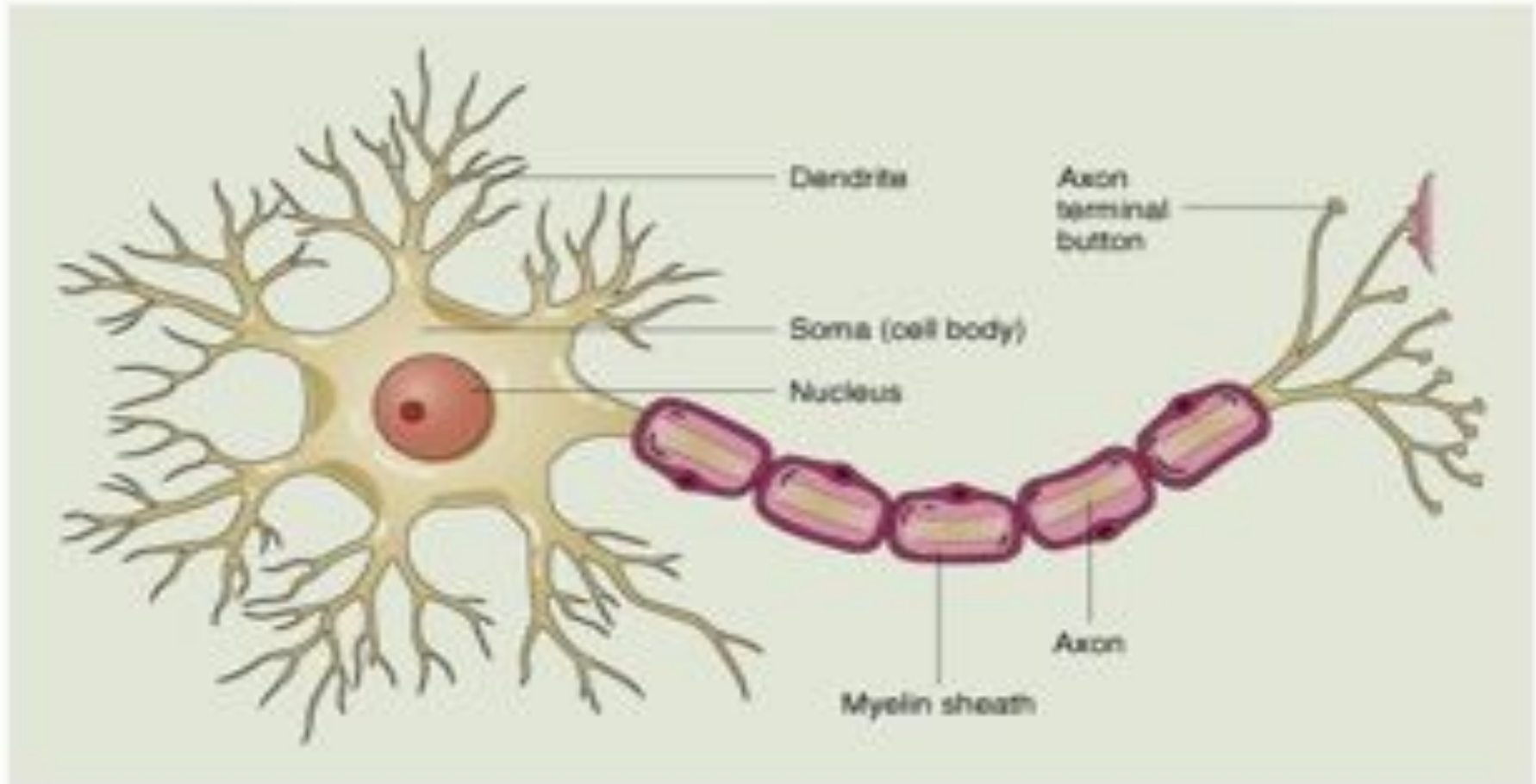
- **Self-directed neuroplasticity**
- **The evolving brain - and its challenges today**
- **“Taking in the good” (TIG)**



Self-Directed Neuroplasticity

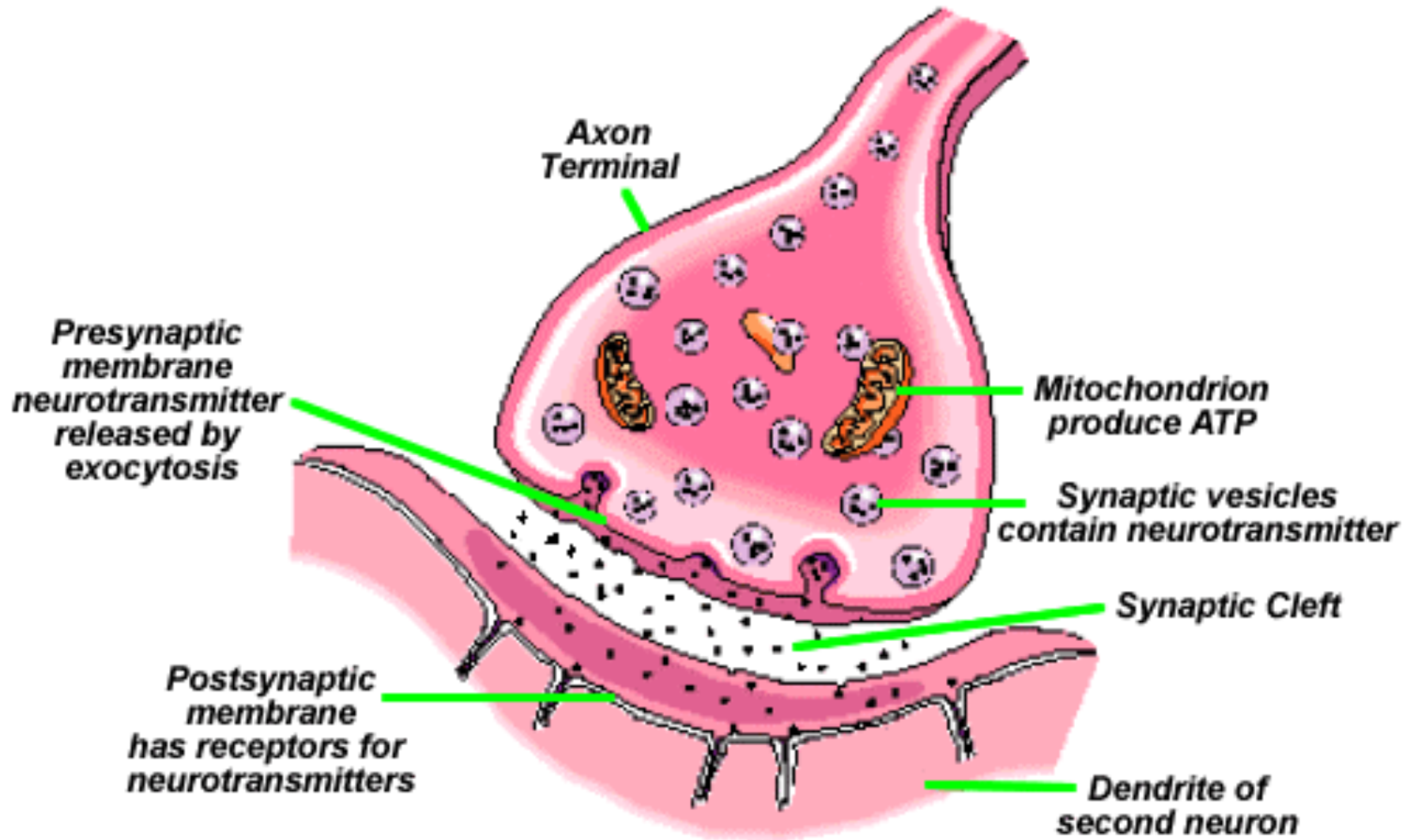


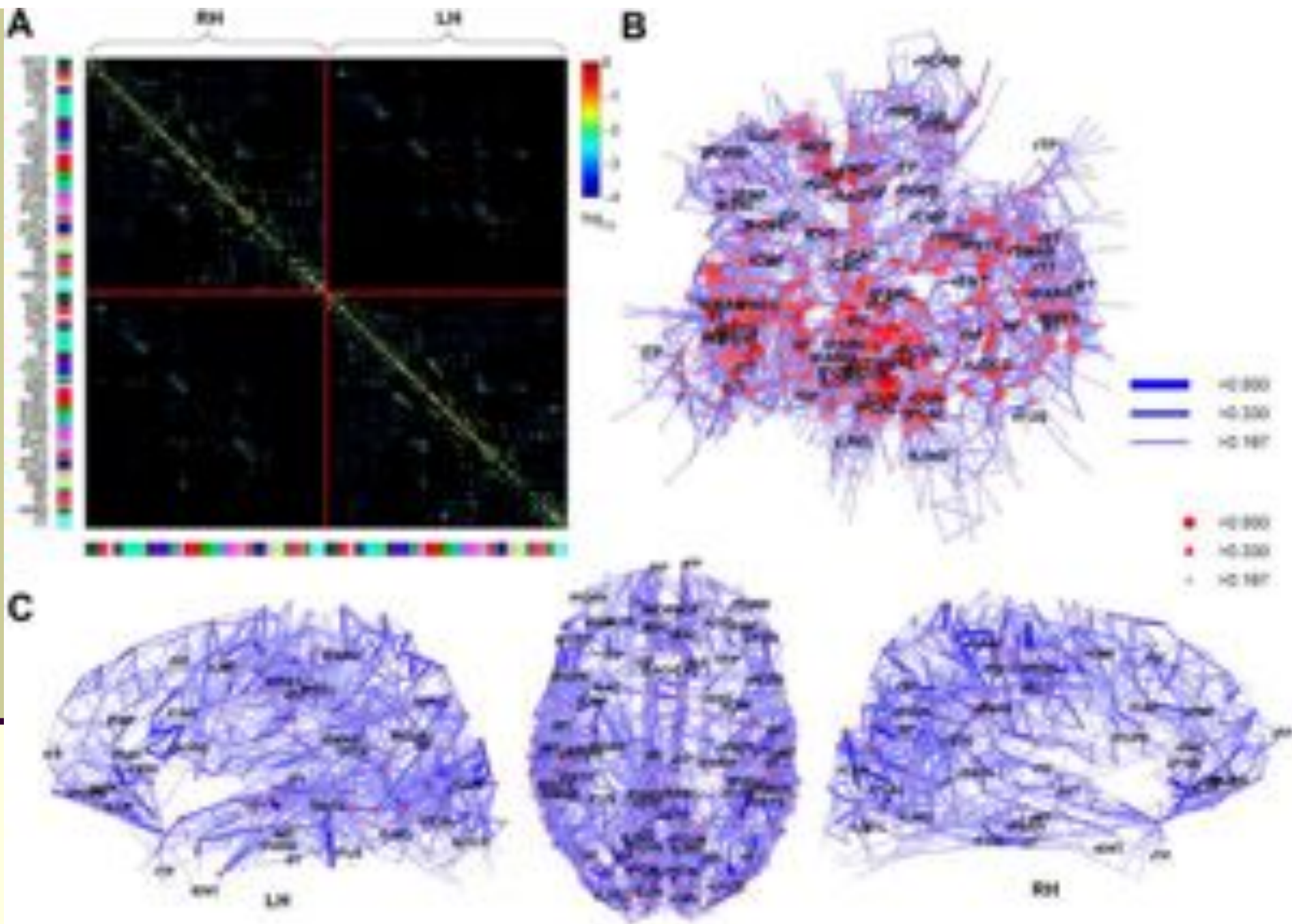
A Neuron



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A SYNAPSE





Fact #1

As your brain changes, your mind changes.



Ways That Brain Can Change Mind

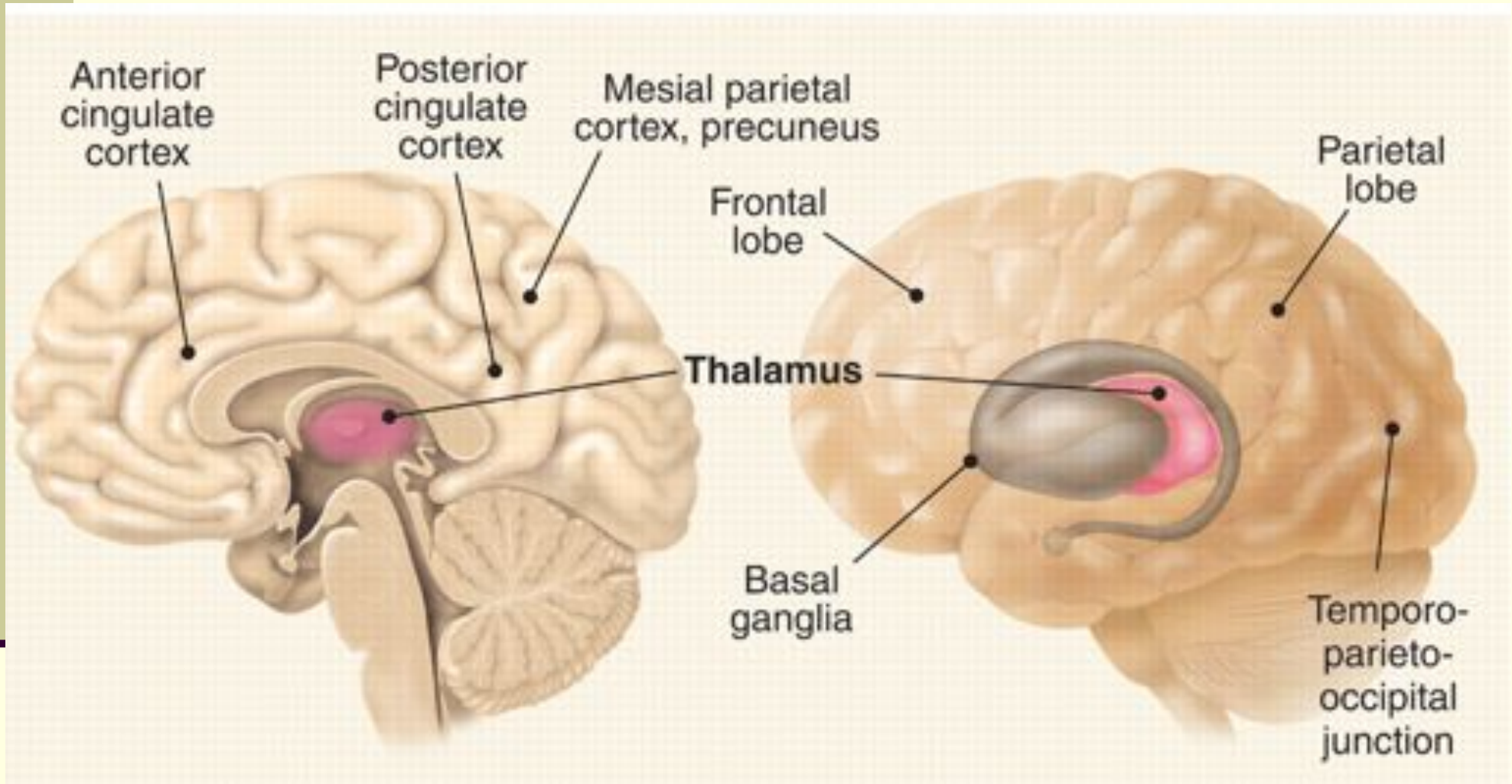
■ For better:

- A little caffeine: more alertness
- Thicker insula: more self-awareness, empathy
- More left prefrontal activation: more happiness

■ For worse:

- Intoxication; imbalances in neurotransmitters
- Concussion, stroke, tumor, Alzheimer's
- Cortisol-based shrinkage of hippocampus: less capacity for contextual memory

Key Brain Areas for Consciousness



(adapted from) M. T. Alkire et al., *Science* 322, 876-880 (2008)

Fact #2

As your mind changes, your brain changes.

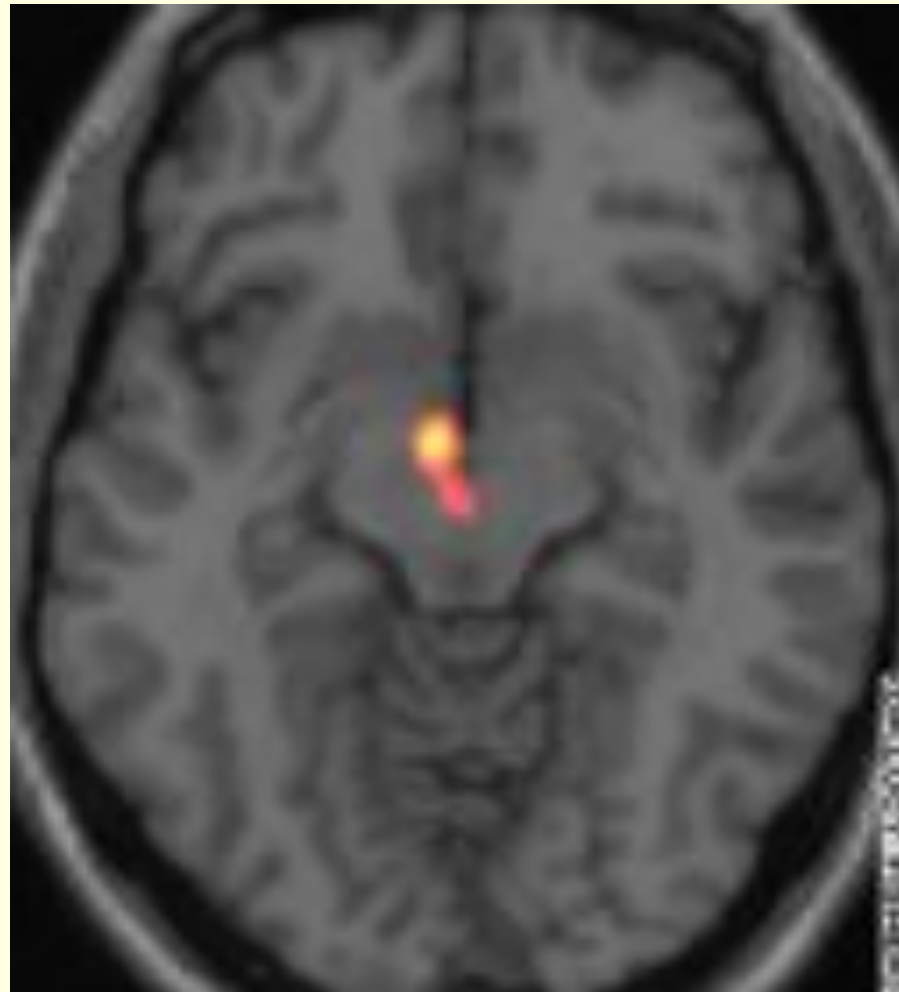
Immaterial mental activity maps to material neural activity.

This produces temporary changes in your brain and lasting ones.

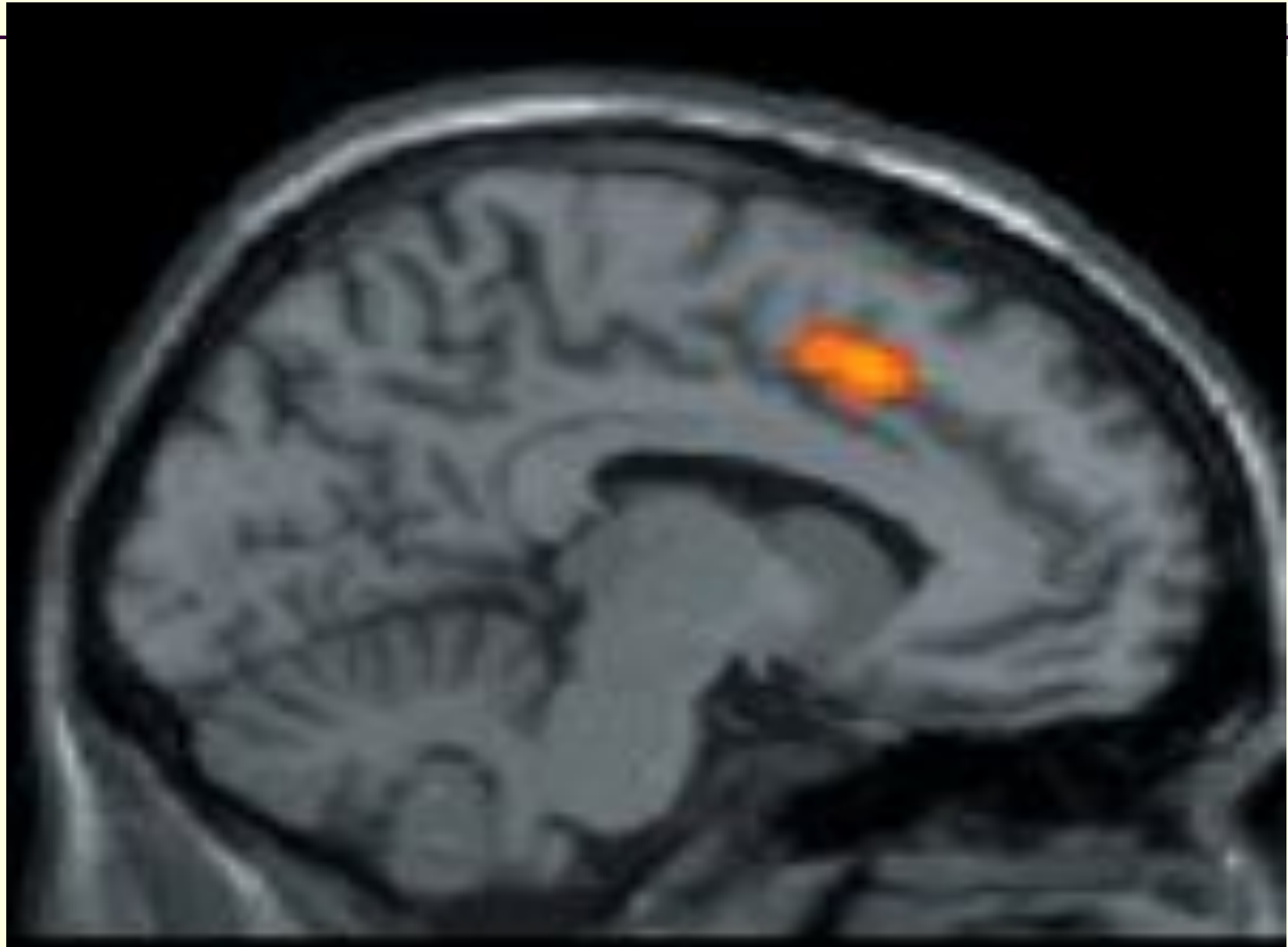
Temporary changes include:

- Alterations in brainwaves (= changes in the firing patterns of synchronized neurons)
- Increased or decreased use of oxygen and glucose
- Ebbs and flows of neurochemicals

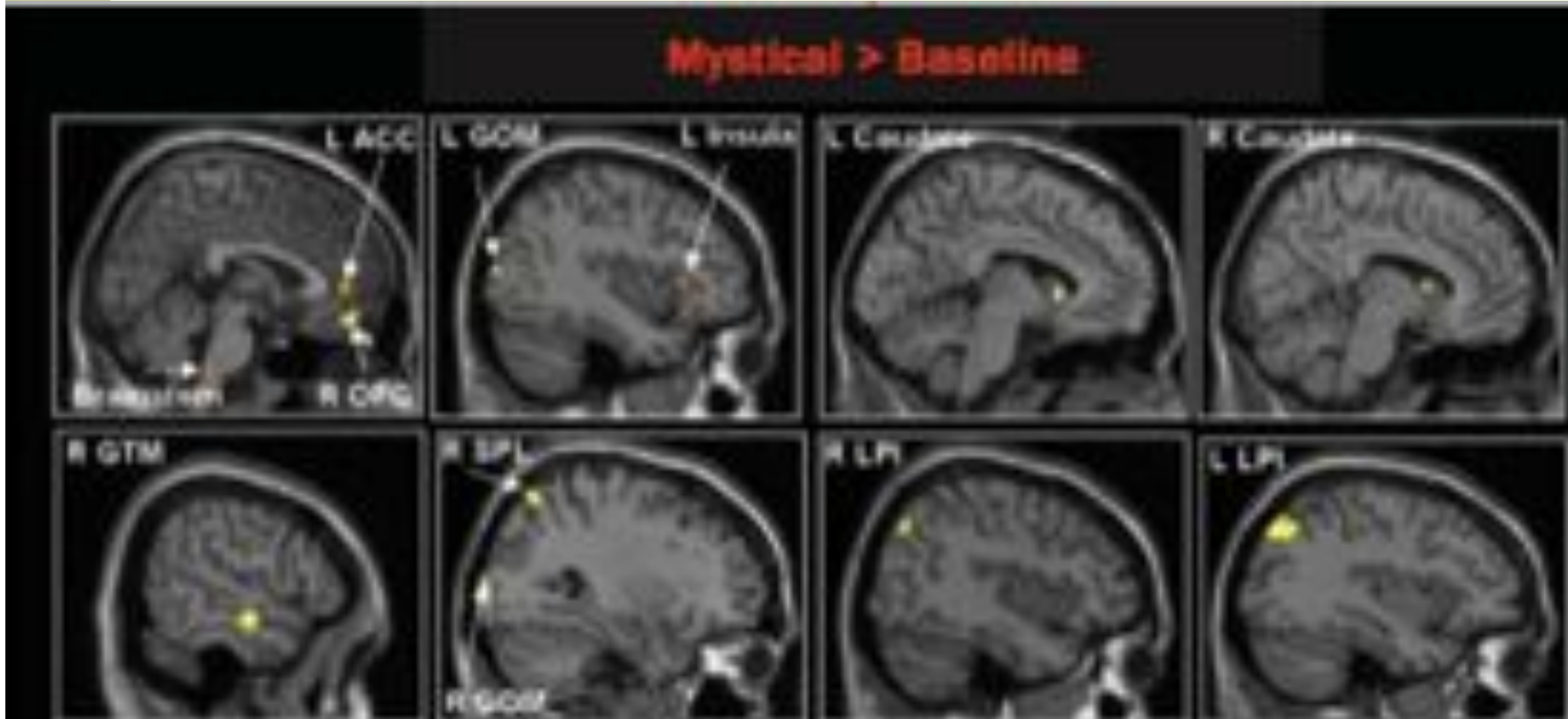
Rewards of Love



Tibetan Monk, Boundless Compassion



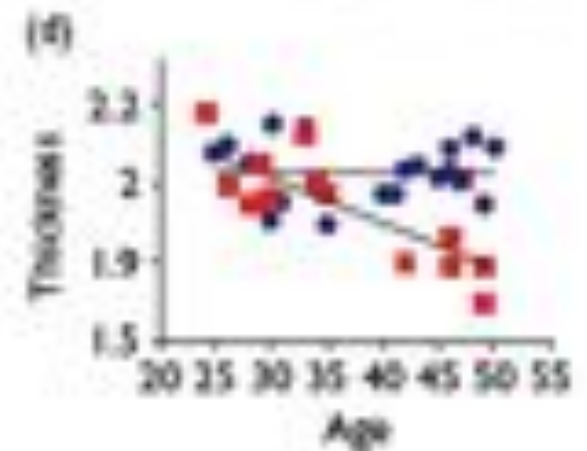
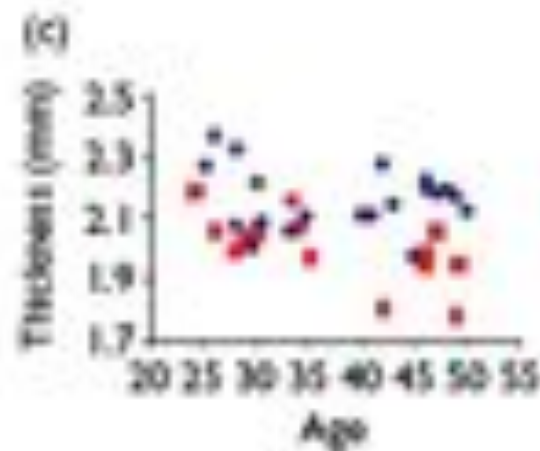
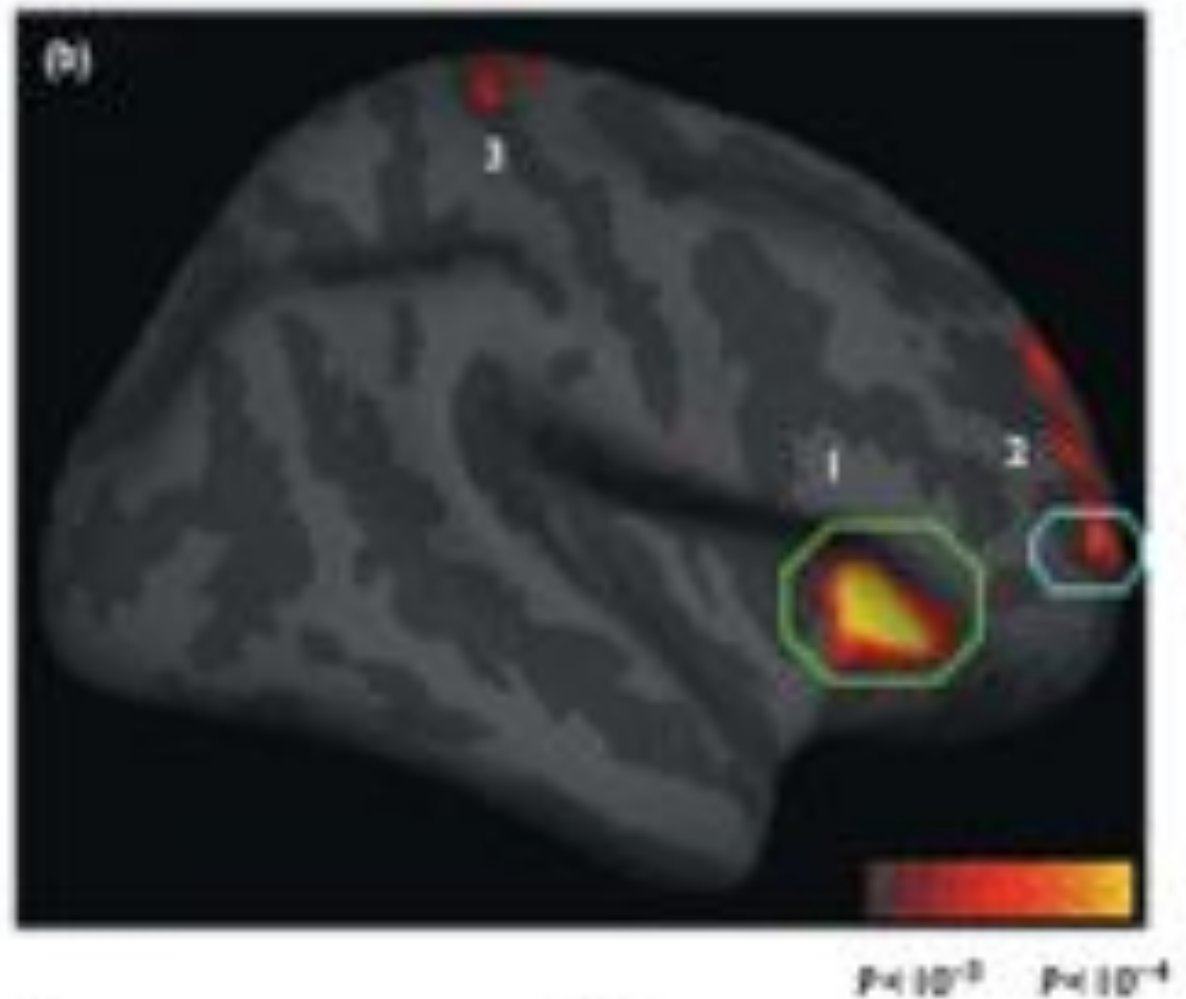
Christian Nuns, Recalling Profound Spiritual Experiences



Mind Changes Brain in Lasting Ways

- What flows through the mind sculpts your brain. Immaterial experience leaves material traces behind.
- Increased blood/nutrient flow to active regions
- Altered epigenetics (gene expression)
- “Neurons that fire together wire together.”
 - Increasing excitability of active neurons
 - Strengthening existing synapses
 - Building new synapses; thickening cortex
 - Neuronal “pruning” - “use it or lose it”

Lazar, et al. 2005.
Meditation
experience is
associated
with increased
cortical thickness.
Neuroreport, 16,
1893-1897.



Honoring Experience

One's experience *matters*.

Both for how it feels in the moment and for the lasting residues it leaves behind, woven into the fabric of a person's brain and being.

Fact #3

You can use your mind
to change your brain
to change your mind for the better.

This is self-directed neuroplasticity.

How to do this, in skillful ways?

The Power of Mindfulness

- Attention is like a spotlight, illuminating what it rests upon.
- Because neuroplasticity is heightened for what's in the field of focused awareness, attention is also like a vacuum cleaner, sucking its contents into the brain.
- Directing attention skillfully is therefore a fundamental way to shape the brain - and one's life over time.

*The education of attention
would be an education par excellence.*

William James


Self-Compassion

- Compassion is the wish that a being not suffer, combined with sympathetic concern. Self-compassion simply applies that to oneself. It is not self-pity, complaining, or wallowing in pain.
- Studies show that self-compassion buffers stress and increases resilience and self-worth.
- But self-compassion is hard for many people, due to feelings of unworthiness, self-criticism, or “internalized oppression.” To encourage the neural substrates of self-compassion:
 - Get the sense of being cared about by someone else.
 - Bring to mind someone you naturally feel compassion for
 - Sink into the experience of compassion in your body
 - Then shift the compassion to yourself, perhaps with phrases like: “May I not suffer. May the pain of this moment pass.”

“Anthem”

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in*

Leonard Cohen

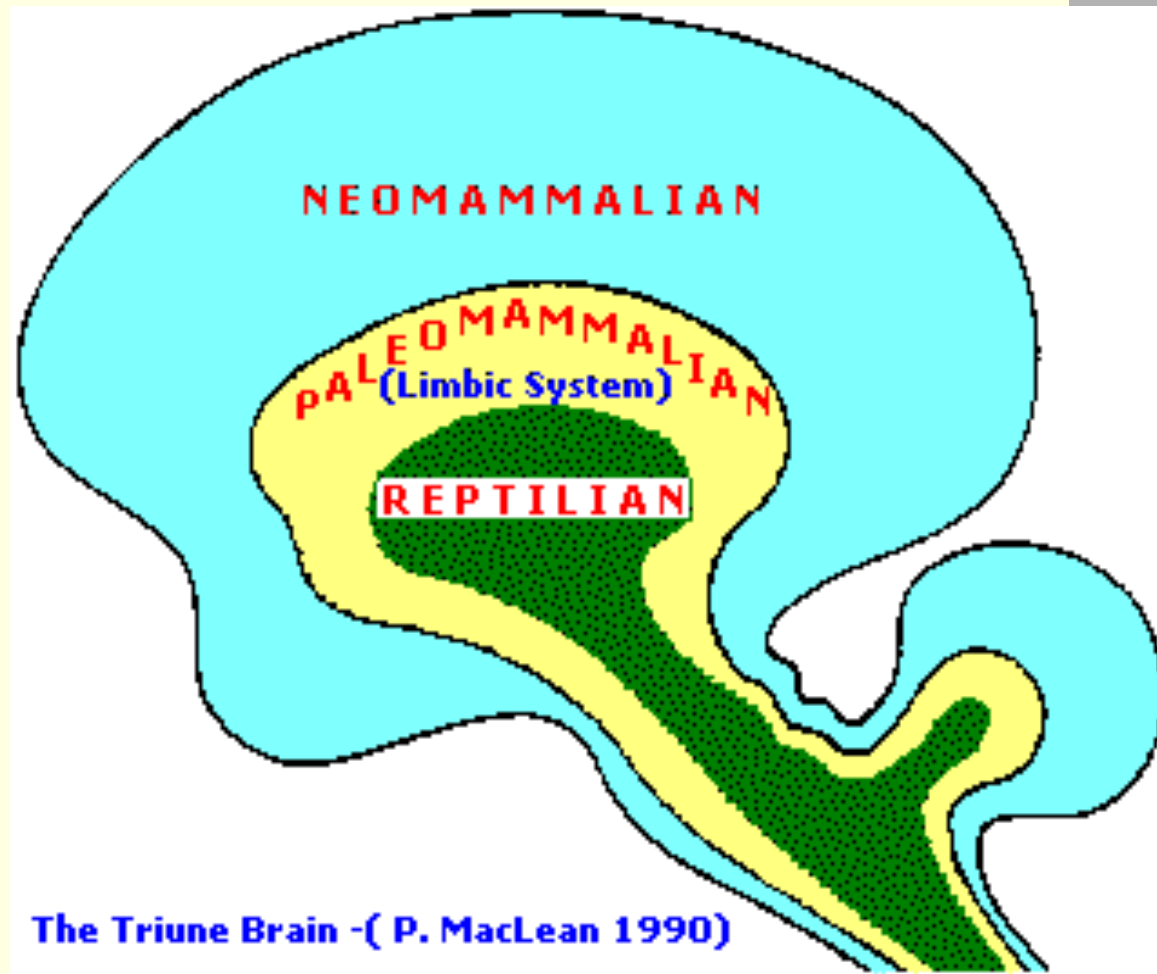


The Evolving Brain - and Its Challenges

Evolution

- ~ 4+ billion years of earth
- 3.5 billion years of life
- 650 million years of multi-celled organisms
- 600 million years of nervous system
- ~ 200 million years of mammals
- ~ 60 million years of primates
- ~ 6 million years ago: last common ancestor with chimpanzees, our closest relative among the “great apes” (gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, bonobos, humans)
- 2.5 million years of tool-making (starting with brains 1/3 our size)
- ~ 150,000 years of *homo sapiens*
- ~ 50,000 years of modern humans
- ~ 5000 years of blue, green, hazel eyes

Evolutionary History



The Triune Brain

Negativity Bias: Causes in Evolution

- “Sticks” - Predators, natural hazards, social aggression, pain (physical and psychological)
- “Carrots” - Food, sex, shelter, social support, pleasure (physical and psychological)
- During evolution, avoiding “sticks” usually had more effects on survival than approaching “carrots.”
 - Urgency - Usually, sticks must be dealt with immediately, while carrots allow a longer approach.
 - Impact - Sticks usually determine mortality, carrots not; if you fail to get a carrot today, you’ll likely have a chance at a carrot tomorrow; but if you fail to avoid a stick today - whap!²⁵
- no more carrots forever.

Negativity Bias: Physiology and Neuropsychology

- Physiology:
 - Greater bodily arousal to negative stimuli
 - Pain is produced anywhere; pleasure is circumscribed.
- Neuropsychology:
 - Separate, low-level systems for negative and positive stimuli
 - Right hemisphere specialized for negative stimuli
 - Greater brainwave responses to negative stimuli
 - ~ 65% of amygdala sifts for negative stimuli
 - The amygdala-hippocampus system flags negative experiences prominently in memory: *like Velcro for negative experiences but Teflon for positive ones.*
 - More negative “basic” emotions than positive ones

Negativity Bias: Some Consequences

- Negative stimuli get more attention and processing.
- We generally learn faster from pain than pleasure.
- People work harder to avoid a loss than attain an equal gain (“endowment effect”)
- Easy to create learned helplessness, hard to undo
- Negative interactions: more powerful than positive
- Negative experiences sift into implicit memory.

Health Consequences of Chronic Stress

■ Physical:

- Weakened immune system
- Inhibits GI system; reduced nutrient absorption
- Reduced, dysregulated reproductive hormones
- Increased vulnerabilities in cardiovascular system
- Disturbed nervous system

■ Mental:

- Lowers mood; increases pessimism
- Increases anxiety and irritability
- Increases learned helplessness (especially if no escape)
- Often reduces approach behaviors (less for women)
- Primes aversion (SNS-HPAA negativity bias)

A Poignant Truth


Mother Nature is tilted toward producing gene copies.

But tilted against personal quality of life.

And at the societal level, we have caveman/cavewoman brains armed with nuclear weapons.

What shall we do?

*We can deliberately use the mind
to change the brain for the better.*



Taking in the Good

Being with, Releasing, Replacing

- There are three phases of psychological healing and personal growth (and spiritual practice):
 - Be mindful of, release, replace.
 - Let be, let go, let in.
- Mindfulness is key to the second and third phase, sometimes curative on its own, and always beneficial in strengthening its neural substrates. But often it is not enough by itself.
- And sometimes you need to skip to the third phase to build resources for mindfulness.

Just having positive experiences is not enough.

They pass through the brain like water through a sieve, while negative experiences are caught.

We need to engage positive experiences actively to weave them into the brain.

How to Take in the Good

1. Look for positive **facts**, and let them become positive experiences.
2. Savor the positive experience:
 - Sustain it for 10-20-30 seconds.
 - Feel it in your body and emotions.
 - Intensify it.
3. Sense and intend that the positive experience is soaking into your brain and body - registering deeply in emotional memory.

Targets of TIG

- Bodily states - healthy arousal; PNS; vitality
- Emotions - both feelings and mood
- Views - expectations; object relations; perspectives on self, world, past and future
- Behaviors - repertoire; inclinations

Kinds of “Good” to Take in

- The small pleasures of ordinary life
- The satisfaction of attaining goals or recognizing accomplishments - especially small, everyday ones
- Feeling grateful, contented, and fulfilled

- Things are alright; nothing is wrong; there is no threat
- Feeling safe and strong
- The peace and relief of forgiveness

- Being included, valued, liked, respected, loved by others
- The good feelings that come from being kind, fair, generous
- Feeling loving

- Recognizing your positive character traits
- Spiritual or existential realizations

Why It's Good to Take in the Good

- In general, adds positive contents to implicit memory
- Internalizes psychological growth (e.g., it usually feels good and goes well to speak from my heart)
- Associates rewards to good steps; boosts motivation
- Brings in missing “supplies” (e.g., love, worth) to help remedy deficits and heal painful experiences
- Encourages prosocial experiences and actions

*The good life, as I conceive it, is a happy life.
I do not mean that if you are good you will be happy;
I mean that if you are happy you will be good.*

Bertrand Russell

Benefits of Positive Emotions

- The benefits of positive emotions are a proxy for many of the benefits of TIG.
- Emotions organize the brain as a whole, so positive ones have far-reaching benefits, including:
 - Promote exploratory, “approach” behaviors
 - Lift mood; increase optimism, resilience
 - Counteract trauma
 - Strengthen immune and protect cardiovascular systems
 - Overall: “broaden and build”
 - Create positive cycles

Potential Synergies of TIG and MBSR

- Improved mindfulness from MBSR enhances TIG.
- TIG increases general resources for MBSR (e.g., heighten the PNS activation that promotes stable attention).
- TIG increases specific factors of MBSR (e.g., self-acceptance, self-compassion, tolerance of negative affect)
- TIG heightens internalization of key MBSR experiences:
 - The sense of stable mindfulness itself
 - Confidence that awareness itself is not in pain, upset, etc.
 - Presence of supportive others (e.g., MBSR groups)
 - Peacefulness of realizing that experiences come and go

Penetrative insight

joined with calm abiding

utterly eradicates

afflicted states.

Shantideva

Great Books

See www.RickHanson.net for other great books.

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- Carter, C. 2010. *Raising Happiness*. Ballantine.
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Key Papers - 1

See www.RickHanson.net for other scientific papers.

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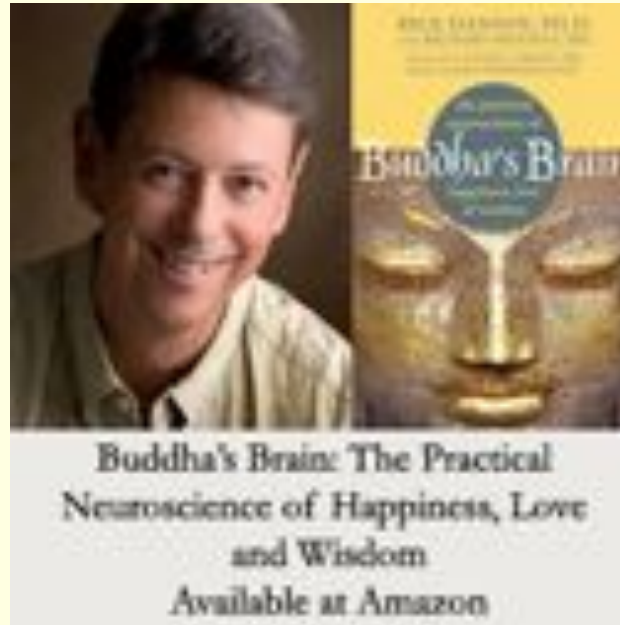
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