

What is Brainspotting?

What is Brainspotting by David Grand <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm3Plvaf3UE>

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Brainspotting is a brain based psychotherapy approach that uses the field of vision to find where a person is holding, not just the trauma but any negative experience, in their brain. We say with brainspotting that where you look affects how you feel, because literally when we look in different places we feel differently. If a person is thinking about a problem and they look to their right or look to the left or up or down, literally one spot they're going to feel more activation and another is going to feel less.

Where they feel more activation if they look at this at the exact pinpoint area where they feel the most, and observe what goes on inside when they're processing. The brain first will find where it's held in the system and then will start to resolve it or unwind it until it really gets to a point of resolution.

What is a Brainspot?

A brainspot is a point in your field of vision that correlates to where you hold whatever problem you have that brings you for therapy. It correlates where you're holding it in your brain. So literally when you're looking "out" at that spot you're also looking "in" at that spot in your brain.

How did you discover Brainspotting?

I was working with an ice skater and I was using a technique that used slow eye movements and she was blocked on one particular jump, the triple loop. She had mastered everything else but this was the last piece that we weren't able to work through. As I slowly did the eye movements as I got over here, her eyes started to wobble profoundly and then just froze. When that happened, literally I felt like somebody grabbed my hand and I just held it in place. For the next 10 minutes, a torrent of material came out from her. This was trauma that we hadn't gotten to in a year of intensive work of other negative experiences. But even more interesting was that things that we had fully worked through came up again and processed through to a deeper level.

I had a sense when this happened that I'd stumbled onto something profound. So when I started to try it out with other clients using the slow eye movements just looking for those eye freezes and eye wobbles. So anytime I saw it, I held my fingers in place and had them look there, and a similar thing happened where they went into a deeper processing. That just seemed to go on and carry things through to a point that hadn't happened before.

I started to also show some of my other friends who were therapists, they started to try it with their clients. And over the course of the next two to four weeks, from what I was observing and what they were telling me, I could see that something was happening that hadn't happened before.

Why do you use Brainspotting?

Because brainspotting has to do with the brain and the body (the nervous system). Any psychological issue, and really certain physical issues, brainspotting can be used with! Trauma you know and traumatic experiences would be the most clear and obvious one. But issues of anxiety, depression, relational problems,

What is Brainspotting?

functioning problems, are all responsive to brainspotting. We also use brainspotting with certain physical conditions, such as pain and other things like that.

Is there anyone you would not use Brainspotting with?

We use brainspotting with everybody for one simple reason: Brainspotting has many different techniques that can be used differently and shaped for each person. So because brainspotting is not just one approach but a variety of approaches. And also brainspotting can be integrated with other other therapy approaches. It can be modified to work with anybody well.

How is Brainspotting different from EMDR?

When I mentioned eye movement I was actually talking about what I was doing when I discovered brainspotting. But when I discovered brainspotting what revealed itself was eye position and eye fixation. So although I was doing these slow eye movements when I saw that that eye wobbles and that eye freezes, I held it right in place.

Brainspotting is based on eye fixation and it's based on focus. EMDR is based on eye movement. Eye fixation is very precise. It's like it's almost like a laser. Eye movement is kind of like a power tool but it's not precise at all, because you really don't know how far to go, how fast to go, how long to go.

Brainspotting we know exactly how to go because the client is staring at that spot and it goes from there. Wherever it goes and we just follow them wherever they go. There are some other differences as well. Which is that the EMDR model has a lot of protocols and procedures as far as will you do this in this circumstance and that in that circumstance. For brainspotting, also we have a structure, yet it is a much more open model. Because what we're doing with brainspotting, with all the different brainspotting tools, is that we're tracking the client and we're choosing which type of brainspotting to use with them, at which time, and which combination. So it's a much more open, flexible model.

Is Brainspotting like hypnosis?

There are parallels. The brain states that people go into while they're receiving brainspotting is similar to brain states that people go into under hypnosis. The difference is that in hypnosis the hypnotherapist has to talk to the person and talk them into the trance state or into the hypnotic state. With brainspotting when a person goes into a similar state, we don't talk them into it. Their brain actually creates the hypnotic state inside of themselves. So it's the perfect trance state for that moment and for that circumstance. So there is a similarity but the profound difference is that we don't guide a person from the outside. We frame a situation for the person so they go there on their own.

Our survival instincts come from the deepest parts of our brain and drive us to be able to not only survive but be able to cope with things in our environment. In this context the true answers come from deep in the brain. And when you hold things for a person in the way that they get access to it, things work the way they can work best.

How did you come up with Brainspotting?

What is Brainspotting?

Well, I tend to be an innovator. Whenever I'm working with people, sort of in a creative way, different things come to me, like what if I try this or what if I try that. So I'm trying out new techniques all the time. So for me, most of these techniques become interesting or they help a certain person at a certain time. But with brainspotting I had a sense that this was a much larger breakthrough. That this was something that could help a lot of people, a lot of the time. So what I did is I started to try it out with different clients, those whom I had been doing EMDR or other approaches, to see if they responded in a different way, perhaps in a deeper and more powerful way. And by doing this, and also with the other people I trained, many of them were EMDR therapists. So what they saw was that something about this really found where the person was holding it, and went deeper and deeper and deeper into it.

Some clients said literally this feels different. Some said I can feel it all the way in the back of my head. Some said the processing is different, okay. The most important feedback we get is from our clients. When we listen carefully to what they have to say or tell us. We find out what is and what isn't. We find out what's similar and what's different, sometimes what's significantly different.

How long does it take to become effective?

Well, first of all, different people have different histories, different conditions. If a person has a single event trauma, it actually can be processed through pretty quickly in a few sessions. If somebody has a lifetime of trauma going back to child abuse and childhood I mean, that can take many months, even many years. But in that time period, the work is much more focused and efficient. And it's going right into the brain, into the body with where the person is holding it.

What makes Brainspotting faster than other therapeutic approaches?

The brain has one quadrillion connections, that's a billion multiplied by a million. That's almost infinite as far as we know. The reason the brain has these massive amounts of connections is because it needs to be scanning the entire body and the brain itself down to a cellular level, perhaps down to a molecular level. This massive, incredibly subtle scanning mechanism, when you harness it, when you turn it on, itself can find what's wrong and can resolve it. Which is really what it's there for.

When somebody comes for therapy that they have a problem that they couldn't work through, it's because somehow their brain couldn't find it or couldn't resolve it as it does most other things. So again, with brainspotting when we find that spot, it helps their brain to do what it's meant to do, which is to find it, figure it out and release it.

Are there any side effects from Brainspotting?

Brainspotting can be very powerful for certain people. Sometimes after a session, a person will feel very mentally or even physically fatigued. Sometimes the processing will continue on for the next few hours even for a day or so. You might call those side effects. But in actuality, because doing brainspotting can be like running a mental marathon. That fatigue is a natural outgrowth of the process. Also the processing that continues after sessions means that the person's brain and body is still working on it and working it through on its own, you know. So that's primarily a positive thing instead of a negative thing.

What is Brainspotting?

How is Brainspotting different from conventional sports psychology?

It's not just that brainspotting is different, is that we approach it differently. We look at athletes who have performance problems, especially the most powerful ones which are really called loss of function or the yips. We look at them as having a trauma background. Most sports psychologists don't take a history and certainly don't take a trauma history. What we look for specifically are what we call the sports traumas.

The sports traumas are comprised of sports injuries, and sports failures and humiliations. Most athletes started when they were very young, so the issues of sports injuries and sports failures start young and get repeated over and over again. These are traumatic to the athlete, and the sports injuries are physically and emotionally traumatic to the athlete and they collect over time. So before we even get to the application of brainspotting the conceptualization, the way we look at and understand what gets in the way of an athlete's performance, is very very different. But when you understand that the athletes are carrying these traumas in their brains in their bodies, we then apply brainspotting to find it and to help to resolve the block, to lower the anxiety, and the natural capacity to perform, and to perform freely without overthinking and without inhibition, just comes back to the athlete on their own.

Can you use Brainspotting with a team?

Brainspotting is meant to be used in all kinds of different ways. Brainspotting is an open creative tool so it can be applied to a group of people as well as an individual. In sports and working with a team, it's best to work with the individuals first and then to work with the team together. Because when you work with the individuals first, you're able to clear through their individual issues and traumas and blocks. Then when you get the team together, you now have a more open kind of situation, and you can work with the collective issues that the team has. But we don't just go for clearing out the traumas in the blocks, we look for what we call expansion which then becomes the opportunity to go over and above where you were even before you had the block or the performance anxiety.

How does Brainspotting work with the performance arts?

I'll take that question in terms of both acting/singing/dancing but also public speaking, which is similar but different. Performance anxiety, stage fright is much more commonplace for stage performers or people in front of the camera also, but particularly stage performance than anybody realizes. So Laurence Olivier, probably known as the greatest actor of all time, used to say to the stagehands when he came offstage "fooled them again"! He had tremendous performance anxiety stage fright and there are actors and actresses that you'll see in film and on stage that you think are totally comfortable and confident. They really are carrying this intense fear and negative thoughts about their own performance. Again this is like the athlete who loses the ability to throw or loses confidence at the play. It's a very similar thing because it's a performance that has to be done in front of other people and there are expectations of how a person is going to do. That takes whatever it is that you're struggling with and just amplifies it dramatically.

So what we do is we work both with the causative factors and we take a history and we really look when did the stage fright begin, when did the performance anxiety begin. and what negative experiences happened from there. In addition to that, we actually work with how the person feels right before they go onstage both as they imagine it and sometimes literally offstage.

What is Brainspotting?

How does Brainspotting work with attachment and dissociation?

In coming into life, after breathing and digesting, the human being, the newborn needs to attach to her or his mother or caretaker which is a dance between the two people. Literally what they need is the mother who is present, who's tuned in, who knows really what that newborn and then that baby needs. As weeks and months go by and is able to just help them to form this basic human attachment. It starts as a physical attachment but it's also a personal emotional attachment.

Unfortunately, many people in the early stages of life do not get this consistent kind of attachment experience with their mothers. It's not because they're (the mothers) bad or they're doing anything wrong, it's just that there are certain limitations that they have. Difficulties they have with being attuned and present, in a sort of way, for their baby. Who knows that they may have depression, they may have three other children, they may have economic crises, you know family crises. But what happens is if you don't have this attachment, you're not able to take it in and then gradually develop in such a way that you feel like that you can be there for yourself, and take care of yourself which happens year by year and into adulthood.

As far as dissociation goes that really goes to more the profound traumas that people have early and often in life. The worst ones are child abuse and sexual abuse, those are the worst versions of this. Unfortunately much more of that goes on than we even want to know.

People who have been exposed to this early and often in their lives, what happens is that the human brain in order to survive, a part of the brain will sacrifice itself and will encapsulate that traumatic experience and hold it off from the rest of the brain, and literally it can be more than one area that encapsulates it. What happens is those traumatic experiences are held in those areas of the brain without the access to the rest of the person's brain and to themselves.

Many people grow up and they forget about the fact, consciously, of the horrible things that happen to them although it's affecting them without them knowing it. We call this dissociation, which means that a person dissociates from part of themselves and part of their experiences. It's not done with any conscious awareness. It's not done by intention. It's done in order to survive and you'll see people who have horrible histories who are able to go out there and function in ways that would seem impossible.

It's because of the adaptive nature of dissociation, to preserve for a person the rest of their experience, and the rest of the sense of themselves, and really the world. But the problem is when somebody is dissociated like that, you can't get to those parts of them in order to help them to heal, and those dissociative barriers are meant to protect the person and the rest of their brain from being flooded or overwhelmed by that, which is terrifying or painful.

In this context, if you have a therapeutic approach that goes there and breaks through that barrier, but we do it in such a way that they don't get overwhelmed. We do it in such a way that they can begin to heal so that ultimately they can face it.

What is Brainspotting?

How does Brainspotting work with pain and medical problems?

When it comes to pain and medical problems, the most important thing is that a person be fully medically checked out and medically treated. So brainspotting doesn't replace anything; it's not meant to replace. It's meant to augment whatever the pain is and the conditions that are causing the pain.

The way we use brainspotting with pain is the fact that we don't separate out psychology and physiology. We don't separate out emotional experiences and physical experiences. We know that physical pain creates emotional pain. We know that emotional pain creates physical pain, and it's all in the integrated circuit that is known as the nervous system. So because of that we're already ahead of the game.

Now with a pain condition, again, we can approach it in a simpler way or a more complex way. We can literally find a brainspot that goes along with the pain which can help to process it down. You have to be careful because sometimes it actually can exacerbate the pain. When that's the case, in the face of the pain, you try to find where the person feels the calmest and most grounded, and that's their body resource.

But we also work with where the pain came from. If it came from a sports injury or a car accident or surgery then we'll go back to the original source of it which really is a trauma in itself. Emotional and physical trauma together that gets locked in the nervous system. We'll find the brainspot that goes along with the original trauma, and the original experiences that led to the pain or where the pain started. Oftentimes, the brain will then follow its own pathways and explore, go back and recover its tracks, and then come back and process it through. Again just doing that oftentimes reduces the pain.

In talking about people who have histories of early trauma and people who have you know attachment issues and dissociation issues, a lot of the times the pain comes from that traumas, the horrible experiences that are encapsulated in those areas of the brain, that get expressed through body pain or body tension that sometimes can seem intractable or incurable. So again there you're working together with those profound traumatic experiences and dissociative processes at the same time as working with the body pain.

Basically we don't approach anything just one way. We tailor it for the individual and we make modifications as we go along. Because there's so much of a connection between the emotional and the physical, we look to enter the system and see where it goes. A lot of times because the brain is wired for healing, once you enter the pathway in, it covers both the psychological pain and the physical pain.

Why would a therapist want to learn about Brainspotting?

My question is why would you not want to become a brainspotting therapist? That may seem like being not so serious, but (I am) actually being very serious! It is the responsibility of every therapist to provide the best service as they can for each client all the time.

The human system, like I said, is so vast that there's not just one approach that covers all the bases. Because brainspotting is cutting edge and brain based, and also well developed within the psychotherapy relationship, it allows a therapist to do whatever they were doing before, but do it better and do it with more focus.

What is Brainspotting?

You don't have to go back to medical school to study neuroanatomy, because we're working with the most powerful profound self-healing mechanism which is the brain itself. A therapist who learns brainspotting will be able to help the person's brain and nervous system to find where the problem is, to focus on it, and hold it in place, until it resolves itself.

As far as I know there's no other technical approach that does this in this way or does this as effectively as brainspotting does.
