Healing the Broken Brain

Remember Hurricane Katrina? How could we forget the horrific images of the aftermath of one of the most devastating hurricanes to hit American shores? The thriving metropolis of New Orleans was reduced to a gutted city flooded by broken levies and numberless shattered lives.

Romans 1:20 tells us that God uses the things that we can see to help us understand the things we cannot see. They are visual aids for teaching us important truths. This principle is illustrated in Proverbs 25:28: “A man with no self restraint is like a city that is broken down and without walls” (author’s paraphrase).

The picture is one of a city with two major problems—inner desolation and overall defenselessness. It possesses few inner resources and no power to protect itself. Such a city is subject to looting by vandals, vagrants, and the violent. It has lost its economy, community, synchrony, and vitality.

The sole driving force of the broken city is survival. As a result, it has lost the power to diversify, prosper, and progress. It is a city in need of renewal, restoration, and repair. No sector is unaffected; no quarter is not in need of attention.

Such a city is a graphic caricature of a brain (and a life) that has been ravaged by stress, vandalized by bad habits and addictions, flooded by negative thinking and depression, and overwhelmed by the storms of life. Such a brain, like that city, is in survival mode, having lost self-control. It is in need of renewal, restoration, and repair.

The brain is constantly learning new ways to increase the efficiency with which we perceive and respond to our world. Just as commercial airplanes can fly a perfect course on automatic pilot, freeing the captain to watch for danger and monitor the controls, so habits—the brain’s automatic pilot—enable you to thrive.

Finally, creating a connection with others and with God provides support and practical resources for learning new skills for living, thinking, and relating to others. Helping others and taking an interest in their lives are the best ways to keep our own problems in perspective. And much practical and spiritual guidance are found in the study of God’s Word.

God has provided other valuable tools such as counseling and medical intervention, both of which may yield great benefit for some on their journey to health and wholeness.

The brain is capable of almost innumerable forms of learning and memory, and potentially as many ways for neurons to change their function. Neuroscientist Mary Kennedy describes the brain’s wonderful range of activity and subtlety of function as being based on “highly tunable” properties of each neuron during development and also in adults, which ultimately influence behavior.

You are valuable, unique, and special. God has a plan for your life. The process of rebuilding, whether a city or a brain, may seem daunting, but with the right tools and the power of God—restoration is sure.

Endnotes
1 The most important unresolved issue in the addictions: conceptual chaos. Shaffer HJ. Substance Use Misuse 1997;32(11)1573.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. iii.
us to perform safe, effective routines that help us cope with daily life. At the same time they free up mental resources for making new decisions in meeting the necessary challenges and changes of an uncertain world.

Automation in planes and brains is great, but what happens when the automatic pilot becomes dysfunctional and gets stuck in the wrong routine? Instead of being tame servants, dysfunctional habits can become ruthless tyrants—relentless, illogical, expensive, depressing, isolating, and destructive. They weave themselves around us like silken cobwebs but soon become iron chains that squeeze us more tightly the more we struggle to get free.

The addiction picture is bigger than drugs. Howard Shaffer, who heads the Division of Addictions at Harvard University, asserts that drug use “is not a necessary and sufficient cause of addiction. It is improper to consider drugs as the necessary precondition for addiction.” “A lot of addiction is the result of experience: repetitive, high-emotion, high-frequency experience.”

Stanford University psychologist Brian Knutson agrees: “It stands to reason if you can derange these circuits with pharmacology (drugs), you can do it with natural rewards too.” “What is coming up fast as being the central core issue…is continued engagement in self-destructive behavior despite adverse consequences,” says Steven Grant of the National Institute on Drug Abuse. “The development of an addiction is a process that involves more than drugs, and can take place even in the absence of drugs.

With this expanded definition, addictions can take the form of not only drugs but food, gambling, shopping, overwork, sex, television, or any other activity that becomes excessive, destructive, or compulsive. This does not mean that all addictions have the same results.

Licensed therapist Anne Katherine tells of her compelling personal struggle with food in her book Anatomy of a Food Addiction: “I knew from my own internal experience just how compelling a food craving can be, how powerful and irresistible…. I knew that my thinking and obsessing, planning and hoarding, sneaking and hiding resembled the behavior of an addict. I also knew that only when I stopped eating the foods in quantities that kept me in a hazy prison, could I develop a normal relationship with food. Till then, foods acted just as addictive drugs do; they stimulated the desire for more. Finally, I knew that if I was food addicted, then others probably were, too.”

God has used the graphic visual aid of a ravaged city to describe a deeper human problem—the addicted brain—and He has the most complete recovery plan available. He has promised to redirect the desires and renew the thinking of anyone who desires a saving relationship with Him. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old state of things has passed away, a new state of things has come into existence” (2 Corinthians 5:17, author’s paraphrase).

He will restore hope, courage, perseverance, and joy to the one who has suffered a life of brokenness. (See Romans 15:13). Rebuilding a broken city requires a plan; so does rebuilding a broken brain.

Long-term success is achieved by working hard and working smart. The power and the plan both come from God—and He will strengthen you to do your part.

He will rebuild your life one day at a time by unfolding His plan for living free. That plan includes tools for restoring the entire brain, not just overcoming one bad habit. His plan begins with creating an internal environment of hope, optimism, and thankfulness—a mind-set that helps you get up, instead of give up, when you make a mistake.

Just as important is creating an external environment that draws you into making positive choices. That can include simple changes such as placing your walking shoes by the door, or replacing that bowl of candy with fresh fruit. These small changes redirect your brain toward the formation of new, positive habits.

But it doesn’t stop there. Rebuilding continues by creating a lifestyle that promotes physical and mental health such as healthful food choices, daily exercise, and plenty of rest. These activities will throttle down stress and improve your mood—two important safeguards against addiction triggers.

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