



How to grow a mind?

The word 'mind' is one that most folks use quite regularly and comfortably. We psychotherapists use it more often than most. However, to the best of my knowledge, nobody has actually seen a mind. So, what is a mind, and why should we grow one?

Those of you who follow us know that at Brighton and Hove Psychotherapy we believe in mind-body integration and espouse a range of approaches in order to facilitate this. Furthermore, our approach is also in keeping with the latest neuroscience findings on why therapy works. So, back to the mind. While there are differing definitions, we believe that a mind is that part of a person that enables them to make sense of their world (inner and outer) and can navigate and mediate between feelings and intellect. If the brain is in the head (no disputing this fact) and emotions originate in the body as sensations, then the mind is what enables us to connect the two up (counter-intuitively, neuroscientists are now suggesting that rather than residing in the brain, the mind is in the body – just like the unconscious).

In psychotherapy, the mind is very different to intellect. We can all probably bring to mind folks who have academically brilliant intellects, but struggle to apply a rational, wise mind to how they relate to themselves and the world around them. It could be argued that some of these people even hold quite powerful positions in government and business, so sometimes having a limited mind does not hinder performance, at least in certain parts of our lives.

We grow our minds from the moment we are born, perhaps even in utero. A mind is grown from the mind of our parents (or caregivers) and thus, the quality of our mind is generally directly correlated to that of our parents. They are the ones who use their auxiliary mind to build ours, hour after hour, day after day, and throughout our young lives.

They begin by helping us make sense of the turmoil of the sensations we feel in our bodies as tiny infants and give shape and form to our emotions through naming them and normalising them. With time, they help us understand that we are not alone in the world, and so, while our own emotional experience really matters, so does that of those around us. Finally, they guide us in developing wisdom in using our minds to navigate a complex arbitrary world. That's if it all goes to plan, anyway, and often it doesn't.

If our parents' minds are limited because their parents didn't enable them to grow their minds, they won't have so much input to give us. This is one example of inter-generational trauma. Or, if our mother was depressed after we were born, she won't have the capacity to attune – to be fully present – to us. In fact, any form of abuse or neglect will have a detrimental impact on our minds.

To emphasise the difference between the intellect and the mind, consider the impact of boarding school, particularly where children are young. This is traditionally an environment where the development of the mind is forsaken in lieu of intellectual prowess.

Why does all this matter? Well, because psychotherapy is about helping clients grow and develop their minds where, for whatever reason, this did not fully happen when they were young. It is precisely why therapy cannot be rushed and needs to be consistent and regular. One cannot fast-track the growing of a mind.



Let's move on to another word we use a lot and consider how this all fits together – trauma. Again, this is a word with many definitions, and it is very much the zeitgeist at present. Essentially, trauma in an emotional sense is shock that has not been processed. There are broadly two types of psychological trauma: single-incident trauma, known as PTSD, or Post-Traumatic Shock Syndrome, and complex trauma, also known as Childhood Developmental Trauma. They are fundamentally different and require different approaches. We can treat PTSD with a range of approaches including counselling, brief psychotherapy, Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT), EMDR and energy psychotherapy, to name a few. All of these can be very effective. None of them grow a mind.

Childhood developmental trauma, or, as I prefer to think about it in most cases, a lack of parental attunement, requires a slow consistent methodical relational approach to enable the development of the client's mind. This is what depth psychotherapy offers and the research – back to neuroscience – evidences that the relational approach does this best.