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01 [Rewiring our brains for healthy love](#)

Posted at 7:40 am by: [Ian Kerner Ph.D. - sex counselor](#)

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[Ian Kerner](#), a sexuality counselor and New York Times best-selling author, blogs about sex on Thursdays on *The Chart*. Read more from him at his website, [GoodInBed](#).



I frequently deal with people stuck in ruts, slumps and negative cycles of behavior, and I'm always interested in learning more about new ways to help them get back on the right track.

Sometimes a fresh idea comes from an unexpected source. For example, not too long ago I gave a lecture at

a singles workshop in New York, after which a woman in her early 30s approached me.

“I need help,” she confessed after a few seconds of small talk. “I’m suffering from OCD.”

I stopped her to tell her that I probably couldn’t help her. I’m a sexuality counselor, not a psychiatrist, and obsessive compulsive disorder is not within my professional expertise.

“No, no. Not that OCD,” she interjected. “I mean that I suffer from obsessive compulsive dating. I’m not in control of my dating life anymore. I just keep dating and dating and it’s all a big blur, and then I feel depressed and rejected if I don’t hear back from a guy I didn’t even like in the first place. I lie awake all night feeling like I’ll always be alone, that I’ll never find ‘the one.’”

While the term “obsessive compulsive dating” brought a smile to my face, the way she defined her problem got me thinking. OCD (the real disorder) is a serious condition marked by [a constant barrage of intrusive thoughts and powerful urges](#) that lead to unhealthy patterns of behavior (such as the need to wash one’s hands 50 times a day).

Those afflicted with OCD often recognize that these intrusive thoughts don’t really make sense at a rational level, but they still feel compelled to respond to them. On a biological level, OCD has its roots in brain processes that can be traced to the development of unhealthy neural pathways and consequent chemical imbalances.

“Obsessive compulsive dating,” on the other hand, is not a real disorder. Yet wasn’t this young woman experiencing irrational obsessive thoughts — that she would never meet somebody, that she was destined to be alone — and then responding to them by compulsively filling her calendar with an endless stream of counterproductive behaviors (in the form of unwanted dates)?

And while it’s a stretch to say that this particular form of OCD was rooted in any sort of chemical imbalance, wasn’t it possible that hard-wired neural pathways reinforced those negative habits and behaviors?

A little research into neuropsychology introduced me to the concept of “[neuroplasticity](#),” the brain’s natural ability to effectively “rewire” itself. While neuroplasticity has long been viewed as a process that characterizes the developing mind during formative childhood years, there has been a good deal of recent debate as to how much of the brain’s plasticity survives into adulthood. Can we replace old, well-worn neural pathways with new ones?

According to Dr. John Ratey in his book “[A User’s Guide to the Brain](#),” “The brain is not a computer that simply executes genetically predetermined programs. Nor is it a passive gray cabbage, victim to the environmental influences that bear upon it. Genes and environment interact to continually change the brain, from the time we are conceived until the moment we die. And we, the owners — to the extent that our genes allow it — can actively shape the way our brains develop throughout the course of our lives.”

But how can we accomplish this re-shaping process? In his provocative book, “[The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force](#),” Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz discusses his radical approach to the treatment of real OCD, based on the concept of mindfulness and the exertion of willpower.

Schwartz reasoned (and then demonstrated via fMRI scans of the brain) that if patients could learn to reassess their obsessive compulsions and then consistently react differently to them, they would eventually alter the neural pathways that underlie them.

According to his four-step approach, patients “Relabel their obsessions and compulsions as false signals, symptoms of a disease. They reattribute those thoughts and urges to pathological brain circuitry. They refocus, turning their attention away from the pathological thoughts and urges onto a constructive behavior. And finally, they revalue the OCD obsessions and compulsions, realizing that they have no intrinsic value, and no inherent power.”

Why shouldn't we be able to apply a similar process to our love lives? Couldn't we all use a little refocusing and revaluing?

To that young woman with her case of “obsessive compulsive dating,” and to others stuck in slumps and ruts, it's inspiring to know that neuroplasticity shows us that what's been done can potentially be undone, and that if we take the steps to mindfully change our actions, our brains will follow.

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-  *WWRRD* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 08:55](#)

Pyshco-Babble. The gal is insecure, afraid of rejection and wants to be in the stronger position of always being the one doing the rejecting. Simple as that.

[Reply](#)

-  *moderndaywarrior* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 09:18](#)

Wow, with that diagnosis, the world can go to sleep tonight without any concerns. Sarcasm aside, insecurity and fear of rejection are behaviors that impact people's lives and for those of us who want to live them fully, learning a new approach to deal with them is better than the simplistic jargon stated above. Change is possible.

-  *Rock* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 09:46](#)

Change is possible but its not in our nature



- o *mrsnow* says:

[September 1, 2011 at 23:28](#)

@moderndaywarrior : that simplistic jargon above said exactly what you just did, xept with a better vocabulary and a scientific backing.



- o *Sandy* says:

[September 2, 2011 at 10:47](#)

Speak for yourself, Rock. I see humans as incredibly receptive and responsive to change. I don't think there is any question that we, as a species, adapt well to change. The less adaptive a species is, the less likely it is to survive inevitable environmental changes. A mere 15000 years ago the place I'm sitting (Toronto) was covered in a sheet of ice a kilometer thick. Imagine the change required for a species to to survive an ice age!

On an individual level, we tend to spend 15-20 years consciously changing ourselves through education to learn how to think and do things we couldn't do previously. Uneducated people change into doctors. Grand children change into grand parents. Single people change into married people. Immigrants change their culture and world view. And so on.

On a personal note, I have consciously chosen to grow my ability to change, with wonderous results. The thoughts, feelings, behaviours and experiences I have today are vastly different than those I had 5 years ago. I enjoyed this article because it alludes to the sort of work I have done internally to affect such change.



- o *Revolusioner* says:

[May 24, 2012 at 07:33](#)

I became aware of the blog via the VOR boacdrast. It's great to see that people of like mind are taking the time to raise awareness about our role and place within the natural world. This is a much needed perspective.



2. *Rock* says:

[September 1, 2011 at 09:45](#)

Send that little broad over to my house and I'll get into a rut alright.

[Reply](#)



- o *stillkicking* says:

[September 1, 2011 at 15:02](#)

Apparently she has gone out with a series of men like you — that would make any woman want

to become a nun!!

3.  *Diana* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 09:52](#)

Can someone help me with my love life problems?? haha

No seriously.

[Reply](#)

4.  *fuyuko* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 10:55](#)

This is clearly not a problem most people have. I would prefer advice columns address the issues and problems the majority experience as dealing with fringe issues and writing columns about them really don't address the problems the majority of those dating have- and make the writer look a bit silly for spending time on a non-issue for the majority.

[Reply](#)

- o  *TMCG* says:
[September 2, 2011 at 00:33](#)

how utilitarian of you! why cure cancer if the majority of people don't have it right now...right?
/boggle

- o  *Sandy* says:
[September 2, 2011 at 10:26](#)

Sounds like you aren't grasping the implications. Set aside the example given in the article and focus on the concept of brain plasticity. It applies to over eating, depression, boredom, lack of fulfillment, anxiety, perpetually running late, etc, etc, etc. Who among us can claim we are truly free of "problematic" thought and behaviour patterns? If we can rewire our brains, we can embody almost any experience within the human range of experiences. Imagine the personal power of that!

5.  *Jane Doe* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 11:16](#)

The Bible has always said to be "transformed" you have to "renew your mind" (Romans 12:2). I guess this is neuroplasticity. I love watching science catch up to the truths of the Bible.

[Reply](#)



- *Susan* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 11:55](#)

Sure, the Bible and other ancient writings. We are not new experts on the human condition, our ancestors were pretty good at living their lives also, within the context of their culture.



- *Dave in Portland* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 11:59](#)

sigh Really? You felt it necessary to bring religion into this? How small and sad are you? Do you answer everything in your life with either “The bible says...” or “God wants...”?

Grow up and think for yourself.



- *Jane Doe* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 14:37](#)

@ Dave in Portland Wow, you really went out your way to criticize some stranger because I merely mentioned the Bible. I believe the Bible has ancient wisdom from a loving God to help us succeed in this short life. Just because you can't see something or measure every little thing with a test tube, doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Yes, I do think for myself and I'm quite satisfied because no matter what life brings, I have an inner peace that this world simply can't offer.

You should give it a try sometime, but hey, to each his own.



- *SDFrankie* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 16:31](#)

I love the bible! Remember when Noah's son accidentally saw his father naked so his father sold him into slavery? Now that's some good stuff.



- *SDFrankie* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 16:34](#)

Hey! Remember when God orders the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites, even the women and children? What a great guy! What great ancient wisdom.



- *Man's thinking never compares* says:
[September 6, 2011 at 12:08](#)

Very true Jane Doe. I love the sheer arrogance of western thinking. They worship everything on the altar to 'science' and disregard the Great Scientists himself, God.

Yes, the Bible can and does transform lives. I have seen it in many people's lives. The Bible does 'transform' a person like nothing else can because it is God's Word and it allows a person to see themselves as they really are. It cuts through all the nonsense and shows a person true self, imperfections and all and shows how to change their personality and how to live a better life. It doesn't butter you up and make excuses like so many want to hear and like to hear. I enjoy many scientific articles but I hate the new-age garbage that tries to excuse a person of every single behavior as if they are incapable of changing it. NONSENSE.

The comments below are typical. Typical atheistic arrogance. They are blinding by it and deluded the same as anyone else is deluded serving a variety of self-centered ideologies. A real man or woman displays humility and is willing to change to be a better person. I don't expect these individuals to understand that concept because it suits them just fine to excuse every behavior as if they are a simply some dog acting on instinct. The rest of us strive for more.



o *Bible Clown* says:

[September 7, 2011 at 14:11](#)

Get back to me when science catches up to "The Earth is flat" and "the world is six thousand years old." You'll really be a happy girl when science duplicates virgin birth, right?



o *Bible Clown* says:

[September 7, 2011 at 14:15](#)

"it suits them just fine to excuse every behavior as if they are a simply some dog acting on instinct." Not true, and meant as a lying insult. You god must be really proud of you for telling such a fine lie in his name. Way to go!



o *Beverly* says:

[July 17, 2012 at 17:21](#)

That's a stretch. But if it helps you understand it, okay.



6. *chasetopher* says:

[September 1, 2011 at 11:28](#)

I love people who dont believe in dinosaurs cause they werent on the arc or in the bible.

[Reply](#)



o *James* says:

[September 1, 2011 at 11:52](#)

Job chapter 40-41 speaks about dinosaurs



- *@James* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 15:26](#)

No it doesn't



- *Emily* says:
[September 6, 2011 at 12:10](#)

What on earth are you babbling about? I am currently studying to become a paleontologist and I ALSO believe in a Creator and the Bible. Stop being so naive and prejudiced. Most of the world believes in a God and we are not all a bunch of backwoods, high school drop-out rednecks.



- *Hayden71* says:
[September 6, 2011 at 13:17](#)

I love how some of the rabid atheists will use one or two bad examples of Christianity and say that this is how Christians think and act.

It's like taking one doctor who's bad decisions resulted in someones death and saying, "from now on I'm not going to visit any doctors because their advise kills people."

Most Christians I know or have met are intelligent, sober thinking individuals who have weighed all of the evidence (not just one side by the way) and were able to come up with an educated conclusion.

It's as ridiculous as saying that all athiests are rabid individuals with a vicious agenda like Richard Dawkins.

Most are not rabid individuals but I will say that most that I have met only learn one or two bible concepts so they can argue against it, rather than taking a detailed and unbiased view of it and weighing the argument objectively.



- *Backwoodsredneck?* says:
[September 7, 2011 at 13:22](#)

So because I'm an agnostic I am now a backwoods, high school drop out? I graduated 3rd in my class out of 400 and I'm from an suburban Western thinking area, there is a reason the Eastern World is called the "Old World," no new thinking there.



- *Bible Clown* says:

[September 7, 2011 at 14:05](#)

“I love how some of the rabid atheists will use one or two bad examples of Christianity and say that this is how Christians think and act.” Good thing you didn’t just turn around and do the same thing, Nimrod.



◦ *Bible Clown* says:

[September 7, 2011 at 15:43](#)

“Most are not rabid individuals but I will say that most that I have met only learn one or two bible concepts so they can argue against it, rather than taking a detailed and unbiased view of it and weighing the argument objectively.” OK, so if you don’t believe in Allah, you have to spend years memorizing the Quran in order to argue against it line by line? If you don’t believe in Bigfoot, you should read every book ever written about it and spend your nights out in the woods, just so you can be objective? Come on, you’d say “Aw, that’s bunk” and that’s all you’d do.



7. *Mark* says:

[September 1, 2011 at 12:01](#)

See also [_Change Your Brain, Change Your Life_](#) (Daniel Amen) which (among other things) describes learning to recognize and disrupt cyclic thought patterns that interfere with healthy living.

[Reply](#)



◦ *Bible Clown* says:

[September 7, 2011 at 14:09](#)

Changing my oil would probably do more for me than trying to rewire my brain.



8. *Thought Police* says:

[September 1, 2011 at 14:41](#)

And the point of this article is what, exactly?

[Reply](#)



◦ *I agree* says:

[October 3, 2011 at 10:07](#)

One of the worst articles I have read on CNN. It really had the potential. So much babble with too little meat.

9.  *Melanie* says:
[September 1, 2011 at 22:51](#)

this article did not live up to its name

[Reply](#)

10.  *CrystalRiver* says:
[September 4, 2011 at 03:32](#)

Americans fall in love too easily. Make it(falling in love) difficult for yourself and for others. Think that you have only one love to give away for your entire lifetime, which is true. Loneliness comes in many forms but take true love or forget it. (Really, all other loves are worthless.) Women, keep your purity until the age 21 so that you can sell your virginity with 2 million dollars. If you keep yourself pure that long, you'll be wise enough to get the true love which is priceless. By keeping yourself pure, women, you increase the number of faithful men among the human population. If you treat love as a game, your life will be over as a game.

[Reply](#)

11.  *CrystalRiver* says:
[September 4, 2011 at 03:40](#)

Dating multiple partners or allowing oneself to a possibility to such lifestyles is downright bad to human brains. Scientists must be con-cealing some data or refusing to conduct studies.

[Reply](#)

-  *Bible Clown* says:
[September 7, 2011 at 14:08](#)

It's actually more common than monogamy. Some people are only interested in genitalia and could care less about conversation. Not bad for you, not good for you, just not as much fun as getting to know one person really well.

12.  *Lis* says:
[September 5, 2011 at 19:48](#)

I just want to say that this article was very inspiring. Having just had a real OCD attack not too long ago this article really was inspirational. Though I have my own"OCD" dating issues, having real OCD issues are challenging. The concept of mindfulness is vital to overcoming issues such as OCD and relationship issues. I appreciate this article; a lot of people today consider the field of psychology to be a lot of mumbo jumbo but frankly it's because people are too self-absorbed that they don't realize how important it is to normal functioning.

[Reply](#)



13. *JH* says:

[September 6, 2011 at 20:18](#)

'I feel depressed and rejected if I don't hear back from a guy I didn't even like in the first place. I lie awake all night feeling like I'll always be alone, that I'll never find "the one" wow. she needs to see a major shrink. There are people out there having even worse case than her but still living their lives in a positive productive way. Instead of complaining why not just work on her self-esteem first. And by the way with her depressive mood i'm not surprised guys avoid her. Just sayin'

[Reply](#)



14. *mommagrizz* says:

[September 7, 2011 at 23:29](#)

hey!
Maybe she was just flirting with you-
silly doctor

[Reply](#)



15. *angel* says:

[September 23, 2011 at 08:45](#)

BIBLE: BASIC INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE LEAVING EARTH!

[Reply](#)



16. *Part P Electricians Leeds* says:

[March 31, 2012 at 13:39](#)

Thanks for some other magnificent post. The place else may anyone get that type of information in such an ideal means of writing? I have a presentation subsequent week, and I am on the search for such info.

[Reply](#)

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