Feeling, Thinking, and Sensing

The feeling dimension of wellness represents a vast landscape of emotions that is core to the human experience. What I hope to illustrate in this article is how integrally related the feeling dimension is with other dimensions. Of course, each dimension affects and is affected by all the other dimensions. But the feeling dimension is deeply interconnected with the thinking, sensing, and breathing dimensions and is often misunderstood. I also introduce some of the science behind this viewpoint and along with practical understandings and tools for approaching this dimension with your clients and students.

Our journey into the feeling dimension begins with a hypothesis by Antonio Damasio, an eminent neuroscientist at UCLA, who says that brain research reveals no separation between cognition (thinking) and emotion (feeling). It’s not difficult to validate this hypothesis by simply noticing our own emotional experiences and then finding the thoughts associated with those experiences.

In the last decade, there have been major breakthroughs in the scientific knowledge about the brain, mind, and relationships. Daniel Siegel, PhD, author of the ground-breaking work, *The Developing Mind*, and a pioneer of the multi-disciplinary field of social neurobiology, says that one of the most interesting areas of the brain is the insula.\(^1\)

Dr. Siegel points out that this little part of the brain is key to understanding human empathy. Together with other areas of the brain, such as the mirror neurons in the motor region of the prefrontal cortex, the insula allows us to perceive emotional states in other people and then create emotional resonance with them. He calls it “mindsight.” He says that it’s the way we can perceive our mind and the minds of others. He calls it “the seventh sense,” where “…your mind takes in the mind of another. We perceive that mind and make a representation in our own brain. That person feels felt. It’s a communion of two minds, known as ‘mutuality’ where two brains are becoming integrated—two separate entities that are differentiated coming together as a whole. At the root of relationships is this fundamental way of seeing another’s mind.”\(^2\)

For many years he has helped run a UCLA program called The Center for Culture, Brain and Development. They have studied patterns of communication in a broad spectrum of cultures and have found that in all cultures, mutuality is the essence of humanity.

Dr. Siegel states that awareness of internal states (interoception) leads to awareness of others’ internal states (empathy). So those who are more adept at sensing, also tend to be adept at feeling emotional states, and these same people are more adept at empathy and mindsight. This all comes together in the brain’s tiny powerhouse, the insula, located in the limbic area near the anterior cingulate.\(^1\)

The bad news is that when we suffer emotional trauma, especially over time, we can disengage this part of our brains and experience a kind of disconnection from our selves and others. This is what happens when our senses have been diminished along with our ability to experience others, i.e., the reduction of empathy. When this occurs we can feel quite isolated, which has huge ramifications in our wellbeing.

The good news is that due to the amazing neuroplasticity of the brain, even those who have disengaged much of the functioning of the insula (for survival reasons\(^3\)), can re-engage it by simply focusing on sensory awareness. It appears that sensory awareness is the foundation for the ability to feel emotionally.

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\(^1\) “The Insula,” a New York Times article, is in the Recommended Reading section of the Training Library

\(^2\) Dan Siegel from a 2005 class, “Relationships from the Inside Out”

\(^3\) See the article “The Change Process” in the Required Reading section of the Training Library

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I have worked with clients who have regained much of this functioning and their ability to connect with others by increasing their sensory awareness, which then enables them to sense their emotions, and finally enables them to sense into others (Mindsight), thus allowing them to make compassionate connections. This is all done within the purview of wellness coaching, in present time, with no need to discuss their past. This is the power of the sensing dimension in relation to the feeling dimension.

By refocusing attention into your “felt sense,” a term that Eugene Gendlin, PhD, a philosopher and psychotherapist from the University of Chicago, uses to describe this amalgam of feeling, thinking, and sensing, you can more rapidly bring integration between sensing, feeling, thinking, and breathing. In the mid-seventies, Dr. Gendlin wanted to know what made the difference between psychotherapy patients who made progress and those who didn’t. He found that those who progressed tended to employ bodily senses in conjunction with awareness of their emotional states. I’ve found that in conjunction with breathing awareness, this “felt sense” takes us further and faster to those essential cognitions, realizations, and enlightenments, commonly called “Aha moments,” than anything else. Dr. Siegel recommends that we help clients connect to their senses because it’s simply the most fundamental way to make sense of one’s life.

**Positive Emotions**

Positive psychology is a young endeavor in the field of psychology. Its principles have been practiced in small enclaves of psychology for many years but it has not achieved the widespread usage and validation that it is beginning to enjoy today. It is, in brief, the science that enhances human functioning and fulfillment. It is a strengths-based approach. Rather than focusing at what's broken, it looks at what works and ways to enhance and amplify it. Studying the effects of positive emotions is one of its primary endeavors.

Barbara Fredrickson, PhD, has been studying positive emotions for over 25 years. In her 2002 address at the Positive Psychology Summit she states:

> Now the bottomline message is that positive emotions can literally transform people and spur on development, not because people are seeking out development, but because positive emotions feel good, and that good feeling draws people in that direction to experience these situations more frequently, and that is an evolutionarily adaptive design for getting people to develop themselves, simply because it feels good to do so, to play, to explore, to savor, things like that. So positive emotions can literally transform people into more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated versions of themselves. Okay, and the various resources that positive emotions build can, in turn, function as reserves that people can draw on later in other circumstances, even in dire circumstances, and those reserves can improve coping and odds of survival.

> You've probably heard about a study that came out a couple of years ago, about nuns who were studied across their whole lives, and they actually went back to their writings from early life and found that those who had expressed the most positive emotions early in life lived up to ten years longer than those who had expressed the least positive emotions.⁴

Daniel Goleman says that emotional intelligence (EQ) is far more important in terms of life experience and success than our intelligence quotient (IQ), which is our standard measure of intelligence. It makes sense. If negative emotions are your standard operating procedure, all of your body’s processes are going to be working harder and thus wear out sooner. You’re not going to be thinking clearly because your cerebral cortex will be at least somewhat disengaged, and you’re not going to be as attractive to others, so you’ll be more likely to feel disconnected.⁵ All of this spells a less successful life than if you

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⁴ Dr. Fredrickson’s full statement is in the Other Resources section of the Training Library.

⁵ In the Authentic Happiness Coaching Program, Martin Seligman, PhD, one of the founders of positive psychology, reported that his research shows a direct correlation between happiness and strong social relationships. No surprises there.
purposely create a positive-emotion reservoir from which to draw when “shift happens” and life throws you a curveball.

So how do you build this reservoir of positive emotions? The key is where you choose to put your focus and attention.

Dan Siegel reports that our focus and attention can actually create new neural pathways in the brain. This is exciting information and explains why the simple act of keeping a gratitude journal works so well. If we are focusing on what we appreciate, or are grateful for, over time, it creates a kind of neural groove. The more you have developed a gratitude habit, the more likely you are going to look for and find reasons to feel grateful. It becomes a gratitude spiral where you get more of what you have.

Research done by Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough indicated that daily gratitude exercises resulted in higher reported levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism, and energy. Additionally, the gratitude group experienced less depression and stress, was more likely to help others, exercised more regularly, and made more progress toward personal goals. According to the findings, people who feel grateful are also more likely to feel loved. McCullough and Emmons also noted that gratitude encouraged a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness among people, since one act of gratitude encourages another.

One of the take-away messages from positive psychology research is that if you reflect on what you want and what is working, rather than focusing on what you don’t want and what is not working, you will tend to get more of what you focus on and increase your sense of wellbeing. Intentionally building an internal bank account of positive emotions will serve you in many ways.

Thirty years ago, at the Wellness Resource Center, the staff and I did many residential “Preventing Burnout” intensive programs for helping professionals. We included a liberal component of play and laughter. We played childhood games like jump rope and tag, and in the summer, had water fights. I would lead a laughing experience where we would all stand, breathe, and just laugh for no reason. As I launched the exercise with my characteristic deep belly laugh, the group would at first giggle, laugh nervously, and then it would soon become a side-holding, joyful contagious chorus of deep, authentic laughter. We would laugh until it naturally dissipated and people would collapse on the floor in deep relaxation. It was usual to hear people say that they hadn’t been that relaxed in a very long time. That’s a sizeable deposit in the positive emotions reserve!

Now there are Laughter Clubs and Laughter Yoga groups springing up world-wide. Lee Berk, PhD, and fellow researcher, Stanley Tan, MD, PhD of California’s Loma Linda University, have been studying the effects of laughter on the immune system. Their published studies show that laughing lowers blood pressure, reduces stress hormones, increases muscle flexion, and boosts immune function by raising levels of infection-fighting T-cells, disease-fighting proteins called gamma-interferon and B-cells, which produce disease-destroying antibodies. Laughter also triggers the release of endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers, and produces a general sense of wellbeing.

There’s a lot to be said for intentionally building your positive emotions bank account!

Understanding the Emotional Brain

When Dr. Siegel was completing the publishing of The Developing Mind, he realized that he had neglected to include a graphic representation of the brain. The publisher emphatically informed him that they had passed the point of adding another image. He could add text, but not an image. He was feeling angry about this news and had clenched his fist. He found himself looking down at his fist and realized that it was a perfect model of half of the human brain. He has since taught his students that we always carry with us this model of the brain.

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6 From a Dilbert cartoon.
7 See abstract in the Other Resources section of the Training Library.
In the illustration below, we see the three primary areas of the triune brain, as described by Paul D. MacLean, MD, the American neuroscientist. The palm of the hand, down into the wrist, represents the brainstem or the reptilian brain. The three bones of the thumb would be the limbic area of the brain, or mammalian brain (Dr. Siegel maintains that the limbic area of the brain is not a “system” as is asserted by many). The metacarpal bones and phalanges of the fingers form the neocortex, or the thinking brain.8,9

The Hand Model of the Brain

The Amygdala

The amygdala in the limbic area is associated with emotional learning and memory. It’s both a very useful and troubling part of the human survival programming. One perfect example of the survival purposes of this part of the brain was shared by Dr. Siegel.

He was hiking deep into the forest with his son on a sunny day, having a great time. All of a sudden he heard coming from his own mouth an urgent cry to his son to stop. He had no idea what it was about. His son immediately heeded his warning, looked down and saw a poisonous snake ready to strike. Had he taken one more step he surely would have been bitten. Dr. Siegel points out that this was the amygdala doing its job, bypassing the neocortex and going directly to the motor region. Thus, without thinking about it, he saw the snake and acted immediately. Had his brain been wired to have to think about it before he was able to act, his son might have died.

There’s another side to the amygdala that affects us rather differently in our modern lives. To illustrate how this works, I’ll tell you a story that shows how this survival mechanism can really cause trouble if we aren’t aware of what is happening.

Three-year-old Johnny is walking in his neighborhood with his mommy, holding her hand. It’s a bright sunny day, there is a plane flying overhead, a red car passes by, and just at that moment, a neighbor’s dog runs out and bites him. He is hurt and afraid. As he grows up, he quickly forgets about the incident.

Thirty years later, Johnny is walking with his wife, holding her hand, while she is telling him something important about her day. It’s a bright day, there’s a plane flying overhead, he catches the sight of something red in his peripheral vision and hears a dog bark. Johnny gets a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach that he immediately interprets as anger. His left brain goes into gear to find a reason for this feeling and he snaps at his wife saying, “I don’t know why you say things like that. It really makes me angry!” His wife is stunned, hurt, and pulls her hand away from his.

What happened?

8 For a simple description of the triune brain, see the file by that name in the Recommended Reading section of the Training Library.
Does this remind you of relational experiences you might have had?

The shorthand way that neuroscientists talk about this phenomenon is, “neurons that fire together, wire together.” What that means is that when Johnny experienced his trauma, everything he perceived at that moment equaled the trauma. So when there is a confluence of triggers, it’s as if the experience is happening again and the brain goes into survival alert. The problem is that adult Johnny doesn’t even remember the event.

There are two kinds of memories. Explicit memories are those that we know are memories. They are our personal narratives. Implicit memories are memories that we don’t recognize as memories but usually experience as physical sensations. When these implicit memories arise, according to Dr. Siegel, we have two main ways we deal with them:

1) Usually our left hemisphere gets very busy making up a story about why we are experiencing these sensations because that’s what the left hemisphere does. It’s a story-making machine. Dr. Siegel says that patients who have had the corpus callosum (the bands of neural tissue that relay neural messages between the brain’s hemispheres) severed, still generate stories explaining their lives and their world. It’s just that the stories are bereft of the rich contextual material that the right hemisphere provides and thus are nonsensical and often funny to an observer. The speaker, however, is in earnest and believes the story wholeheartedly. When we can’t make sense of something because we don’t have the sensory awareness to process it, our left hemisphere will create a story to explain it.

2) However, if we are aware of implicit memories and have built an adequate sensory awareness, we can notice the sensations, identify them as just that, get interested in the experience, get more precise in our noticing and perhaps bring the implicit memory into an explicit memory. Or perhaps we just let it be an implicit memory that needs no further story, as we simply notice the sensations as sensations. We don’t need to make up a story about them; we can just let them be interesting sensations until we are ready to hear what they have to say.

I’ve found that this information can be quite illuminating for some of my clients. It’s a kinder, shame-free, way to make sense of both their behaviors and the behavior of others. However, when dealing with implicit memories, please see below for cautions about not stepping outside the purview of coaching and into that of psychotherapy, unless, of course, you are a licensed psychotherapist or psychiatrist.

**Emotional Flooding**

Using the closed hand model, we see an integrated, coherent brain. Notice on your own hand how the two middle fingers, which represent the orbitofrontal area of the prefrontal cortex, is the area of the brain that connects all three parts of MacLean’s triune brain. Dr. Siegel points out that this part of the brain is very important to understand when we discuss emotional flooding, or what Daniel Goleman, PhD, calls “amygdala hijacking.”

If you have ever been so angry that you’ve seen red, or perhaps felt fear that rendered you out of control, you’ve experienced emotional flooding. Remember that the amygdala does what it does best: it bypasses the neocortex—the thinking brain. Literally what happens, according to Dr. Siegel, is that the orbitofrontal region virtually disconnects the neocortex from the mammalian and reptilian brain. The synapses become very slow in this region, so you literally can’t think; you can only react from the more primitive areas of the brain.

Have you ever seen trapped wild animals? They will do anything to either remove the threat or get themselves out of danger. It’s the fight, flight, or freeze survival response. When your brain disconnects with emotional flooding, it’s the mammalian and reptilian brains that are running the show. You are literally like a trapped wild animal. That’s why you say or do things that you wish you hadn’t later.

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Does this help to understand some of your own experiences? Does it help you to understand others in your life?

**Helpful Hint for Emotional Flooding**

It takes the amygdala about 20 minutes to calm its synaptic firings after an episode of emotional flooding. So there is a lot of wisdom in the advice to take a break, think unrelated thoughts, and do some deep breathing to calm the body and re-connect the brain. Obviously, taking 20 minutes to stew about the “offense” isn’t going to accomplish the goal. You need to redirect your thoughts and give your brain a chance to return to balance. Once your brain is reconnected, then you can attend to the matter using your whole brain in a more productive manner.

Often employing a hand signal with those you love is an efficient way to communicate that your brain is about to disconnect. Explain to them in advance how, once the brain disconnects, there is absolutely nothing productive that can happen, because you will be left with the brain of a wild animal. Actually, they probably already know this. Using a hand signal is more useful than trying to use words because at that point, words can come out quite wrong and make things worse. A hand signal bypasses this danger and best achieves the goal. It signals that it’s time to back off, take a break, and reconnect your brain. In my training with Dr. Siegel, he taught us to raise our fist, as in the hand model of the brain, and then flip up our fingers, indicating that a brain disconnection is imminent. I’ve found this technique to be quite useful myself, and clients and students have described using it in their intimate relationships with great success.

Even though this is fairly technical, I hope some of this information helps you to understand more deeply the connection between the feeling, sensing, and thinking dimensions. I have found this understanding of social neurobiology to be a huge shame-reducer, both personally and professionally. When I’ve briefly explained some of these findings to clients, they often undergo a shift. They are more able to have empathy for themselves and others.

**Breathing and Emotions**

I can’t complete this topic without at least touching on the most powerful tool in the feeling Dimension toolbox: breathing. One of my teachers said, “Never underestimate the power of the breath!” It can help you to get to the heart of an issue and take you to that delicious epiphany that wakes you up to what you really want. It can calm unwieldy emotions and bring the mind to a steady and clear center. It can heal the body and awaken life-enhancing, pleasant sensations.

Watching your own breathing in a coaching session will reveal volumes to you about your presence in the moment. It’s impossible to be in protecting mode and breathing deeply. When you notice shallow breathing, simply making the choice to shift to learning mode will also shift your breathing.

Taking a moment to suggest a pause in the conversation to direct a client into an awareness of their breathing can be enlightening. Listening or watching carefully the breathing of your client will reveal such depth of understanding and empathy that can enable you to sense right into that person as if you were in their skin. That kind of listening and presence is a gift that people are often starving for. You can feel the intimacy of deep connection even though you are halfway around the world from each other—just from such a simple and primal activity as breathing and listening. There is no greater gift.

**Coaching and Emotions**

If you are not a trained therapist, you will need to be very careful about how you treat the subject of implicit memories and emotional trauma when you are coaching others. During coaching, there is a possibility that someone might fall into some deep wound from the past that they are not able to process on their own. If this happens, refer them to a qualified psychotherapist to address the issue. Your job as a coach is to assist with present time issues and experiences, not with deep wounds from the past. However, never end a session if the client is deeply disturbed. Stay with them until they are back in present time and space.
If a client is triggered into a deeply disturbing trauma or emotional experience from the past, here is a simple process to help them return to the present. Ask them if they are willing to try something that will help them feel better. If they are, direct them to notice something in their physical environment that is OK to look at. Ask them to describe it to you. When they’ve done that, ask them to find something else. Repeat it a couple more times. Then ask them if there is something in their physical environment that would be OK for them to touch. Ask them to describe it. If they want to, they can touch it. Repeat that a couple more times. By then, they should be calmer and back in present time so that they can notice their breathing. Then you can guide them into some deep breathing and relaxation. I don’t recommend trying to direct someone into their breathing if they are re-experiencing a trauma. Get them into present time and space first.

As coaches, it is our mandate to offer a safe space for our clients. In order to do this, it’s imperative that we do our own emotional work so that we can be fully present. If we get reactive, we can’t effectively hold that space. We need to do our own work that integrates breathing, sensing, feeling, and thinking. We can give it away only if we first own it.

Conclusion

Being more aware of how integrated the wellness dimensions of breathing, sensing, feeling, and thinking are, can transform every aspect of our lives. It all comes down to learning and protecting. If we are attentive and curious, we can build the neuropathways for emotional intelligence in ways that give us more resilience, health, and happiness.

Coaching Tips

When you are coaching your clients, or leading classes and workshops, consider the following:

- Use their Wellness Inventory strengths as a strategy for change. At your first meeting, spend some time on their strengths, as indicated in their scores and responses. Take note of wellness behaviors they have already integrated into their lifestyle. This can be very useful later when you are discussing what they want to change. You can inquire into the specifics of how they integrated that behavior. You are establishing a successful strategy of change that they have already employed. Then you can inquire if that same strategy, or some part of it, might be helpful in the changes they want to make now.

- Use the Spin on the Wheel to enhance the client’s motivation for change and to generate possibilities. Focusing on what they want, and how the dimensions of wellness can support them, is a positive and uplifting strategy.

- If your client is spinning off unproductively in the past, or worrying about the future, consider taking a moment to pause in a session and direct your client to an awareness of the body and breath. Ask what they notice or experience in their body, not what they “feel.” For some reason, when you ask many people what they “feel” in their body, they immediately go into their heads and their old stories. It’s strange. I’ve found that it’s more effective to ask them to pause and just take a moment to notice their breathing and whatever sensation they can notice in their body. Sometimes it’s helpful to ask specifically about common tension areas like the jaws, abdomen, or neck. Just this awareness alone can often get them back on track and in present time.