

mBIT as an Experiential Coaching and Therapeutic Approach in Stress Management and Resilience Building – a series of case studies

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Abstract

Introduction: *This paper discusses using an mBraining approach in the management of stress, including building longer term resilience in order to avoid ongoing problems and recurrence of prior symptoms. By the provision of several case studies, we propose the effectiveness of this approach in practice and outline the opportunity to utilize mBIT alongside other existing and established therapeutic approaches.*

Objectives: *This paper aims to discuss the perceived value of the mBIT (multiple Brain Integration Techniques) approach as a complementary technique in the applications of psychotherapy, counseling, coaching and overall personal optimization and development, with specific focus on reducing unwanted stress and building resilience over time.*

Methods: *mBIT approach methodology and brief literature review.*

Results: *The discussed case studies suggest a demonstrable value in introducing mBIT into the optimal management of stress and building of personal resilience.*

Conclusions: *We advocate that mBIT can be successfully used as a complementary approach to reduce the day to day experience of stress and to change the way clients process stressors in the longer term.*

Keywords: *neuroscience, coaching, multiple brain integration, embodied cognition, stress, resilience*

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I. Introduction

Why are Stress and Resilience such major issues?

Presently, research, academic literature, popular magazines and the business press are generally full of information about stress. In May 2018, Forbes Magazine published an article entitled “How Stress is the Business World’s Silent Killer”, claiming that this is a life and death issue at the workplace (Denning, 2018). In a recently published book, Pfeffer (2018) also talks of how our workplaces are harmful to our health because of stress and indicates long working hours (which impact on commitments outside of work and have become the new normal) as a key component of that stress. In fact, Pfeffer claims that long working hours have become a status symbol of sorts amongst colleagues. Other cited factors included perceived low control over roles and the environment one works in, along with increasing demands to work faster, longer and more productively. It is not difficult to see why stress has become an issue, and is quoted to be increasing, according to the United States Stress in America poll (Bethune & Lewan, 2017), showing that the US experiences its highest level of stress.

Chronic stress is particularly damaging for health and the American Psychological Association (n.d.), gave a brief overview of the potential issues related to chronic stress that goes unmanaged. Anderson (1998) advises that “*an extreme amount of stress can have health consequences and may adversely affect the immune, cardiovascular, neuroendocrine and central nervous systems*”.

While there are multiple definitions of stress, it is fundamentally considered as any uncomfortable “*emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological and behavioral changes*” (Baum, 1990).

Stress, as a manifestation in the adult population, is unfortunately becoming a worldwide phenomenon, as we will further see in this section of the article. Based on the 2017 APA related stress survey (Bethune et al., 2017), the New York Post discussed the political climate as part of this increase, and highlights that stress is particularly high amongst younger generations (Shea, 2017). Another stress survey conducted in Romania (Dynamic Human Resources & Learning Network, 2017) reported that 80% of the population manifests stress-related symptoms at a physical, emotional and social level and 11% of the population suffers from acute emotional stress-related symptoms. Rising figures are also cited in New Zealand

(Umbers, 2018), with workload and working hours cited as the biggest stressors. Another survey made by The Physiological Society (2017) in Britain cited that “*In the 21st century, stress is all-pervasive*” and The Global Organization for Stress (2018) reported that “*Stress levels in the workplace are rising with 6 in 10 workers in major global economies experiencing increased workplace stress, with China (86%) having the highest rise in workplace stress*”.

Figures of perceived stress vary, to some extent, by country and discipline, but what is clear is that scores are exceptionally high on average. The APA, cited on the Global Organization for Stress (2018), shared that “*75% of adults reported experiencing moderate to high levels of stress in the past month and nearly half reported that their stress has increased in the past year*”. In addition, on the same site, the American Institute of Stress has claimed that “*80% of workers feel stress on the job and nearly half of them say they need help in learning how to manage stress; 42% say their co-workers need such help*” and that “*91% of adult Australians feel stress in at least one important area of their lives. Almost 50% feel very stressed about one part of their life – Lifeline Australia*”.

While there is no definitive figure for the overall stress experienced by people all around the world, Brunet (n.d.) sums up the situation in a quite interesting way: “*In today’s society, we thrive on performance, competition and perfection, which leads to an insidious increase in stress. Stress causes damage that is often underestimated, and it is a social phenomenon that should be closely examined and evaluated*”.

It is within the above outlined background that we bring these case studies, to offer some additional tools to manage the volume and severity of stress in the current, fast changing world that we find ourselves in.

Exploring the latest science of Heart and Gut Intelligence and the field of embodied cognition in relation to stress

A previous paper explored the role and the relationship between the cerebral, enteric and cardiac neural systems and shared the potential of mBIT as an optimization tool in a range of case studies (Soosalu, Henwood & Manea, 2018).

In brief, with each day we learn new information about the body, with knowledge of multiple brains being longstanding in some disciplines. Armour (1991) showed that the heart can function independently and some of the functions he outlines have a particular

relevance to the treatment of stress, namely: the role of memory, the ability to learn and adapt responses and the heart's ability to 'feel'. In addition, neurological signals from the heart transfer this information to the head-brain, which influences our personal perception of the 'stressor' and our ultimate response to it through system-wide autonomic regulation (Armour, 2004; Thayer, 2007). It is clear why coaching the heart intelligence is an important part of stress management.

The neurology of the gut has also been shown to work independently (Gershon, 1999; Goldstein, Hofstra & Burns, 2013; Holzer, 2017; Holzer, Schicho, Holzer-Petsche & Lippe, 2001), but numerous studies now show a link between gut health and mental health (Clapp, Aurora, Herrera, Bhatia, Wilen & Wakefield, 2017; Daulatzai, 2015; Carabotti, Scirocco, Maselli & Carola, 2015; Zhou & Foster, 2015; Ait-Belgnaoui, Durand et al., 2012). Indeed, Anthony Komaroff claims that *"a person's stomach or intestinal distress can be the cause or the product of anxiety, stress, or depression. That's because the brain and the gastrointestinal (GI) system are intimately connected"* (Komaroff, n.d.). Coaching stress, without intervening at this level of gut intelligence, could be said to be incomplete.

In the mBraining certification training for the Master Coach level, the role of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) as an intelligence is also introduced. The ANS is closely related to the gut from a neurological perspective, and it is like the ultimate communication between the brains. However, in passing the communication between gut, heart and head, the ANS also interacts with and alters the signal, taking on board directly perceived messages through neuroception. *"Neuroception describes the way our autonomic nervous system scans for cues of safety, danger and life-threat without involving the thinking parts of our brain"* (Dana, 2015).

As such, there is a degree of intelligence within the ANS worthy of consideration within the treatment of stress. The role of the ANS is extensive and includes regulation, activation, coordination and communication (Levenson, 2014), as well as *"generation, expression, experience, or recognition of emotion"*, when *"the role of the ANS is critical"* (Levenson, 2014, p. 100). The ANS will be extensively involved in diverting energy to deal with a stressor on the short term, and then working to bring the body back to homeostasis over time. Again, coaching without including this vital component would rightly open questions as to whether the intervention was comprehensive enough to cover all aspects of stress.

Additionally, although beyond the scope of this paper, the origins and development of the ANS are other important components to consider in stress management in relation to Porges' Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2009). If the development of the ventral vagal system is adversely impacted in the early years, it is possible that a person operates from a hyper sympathetic dominant stance as their normal mode of operation. This being true, it will undoubtedly impact on their stress response and their ability to manage stress. Teaching clients about the polyvagal theory, the different arms of the Autonomic Nervous System (including Dorsal Vagal and Ventral Vagal arms of the Parasympathetic branches of the ANS) and how to adjust the function of the ANS through repeated new learning and behavior, offers a radical new comprehensive approach to stress management.

The present paper explores the potential inclusion of the heart and gut complex adaptive neural networks and the inclusion of the ANS in the treatment of stress.

II. Method

mBraining – a neuroscience-based model for coaching the multiple brains

Soosalu and Oka (2012a) offer a comprehensive model to communicate with, and align the complex adaptive neural networks of heart and gut. Originally framed as a coaching model, mBraining is now being used as a complementary therapy with impressive results in the field of stress reduction and resilience building.

The mBraining model aims to facilitate clients a reconnection to self, by bringing a deep sense of awareness of the multiple neural networks and the functions they play. The overall aim of mBraining is to facilitate the emergence of clients' inner wisdom and a deep shifting of how they are using their multiple brains in practice.

The heuristic model requires a deep understanding of the underpinning neurology and physiology of the multiple brains and does not offer a simplistic scripted approach. Nor does it claim to offer a 'quick fix'. The model relies on the knowledge and function of neuroplasticity, to remodel behaviors over time through changed action, by changing physiology.

The basic framework is demonstrated in the mBIT Roadmap:

The mBIT Roadmap



The time spent to prepare the client enables the construction of a deep rapport, which in exchange builds a trusting relationship with the mBIT trained coach and facilitates the holding of safe space for deep ontological change work to occur. This is particularly important when coaching clients with stress. If clients do not feel ‘safe’ at all levels, it is unlikely they will make physiological changes; instead may revert to deepen their protective patterns, of which the stress response is undoubtedly a part.

The Present State to Desired Outcome model is a little different from other coaching frameworks, with a focus on “what stops you” and how clients process that blockage with the multiple brains, thus preventing them from achieving their desired outcome immediately. In mBIT, the process of blocking becomes the focus of the coaching intervention, in contrast to the content of the stressor.

Finally, in preparation, an mBIT coach works with a client to level the Autonomic Nervous System, through balanced breathing techniques, prior to any intervention focused on change. In particular, in case of clients experiencing stress, this is especially important. A dominance of either Sympathetic or Parasympathetic modes within the Autonomic Nervous System would prevent both effective communication with the multiple brains and the likelihood of alignment of the brains. The physiological teaching provided in this preparation phase will be continually modelled and reiterated proving to be instrumental in the creation of psychophysiological coherence “characterized by increased order and harmony in both our psychological (mental and emotional) and physiological (bodily)

processes” (Rozman & McCraty, 2013). It is from this place we can access optimal functioning of the body and the deep changing of any existing stress response.

The Autonomic balance, and subsequent move to communicate with the brains, further allows the emergence of other possible desired outcomes, which may have been outside of conscious awareness. The triple preparation phase significantly impacts on the trajectory of mBIT coaching and fosters the possibility of a successful outcome.

The first step on the Roadmap is one of communication and communication begins around the Prime Functions of each brain, detailed below (see also Soosalu, Henwood & Manea, 2018):

Heart-Brain Prime Functions

- Emoting
- Values
- Relational Affect

Gut-Brain Prime Functions

- Core Identity
- Self-Preservation
- Mobilization

Head-Brain Prime Functions

- Cognitive Perception
- Thinking
- Making Meaning

Prime Functions of the Autonomic Intelligence

1. Communication and Control
2. Homeostasis and Energy Mobilisation
3. Orientation and Attention

The mBIT coaching process facilitates deep communication across all Prime Functions, and further works to assess and align the multiple brains.

As discussed by Soosalu & Henwood (2013), mBIT aims to resolve any conflict between the client’s thoughts, feelings and actions, by aligning the three neural networks found inside the head, heart and gut areas. In stress coaching, the ANS is also included in this alignment process, which is done through the Foundational Sequence (Soosalu et al., 2018), which outlines the optimal brain processing sequence or order.

In case of a client experiencing stress, it is likely that there may be evidence of a conflict between the brains, or a brain dominating the processing across all areas (for example excessive thinking at the head-brain, which hyper-stimulates the stress response and can get clients stuck in a head-gut loop). With skillful coaching, the client can gain new insight and communication with each of the three brains, bring them

back to being a unified team, working in the same direction, so that each is rising up to their highest expression (Compassion, Creativity and Courage, Coherence), to ensure the emergence of their own wisdom. The model requires artful and skilled coaching; responding to the client's individual processing in a dynamic, profound manner. There is no one set script to follow, nor a specific process to map, which is why the training is competence-based and fully assessed in person, to ensure coaches are using it effectively and safely in their practice.

Bridging the fields of Experiential Psychotherapy and mBIT

Niemiec (2017) outlines 10 research-based strategies for the therapeutic treatment of stress. Relating these to the multiple brains, it can be proposed that reframing experiences and improving one's planning process are head-based strategies. Also, relaxation is an embodied approach and could be linked to the ANS. Affirming values, being forgiving and showing gratitude could be related to heart-based Prime Functions. Using strength, managing the power imbalances and self-affirmation could be related to the gut-brain in terms of taking action or not. When used, identity and mindfulness can be related across all of the three brains as forms of multi-mindfulness. Concluding, we can see that it makes sense then to use the multiple brains when managing stress, covering all of these aspects in one treatment package.

The focus of the mBIT approach is to develop the full potential of the client. In line with the humanistic movement in psychology, the focus on Highest Expressions in the mBIT Roadmap shows how this is central to the heuristic framework taught to practitioners. Coaches work with clients to enhance adaptability, giving flexibility and choice in how they respond to repeated stimuli.

A deep multi-mindful awareness is essential as a starting point in mBraining, bringing mBIT in line with mindfulness techniques at the preparation level. It is from this baseline that further work is done to change physiology and enable sustainable changes in behaviors, taking the model beyond the scope of a mindfulness practitioner alone.

A particular strength of the mBIT processes is the focus on the emergence of clients' own solutions and wisdom. This 'generative wisdom' is the basis of the transformational change achieved as it comes from within the client, is fully aligned across all of the intelligences and works towards the clients' highest

expressions. It also offers the ultimate reframe for the client to open up a new perspective which is compassionate, creative, courageous and coherent. In the coaching of stress this offers a self made solution which is highly individualized, deeply meaningful and owned by the client, ensuring deep buy in and motivation to undertake the ongoing behaviors required for sustained change. The transformation changes the way the client sees the world, even if the actual physical stressors remain unchanged.

As discussed in a previous paper (Soosalu et al., 2018), the mBIT approach can be considered an experiential-based one, due to the principal similarities between the two, such as: the concern for the development of the client's full potential as a human being, the alignment and awareness of the client's thoughts, feelings and perceptions and the focus in regard to client's manifestation of his personal creative potential. Also, as we can see discussed by Mitrofan (2004) and Cucu-Ciuhan (2014) experiential-based therapeutic techniques are also being effectively used in case-studies with clients who were suffering from stress management related issues.

III. Case Studies – the use of mBIT coaching in stress management

In the following case studies we will demonstrate how the mBIT Coaching techniques and insights have impacted on clients which experienced high levels of stress, thus demonstrating the value of coaching to all three brains and the ANS.

Case Study no. 1: Extreme Stress at Work

Sarah H. is a UK born academic and health care professional who in 2008 moved to another country to take up a senior academic role. Her case was outlined in Soosalu et al. (2018) and is revisited again here in relation to how mBIT coaching specifically enabled her to manage her stress and thrive in life again.

The key issues acting as triggers in Sarah were: bullying at work and workload. Sarah was skilled in a number of coaching techniques and self-help habits, but she had not managed to stop the perceived downhill spiral into a chronic stress response over time. The repeated nature of the triggers was a particular challenge, creating a chronic stress response which she believed became self-perpetuating.

The key components of change for Sarah were:

- a) Time with a coach to stop and reflect on what was happening. The space provided in order to be heard and acknowledged acted as a starting place to begin

finding a new way to cope with the perceived stressful situation.

- b) Learning skills to balance her Autonomic Nervous System gave her enough inner space to assess what was happening and created a physiological pattern interruption. Prior to that, her stress response was driving a negative emotional reaction, while closing off the pre-frontal cortex, making wise decision making almost impossible.
- c) From an autonomically balanced state, Sarah was able to communicate with her heart and gut, accessing information about what was deeply important to her (heart-brain) and in relation to whom she is (gut-brain) and wants to be in the world.
- d) Through gut-based communication, Sarah reconnected with herself, and found the courage to take the steps required to make changes in order to protect herself, including looking at creating new boundaries around work issues and behaviors.
- e) Creating ongoing daily practices was a key element to ensure a sustained change for Sarah. Balanced Breathing and the use of gratitude diaries were the fundamental components of her plan to change, but the daily discipline was essential to create new habits over time.
- f) The combination of the physiological pattern interruption, the ability to balance the autonomic nervous system, the quieting of the head-brain and of the internal dialogue enabled a reconnection with both the heart-brain and the gut-brain, which opened up the possibility of Sarah making new choices.

The changes did not offer an immediate resolution. The bullying behavior at work continued, in fact it quite escalated. But Sarah was able to moderate her response to those external behaviors and create a safe enough work environment to continue in. Sarah did leave her place of employment, but she did it, in her words, 'gracefully' and in a time that suited her. While the practices and skills did not change the work situation, the change to Sarah's wellbeing was considerable.

Case Study no. 2: Stress due to Marriage Breakdown

Ruth is a mature lady who had been married for 46 years when her husband left her. The relationship had become more unsettled over time, with frequent arguments and an almost competitive approach to putting each other down. Despite this, the termination of

the marriage came as a surprise, creating an acute stress response which had severe physiological symptoms.

Ruth experienced major sleep disruption, high blood pressure and a lack of joy in life, leading to a depressed view of the world, an insular lifestyle, reluctance to socialize and uncertainty about the future, which created further stress.

Over a series of mBIT Coaching sessions a variety of tools and techniques were used:

- a) Ruth used mindful awareness of her negativity bias to begin to question her reality. The use of a simple journal to record positive experiences in the day helped Ruth to evidence that the reality was not as bad as her head based negative story would have had her believe.
- b) Ruth used the coaching sessions to learn how to be more interoceptively aware. Ruth learned to deeply reconnect with her heart and become familiar again with positive feelings at a physiological level, while being OK acknowledging the more difficult and negative feelings that she was experiencing.
- c) Using the Foundational Sequence, Ruth was able to move positive feelings (particularly gratitude) around her body, by utilizing visualizations initiated from the interoceptive awareness practices. This acted as a biofeedback amplifier of positive experiences, which over time helped to change her general outlook on life.
- d) Skills in taking the negative voice outside of her helped to emphasize the shift away from a negative bias.
- e) Understanding of how breathing stimulates parasympathetic and sympathetic arms of the ANS enabled Ruth to use longer, deeper outbreaths for relaxation prior to sleep while using a more balanced practice in the day to maintain flow.

Ruth continues to make progress, with current work focusing on being aware of and creating new meaning in her life.

Case Study no. 3: Loss of Connection to Self

Gary is a 56 year old professional man who has been in his current job for 8 years. He describes a change of leadership, which had generated a change of style and approach, further leaving him feeling uncomfortable, to the point that he was at the time looking to change jobs. He was referred for coaching by his GP, who had seen him on several occasions with medical symptoms he believed were related to stress.

While Gary presented with stress management as his main focus, it became clear that there was something else that was sat beneath this causing him

concern.

Gary lived alone and had not had any serious, long term relationships. He described a challenging childhood, with a father who set high expectations and a feeling of being 'a bother' to the family. He talked of 'anxiety running in the family'.

He mentioned not being able to prioritize for himself, or meeting his needs and he would do anything not to feel lonely, reporting that he 'longs for company'. Also, he had, in the past, seen the GP for suicidal thoughts and had a strong internal voice berating him for not being better at everything; moreover, he reported that he was fearful of everything.

Within three sessions, Gary described that he felt he should feel more stressed. Things have got more difficult at work, but he was feeling remarkably calm. This had been achieved through education around balancing the Autonomic Nervous System and making a choice on how he wanted to behave in the workplace. Gary had also made the decision to leave work and in the mean time to 'cruise under the radar'.

What was interesting was that, in one session, a clear lack of trust between the head-brain and the gut-brain emerged during a communication phase of the mBIT Roadmap. A deep lack of self trust at the gut level came up, and a younger Gary (age 6) spoke of closing down the gut identity to hide away. Through mBIT coaching, communication with all of the three brains and with ANS was reestablished and the alignment was achieved, with an emergent outcome of health and self connection.

Also, techniques to stimulate the vagus nerve were taught, to encourage deep parasympathetic activity, in order to further reduce the chronic stress response. A comprehensive self-care plan across all domains of health (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual/social) was created to prompt new different regular behaviors moving forwards.

An emergent purpose became apparent during the session (to inspire success and development of others), which, along with elicitation of current values, has given a way forward in looking for a new role in another company. This fitted well with Gary's new awareness of when he was deeply serious about something – nothing would stop him achieving it. A new alignment of head, heart, gut and ANS has given renewed passion to take action on purpose.

Case Study no. 4: When things get under your skin

Sally is a young mother who had been nursing a sick husband with a potentially life-threatening

condition. She was looking to set up her own company, but her stress had been so debilitating that it has created skin hives, which led to burning and itching sensations on a permanent basis.

In an early session, she experienced a block in her throat, preventing her from voicing what it was she really wanted to do. She felt she could not pursue her vision for the new company as she was needed in the home.

The focus of our early coaching was around self care and switching off each day. Sally was a long term meditator (20 years), but the addition of balanced breathing to that meditation, along with swallowing appreciation into the gut-brain, enabled a deeper level of calm to be experienced.

At the start of the third session Sally reported that she felt 'normal'. Now she could begin to work on the development of her company. Interestingly some of her thinking was 'scary', with big dreams emerging, which she said she did not want to run away from, but she acknowledged it was a big shift away from being a full time mum.

After a period of time, Sally reported at a session she felt 'spineless' as she had not taken as much action as she would like. She felt she required deeper courage, in relation to work, but recognized deep courage in other areas of life. A coaching session focusing on deep gut communication revealed a lack of self-trust in the area of work. Sally did not feel 'safe' at gut level to take action and through the coaching realized she needed to let go of some deep held anger. Following this, her gut indicated it now felt safe.

We should also note that a series of interesting links emerged over time in relation to the skin irritations, through phrases such as: 'feeling safe in my skin', 'itching to get going' and 'not letting things get under my skin'.

While there was no one point of immediate resolution to the skin hives, and the condition flared along the way, over the coaching relationship skin healing occurred.

IV. Discussion

The case studies outlined above in this paper indicate that the mBIT approach has a potential role to play in stress management and coaching of stressed clients, alongside other therapeutic techniques. The embodied nature of stress raises the need for coaching to gain an understanding of stress held at head, heart, gut and ANS levels. Working with the embodied neural intelligences that the fields of neuro-gastro-enterology and neuro-cardiology have labeled as 'brains' in the

science literature, offers an even deeper way to work with stress, that encompasses the multiple areas of impact and which enhances the opportunity for long term sustainable change and the development of resilience behaviors.

What is more, the case studies outline how in each case different foci were evident, highlighting the need for a flexible model, adapted to each individual and the way they process stress in their life. What is clear is how the different cases show the multiple brains in play as well as the need for head, heart, gut and ANS to be considered in stress management.

V. Conclusions

Having outlined the above case-studies, we intend to propose the mBIT approach as a valid intervention tool in stress management and we hope that they will engage the curiosity of experts in the field of experiential psychotherapy to further explore the work of mBraining and to consider using it as a complementary modality when helping clients to manage stress.

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