

The Driving Force to Heal a Traumatized Generation

We all deal with shame at times, but this emotion has a deeper impact on some of us than others. For more than a few people, shame stays for long periods and proves profoundly harmful. It can also trigger other negative emotions and even lead us into destructive behavior. Yet God has already prescribed throughout Scripture the antidote we need, a solution supported by science.

Dr. Curt Thompson, a board-certified Christian psychiatrist, has studied this force of shame with the benefits of interpersonal neurobiology. He teaches that shame has a unique neurobiology.

You've probably never thought about this when you were feeling shame or helping someone through a season of shame. Yet we have to remember what we are learning today about relationships and the wiring of the brain. All strong emotions, particularly unhealthy ones, have their own neurobiology, their own tracking and their own ways of working in the brain. This is good news because we can use the insights we gain to set people free.

To understand this unique neurobiology of shame, I'll need to get a bit technical for a moment. From a scientific perspective, the mind does the job of regulating the flow of energy and information that moves from neuron to neuron through the magnificent organ we call the brain.

Amazingly, as one reviewer of Dr. Thompson's book noted, "there is a biological correspondence between toxic shame and the brain." This kind of shame creates "an observable pathology of disconnection in the brain." It cuts off one section of the mind from another. In other words, toxic shame

creates in the biology of the brain exactly what it is creating in the life of a shame-filled person: brokenness, disconnection and exclusion.

Now, “the bad news is that shame is stubborn” and not easily erased. It can be deeply rooted in the brain by childhood experiences that have left their imprint biologically. Since these early experiences “are foundational,” it can be “difficult to undo the foundation.”

Yet now comes the great insight of the new science. Since the brain and the mind are separate but influence each other, we can deploy the mind to help rewire the brain. Remember, we are learning that the brain is more flexible throughout life than we have believed before. So now we understand that healthy practices can help rewire the brain. What kind of practices exactly? Biblical practices. Powerful spiritual practices like “Christian fellowship, bearing one another’s burdens, confession of sin, loving and accepting one another in authentic relationships”—all things Christians are meant to be doing anyway. Now we know that these have tremendous therapeutic value, that they can make a huge difference in healing lives.

Our Relational Future

It may sound odd for me to say it this way, but our future is relational, and our healthy relationships are the answer to a great deal that traumatizes our generation.

It wouldn’t have been necessary to say such a thing in most previous generations. Relationships seemed almost automatic. Usually, families were large. Members of such families, even extended families, lived together most of their lives. Then there was the tribe or the village. You needed to be in community to survive. You needed to band together, and out of this essential closeness came vital relationships. Communities were tight. Love and laughter, storytelling and music, dancing

and celebration were all part of the rituals of life. Life was too dangerous to be a loner.

In short, in many ways people were more connected in earlier generations because the opportunity for relationships was abundant. Given what we now know from interpersonal neuroscience, we can see why people at least appeared healthier. They had meaningful interactions with other human beings from the moment they were born. They lived in a tight-knit relational world, and they belonged to a loving group of people. To put it in modern terms, their brains were encouraged to grow. Strong, positive relationships fired their neurons. All the factors of healthy brain growth were present, from loving touch to play to verbal interaction. Yet keep in mind, relationships were the key.

Now, why have I taken us back into history? It is because even though today we are armed with the insights of modern brain science and can start realizing the vital power of our relationships anew, the truth is that we are also living in a relationally challenged world. We have enemies, so to speak, that we must face if we are going to have the relationships that heal us, fulfill us and make us healthy, godly human beings. In short, we have a battle to fight for a relational life and a relational future.

The Rewiring of Social Media

We are all grateful, I'm sure, for the blessings of modern social media. I doubt any of us want to see it done away with. So many good things come into our lives from digital technology and the social media that springs from it. But when we understand how vital relationships are, how they can help to heal the trauma of our age, then we also have to be concerned about what social media is doing to us and what a challenge our digital lives are to our relational lives.

Modern interpersonal neuroscience is giving us astonishing

insights that can help us fight against one of the great perils of our age. You see, as we've been learning here, "the brain is a social organ." It is the reason people want to connect, and it is also the reason social media has such appeal to us. We are made for relationships, and so we seek relationships however we can get them, even digitally through social media. The problem we face, though, is that like all human interactions, social media is rewiring our brains. It is shaping us as we use it, and this may not be a good thing. Let me explain.

Dr. Dan Siegel, psychiatry professor at the UCLA School of Medicine, explains that when you are actually with another human being, you experience him or her fully. You make eye contact. You note facial expressions. You take in, even subconsciously, the person's posture, tone of voice and intensity. Even his or her timing and gestures are signals that your brain is processing to understand, relate to and communicate with that person. Psychologists often speak of these seven signals in human relationships and communication, so you might want to memorize them: eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice, postures, gestures, timing and intensity.

Now, while social media can bring people a bit closer together in some ways, the truth is that it lacks all of these seven signals of up-close human interaction. When you are just texting or writing an email, you are using only the verbal part of your brain.

You aren't receiving and sending these seven signals that are part of our normal interactions with each other.

Since we know all human interaction develops the brain in some way, the question is this: What is social media doing to our brains?

It would be going too far to say that modern social media is

making us robots, but this is an image that might help us understand how social media is rewiring our brains—toward words and logic, away from the human, the emotional and the physical.

Away even from self-knowledge. Hmmm. Sounds to me like the robots I've seen in the movies!

The Convergence and the Crisis

In all that we've seen here about how we are made for relationships and how relationships even serve to wire our brains for good and bad, two conflicting facts are creating a major social crisis in our age.

God created us as social beings. Scientists tell us that the brain is a social organ. We are learning that our relationships help make us who we are. We are, as we have long been told, social beings.

Social media is capable of rewiring our brains and impacting our personalities. Relying on texts, emails and posts for relating to other people emphasizes only one part of the brain—the logical and verbal.

The other part of our brain is not challenged as it would be if we were actually with people. So the parts of us that are emotional, physical and self-aware weaken and grow distant, as the brain scientists indicate. This moves us away from being genuinely able to relate to the world and others in a full and meaningful way.

Now, if we hold these two facts in our hands—we are social beings, but social media moves us away from deep relationships and experiences of the world—what would we expect to find happening around us? What feeling would we expect people, the young and social media-minded in particular, to be consumed with? The answer is loneliness.

It only makes sense. And this is precisely what we do find. Indeed, it is one of the mounting crises of our age.

Researchers are confirming this almost daily. Among the most “wired” online age group—Millennials, meaning those born between 1981 and 1996—life ought to be good. They are well-educated. They are among the most prosperous of all their age-mates throughout history. They should be feeling the joy of starting families and moving up the career ladder. But a growing number of them don’t feel this way. A recent poll revealed that “30% of Millennials say they feel lonely.” This is the highest percentage of any generation living today.

Not only do 3 in 10 Millennials say they feel lonely, it gets worse. Some 27% “said they had ‘no close friends,’ 30% said they have ‘no best friends,’ and 25% said they have no acquaintances,” while 22% stated they had no friends at all. So not only are Millennials—the most social media-engaged age group—feeling lonely, but a considerable portion of them also find they don’t have close, meaningful relationships. “In comparison, just 16% of Gen Xers” (the age group between Baby Boomers and Millennials) “and 9% of Baby Boomers say they have no friends.”

So why would a quarter of an entire generation say they lack friends? And perhaps more importantly, what is going to happen as Millennials age, since experts tell us that loneliness tends to increase the older a generation gets?

Allow me to stick with the negative news a bit more to illustrate the good news I want you to know. You see, it isn’t just the Millennials who are feeling alone. Americans in general report a crisis of friendship.

Recently, one of our nation’s largest health insurers, Cigna, reported the results of a study revealing that most Americans feel “lonely, left out and not known.” Similar studies by the Barna Group showed that “the majority of adults has anywhere

between two and five close friends (62%), but 1 in 5 regularly or often feels lonely.”

Adding to this, while most Americans see their neighbors weekly (39%) or daily (28%), 37% say these interactions are friendly, polite greetings that do not usually lead to more meaningful connections. In other words, Americans see and greet their neighbors, but their neighbors seldom become friends of any depth.

An interesting part of Barna’s research reveals that when it comes to friendship, opposites don’t attract. People tend to be friends with folks who are like them, not different. Americans’ preference for befriending people who are like them “is true for religious beliefs (62% similar, 38% different), race or ethnicity (74% vs. 26%), income (56% vs. 44%), education level (63% vs. 37%), social status (70% vs. 30%), political views (62% vs. 38%) and life stage (69% vs. 31%).”

I should add that this same Barna report states that “evangelicals are less likely than most to have friends who are different than them.” This is especially true when it comes to friends who share their religious beliefs (91% similar), friends who have the same ethnicity (88% similar) and friends who share their political views (86% similar). In short, when it comes to friendship, evangelicals in America just aren’t reaching out to people who are unlike them.

Where does all this lead us? If we are considering the future and both the challenges and the blessings that it brings, the insights of interpersonal neuroscience promise wonderful things.

We see how vital relationships are for happy lives. We understand that our brains can change—not just in our early days but throughout our lifetimes. We also find that habits of the mind and body can bring health to the brain and thus to our lives.

Yet we also have to realize that we are living in a society that is increasingly disconnected, increasingly damaging itself through social media and increasingly feeling lonely and friendless. This is tragic both because it is painful and because of something the new brain science is teaching us: Relationships are the key to healing trauma.

Community—particularly Christian community with its devotion to prayer, confession, openness, vulnerability, service and investment in others—is more and more being understood as a bulwark against the traumatizing culture in which we live.

There are tremendous opportunities for Christian churches here. At a time when society is suffering relational wounds and loneliness, when technology and social trends are rending the fabric of our relationships, churches can offer the very relational interactions that brain scientists tell us are the keys to healing and restoration. Of course, social scientists are speaking just at a psychological level.

But we Christians know that we have not only the mental benefits of our faith and practices to offer but also the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. We really can be the healing force we are called to be in our traumatized generation. We can make the difference our age needs and that we believers in Jesus long to be in our time.

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