

# Sculpting a Less-Anxious Brain

*Ships will come and go in the harbor of your mind, but you'll be able to decide which ones to unload. Slowly but surely, you can fashion a mind that is aware of it self and amazed by its complexity and powers of compassion.*

**By Kathleen Smith**

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"Brain architect" sounds like a profession from science fiction, but in the book [Mindsight](#), psychiatrist Dan Siegel argues that we have the ability to fashion our own brains. When we pay attention to our mind and the minds of others, we develop a sort of superhero seventh sense, which Siegel terms "mindsight." Though Agent Phil Coulson might not be calling you up, this remarkable ability allows us to physically change the structure of the brain itself, long after we leave childhood.

How do you fashion a healthy brain? Mindfulness practices are essential to observing and rerouting our mind's circuits. When we're mindful, we slowly learn how to gain control over our reactions rather than smashing that bright red panic button. Mindfulness can look like meditation, but it also can be accomplished through [small but significant changes](#) in a daily routine. Here are some of Siegel's suggestions.

## 1. See Your Circuits

Siegel explains that there's a difference between seeing anxiety as a way the brain functions and seeing our emotions as character flaws. When we don't notice emotions as reactions in a vast network of potential responses, we're slapping a "Hi, My Name is Panic" label onto ourselves.

Taking that extra step to go, "Hey, that really lit up my anxiety response!" can help a person respond more thoughtfully to rush hour traffic or an ambiguous voicemail from their boss. If you don't want to think of your worries or panic as wires, you can use other metaphors. I like to think of them as boats flopping up and down they cruise the harbor of my mind. There goes the S. S. Catastrophizing.

## 2. Practice Brain Hygiene

Neuroplasticity is accomplished by many of the no-brainer recommendations you'll hear from your doctor or therapist. Getting enough sleep, eating healthy, and exercising not only maintain a fit body, but they also keep your mind adaptable. There's also a link between body awareness and being able to put ourselves in another's perspective. When you can't tell how your body responds to stress or fear, then you'll be quick to absorb the emotions of others or project your own emotions onto them.

### 3. Avoid the Shoulds

"Should" isn't usually a motivating word, and we get mentally stuck when we start bossing ourselves to shape up, do better, and calm the hell down. Practicing awareness means observing emotions and reactions like a naturalist, with respect and curiosity. When we try to cage them and tame them, we become even more fearful of their beastly power.

"If you have a fight with yourself," asks Siegel, "Who can win?" Yes, the fear response is annoying when triggered by the slightest thing, but it's helped us survive as a species for [millions of years](#). So have a little reverence for the beauty of the brain, and maybe those emotions will creep forward and start eating out of your hand.

### 4. Take a Pause From Technology

Social media and smart phone culture do not lend themselves to real reflection. The itch of the fingers to tweet a complaint or text your fury can switch off the power of mindsight. And when we only reach out to those we know who will agree with us, we become [less empathetic](#). Emotionally intelligent humans hit the pause button to gauge a situation with their prefrontal cortex. "Reflection is a compassionate state of mind," says Siegel. While whipping out your smart phone might feel good in the moment, chances are your reaction will be a less than thoughtful one.

### 5. Lean Into Panic

Many of us spend a significant amount of energy trying to avoid negative emotions. But Siegel recommends that when it comes to the anxious brain, we should lean in. The resilient mind is able to move toward a challenge, and the more we engage curiously with how the mind functions, the more it will take for us to become reactive.

Siegel uses the metaphor of a river to describe this process. If a person is willing to accept how the brain and body react, the banks of the river grow wider apart and the less likely we are to careen headlong into the shore. So as Jillian Michaels yells at me in her exercise videos, "Get comfortable being uncomfortable."

None of these practices will be easy at first. Siegel assures us that the waves will break on the shore eventually, and the emotions will relax their grip. Ships will come and go in the harbor of your mind, but you'll be able to decide which ones to unload. Slowly but surely, you can fashion a mind that is aware of itself and amazed by its complexity and powers of compassion.

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