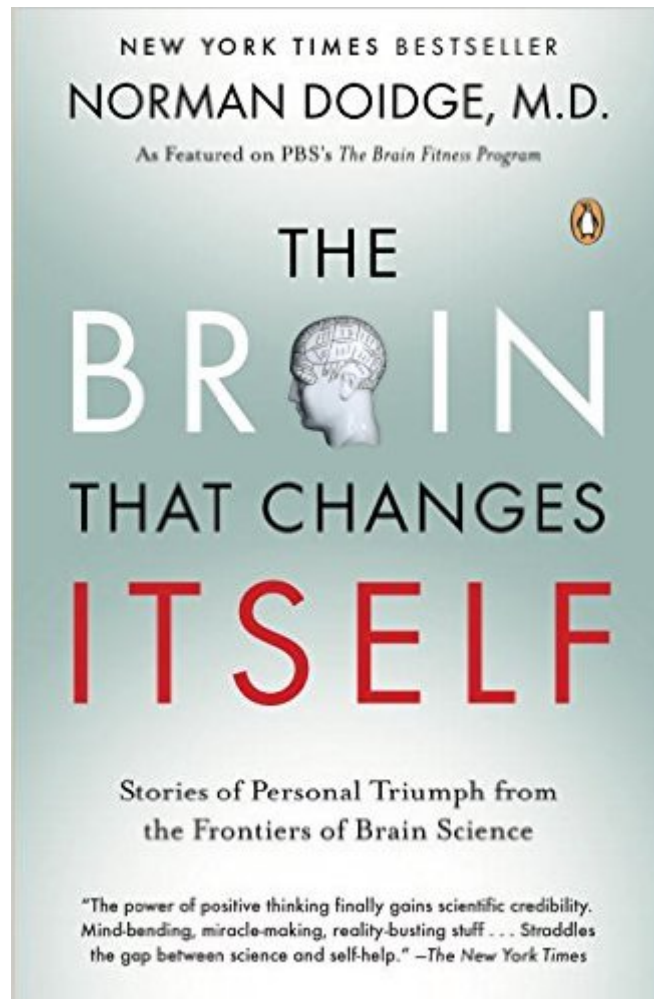


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The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories Of Personal Triumph From The Frontiers Of Brain Science



Synopsis

An astonishing new science called "neuroplasticity" is overthrowing the centuries-old notion that the human brain is immutable. In this revolutionary look at the brain, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Norman Doidge, M.D., provides an introduction to both the brilliant scientists championing neuroplasticity and the people whose lives they've transformed. From stroke patients learning to speak again to the remarkable case of a woman born with half a brain that rewired itself to work as a whole, *The Brain That Changes Itself* will permanently alter the way we look at our brains, human nature, and human potential.

Book Information

Paperback: 427 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; 1 Reprint edition (December 18, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143113100

ISBN-13: 978-0143113102

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.9 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (902 customer reviews)

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Neuropsychology

Customer Reviews

Neuroplasticity has recently become a bit of a buzzword. Long the preserve of neuroscientists, this is one of a number of new books on the topic written for the public. I recently reviewed Sharon Begley's superb book - *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain* - and this one is in a similar vein. Though it is rather different from Sharon's book in which the main focus was on the changes wrought in the brains of meditators, while this one looks at the extraordinary responses of the brain to injury or congenital absence of sensory organs. Since this book went to press, yet another study, this time from India, has shown that some blind children may be able to regain their sight, an observation that is helping turn a lot of neurology on its head. Neuroplasticity is a topic of enormous practical importance. The increasing evidence that the brain is a highly adaptable structure that undergoes constant change throughout life is a far cry from the idea that we are simply the product

of our genes or our environment. Our genes help determine how we can respond to the environment; they do not make us who we are. And we all have untapped potential. This is more than the old nature/nurture debate in a new bottle. It has implications for human potential: how much can you develop your own brain and mind? Can you really teach a child to be a kind, loving person who can dramatically exceed his or her potential? Can psychotherapy really help change your brain for the better? Can we help re-wire the brain of a psychopath? Do we have the right to try? The author is both a research psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst who has interviewed many experts in the field.

This is one of the most interesting nonfiction books that I have *ever* read. I found the book fascinating, but lest that be chalked up to my being a psychologist, my husband the computer scientist found it fascinating, too. Scientists used to believe that the brain was relatively fixed and unchanging -- some of them still believe that -- but recent research shows that the brain is much more mutable than biologists, psychologists, physicians (and any other scientists who studied brains) had ever thought. For example, anecdotal evidence had long supported the idea that blind people hear better than sighted people, but scientists pooh-poohed this idea, saying that there was no mechanism for that to occur. Well, they recently discovered that the area of the brain usually called the visual cortex is taken over for auditory processing in blind people. So blind folks have twice as much brain space devoted to processing sounds, which means that they really do hear better, and now we know why. Scientists were astounded to discover that the "visual" cortex was really just brain space that could be used for anything. Psych 101 and Bio 101 textbooks often have a picture in them that shows which areas of the brain control which bodily functions, and this is all presented as fixed and unchanging. Imagine our surprise to learn that the brain can make fairly large shifts in just a few days -- for example, if you blindfold somebody for five days, the area of their brains that's usually called the visual cortex starts using large sections of itself to process touch and sound, and this change is made in as little as two days. Two days!

I have a general professional interest in psychology and brain science, which often leads me to be frustrated by the tendency towards reductionism and exaggeration. This book looked promising to me because the author is advertised as a psychoanalyst--something that usually does not mesh well with neuroscience. I was intrigued to see how Freud might think about modern psychology's biological determinism. On that score, I found *The Brain That Changes Itself* reasonably satisfying; the chapter on how neural plasticity can help us understand the impact of psychotherapy was

among the best in the book. I very much appreciate the emphasis on how experience (including talk therapy) and culture, not just genes and drugs, shape the brain. That is something that is easy to miss in viewing the pretty brain scans of contemporary popular science. I also found the appendix on how culture works through neural plasticity interesting, although I don't find it helpful to define culture as Doidge seems to--something akin to cultivation and taste (a definition that leads to a problematic hierarchy of cultures based on somewhat arbitrary criteria). It is, however, important to recognize that culture and the brain have a reciprocal relationship. My main concern with the book is that much of the argument seems to imply that the brain is infinitely malleable with the right exercises and effort. Though Doidge does note at points that plasticity is not infinite, he also seems to endorse the very American cultural script that individuals have total control over everything that happens to them. If babies are properly stimulated they will all be geniuses! If ADHD children go through the proper attentional exercises they will suddenly excel! If the elderly go to brain gyms they will never lose their memory!

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