

Transcript of FBC Foundational Knowledge Audio Lecture 5

Hello I'm Dr. Leonard Matheson.

This is faithful brain foundational lesson five. The focus in lesson five is going to be on Carol, my client whom I discuss in chapter 3 of my book "Your Faithful Brain: Designed for so much more!".

In today's lesson, I'm going to present the *Healthy Hippocampus Exercise* and how I used it with Carol to help her develop bravery or courage to deal with the situation that she was in.

Carol was a 30-year-old registered nurse who came to me with difficulties with insomnia, self-confidence and anxiety. These symptoms had begun three months before and they were stemming from an unwanted relationship at her hospital with a physician who was married and was basically stalking her.

As Carol told me, *"We were friends and coworkers, but I definitely didn't want to be involved in a relationship with him. I thought I'd made it real clear but I made the mistake of accepting his help when I moved into my new apartment. He and several other coworkers help me for a few hours one Saturday and then basically he just started pursuing me. He won't take no for an answer. I guess I shouldn't have encouraged him."*

Now that surprised me when I heard her say that, so I had to ask, "How did you encourage him?" *"I accepted his help moving and I should've known that he'd expect more in return than I was willing to give. He leaves me sticky notes on the charts we're working on together. He touches me when and where I don't want to be touched. It's now to the point where we were working on a patient he moves so close that he can look down my shirt or check my bottom. It's disgusting and I've told him to stop and back off 100 times but he just winks and smiles. I talked with the head nurse who said she noticed that something was wrong but wondered what I had done to draw his attention, almost like I had seduced him. Now I'm starting to wonder if I did. But I dress like all the other nurses and I've never even hinted that we could be anything other than coworkers. I just don't know what to do, I feel confused and guilty and embarrassed all at the same time. I need this job, but he's the head of the department so he's always going to be there. If I keep bringing it up to my boss it'll only make things worse."*

So where is sin in all of this? Well obviously it's in the physician's behavior but let's not pass by Carol too quickly. Remember that sin is really falling short of

God's best for us, and it's really helpful if we can help Carol look at how she's fallen short. Now she did not precipitate the problem. This did not begin with her. She did not seduce him but in the ripples of sin from the physician's behavior, she didn't turn to God first. She didn't follow what Jesus says that we're to do, *"to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength"* as the context within which we are to love our neighbor as ourself.

Now I'm definitely not going to preach to Carol about this, that's not going to do any good. That's actually going to be counterproductive. But I am going to help Carol realize how that she can pull their own strings in the situation. How she can integrate faith and neuroscience using the healthy hippocampus exercise to harness the design of her brain, to take care of herself. But that requires that she first turn to God, that she begin with vertical integration, reaching up to God relaxing in the love of God, allowing God's love to guide her.

So, how did I help Carol. Well, we needed to begin with her vertical integration, reviving her relationship with God, really living out Jesus' commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And that began with prayer. We prayed in the office and then I assigned her some homework. This is very exciting homework for me because first of all it's enjoyable but secondly it touches both the vertical integration that we need to establish and the horizontal integration simultaneously. And the homework was getting engaged with worship music, both at church and on her local FM station.

One of my favorite songs that also has tremendous psychotherapeutic application is David Crowder's "How He Loves Me". The words of Crowder's song engage the left brain while the music simultaneously engages the right brain. *"He is jealous for me, loves like a hurricane I am a tree, bending beneath the weight of his wind and mercy. When all of a sudden I am unaware of these afflictions eclipsed by glory and I realize just how beautiful you are and how great your affections are for me. Oh how he loves me."*

And that's a wonderful anthem for psychotherapy for Christians. It helps us revive and vitalize our vertical relationship with God while simultaneously integrating us horizontally. Spending time with that is brain revival, brain rehabilitation. It's wonderful homework! And so, Carol and I began with prayer and worship music. I assigned her homework and then we stepped into some psycho-education. We focused on corrective emotions.

And so, what I would like to do now is to explain to you the value of corrective emotions. What are corrective emotions? Well, our brain is designed so that our values create pain that help to correct our behavior. We have dominant neural

networks that are devoted to our values and when we behave in ways that either ignore or transgress those dominant neural networks, those values, emotional pain is created. The purpose of that emotional pain is to correct our behavior, that's how God designed our brains. Now, when we have poorly developed values, we're more easily confused because we don't experience the emotional pain to correct our behaviors. And values confusion is often what brings people to the counselor or pastor.

As a counselor, if you think about the times that you gone in for counseling yourself and if you reflect on the clients that you've begun to treating your early professional practice as a counselor it will become clear to you that values confusion is a key inflection point and source of emotional pain. Values confusion can happen to all of us, typically through either poorly developed dominant neural networks that are devoted to values or poor maintenance of dominant neural networks devoted to values that were presented to us as children by our parents and other people cared for us. Most of us get into emotional pain through a combination of both routes to values confusion. As our values confused behaviors lead to choices that do not fit the moral pattern of how we like to think of ourselves, we experience corrective emotions. These are important signals that we are violating our moral code.

In Chapter 3 of *Your Faithful Brain*, I've got a simple graph that depicts the cycle of corrective emotions. Corrective emotions begin with confusion. If we don't deal with the confusion as an initial corrective emotion and change our behavior, we begin to experience guilt. Next, if we don't recognize the guilt as a corrective emotions and use it to change our behavior, we experience embarrassment.

Embarrassment unaddressed can morph into shame. Now shame is a very powerful corrective emotion. Most people respond to shame by freezing but some people push through the shame and get to self disgust. Self disgust is destructive. Self disgust erodes our competence, erodes our image of ourselves, robs us of our humanity.

If we try to ignore what's causing our corrective emotions, these continue to fester and create even more confusion. It's a horrible and debilitating cycle. Now counselors can be very helpful in assisting people who are experiencing corrective emotions due to values confusion. We begin by pointing out that whichever corrective emotions are being experienced they're important to acknowledge. They signal that our moral character networks are still active and can be helpful in changing the clients behavior.

Now from time to time, I have been accused by my clients of not taking their pain seriously because as they sit on my couch and they describe what they've been doing and they begin to share with me their emotional pain, I can actually smile. Now what's that smile about? I'm not making fun of the person, I'm recognizing and I'm getting ready to share with the person that their wiring is still intact, that the neural networks that have to do with their values, are actually causing the pain.

Having the neural networks that kick off corrective emotions means that remediation is readily available. We don't have to start from scratch in developing those values. Those neural networks are already there, we just need to point them out, encourage the client to revisit them and revive them.

Now, it's a lot easier to say than actually do, but I really am pleased when I have a client sit on my couch and share with me the pain that they've got that started with their values confusion because the pain of their corrective emotions means that their values-based neural networks are still intact and we can call on them to provide the guidance that the person needs to pull them out of their values confusion and to lessen the emotional pain that they're experiencing.

Carol's corrective emotions were kicked off by her interaction with the person who was in a position of authority. She said to me, "*I feel confused and guilty and embarrassed*". Well that's the corrective emotions cycle right there. Carol was losing her brain integration under assault from the physician who was stalking her.

Carol tried to withstand the onslaught of the corrective emotions by hunkering down and trying to gut it out. She saw herself as a tough and resilient independent woman who certainly should be able to handle something like this. But Carol did not realize she was outmatched in several ways. Her transgressor was in an authority position over her. Her transgressor was older and more experienced. Her transgressor had developed strategies that had been previously effective with other women. Her transgressor had convinced other key people such as the nursing supervisor that he was innocent.

Carol began to lose sleep which is a vital resource for values resilience. In the quiet of our sleep, the Holy Spirit has access that seems to be less available during the busyness and noise of the day. I admit that I do not fully understand this, but neuroconsolidation seems to be a tool that the Holy Spirit uses frequently in my life and in the lives of my Christian clients as they work on their faithful brain development through brain restorative sleep.

Carol didn't recognize that she had already given up her vertical brain integration link to God which brought about chronic neurochemical stress responses that began to erode brain function and would gradually damage brain structure. And it's so easy to disrupt the designed-in integration of our brains.

As we turn away and separate from God and try to ignore or define his created reality, we sin. From the brain-based perspective, sin interferes with heart, soul and mind integration. Sin leads to disintegration of our brain from God. Carol did not intentionally turn away from God, but she admitted that she did not turn to God first.

But one of the wonderful gifts from God is grace. Grace is a crucial resource when we're working with clients to recalibrate and re-center their corrective emotions. Grace provides us with the opportunity to face the truth of our behavior that has produced a corrective emotion so that we can amend our behavior and move back into synchrony with God's created reality.

I had a conversation with Carol about her behavior at her resultant corrective emotions that helped her to realize that her value system was there but just needed to be revived, to be revitalized. The first step was prayer, to invite God into the mess with Carol surrendering asking God for direction. I encouraged Carol to continue to actively reintegrate with God through prayer and Bible study. I encouraged her to become more active in her church and speak with her pastor privately about her troubles at work. And of course I encouraged her to get more actively involved with worship at church and listening to worship music during the day and evening. And finally, in addition, I assigned her to read "What's So Amazing about Grace" by Philip Yancey. We discussed one chapter each week integrating the book into her therapy.

And I like to look at this as grace-based neural rehabilitation. God's grace sets the stage for neurorehabilitation through four interventions. First, brain restorative sleep, second, part of brain restorative sleep is personal prayer relaxation. Third, a natural extension of personal prayer relaxation is the happy hippocampus exercise for depression or the healthy hippocampus exercise for character strengths development. And finally, values-based goaling helps to link the person to a God honoring future and stabilizes their emotional resilience. Each of these innovations is described in Chapter 3 of "Your Faithful Brain: Designed for so much more!".

Let's take a closer look at the healthy hippocampus exercise. The hippocampus lies under your cerebral cortex on either hemisphere, it's about the size of your little finger. It really is at the boundary between the cerebral cortex and the limbic

system your emotional brain. For adults, I'd like to have you think about the hippocampus as the gateway to your autobiographical brain. The hippocampus is where information is temporarily stored before a very small portion of the information gets made into long-term memories and becomes part of your life story, your narrative.

Now, most of us don't think about having the hippocampus be our autobiographical brain because we just assume that everything that we experience automatically becomes part of our narrative, our life story. That's just not true. We do have some control over what we pay attention to, and in that process what we pay attention to we have some control about how to write our own story.

The hippocampus is where information is temporarily stored before it's made into long-term memories throughout the day, all 24 hours. The process of taking information from the hippocampus and making it into long-term memories is called neuroconsolidation.

Neuroconsolidation is happening right now as you listen to this, but there's a lot of information coming in that's competing with what you're listening to. There is a lot of information coming in that's competing with what you're trying to pay attention to and so neuroconsolidation is pretty inefficient right now.

Neuroconsolidation is much more efficient and powerful while you sleep, and that's the key for the healthy hippocampus exercise and the happy hippocampus exercise.

Now the difference between the two is just slight in terms of the focus. The happy hippocampus exercise focuses on improving optimism. It's an extension of the three blessings exercise that was developed at the University of Pennsylvania to help treat depression. It's a very effective strategy for dealing with depression. The healthy hippocampus exercise is a broader approach that deals with the development of all of your character strengths, not just optimism.

Now the process for both is the same, it has to do with what you pay attention to just as you get ready to drop off to sleep. That information goes into the hippocampus and doesn't have much competing with it while you sleep so the neuroconsolidation is much more effective. Bringing about long-term memories, helping you to write your life narrative focused on what you chose to pay attention to just as you dropped off to sleep.

Isn't that wonderful, you can pull your own strings. It's a subtle but powerful way for you to guide your story, for you to describe to yourself who you want to be.

God has designed into your brain the ability to write a God honoring story, as I helped Carol to do, focused on developing courage.

To start the process to help Carol boost her self-confidence, I administered the character strengths rating scale. You can get more information about this at www.faithfulbrain.com.

The basic idea is that I had Carol rate her character strengths using Jesus Christ as a standard reference. Now she had some trouble with this, but I was very intentional about using Jesus as a reference because it helped Carol move in closer to Jesus, really recognize that she was also a child of God, really recognize that her character strengths were there. She'd been running herself down for the past three months causing herself to be un-empowered.

Now the character strengths rating itself has efficacy in that it helped Carol stop her self-destructive hippocampal rehearsal. What's that? Self-destructive hippocampal rehearsal is what most of us participate in just as we drop off to sleep. Instead of being grateful to God for what we've been able to experience over the course of the day, we put information into the hippocampus about what we're worried about, about how we are un-empowered to live life-to-the-full, about how we are inadequate rather than adequate, about how we are far away from God rather than God's children.

On the character strengths rating scale, Carol compared her character with Jesus across 24 character traits and selected bravery to work on. Bravery is defined as: *“Confronting threats, challenges, difficulties, fear or pain; speaking up for what is right when there is opposition; acting on unpopular convictions; not the absence of fear.”*

I asked Carol to make this commitment: “As you prepare for bed each night find three episodes during the day in which you were more brave than you were yesterday. Before you drop off to sleep briefly bring each of these episodes to mind and thank God for those opportunities.” Her homework was to do that every night for the next week, until we met again.

At the next session we reviewed her progress. She told me, *“Some days it got to be late in the day and I hadn't done anything that was brave so I had to come up with something. Usually it wasn't much, but I was amazed that I could, even helping some of my friends to be more brave.”* You can get more details about how the healthy hippocampus exercise and the happy hippocampus exercise work by taking a look at Chapter 3.

Carol's perception of her bravery changed radically within a few weeks, in part because she began to recognize that bravery was already part of her character. She also enjoyed taking a closer look at her relationship with Jesus. As she told me, *"Thinking about how some of his character has rubbed off on me was pretty neat. I really saw how Jesus has been influencing me more than I'd imagined."*

Taking these steps, Carol was quickly able to improve her anxiety and insomnia. Her self-confidence developed slowly but surely. She began to realize that she did not need to feel guilty or embarrassed about the situation. Carol had been caught in the ripples of another person's sin. Carol began to explore formal legal action against the physician and her employer, but she was ambivalent. *"His wife is a wonderful person and he's got grown kids who'd be horrified if they knew how their father was acting. I just don't want to hurt them."*

I suggested to Carol that she talk in confidence with her pastor and develop a biblical perspective that was broader than what I was competent to offer. After consultation with her pastor, Carol decided to take formal action against the physician, but she couldn't find any coworkers who would join her. However, two former nurses at the hospital and a physician's assistant were willing to confirm the physician's offending behavior and the difficult workplace this created. Carol retained an attorney who counseled her about what she could expect if she moved forward. Her excellent work history allowed her to choose to leave the hospital and work for home health agency across town.

In her hospital exit interview, she described once again to her supervisor the physician's pattern of behavior and ask that it be investigated. After not hearing anything from her former employer for three months, Carol's attorney wrote a letter to the physician and hospital administrator that immediately brought action.

After receiving a personal letter of apology from the physician and her nursing supervisor and a promise from the hospital administrator that the physician would be reprimanded and required to participate in counseling, she stopped short of filing a lawsuit. Though she hadn't asked for it, Carol was offered an opportunity to return to her former position with a salary increase but she declined.

Today, Carol is a healthy, happy, emotionally resilient nursing professional. She's got a great reputation as a person of integrity. And so what have we learned from Carol's story? Well, let's address the first question, "Why must I start with God?"

Brain integration begins with God so that we can be realigned with God's created reality. This is another way to consider Jesus' instructions that we are to love God with all our heart and soul and with our entire mind. Sin separates us from God,

disrupts brain integration and makes it easier to separate from God even further. As we sin, we spiral away from the purpose for which we were designed, fitting into God's created reality.

Although we will never achieve a perfectly faithful brain, inviting God to help us develop and maintain brain integration is a necessary and effective first step. As we look at how Carol was helped to deal with her situation, it's important to recognize that we started with her vertical integration, taking a top-down approach. She began by reconnecting with and becoming reoriented to God.

This first step is crucial and sometimes bypassed as people move to horizontal integration and try to depend on their own resources to develop a new solution or move to social integration in which they seek the support of others to come up with a solution. These both must come after we have reconnected with God.

In emergencies and when we're feeling threatened, we tend to miss the efficacy of God and rely on our own resources and on the resources of those closest to us or on people we recognize as experts. We have a sense of desperate urgency that drives us to take action and miss the most powerful action we could take, asking God to step into our emergency. Taking this first step, allows God to guide all of the integration that follows. Taking this first step, also helps with clarity and gives us a sense of security both of which are important for survival and resilience.

I have been involved with thousands of people in desperate situations facing horrible losses and fearsome threats but I have never been disappointed when we began our vertical integration with God.

Well, thank you very much for your attention. If you'd like more information about the character strengths rating scale or other instruments that can help you develop faithful brain fitness, contact us at www.faithfulbrain.com.

We have several online resources that can help. In the meantime, take a look at Chapter 3 in *Your Faithful Brain: Designed for so much more!* You're going to find a lot of information that's going to be very useful for you as you work on your brain health and fitness.

Take care now.