

BRAINBOX Deborah Bone

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

When we get anxious or angry, it's hard to think straight. We often get so caught up in the emotions that triggered it, we just react.

By taking a step back, even if nothing else has changed, it's easier to get a grip over our emotions. There's the old "Count to ten" trick, but taking deep breaths or walking away from the situation can also help.

Psychotherapist and BrainBox creator Deborah Bone takes this further. The BrainBox shows people what is actually going on in their brains by using recycled computer parts and wiring as a metaphor for the human brain.

Deborah became aware of more and more people having anxiety related disorders while working as an Emotional & Mental Health Advisor for a Primary Care Trust. A ChildLine report published in February 2007 echoed this feeling.

Because most of her work is with children, she focused on a way to help them through it but the BrainBox can be used to help people of all ages. Frustratingly, when we're worried or stressed, it becomes almost impossible for us to learn. Deborah says, "Being highly emotionally aroused literally makes us stupid."

For children who find it hard to concentrate, this often shows up as destructive behaviour which not only hurts them but slows down their peers (and makes life at the front of the classroom exhausting for the teacher).

Deborah's training as a Human Givens Psychotherapist and NLP Practitioner helped her focus on finding solutions. She wanted to use a metaphor that would make sense for the children she worked with, as well as adults.

"The BrainBox was one of those four o'clock in the morning things," says Deborah. "I woke up early thinking about how I could explain to young people what's happening in their brain when they get anxious or angry. I've always been very passionate about mental health and the computer analogy is helpful for children. My husband is used to me waking up at 4am. We have a lot of computers around so we took one apart and made the BrainBox from recycled parts.

"Different computer pieces are used to represent different parts of the brain and these are connected with wires and crocodile clips. The BrainBox shows how messages are sent between three different parts of the brain."

In 2007, the BrainBox won the 2007 national

McQueen Award for "Excellence in Practice." Now Deborah is keeping her fingers crossed for another award. She says, "We've been short listed for an NHS Innovation award. I'm presenting next week and will be attending an awards dinner with Jo Brand."

While awards are wonderful, Deborah loves the feedback she gets from watching people using it. She says, "Anyone who sees it says, 'Wow! Why wasn't I told that before? That really makes sense now.' School nurses

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are using the BrainBox in assemblies to help students prepare for exams."

"We have the worst emotional and mental health in the whole of Europe. For young people, especially, there are anger issues," says Deborah. Although Deborah hasn't personally experienced the extremes of anger and anxiety many of the people she works with battle, like everyone she says, "I had some problems when I was anxious. I wondered what was happening inside my brain when I took an exam and went blank. And I've always been passionate about helping people."

While they knew they had a great idea from their chisel box prototype, Deborah says it was challenging to come up with a product they could sell. "We've broken even now," she says. "And we've done it all on our own with a bit of help and advice from Business Link."

Parents love it too. "It helps them understand why they've got a teenager who is using the stupid part of their brain," says Deborah. They learn about their own brains, too. Explaining what is happening to their brains helps people understand their own anger, anxiety and worries better.

"We teach them techniques like taking time out and breathing techniques to reconnect

the brain. We also use a lot of visualisation by paying attention to the client's map of the world. By finding out what kind of thing has helped them relax previously, we can make it big and bright and bold. When they do that, their brains can reconnect and their breathing slows."

As for hopes for the future, Deborah says, "We're hoping it's going to win the award. We'll get a lot more support in developing the server. We want to refine the product and there's potential for a BrainBox game, cards and pencil cases. I'd like to develop more resources around it.

"It would be great if every school had one but it's helpful for adults, too. It can be used to help people prepare for job interviews by helping people understand what's happening. It's almost impossible to think straight when you're anxious because your brain is sending stress signals. You can use the BrainBox to demonstrate and teach how important it is to learn to relax."

This can help people not just with exams and interviews but driving tests, stage fright, dating or any other event that typically makes them anxious.

While Deborah had been looking for something to use, the demand took her by surprise. She says, "I was using my chisel box prototype and people were saying, 'I want one. Where can I buy one?' We've sold them to educational psychologists, youth offending teams, school nurses, youth workers and other people working with 0-19 year olds." ●





HELP YOUR BRAIN RELAX

By practicing relaxation techniques on a regular basis, it will be much easier for your (or your child) to anchor this more helpful state. This will help you access it when things get stressful and enable your brain to reconnect more quickly:

1. Make sure you're sitting comfortably. Take some deep breaths in and out.
2. Scan your body for any tension you may be holding onto. Let it all out with each exhalation.
3. Deepen your sense of wellbeing by thinking back to a time when you felt completely safe and relaxed.
4. Think about this time in detail. What could you see? What sounds were you aware of? How did you feel? Were there any special tastes or smells?
5. What happens if you make the feelings stronger? The colours brighter? The sounds louder? Experiment with the submodalities until your relaxing memory feels just right for you.
6. Anchor it in some way that will help you recreate this wonderful feeling any time tension and anxiety bubbles.
7. Practice regularly to strengthen your new tool.

Test it out in stressful situations and improve it until it's just right for you.

UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN BEHAVIOUR BETTER

It's not just young people who feel stupid when their reptilian brains take over. Have you ever tried to break a habit (maybe smoking, drinking, self harming, shopping or overeating)? Logically, you probably know a thousand reasons to stop. Yet sometimes, when stressed, you lose control?

"When the brain disconnects, you're temporarily stupid," says Deborah. "So when nicotine levels drop, the reptilian brain sends signals: 'Hang on! There may be some danger here!' This speeds up the heartbeat and breathing. You become temporarily stupid and go out and have a cigarette because the drug is so strong."

So next time you lapse, be kind to yourself (as you'd be with a small child). Remind your reptilian brain that you're safe and aim to keep going. What can you do differently next time you want to smoke / shop etc.? Again, by practicing relaxation techniques, you can use them to reconnect and this will minimise cravings for your usual fix.