

LEFT BRAIN RIGHT BRAIN MENTAL HEALTH IS A BALANCING ACT

You have probably heard that people are either right brained or left brained. You also may have heard that if a person is right brain dominant they tend to be more creative while left brain thinkers are said to be more logical with stronger math and science skills. There are many self-help sources that tempt you with promises to unleash your right brain creativity or left brain deductive logic. You might be surprised to learn these long held ideas are mostly myths. Actually having all "sides" of one's brain balanced is an integral key to being mentally healthy.

What Is Left Brain-Right Brain Theory?

According to the theory of left-brain or right-brain dominance, each side of the brain controls different types of thinking. People are said to prefer one type of thinking over the other.

A person who is "left-brained" is said to be more logical, analytical, and objective. A person who is "right-brained" is said to be more intuitive, thoughtful, and creative.

In psychology, the theory is based on lateralization of brain function. The brain contains two hemispheres and each performs a number of roles. The two sides of the brain communicate with one another via corpus callosum.

The left hemisphere controls the muscles on the right side of the body while the right

hemisphere controls those on the left. This is why damage to the left side of the brain, for example, might have an effect on the right side of the body. It led to the simplified idea that the two sides are in total control of different aspects of thinking and emotions.

Later research has shown that the brain is not nearly as dichotomous as once thought. Extensive studies have shown abilities in subjects such as math are strongest when both halves of the brain work together. Neuroscientists now know that the two sides of the brain collaborate to perform a broad variety of tasks.

Pop psychology's notion of a left brain and a right brain doesn't accurately explain their working relationship. Using language as an example: The left hemisphere specializes in detecting sounds that form words and working out the syntax of phrases, but does not have a monopoly on language processing. The right hemisphere is more sensitive to emotional features of language, tuning in to rhythms of speech that carry intonation and stress. The left brain handles mathematical equations, but right brain helps out with comparisons and rough estimates.

The implication of the left brain/right brain myth is that some people are better than others, or more suited than others to certain tasks as a consequence of brain structure; this is not true. An often believed genera-

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lisation is that girls are more right brained and boys more left brained. This has led to girls and boys being programmed in school that to a degree life is there to follow certain paths. There are many studies that show girls and boys being equal in the math/sciences until a certain age. At that point boys surge ahead. However, there is no neurological basis for boys to be better than girls at math/science.

Recent studies are exploring how problems like bi-polar disorder, depression, and anxiety may relate to problems in the interaction between the hemispheres.

To be mentally and emotionally healthy we need to stimulate all parts of our brain and take advantage of how our mind collaborates. If we do not lock ourselves into thinking I cannot be creative or I will never understand math a world of possibilities opens to us. If we raise our children to understand they innately have a mind that is capable of both logic and intuition they will feel more confident and happier to take chances and explore.

The therapists and counsellors at Affiliated Clinical Services are experts in helping people look at these and other obstacles that interfere with emotional health.