

The Architecture of Mindfulness

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Mindfulness is a construct that is quickly growing among mental health professionals, body workers, and alternative medicine professionals, and continues to evolve in definition. The most coherent, comprehensive scientifically grounded, work of mindfulness has been the work of Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., with his term MINDSIGHT and the field of interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB).

This paper highlights the practices of the Therapeutic Spiral Model as compatible, life-giving formulae to the models brought forward by Daniel Siegel, and Siegel's work validating and supporting TSM. Taken together, mindsight and the Therapeutic Spiral Model build internal structures to support growth, interpersonal attunement, and neural integration.

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Integrating Interpersonal Neurobiology and the Therapeutic Spiral Model

The Therapeutic Spiral Model: Mindfulness in Action

Since its inception, the Therapeutic Spiral Model has brought balance to trauma healing by offering left and right hemisphere components (horizontal integration), a Body Double to invite wisdom and sensory information from the body to brain (vertical integration), an Observing Ego to invite participants to “observe” in addition to experience their trauma, which steadies and stabilizes a trauma survivors emotional world.

The model offers a number of structures concretize, label, and strengthen a person’s ability to stay present, witness, and stabilize during overwhelming feelings; all traits that we now call “mindfulness.”

Thankfully, many of these brain- and heart-balancing practices are now robustly supported by research by great leaders like Daniel J. Siegel, Bonnie Badenoch, Jack Kornfield, and are being promoted across many disciplines. We are proud to join this great gathering of science and practice, taking our seat at the campfire, offering unique action structures as shared dishes at the emerging buffet of mindfulness. Action structures of TSM are distinct ways of installing the internal infrastructure (Trauma Survivor’s Internal Role Atom) that create balance, awareness and security as a person begins to stabilize her inner world.

Mindfulness in Action

Experts converge on a common definition of mindfulness as *staying aware, purposefully and non-judgmentally, of what is happening in the present moment*, (Siegel, 2010; Spradlin, 2003). Mindfulness is on solid scientific footing in helping people stabilize mood swings, build life narrative, and shifting to left hemisphere’s approach rather than right hemisphere’s withdrawal – called “left shift” – during challenging situations. These traits begin to define resilience and mental/emotional well-being (Siegel, 2010a).

Therapeutic spiral Model has a rich structure to bring these traits to life and embed the experience of balance and awareness in a trauma survivor. TSM begins with concretizing the Observing Ego (OE), or the safe witness for the contents about to be revealed through dramatic action. This often-overlooked structure is profoundly integrative in healing the psyche of a trauma survivor, since it allows the left hemisphere (logic, linear story) to safely embrace the right hemisphere (feelings, experience, symbols) and weave together once fragmented chards of traumatic memory into a coherent, grounded narrative.

When the Observing Ego takes root in the psychodrama, it allows the protagonist ‘safe distance’ to feel secure and seen in the heat of a psychodrama, able to feel emotions but not be overtaken by them. This experience can later translate into real life, where one can learn to hold one’s self in a non-judgmental, stable stance during life’s rocky seas - experiencing the fullness and texture of feelings without being swallowed. A well-developed Observing Ego allows us to live with equanimity, balance, and positive regard – the traits cultivated and further developed in mindfulness practices.

Many other TSM structures enhance the ability to stay present in the moment: a key trait distinctive in mindfulness practices. The Containing Double was developed to anchor the protagonist in the present by speaking hidden feelings from the inner voice, yet grounding the person in the senses, for example, “I am scared – and I can feel my feet on the floor.” This role, developed initially in the drama and later in real life, allows a participant to feel their internal world AND remain present.

Rather than spiraling into uncontrolled regression or dissociation, the client develops the internal strength to experience palatable doses of the painful experience, yet remain present, attuned, and connected. Similarly, The Body Double opens the channels of communication open between self and sensation; developing the ability to *lean in* to one’s bodily sensations. This practice heightens the present moment, allowing the wisdom and sensibility of the body to “come live” into the room, give voice to itself, and become a permanent companion of the protagonist.

These roles – Observing Ego, Containing Double, Body Double – can continue to be nurtured, fed, watered and cultivated with daily meditations, journaling exercises, the “Wheel or Awareness” meditation by Daniel J. Siegel and a plethora of mindfulness practices. Taken together, it is easy to see that attuning to our bodies attunes us to ourselves and to others.

The Triangle of Traits

This set of exercises is designed to access the emotional life underlying of the VPA roles, finding the emotional currents and tendencies that can lock participants in chronic roles of victim, perpetrator, and abandoning authority. Through exploration, participants discover habitual emotional patterns that can lead to ‘stuck’ roles, and can experiment with novel responses (in less dominant zones) that breathe life into new, more empowering roles.

Theoretical Base

The theory put forth by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., and colleagues says that as we develop, we begin to experience distress, fear, and aversive states, which leads to the predominance of one of three systems of emotional circuitry: Fear, Anger, or Sadness/social distress, (Siegel, 2010b, Panskepp, 2009). Our dominant response becomes wired for prevalence, and responses that are frequent cause myelination, or a conductive fatty tissue to form high-speed neural pathways. The increase in myelin sheath not only increases the speed of neural firing by as much as one hundred times, but also decreases the refractory period (resting time) and by 30 times. All said and done, the neural circuitry of, let’s say anger, can fire up to 3,000 times faster than the less dominant responses of fear or sadness (Siegel, 2010a). Over time, this first response gains speed and valance, creating a cluster of traits that become hotwired as part of our character, at times leaving stuck in all-too-familiar territory.

Exploring this affect terrain allows participants be kinder with themselves, loosen the grip of habit, and ease into more conscious and flexible responses. This exercise would be considered role analysis, or beginning to understand the landscape of one’s internal roles and their development or lack of development. One discovers what dimensions of personality are

underdeveloped or suppressed, while others overdeveloped responses might be a blaring trumpet over softer possibilities (Blatner, 2000).

For exploring the Trauma Triangle, it is useful to share with participants the cluster of traits that may help them identify the dominant emotions. Combining the work of affective neuroscientist Jaak Panskepp, the Enneagram and attachment theory, Dan Siegel and colleagues have developed a system of proclivities and developmental propensities (PDP) that leads to nine personality types (for further reading, see Mindful therapist, 2010). For work in the VPA roles, we will simply use three affect states and the abbreviated list of possible characteristics (2010b, pp.165-168):

- **FEAR:** Looks for safety, certainty, preparedness, and opportunity. Tends to worry, have doubt, need security, scan environment looking for danger, may enjoy time alone, may collect things, may find people intrusive, worries about wasting time, may withdraw to restore energy.
- **DISTRESS/SADNESS:** Feels distress particularly in social situations, need for love and connection includes need for recognition, approval, pair/group bonding, and affection. Needs to have a degree of acceptance and approval, task oriented, may compare oneself to others, may feel misunderstood, spends time on relationships, feels others' emotions.
- **ANGER:** Needs to feel valued and protected, including notions of respect, power and control, congruence, comfort, and harmony. May notice what is not right in the world, may feel resentful, may have harsh inner critic, may feel responsible for fixing things, may need comfort, honesty and truth may be important, may be seen by others as intimidating, needs harmony.

Like all action structures, this exercise can serve as a great warm up leading to a drama, or open up a variety of possibilities. For example, part two of the locogram can involve visiting other areas of the locogram experimenting with novel responses that may arise 'as if' that emotion arisen first. This allows participants to explore a wider range of possibilities, increasing response flexibility or even open the door to role creation, role training and development.

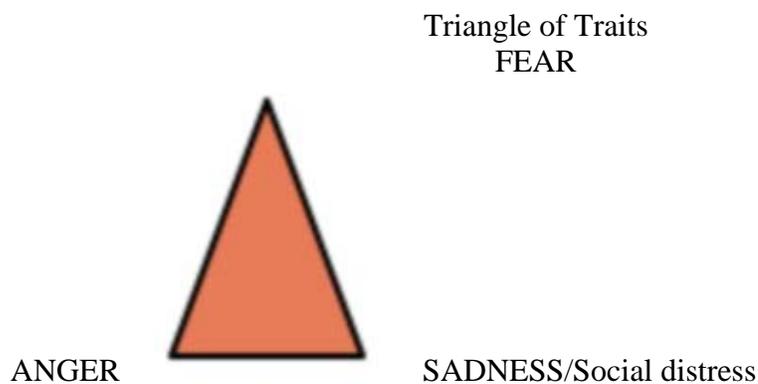
For example, one who typically falls into the sad or deflated feeling might tap into the anger feelings, experiment with stomping a foot or calling out others who have crossed boundaries. Role naming, according Blatner, can be a first step and bring relief to a protagonist because naming begins to sort the sense of ambivalence into working components (2000). From there, a protagonist might create the role of, say, "Inner Authority" or "Big Boss" and further practice develop and expand the role as a bridge between surplus reality and real life.

Science gives us the good news: We can alter the embodied brain throughout the lifespan. In other words, role training alters brain chemistry, neural firing, and structural components more than we have previously known.

According to Siegel:

This process of neuroplasticity involves at least three components: We can create and strengthen synaptic connections; we can stimulate new neurons to grow; and we can increase the sheathing along the axonal lengths to enhance conduction speed of neuronal electrical impulses. These aspects of neuroplasticity —synaptogenesis (including synapse modulation) neurogenesis, and myelinogenesis—each contribute to how a state of neuronal firing in the moment can become a long-lasting trait of changed neuronal architecture (2010, p. 219).

Siegel goes onto elaborate on the process of myelination, which is primarily hours of practice, repetition, and “deep practice” which involves struggling to overcome obstacles and the reflection that ensues. Whether it is mindfulness meditations, role training, or any daily practice, we can alter the conductivity speed and valance of states and traits. Put simply, “what fires together, wires together.”



This exercise explores the underlying feelings that may develop into ‘familiar roles’ of Victim, Perpetrator and Abandoning Authority (VPA). The triangle of traits is based on the archetypal personalities of the Enneagram and affective neuroscience, yielding certain proclivities, propensities, and traits (Siegel, 2010b). In essence, since we were infants we have a certain tendency to respond under duress in one of three ways: Fear, Anger or Sadness/Distress. Over time, and through habit, this response system gains speed and valence, creating roles that liven quickly, automatically, and without flexibility. This allows participants to explore 1) affective tendencies, and 2) discover novel responses and create new roles.

Can we get unstuck?

- In a **spectrogram**, measure each affect (Fear, Anger, and Sadness/Social Distress). When the spectrogram is set up, asking “how prevalent is this feeling in your life?” and allow participants to share in some format.
- As a **locogram**, invite members to explore their most common places in the locogram. It is suggested that you share 4-6 of the accompanying traits, either on a sheet of paper or verbally. Clients can share in some format (verbal, sculpture, phrases, etc.)

VARIATIONS:

- One option here is to do a **second locogram of the VPA**, placing Perpetrator in the Anger place, Fear in the Abandoning Authority place, and Victim in the Distress/Sadness place.
- “What if” exploration of new roles. Invite participants to recall a situation in which they responded in their typical fashion and invite them to explore other loci to experience what other emotions could have been hidden, underdeveloped, or stunted. “What if.... What would it feel like to respond this way?” Share with word, action, sculpture. Participants can call out phrases from that place, experiment with a novel response, or explore underlying emotions. For example: If fear and withdrawal are first response, perhaps the person can explore what softer or quieter responses might hold wisdom in the other two areas? “What happens if I experience the anger of this situation, or allow myself to feel the sadness or disappointment?” Clients can give that a voice, an action, a vignette, for example.
- The above spectrograms, locograms and other explorations could be employed as warm ups to a psychodrama.

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