ACCU2014

My ACCU 2014 talk on "HOWTO – The Brain" was based on two articles - "HOWTO – The Brain" and "Mental Health Presentation". Those two articles are provided here. They were based on a number of efforts regarding mental health especially concentration.

I have since decided to work on improving my memory's performance and may be writing about that in the future.

Ian Bruntlett, April 2014.

HOWTO – The Brain – Ian Bruntlett

Where my knowledge & experience comes from.

- Background - Where my knowledge came from.
    - If you told me that, after I'd graduated from University, eight years later I would be on an NHS acute psychiatric ward, I would have told you you were mad. In 2001 I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia. These days instead of being a salaried employee I am a volunteer worker at Contact Morpeth. I've had roughly 1+ year on an acute hospital ward (St George's Park) and 2+ years on sheltered accommodation also at St George's Park.
    - Sharing knowledge. I have a blog – schizopanic.blogspot.co.uk. What is schizopanic? Its the look of panic in someone's face when you tell them you have schizophrenia. Are schizophrenics dangerous? Statistically **No**. However, the headline cases of people with schizophrenia attacking people do have common factors:- 1) The patient has not been on medication for 6+ months; 2) they have dropped off the radar of Mental Health services.
    - Sharing knowledge. Once a fortnight I co-facilitate (with a CPN's involvement) a 'Hearing Voices Group' session. 'Hearing Voices' is usually but not always an indication that the patient is suffering from a psychotic illness.
    - Sharing other types of knowledge. Some of my writings are on https://sites.google.com/site/ianbruntlett/ - mainly about computer programming or running Role Playing Games (in particular Mongoose Traveller).

How to use the Brain and Body best – get the most out of life.

- All the suggestions made here came about from living on a £3 a day budget in sheltered accommodation, and so are completely affordable.
- Keep Physically fit.
    - Exercise. Go for walks with a bottle of tap water.
    - Healthy eating. Have a varied diet and try to have some kind of fruit or vegetables every day.
    - Budgeting. Have tinned food because it takes a long time to go off. Have tinned fruit (in juice), tinned soups. Mix the averagely priced stuff with the usual stuff. Shop at a variety of shops.
    - Take time off - rest adequately – both mentally and physically.
    - Be a 'Jack of All Trades' (and maybe a master of one). Varied activity keeps interest alive and the brain and body happy.
- Keep your Brain fit.
    - If you can't handle complete books, read newspapers – even one page is a start.

- Use your local library. They have a range of magazines that are like New Scientist which is very interesting but over the course of a month are very expensive. Read newspapers in the library to save money. Use the money saved to buy science or other books. Use library computers to access the Internet.

- Amazon UK is a very cheap way to buy books and its range is particularly helpful if you live in a rural area (e.g. Northumberland). Other good sources of books are charity bookshops. You can help charities by buying and donating books.

- TV or Radio programmes can be a useful distraction.

- Pick a topic or subject and study it in depth. The ACCU (www.accu.org), an organisation for programmers, runs study groups for particular tutorial books. If you have a particular interest, you may want to consider setting up a study group of your own. Local libraries are a good source of books and information.

- Read actively. Don't just passively read it. Think about it. Make notes. Use highlighter pens (e.g. yellow for important things, orange for important warnings).

How to handle the Brain – when Things Go Wrong.

See your GP. Take time off work. Talk to a friend. Use self help books, drop-in centres and other resources (e.g. Contact Morpeth MHG, Mind, Samaritans). G.P.s, health centres and the Citizen's Advice Bureau (C.A.B.) can also help. Some people fall through the network – if so then try the C.A.B. who can help.

How to handle the Brain - when Things Go Seriously Wrong.

When I was ill, I told the NHS staff *everything*. I trusted them *completely*. In NHS terms I 1) am compliant and 2) I have insight. Personally I thought I was doing an OutputDebugString (a facility in Windows for a programme to report debugging information) and the NHS staff were debugging my brain.

Cognitive Impairment.

Psychotic illnesses, the medication used to fight those illnesses and the *low stimulus environments* in Hospitals and sheltered accommodation can lead to '*Cognitive Impairment*' as well as boredom. Cognitive impairment is where the brain isn't quite working correctly, leading to some difficulty thinking and remembering things. It is important to remember this is impairment and not disability – with effort, you can achieve the same results or better than people without 'Cognitive Impairment'. Some articles I have read have suggested that '*Neuron Loss*' may be experienced – quite possibly memory loss? – which could account for why my Perl and Python knowledge have walked out of my head.

Stress Vulnerability Model.

The NHS have this model. It explains why increased stress can lead to mental ill-health.

Coping Strategies.

Used by the NHS to cope with side effects of mental ill-health, there are a variety of strategies to employ such as listening to music or sharing a cup of tea with a friend. Other strategies include:-

- Ground self in the present – keep a grip on reality. This is especially difficult when hearing or seeing hallucinations.
- Think of consequences of actions – no matter how paranoid you are, do your best not to get into physical confrontations.
- Try reading a newspaper, magazine or book.
- Exercise.
- Watch TV, listen to radio or CD or iPod or walkman to take your mind off things.
- If on a bus, look out of a window or perhaps move seats.
- Phone (NHS) staff or other carers.
- Perform breathing exercises to calm yourself down physically and mentally.
- Remember all achievements, positive things that have happened.
- Use PRN (pro rate na) medication that is supplied to deal with difficult situations.

Not all of these suggestions suit everyone. Try and identify the coping strategies that work best for you – a toolbox of ideas/methods that can be best used to help when you need them.

Employment.

Neuroatypicals are people with extraordinary thinking patterns – people who think differently - some companies are beginning to appreciate their strengths and are looking to employ them because of these strengths. For example New Scientist has reported that the German I.T. Company SAP are actively recruiting people with Autism because of their above average ability to spot patterns and errors.

Bibliography.

"*How to read a book*" by by Mortimer J. Adler & Charles Van Doren.

"*Lateral Thinking*" by Edward de Bono. Sometimes reading this book and others about thinking might stimulate your mind.

"*Neurocomic*" by Dr Farinella and Dr Ros for a light-hearted look at Neuroscience.

More writings by me...

Scribbles/Articles - https://sites.google.com/site/ianbruntlett/

Blog - http://schizopanic.blogspot.co.uk/

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Mental Health Presentation by Ian Bruntlett.

Note. If I say "Oops" I'd like someone to change the subject.

1. Opening – story and sequel

It was a dark and quiet night. People were hacking into my brain using secret tape players at night along with hypnotism and radio waves. The Berwick people were coming to get me. I went to a neighbour, George, who arranged for a Doctor to see me. Some friends from work came round concerned about some phone messages I had left.

Before I knew it, I was in an ambulance taking a 45 mile journey from Berwick to Morpeth's St George's Hospital. I was told I was being taken to a place of safety. I thought I was going to be killed.

If you had told me that, after I'd graduated from University, eight years later I would be on an NHS acute psychiatric ward, I would have told you you were mad. In 2001 I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia. These days instead of being a salaried employee I am a volunteer worker at Contact Morpeth. I've had roughly 1+ year on an acute hospital ward (St George's Park) and 2+ years in sheltered accommodation also at St George's Park.

Those events shaped my life dramatically. I've been looked after by people. Initially it was St George's Hospital (2001-2004ish) and after that my current carers - Community Assertive Outreach Team, run by NHS and Social Services (2004 – to date) – became involved. Been a general volunteer for Contact for years, now.

This is how I gained my experience with Mental Health and relevant services.

2. Discussing the Mental Health and Stress Vulnerability Model

Illness can happen to anyone. The precise cause of schizophrenia is point of debate. There are some indicators that medical staff used when assessing someone's mental health needs.

1. The Stress Vulnerability Model.
2. Nature. Inheritance. I'm adopted so I can't really comment on that.
3. Nurture. There are a few personal childhood problems that I'd rather not talk about.

The Stress Vulnerability Model is a Goldilocks sign. You must not have too much or too little stress. Exposure to excess stress can lead to ill-health.

There are good mental and physical health practices that can reduce the risk of illness.

3. Signs to look out for when someone is becoming unwell? Use stages of hearing & help

There are warning signs as to when someone is becoming unwell. I know all about being unwell but I've asked around for the point of view of family, friends & colleagues and how they react to people with mental problems. They often:

- Feel helpless.

- Feel to blame.

- Feel frightened.

So its good to try and seek support for carers as well. Contact and probably other Mental Health charities provide that as well.

4. How to help and when?– The sooner the better!

How to realise Mental Health is diminishing

The behaviour of the person who is becoming unwell will change. There are signs that may be noticed by friends or relatives. They are:-

- Missing work.

- Not sleeping.

- Not eating.

- Isolating self.

The support provided by friends and family is crucial. However this can lead to stress and make things worse. Having friends and family in touch with services (NHS, Social Services) may mitigate that.

How to handle things when something is wrong with you

See your GP. Take time off work. Talk to a friend. Use self help books, drop-in centres and other resources (e.g. Contact Morpeth MHG, Mind, Samaritans). G.P.s, health centres and the Citizen's Advice Bureau (C.A.B.) can also help. Some people fall through the network – if so then try the C.A.B. who can help.

How I handled things when something was seriously wrong with me

When I was ill, I told the NHS staff everything. I trusted them completely. In NHS terms I 1) am compliant and 2) I have insight. Personally I thought I was doing an OutputDebugString (a facility in Windows for a programme to report debugging information) and the NHS staff were debugging my brain.

Provide employment – you might just benefit

Neuroatypicals are people with extraordinary thinking patterns - some companies are beginning to appreciate their strengths and are looking to employ them because of these strengths. For example New Scientist has reported that the German I.T. Company SAP are actively recruiting people with Autism because of their above average ability to spot patterns and errors.

Coping Strategies

Sometime in hospital I was introduced to "Coping Strategies". Further investigation led to the idea of keeping a laminated card of Coping Strategies. Here are the strategies currently being employed by me:-

- Ground self in present.

- Think of consequences of actions.

- Try reading a newspaper, magazine or book.

- Watch TV, listen to radio or music.

- If on a bus, look out of a window, move seats.

- Phone (services) staff.

- Breathing exercises to calm self down.

- Remember all achievements, positive things that have happened.

- Use PRN (Latin – Pro Rate Na – for "as and when required".

Also on the card were other details-

- Name

- Declaration that I have a mental health problem.

- The names of teams that look after me and their contact details (the Outreach Team, Contact where I do volunteer work and my Consultant Psychiatrist.

- Notice that I have emergency medication with me.

Encourage good housekeeping – in particular money management. Some people have their financial affairs looked after by Social Services and the Assertive Outreach Team visits them and gives them their pocket money.

Good computer housekeeping would be using free software and getting friends from the community to keep their computers shipshape. See Contact's Free Software webpage.

5. Impact on life – everyday norms of feeling low and major mental health issues and impact

There is still stigma regarding mental health in the community, typically fuelled by tabloid newspaper scaremongering or ignorance. Fortunately these days, acting against unwell people is a "hate crime".

Effects of Illness:-

- Relationships might be stressed.

- Mild depression might be experienced.

- Work might be affected – there may be loss of employment potentially leading to long term unemployment.

- Physical health may be impaired. Illness can lead to premature death. I've lost friends that way.

Effects of medication side-effects (Clozaril, Sertraline)

- Excessive sleeping (typically 10 hours of sleep required for Clozaril patients).

- Cognitive Impairment.

- Clozaril – may kill off white blood cells (dangerous) so regular blood tests are required.

Burn-Out / Cognitive Impairment caused by in-patient experiences

Whilst you are all familiar with the causes of burn-out, I thought I'd share some condensed experiences that led to *Cognitive Impairment* whilst a medium-term patient in a psychiatric hospital ward.

Psychotic illnesses, the medication used to fight those illnesses and the low stimulus environments in Hospitals and sheltered accommodation can lead to Cognitive Impairment. Cognitive impairment is where the brain isn't quite working correctly, leading to some difficulty thinking and remembering things. It is important to remember this is impairment and not disability – with effort, you can achieve the same results or better than people without Cognitive Impairment . Some articles I have read have suggested that Neuron Loss may be experienced – quite possibly memory loss? – which could account for why my Perl and Python knowledge have walked out of my head. Life on the wards or in sheltered accommodation lacked intellectual stimuli:-

- Minimal stimulus – spending all your time on the ward chatting about music and drinking tea.

- Lack of intellectual stimulus – no newspapers, nothing decent to read (at one point I re-read *Lateral Thinking* by Edward de Bono).

- Only access to the Internet and e-mail was in the Occupational Therapy Department under one-to-one supervision. I kept in touch with friends via Hotmail. I'd like to give Kevlin Henney a big thank you for being supportive at that time.

Burn-Out / Cognitive Impairment caused by an I.T. Career

- Over-work

- Stress

- Inadequate time off

- Relationships / Personality clashes

- Lack of physical exercise

- Poor diet.

6. Ways to care for your brain

- *The varying degrees of mental ill-health*. It varies from Anxiety and OCD (with OCD you rarely need smart pointers. All the way up to Bi-Polar disorder (Richard, a friend of mine, has bi-polar and because of the spending sprees he sometimes goes on, I call it "Buy Everything Disorder".

- *How a sensible lifestyle can either mitigate/prevent mental ill-health or maintain wellness*. This will sound like the usual refrain from Health Workers. Good lifestyle choices are important. In particular avoid social isolation/exclusion (this is why Contact's Coffee Den and Eatery are so important). These are all things I learnt whilst living on £3 a day in sheltered accommodation.

  - **Keeping physically fit on a limited budget**

  - Get regular exercise – Go for walks. With a bottle of tap water.

  - Have a balanced diet. Have a varied diet and try to have some kind of fruit or vegetables every day.

  - Take in fresh air.

  - Avoid smoking.

  - Avoid drugs.

- Drink in moderation (if at all).

- Avoid working too hard or excessive hours.

- Budgeting. Have tinned food because it takes a long time to go off. Have tinned fruit (in juice), tinned soups. Mix the averagely priced stuff with the usual stuff. Shop at a variety of shops.

- **<u>Keeping your brain fit</u>**

- Get enough sleep – avoid burning the candle at both ends.

- Be a Jack of All Trades (and maybe a master of one). Varied activity keeps interest alive and the brain happy.

- If you can't handle complete books, read newspapers – even one page is a start.

- Use your local library. They have a range of magazines that are like New Scientist which is very interesting but over the course of a month are very expensive. Read newspapers in the library to save money. Use the money saved to buy science or other books. Use library computers to access the Internet.

- Amazon UK is a very cheap way to buy books and its range is particularly helpful if you live in a rural area (e.g. Northumberland). Other good sources of books are charity bookshops. You can help charities by buying and donating books.

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- Read actively. Don't just passively read it. Think about it. Make notes. Use highlighter pens (e.g. yellow for important things, orange for important warnings).

- **<u>Other degrees of fitness</u>**

- Recognise life's stressors – debt, redundancy, bereavement, relationship breakdowns, physical illness.

- Find time to relax.

- Maintain healthy relationships.

- Get help if you notice the warning signs in yourself or someone you know.

- How to get the most from your brain. Keep your brain active whilst treating it well. See the previous information about good lifestyle choices. Take breaks. Eat and sleep well. Vary your activities.

- How to improve your brain as well. In July 2010's Cvu magazine I wrote a short article about Competency, along with a scale to measure it. This is the scale I came up with:-

- **0   No knowledge**

- **1-3   Novice**

- 1 Done a "Hello World" program from a magazine/web site article.
- 2 Novice/Tourist – relies on "phrase books" (e.g. O'Reilly's books).
- 3 Novice – less reliant on books.

- **4-6 Practised**
- 4 Gaining confidence – books / man pages used for reference.
- 5 Average – knows the ins and outs of the language/topic.
- 6 Fluent – above average, becoming an expert.

- **7-9 Expert.**
- 7 Expert.
- 8 Lead Programmer.
- 9 Mentor.

- **10 Guru.** (e.g Bjarne Stroustrup for C++).

7. Internet resources

- My scribblings website:- sites.google.com/site/ianbruntlett/ which leads on to a mental health blog and a page about free software. This talk will be made available. Ask on accu-general to remind me :)
- Contact's Free Software page:- contactmorpeth.wikispaces.com/SoftwareToolkit
- Mind – www.mind.org.uk
- Samaritans - www.samaritans.org

8. Further reading

- "How to read a book" by by Mortimer J. Adler & Charles Van Doren.
- "Lateral Thinking" by Edward de Bono. Sometimes reading this book and others about thinking might stimulate your mind.
- "Neurocomic" by Dr Farinella and Dr Ros for a light-hearted look at Neuroscience.

9. Acknowledgements

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