



Mental Health and Parkinson's

Integration is Key

With Brian McElwain

Davis Phinney Foundation

Leigh Cocanougher (Education Program Manager, Davis Phinney Foundation):

Hi, everyone I am Leigh Cocanougher, the Education Program Manager at the Davis Phinney Foundation and I'm here today with Brian McElwain. Brian is a retired psychologist and a Davis Phinney Foundation Ambassador and he's joining us today to talk about mental health and wellness and everything that that really means so thank you so much for being here Brian.

Brian McElwain, PhD (Psychologist, Davis Phinney Foundation Ambassador, Person with Parkinson's):

Yeah I'm really excited about it thanks.

Leigh Cocanougher:

Great so just to get us started will you tell us a little bit about your background and your interest in mental health?

Brian McElwain:

Sure, well first thing I should always say is that I am a person with Parkinson's I was diagnosed back in early 2008. And I retired from that job as a university counseling center psychologist in 2018. So my background in psychology is that I earned a PhD in clinical psychology from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania and after my degree after that degree I did most of my work in university counseling center settings. So I worked with people who are enrolled in universities and worked with them in individual counseling, group counseling

settings, did some training of various kinds of residents and taught some classes and my interest in groups led me to facilitation groups related to trauma, specifically sexual trauma, people who have been victimized in that kind of way and also grief was another group that I did frequently. I should also mentioned another thing that is relevant here too, I started and facilitated a group about learning basic mindfulness skills and I led that group for about eight years at the university so that was really rewarding and relevant to parts of our conversation today.

Leigh Cocanougher:

Wonderful, thank you. So what we are going to talk about is mindfulness and and several other areas of what we hear of mental health and mental wellness and we have an upcoming Victory Summit Event with that name, mental health and wellness, but we hear these terms every day, but will you help us conceptualize what it means? What does it mean when we say mental health? What does it mean to be mentally well? Given your background what should we know about that?

Brian McElwain:

Yeah, it's interesting even within the field of mental health there's not necessarily so much talk about what that means. There's much more clarity about mental illness or defense mechanisms or other kind of sort of pathology kinds of things but not as much positive definition of what what mental health is and what we're really searching for. It usually falls back to so not ill, but mental health. So there's a psychiatrist at UCLA, Dan Siegel who who recognized that problem and sort of built a system, a way of thinking about mental health that I really like and that'll inform a lot of what I'm going to say about this today. But his definition of mental health and wellness would be the linkage of differentiated systems, I'm sorry, the linkage of differentiated parts of the system, which sounds really abstract and may not mean anything to you at the moment but I'm going to come back to that and try to spell that out and



elaborate that in many ways over the course of this conversation. So the linkage of differentiated parts of a system.

So what's that about? So the first thing we need to do to understand that abstract definition is to sort of agree that we're talking about a system of things. A system is a way of thinking about things that are related to one another in some kind of way, that are connected in some kind of way. So an ecosystem is one way to think about it, or the environment. So if we think about the environment, everything is related to everything else. It may not seem like that on the surface but when you look closer you can see the connections between things that you that might not have been apparent. Another way to think about a system would be a baseball team. I'm a Cincinnati Reds fan and so I'm thinking about, they're doing well right now, and so I'm thinking about them a lot. So a baseball team has nine players on the field I also have some players that are not on the field at the moment, right, if they're batting, if they're batting they'll have one player at bat but some players on base but each person contributes to the team as a whole. Each person has a variety of roles potentially too and they can specialize.

So a team is not going to be a great team if everybody, if it's all pitchers, right, and nobody is good at hitting, and then fielding is also important right? So you need to have players who can play the different positions on the field, catching, first base, second base, the outfield, all the different field fielding positions and then there's the manager and then there's the umpires and all the different sort of people that go into this, making this baseball game happen, right? So they're all part of the system and so I said the definition was the linkage of differentiated parts of the system.

So they have their own roles, so differentiated roles and they work together and they are a better system, they work better if they have individualized roles, but if they just go off and do their own thing, if they're uncoordinated, if they're not integrated, if they're not connected, then that's not going to work, right? If you just have a bunch of umpires show up, that's not

going to be a very exciting game right? You need you know all the different roles. We need to think about mental health and mental wellness as related to physical health and related to spiritual health and other other aspects of the human experience, so when I'm talking about a system, we're talking about a way to think about the connections between things and how each thing affects each other thing.

Leigh Cocanougher:

If we're thinking about mental wellness related to all of our wellness, so our physical and our emotional and our spiritual and our mental is all connected in the system, which is what you're saying, how can we take that and think about how that relates to the system, and what can we do to to try to stay focused on the wellness part instead of as you were saying earlier, the illness part, the focus on what it means to not be well?

Brian McElwain:

Okay, it's interesting I my first thought is to answer kind of the opposite of the question you're asking, but it's all related right? So this will work. So what I mean by that is, I'm really wanting to focus on integration again, that defined as the linkage of differentiated parts of a system. But let's think for just a moment about what the opposite of that would be of illness or disintegration you could say. So think of disintegration, that's a word that we often hear in other contexts. In this context what disintegration is going to look like or illness is going to look like is rigidity or chaos or maybe a combination of the two in some kind of way. So when the system is integrated it has some features which are really nice they feel really good.

The body is a good guide in this sense about when things are going well. So there's an acronym that Dan Siegel uses for this, FACES, so what it looks like when things are integrated is the system is Flexible, it's Adaptive, it can adjust to the needs of the moment, it's Coherent, it's not flying off in all different directions, it stays connected to who its identity so to speak, there's a sense of vitality or Energy, it's energized and it's Stable.

It's not rigid on one extreme or chaotic on the other so Dan Siegel talks about sort of the FACES flow or the river of integration. So if you imagine the experience of integration as sort of gliding down a river, that river of integration, you can get hung up on the banks on one side of chaos on the back of the other side of rigidity, but there is a nice flow which connects to things that people talk about like flow states, as well but things are moving moving along well, they are able to adapt to the changing circumstances on the river, other people coming the other direction or whatever it might be, the changing weather patterns, but you can stay sort of drifting or floating down the river of integration that's what health looks like, flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable.

Leigh Cocanougher:

Great.

Brian McElwain:

Does that make sense?

Leigh Cocanougher:

Yeah, it does. So when we talk about you know we're thinking with mental health and wellness as our victory summit event and one thing that we're doing a whole session on is mindfulness which you have the background in and I'm wondering how that concept you know being present, being aware of your thoughts in the moment, how does that tie in with this idea of integration as the key to feeling well, to being mentally well?

Brian McElwain:

Yeah, mindfulness is a very current topic in the past several years in psychology and beyond. So mindfulness is a really powerful thing, but it boils down to in the way that I think about it, it boils down to two things that you're trying to accomplish. First thing that you're trying to accomplish with mindfulness is to stabilize the mind, stabilize your concentration, because we tend to get distracted and our attention wanders and we can't remember what we were saying before or what we were focused on before, what we were trying to do before we came to this room. We get distracted. It happens to all of us, it happens to the most disciplined and trained practitioners of mindfulness as well, but you can't develop the muscle of mindfulness or the focused attention without practicing so there's a lot of practice, different ways to practice mindfulness.

So the first move is to develop your ability to pay attention, to stay focused in your attention and the second part is to become more aware of and more familiar with your own patterns, with your own strengths, as well as weaknesses, you know, what what tends to distract you, so that when you become aware of that, then you can bring your attention back to what you intend to focus on. But if you're not aware that your attention is drifted then you can never refocus your attention and focused attention is really important because it allows you to stay with things long enough to make a difference in them, right? So mindfulness allows you to sort of monitor what's going on for you. If you're distracted by this or that thing, that you're distracted at all, and then to bring your attention back to what you wanted to focus on. And when you focus your attention, that's really powerful, it relates to the concept of neuroplasticity which we hear a lot about in the neurosciences these days and that is the idea that what you do and what happens to you, both actively and passively, those things change the structure and function of your brain, of your nervous system more largely.

And so if you can focus your attention skillfully then you can direct the way that your brain changes, the way that your brain will function going forward, so it's a really exciting possibility that 20 years ago nobody believed it was possible that we now know that we can grow new

brain cells and that we can grow new connections between those brain cells so that's the sort of fundamental basis of learning. And that learning process goes on from from birth or before to death. We used to think that nerve cells, you're sort of born with the number of brain cells you're gonna have, and that was it, we only lose them, but we know that's not the case.

I think of of mindfulness and this ability to focus your attention is really the primary tool that we have to make the kinds of changes that we want to make, the intentional changes we might want to make, and so there's a way of, well again going back to Dan Siegel's ideas about this, he identifies several different domains of human life and experience that can be more or less integrated, more or less disintegrated, and so at sort of the foundation he puts consciousness, that's what we often think of as sort of defining the human experience compared to other kinds of experiences.

So the integration of consciousness which you can develop through mindfulness practices for example helps you to become aware of the thoughts you're having and see them as in some way separate from you, not separate from you but not the whole of you, so it's the ability to become aware of the thoughts you have or the experiences you have, and know that there's also you, separate from those and some kind of like differentiated but linked, right? So there's the knower and the known. So when you're feeling anxious, you can have the choice of being aware that you are anxious, not simply being the anxiety, where there's no separation between the two. So that's one level or one domain.

Other domains that he talks about, I'll just sort of quickly run through these and you can ask me more about specific ones if you have questions about them later, but so it starts with integration of consciousness and other domains that he looks at are sort of bilateral integration. Bilateral integration has to do with the ways that some features or some abilities that we have are more sort of associated with the right hemisphere. So we often think of the right hemisphere of the brain as being the creative side, so the more artistic and holistic ways

of thinking are there, whereas the left side has all the I's where it's about logic and linear thinking and it feels really sort of focused on details, it's literal, whereas the right hemisphere is seen as more metaphorical oftentimes.

So this level of integration is about being able to sort of draw on both of those in coordinated ways, right? So just a simple example of that kind of integration would be writing or journaling about your feelings, because sort of writing is a linear thing but you have to access the feelings the emotional side of things that are sort of associated with the right hemisphere.

After bilateral integration, you think about vertical integration, and that's the way in which sort of we can think of the nervous system as having sort of lower levels and upper levels so lower levels associated with the body the way that their nervous system extends into the body and upper levels sort of lower parts of the brain, the brain stem, the midbrain, the hindbrain and what's called the forebrain or the cortex ,one of the most sort of complicated aspects of our our human experience are sort of associated with.

Whereas the lower parts of the brain are associated with just so sort of staying alive, breathing and very basic things like that, digestion, things that that you don't think about, whereas higher things are more things that you would think about, in terms of that way of thinking about the brain, but it's important to be able to sort of connect the two so that you can become aware, consciously aware of what's happening throughout your body right, and use things like intuition, that's where things like intuition come in, right, sort of a felt sense of something that you might have difficulty sort of articulating, but it can guide you in some kind of way.

Other domains of integration include memory. So oftentimes when people have experienced a traumatic event the memories associated with aspects of that will become lost to their conscious awareness for some period of time or maybe indefinitely, but when memory is integrated that can be some part of what happens in psychotherapy, for example, when you

can recover some memories of what what has happened to you that had previously been lost to you, then you can become more whole in some sense, more integrated.

Narrative integration is another domain there, that has to do with sort of putting the pieces of your life together in a coherent story, so you have a sort of a sense of identity and some sort of through line going through your life that makes sense. State integration is another one that has to do with the different kinds of ways that you might find yourself, so you can think about that in terms of like emotions. So I could be angry at one point sad at another, and relieved at another, or really proud of somebody at another point, but those are all me and we can also think about it in terms of roles that I might play right, so I'm a father, I'm a brother, I'm a son, I'm a husband, I'm a retired psychologist, all these things are, these are all truly aspects of me, and so they're all connected in some kind of way, but they're differentiated too, they're different roles I've played, different spaces I've occupied, different ways of being are oftentimes associated with certain roles.

So the way that we can integrate those can be really helpful in terms of finding some stability of yourself, sense of self over time. Probably the one that gets the most attention even if it's not thought of it exactly in this kind of way and it's really important, it's good that we're paying a lot of attention to it recently, is the level of interpersonal integration. That's such a powerful aspect of human experience because we're radically social creatures, we are always in relation to other people, even when they're not there, right, we're connected to them in terms of our memories of them, in terms of the ways that they've affected us. So even the person who's physically isolated is still in relation to other people all the time there's so many ways in which we are connected.

So the ways that those relationships play out are really powerful in terms of affecting our experience of health and wellness on all those other levels right, so interpersonal integration looks like, well, it involves the ability to be your own person, but still be connected to other



people, right, so you don't have to simply be exactly who your parents wanted you to be. They can have their wishes and desires for you and make them to you but still respect your choices and your path in your life and so on the other side of that, you can respect them and their wishes for you and do your own thing.

So there are lots of ways in which this plays out in a very minute way in terms of communication patterns or in terms of conversations you can, if you watch a conversation, you can see the way in which that can sort of ebb and flow, where you see the people, as you're watching the conversation you see them sort of get what the other person is saying and express some empathy and so that's about the linkage, right, but empathy also involves recognition that they're different from you, they're other than you, they're going to have different perspectives than you, even if you're looking at the same thing because they're going to be positioned slightly different than you are. So interpersonal integration I mean there's so many things that can be said about that, but it's about the way in which people interact that allows them to be linked but differentiated. So back to that integration definition.

Leigh Cocanougher:

Yeah absolutely I mean we talk so much at the foundation as you know as an ambassador and such a big part of our community that we say that besides medication and exercise, the best thing, the best treatment for Parkinson's the best way to live well is to be involved in your community so it makes, it's really interesting to hear it said that way but just emphasizes the importance of that staying connected and we've of course seen with the isolation with Covid what it can do to not have that community, so that's super interesting. So let's say we're floating down the river of integration nicely, things are going well, and then we get pushed to one of these banks or to both of these banks somehow at the same time and start feeling disintegrated, what are some takeaways that we can get from this? What can we do to stay on track or to get back on track?

Brian McElwain:

Well there's so many things you can do, so many things you can do, because everything is related to everything else, so that means that anything that you do will affect other things. But at a really simple and basic kind of level and more individually controllable kind of level I think about two two main things. One is to breathe, just sort of stop stop the action, even if the action is being frozen or rigid, so to breathe and to connect out to other people. So as I was saying earlier focusing our attention allows us to change things, focusing our attention also allows us to become aware of what our situation is and where we find ourselves. So when I say breathe, that's the first thing, sort of pausing and becoming aware of what's going on for you internally, but also becoming aware of your situation more broadly and then when you've done that, you'll likely be able to see all kinds of possibilities that you weren't able to see a moment ago. Even though they're right in front of you, or maybe you'll remember things that have worked for you in the past

Maybe you will be able to draw on something that worked in another situation, from another state that you might have been in when you were, instead of being frozen, you were angry and there's some energy associated with that, so you can have a different response. Or maybe you can draw something from a different role that you play, so in other circumstances, so you can draw on or let's say I could draw on something that I would do as a matter of course when I'm operating in my psychologist mode, but then I'm not accessing that when I'm in the mode of being a son or a dad or some other kind of role so when you stop, you can survey the situation and you can often access different kinds of options that you wouldn't have been able to access before. The other thing I said was connect and that goes back to sort of the idea of interpersonal integration. So when we find ourselves frozen, rigid, or chaotic, reconnecting to somebody, especially somebody who we have a relationship with, is a positive relationship, who can recognize and acknowledge and connect to us as someone separate from them, but also linked, right, there's that integration there, especially when we can find somebody like that to connect with, then we'll settle down and we'll be able to access options that we couldn't



have accessed otherwise so that interpersonal connection, those relationships are so so important as a source of stability for us but also as a source of possibilities that we wouldn't otherwise recognize.

Leigh Cocanougher:

Absolutely. Well, Brian thank you so much, this is really illuminating and it makes me excited about the Victory Summit and just also thinking about how one positive action, you know it can be so overwhelming when you hear all these things you need to do for wellness, but to say like one action in one of those domains, thinking about one little thing you do can trigger positive reactions and help everything be brighter, even just one thing, that's really a hopeful takeaway for me. So thank you again so much and thanks everyone and we'll see you again soon.

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