

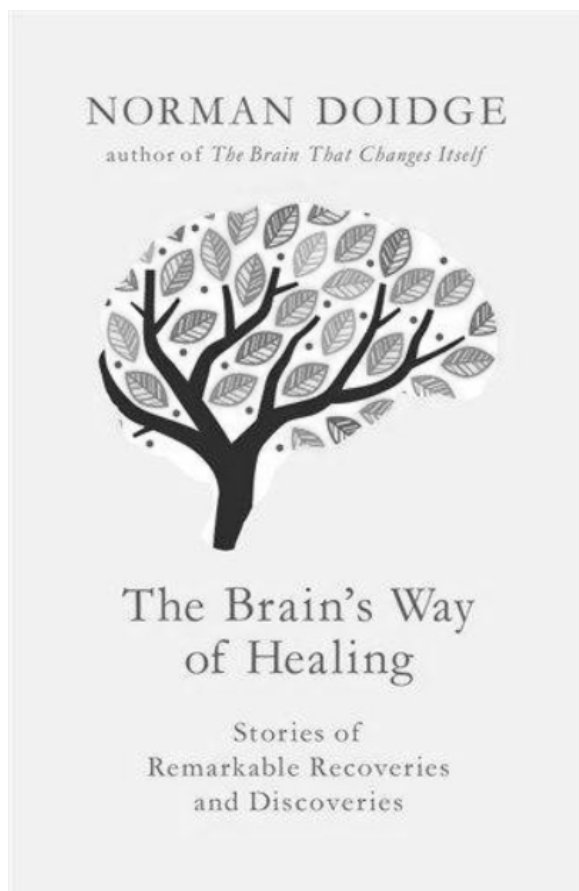
Book Review: The Brain's Way of Healing by Norman Doidge

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Norman Doidge, M.D, is a Psychiatrist and a Psychoanalyst, currently working at Toronto Institute of Psychoanalysis. Apart from his scientific writing, he is also well known for his literary work for which he has received many awards including The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/ Saturday Night Literary Award, in 1994, one of the highest achievements for unpublished work.

Highlights of the book

Norman Doidge in 'The Brain's Way of Healing,' presents the concept of neuroplasticity in the process of healing from injury, in a way that can be appreciated by the scientific community and everybody else, alike. All the applications of neuroplasticity mentioned in the book revolve around three main concepts: 'Learned non-use,' 'Noisy brain' and 'Rapid ongoing formation of neuronal assemblies.' 'Learned non-use' refers to when a

person faced with a neurological deficit finds ways around the problem, using parts of the body controlled by other parts of the brain. This leads to further deterioration of the neuronal function of the affected part of the brain. 'Noisy brain' refers to the loss of the ability of the brain to prioritize between the neuronal signals, as damaged neurons don't necessarily 'fall silent'. 'Rapid ongoing formation of Neuronal Assemblies' is a concept highlighting the property of neurons working in groups. These concepts are brought together in the book in exploring different applications of neuroplasticity which ranges from simple exercise as walking, to treat Parkinson's disease, to a device which uses minute electrodes placed on tongue (Portable Neuromodulation Stimulator – PoNS), to treat patients debilitated by stroke, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, traumatic brain injury and so forth. These healing methods even though don't seem to align with the conventional methods of treatment, are backed up by research and scientific evidence with tangible proof of the efficacy of the methods.

Patient care

What struck me the most while reading the book was the extent to which these methods of treatment were patient-centered. In each case the treatment method was fine-tuned to suit each patient, and most of the time the treatments require a lot of commitment, unlike the pharmaceuticals-based medicine practiced these days, which produce fast results and with many side effects. Even though most of the treatment regimens explored in the book are time consuming and tedious, the outcomes are almost miraculous with almost no side effects.

Treating the patient as a whole

Treatment methods in the book have a very holistic approach, addressing the body and the mind. "Work with it, not against it," notes Moshe Feldenkrais, who developed methods to use mindfulness on movement to heal from serious nervous system related conditions. He believed that the mind and body functions as a whole and that there are no purely mental experiences. In modern medicine, this is a concept that is most often overlooked.

Observation as the key to better patient care

Lastly, I would like to highlight the importance of not giving up on treating a condition, being observant and having an inquisitive mind. Most of the treatment programs mentioned in this book have been discovered despite medical opinion stating certain diseases and conditions as having poor prognosis. Until recently, neurons were considered to be non-regenerating, static structures, a concept now belonging to the past with all the new discoveries related to neuroplasticity, neuronal stem cells and so forth. As scientists and clinicians, this highlights the importance of having an observant mind, open to new possibilities.