

## **BUILD YOUR BRAIN**

**Final Week of the 3-Week Series, "Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess"**

**July 3, 2022**

**With Rev. Richard Maraj**

Hey, so you ever try to eat healthy? And you find it hard, because something derails you? Have you ever had that experience? You know, every time I try to eat healthy, a chocolate bar looks at me and snickers! [Congregation laughs] You know, I'm kind of proud to announce and share with you that I have finally gotten over my addiction to chocolate and marshmallow and nuts ... but I can't lie, it was a rocky road. [Congregation and Rev. Maraj laugh]

Almost as rocky a road as telling these jokes! [Congregation laughs] Anyway ...

So today we're wrapping up a three-week series looking at the power of the mind: how to manage our minds better. Our minds are the most powerful creative tool that God has given us. Through our minds, we can think; we can imagine; we can visualize. With our minds, we can conceive of dreams and desires and possibilities. We can choose; we can decide; we can reason; we can analyze. I mean, the power of our mind is what attracts the things in our lives.

You can say that the quality of our thoughts is reflected in the quality of our lives. The things we hold in our mind are the things that actually are manifested and attracted in our relationships; in our health; in our finances; and in all areas of our lives.

Sometimes we think that time management is the key to a better life, but it's really mind management.

As amazing as our minds are, they need better management. How many people say -- based on how your life is -- how many people would you say you could do a little better job managing your mind and your thoughts? Anybody?

Because as amazing as these minds are, they also have a tendency to worry and overthink and obsess. We also have the tendency to focus on the worst-case scenario; focus on the negative things, the things that aren't working. Sometimes we develop some pretty unhealthy thought patterns. Sometimes our minds make up stories that aren't true, that aren't healthy or real. Sometimes we create all kinds of drama, and we get stuck in unhappiness and frustrations, disappointments and feelings of unworthiness.

And we make mental messes! We create messes in our relationship; messes in our family life; messes in our finances in all kinds of different ways. And by the Law of Attraction, what we hold in our thoughts we attract more of into our lives.

You ever notice that sometimes we have the same arguments? The same problems? Date the same people? Do the same things? Eat the same food? Why? Because studies show that 95% of the thoughts we think today we thought yesterday! We shouldn't be surprised, because we keep putting the same things into our minds and getting the same results.

Here's the good news. The Apostle Paul said this in the Book of Romans. he said, "*Do not conform to the patterns of this world*" -- don't conform to the way you've always been thinking -- "*but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" If you want to change your life, renew your mind. If you want to change your life, change your thoughts. Find new and more prosperous and healthy things to infuse into our mind so we can attract greater things.

You know, Paul said what the goal was; he said, "*Let the same mind that was in Christ Jesus be in you.*" So our work is to take our human mind that can get distracted and fearful and worry and do some practices to open it to allow the spiritual mind; the Christ mind; the God mind; the more loving mind; the more compassionate and giving and caring mind; the more abundant and creative mind that we have within us. But it takes work. It takes practice.

And in the last couple of weeks I've shared some of the things to do to better manage our mind and get better use out of our mind. And the number one, by far -- if you want to improve the quality of your mind and your life -- is to **take time to regularly quiet your mind.**

As powerful as our mind is, it will be more powerful if we slow it down and be still. Have periods of quietness. Not only does it calm us and relax us and get us away from being so distracted, but our mind also is able to balance itself. We have mental balance and emotional balance when we quiet our mind. We also immerse our mind in the Mind of God and things that are not of God just begin to fall away. And finally, quieting our mind opens it to greater inspiration and answers and guidance and creativity and possibilities.

And the other important thing is to **do neuroplasticity practices.** Neuroplasticity says that your brain -- all of our human brains, regardless of what age they are, regardless of what trials they've been through - can be trained to function more effectively and more efficiently. So we have that power to change our brains. We have that ability!

And one of the practices is **self-regulation.** And we all do this from time to time. Do you ever catch yourself saying something negative and you say, "Oh, stop thinking that way!" or, "Cancel; cancel; cancel!" That whole idea of self-regulation shows that every one of us knows what it takes to be happy. Every one of us knows that our words matter and make a difference

So the reason we are able to catch ourselves is because we have an idea that our words are powerful and they absolutely make a difference. And we need to self-regulate and adjust when we catch ourselves saying words that are not in alignment to the kind of life that we want to live, and the kind of people that we want to be.

Remember when it says in the Old Testament, "*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.*"

It's saying: self-regulate! Make sure the words that come out of your mouth that you speak about yourself and others and your life ... Let them match the level of positivity and love and goodness and abundance that you want to have.

The second neuroplasticity practice is to **pause after something harsh has happened.** Do you know that the brain has an electrical surge -- a little circuit that it runs -- that takes 30 to 90 seconds when new information is introduced to you. And sometimes when it's harsh information, the mind is a little discombobulated, and we can sometimes impulsively fire off some remarks that we later regret. Anybody ever say something fast or snappy that you afterward thought, "*Why did I say that?*" Anybody? Apparently only four of us; but that's okay! [Congregation laughs]

And so what it is saying is: When you let the mind finish the circuit of trying to reorient itself to new information, and you take a deep breath and you withhold yourself from responding quickly, you have a better chance after that period. They all it the "regret zone." Don't say anything immediately; just wait and breathe. Because even that bit of pausing helps you help your brain to not over-react, and actually use it more positively.

And then the last one it said is to **increase the ratio of your positive to negative.** Any time you catch yourself in a negative, say three positives. And make up a list of things that make you smile, or you think are beautiful that are working well. Maybe a bouquet of flowers or your new kitten or your family or your grandchild. Whoever it is, or whatever makes you happy: think of those. So almost using your negative thought as a trigger to add three more. Because that ratio needs to be higher to be able to balance out and stay positive.

Today we're going to continue building on managing our mind -- better practices. And this one is called, "Build Your Brain."

And the first thing to build our brain -- to use our minds better -- is to make sure we **CHALLENGE AND STRETCH OUR MINDS AND OUR BRAINS REGULARLY.**

How many people play any of those brain games like Sudoku or Words with Friends or Candy Crush? Anybody play any of those kind of brain games?

Do you know why we play them? Because our brain needs them! The brain needs to be challenged. It needs puzzles; it needs problems to be able to work through. That's how you get a more efficient and effective brain! Like, the same way that muscles need exercise, and the body needs a healthy diet, the brain has to be challenged. And it has to learn and expand and grow and see and be stretched to new perspectives. Because that's what increases our intelligence. That's what makes our mind more functional and flexible.

And here's the other one: it makes it more resilient. If you are challenging your brain and your mind, when other things that come into your mind, you'll handle it actually calmer, easier and more effectively. And what happens is: When you don't use your mind and test it, toxic energy builds up, and you actually don't think as clearly. And you're actually not as sharp.

Tell me which one would be a better car: a car that you always kept in the garage and never drove it? Or a car that you took out on a regular basis and drove it? And I think we'd all agree; it's the one that's being used. Inactivity is not great. Trying to do things where we don't have to think or don't get challenged is actually not healthy for us. Because the more we challenge our brain and mind, it's sharper. It balances our emotions. And it's a better foundation for getting more positive, effective use out of the brain and your mind.

You know, Dr. Caroline Leaf says that you need to find things that interest you and study them as if you were to do a 20-minute presentation on it. Find something that challenges you that you want to learn about that's outside the normal things that you already know. It's about stretching your mind.

So maybe for you it's learning how to play chess. Maybe it's learning to speak Russian. Maybe it's taking a French cooking class. Maybe it's to learn how your car engine works. Maybe it's to learn and memorize all the bones in your body. Maybe it's to learn about crypto currency (and then explain it to me!). [Congregation laughs] Maybe it's to play a musical instrument: the piano or the guitar. Maybe it's to relearn about the solar system. Maybe it's to read a book of poetry. Maybe it's to memorize Shakespearian soliloquy. Maybe it's to learn about photosynthesis or bird watching. Maybe it's to learn how to write a book ... and write a book! Maybe it's to learn and write a 10-minute stand-up routine. Maybe it's to learn about the culture of Portugal or Madagascar or Qatar.

It doesn't matter what it is! It's what interests you. And are you willing to learn? Are you willing to challenge your brain and expand it? Because building your brain absolutely helps us think more effectively; stay calmer; have a better perspective; and it makes the brain resilient. And so this is a powerful and important thing for all of us to do.

The other one is: if you want to have your brain work better and your mind work better, exercise your body! Push your body! Go for a run; lift weights; do yoga. Whatever it is ... when you exercise and push your body physically, it actually makes your mood better. It makes us think clearer and make better decisions. That pushing and challenging our brain and our body actually helps our mind to be more powerful; to be more focused; more creative; and more effective.

And over time, you know what happens? All the chaos on the unhealthy patterns that we have? Actually, the brain starts reorganizing itself, and becomes more efficient and effective as we do these individual things. I mean, these things sound simple, but they're available for all of us to do. The question is: Are we willing to do that work to help ourselves.

The second one -- and this is the big one and the hard one -- and that is you have to be able to **PROCESS and FEEL AND HEAL THE EMOTIONAL TRAUMAS AND PAINS** that we've allowed ourselves to bury and never process and never address.

Every single one of us have been wounded in some way. Every single one of us has some level of hurt or shame or abuse or betrayal, or an energy of abandonment. Or feelings of unworthiness. Every one of us carries some of that stuff, and stuff that we have not yet processed.

And whether it is a huge thing or a middle thing or a smaller thing ... we have them all! And we sometimes aren't willing to allow ourselves to face it or address it. And those things end up showing up in our relationships. They end up showing up in our lives to teach us -- to help us -- heal if we will allow it to. And if we notice the areas of our lives that get triggered -- that bring up our wounds -- it's important for us to pay attention.

As you know, I have had some serious issues with my relationship with squirrels. [Congregation laughs] I have a love/hate ongoing battle and relationship with squirrels.

And I think I told you it began five years ago, and some squirrels broke into my house, and they actually got into the walls. And they would be running up and down the house in the walls. I'd get so angry I'd be smacking the walls to try and scare them out. It took a while to get them out. But there was a lot of forgiveness work for me to do. [Congregation laughs] That I had to work through.

And then, a year after that, they started tunneling in the back yard, and making all these tunnels. And the piles of dirt were ridiculous! And so the level of anger of them disrespecting my property; I had a lot of stuff to work through!

And then a year ago -- after I took care of that ... And you know, you keep thinking, "*I'm over all that. I'm over all that.*" And then it pops back up. And so this last year, there were six baby squirrels there in a hole. They were in perfect little order, moving in a well-choreographed way -- like a little boy band. A squirrel boy band! [Congregation laughs] They were the most adorable thing! Except six baby squirrels might be cute, but when they get to be bigger they are all over the place! So it took a while to kind of make that more harmonious.

Well, a month ago I'm in my backyard, and I see this squirrel that I'd never seen before. And it was the most buff, muscular squirrel I've ever seen. [Congregation laughs] And I look at him, and he catches my eye. And then he gives me one of these. [Jerks his chin upward - congregation laughs] This is my house, and you give me one of those?

So then he turns towards me, and he was so muscular and buff. I'm telling you, this would be the Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson of squirrels; I'm telling you he's so big. [Congregation laughs] And then he flexes as if to say, "*Come on; bring it on.*" Like he wanted one of those Wild West showdowns, except he wanted a spiritual showdown. It was to see who could be silent the longest.

And so we're there, both being still. After five minutes, my stomach starts gurgling, and I'm getting hungry. But I'm saying, "*Hang in there; hang in there! You're a minister; you can't lose to a squirrel!*" [Congregation laughs] "*You've got to have more spiritual prowess than that! Come on, let's go; let's go!*"

And I kept thinking, "*When is he going to move? When is he going to stop?*" This is the most Zen squirrel I've ever seen in my whole life. And then, finally, I was so, so distraught, but I had to give up. I had to give up, and you know ... initially I felt a lot of shame and embarrassment, humiliation. How could I lose to a squirrel? But then when I went inside I thought, "*You know, that's nothing. It's not a big deal. You know, phhhhhh. That's nothing! It doesn't matter.*" But [through clenched teeth] it mattered!!! [Congregation laughs]

And sometimes that's what we do in our lives. Is that we've got some kind of hurt: we're kind of shamed or kind of embarrassed about it, but we deny or we pretend or we minimize it, and say it's really not that important. And the fact is: Those messes in us will fester and manifest and come out in ways that aren't healthy.

And one of the things we all have to be willing to do if we really want a healthier better life and to use our minds better: we have to be willing to be vulnerable and honest and self-compassionate to process

these feelings and emotions. And that's the important part: the feelings of shame. The feelings of regret or humiliation or betrayal. And it's important for us to process it.

And one of the things that I've really been reading a lot, studying about and practicing a bit more is the therapeutic benefits of writing. You know, we've all heard that writing your goals, you're more likely to achieve them. There's something about writing -- about putting it down on paper -- that creates clarity and focus.

But do you know: just writing ... like, in Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*, she says write everything morning, and it kind of "de-sludges" you; it kind of releases you. But there is actually a therapeutic benefit to writing about negative past experiences and traumas and our hurt and our feeling of loss. And it actually frees us up to use more of our cognitive resources to help us actually heal and overcome and understand.

And you know what's even more interesting? That therapeutic writing is used for people who have terminal illnesses. That even writing about the pain and the sadness of terminal illness can actually create a healthier mindset and perspective to move through it; to get as much as you can while you're still here. And sometimes even healing can take place! But it all comes down to a willingness to be honest and just share with ourselves the emotion and the pain and the humiliation and the guilt, or all the other -- all those emotions.

And writing it down, for some reason, has a powerful benefit of healing, releasing, feeling and processing. And being liberated from it. And when we take time with that, at some point -- and it's not to rush it, it's to make sure we keep doing that ... At some point, it's to ask ourselves a question like, "*So what else do I need to do to help myself heal from this?*" "*What is a better attitude or perspective I could have?*" Or, "*What am I holding on to that I still might need to let go?*" "*What do I have to learn from this? How was this here to make me stronger or wiser? Or to help me improve myself, or make my life better?*" You know, "*How am I supposed to maybe help others who have been through this experience?*"

It begins to transform from something buried in us that we want to avoid -- bringing it to the light to be healed. But then having it actually transformed to bless us and help us in a positive way. And no longer being imprisoned by that pain.

You know, this is a vital and important thing. And probably -- of these three points that I make -- it is the hardest and, yet, it is the most liberating and the most powerful of the three. Are you willing to process and feel and deal with and heal whatever trauma and emotional pain that you have felt. And it's not to guilt yourself or feel bad about it; it's actually just to help yourself deal with what has happened, and what feelings that you have from it. To be liberated from it.

The final one to help us build our brain and to be more positive is to **DEVELOP AND PRACTICE LIVING FROM A MINDSET OF GRATITUDE.** To develop a grateful mind.

Plato once said, "*A grateful mind is a great mind that eventually attracts to itself great things.*" Why? Because a grateful mind is able to see the good, even when things aren't looking so good. A grateful mind is able to enjoy and appreciate what we have, whatever amount we might have. A grateful mind is able to create an energy of gratitude and appreciation that -- almost like a magnet -- attracts even more of that good and more things to be thankful for.

We all have so much more to be thankful for than we realize. We should be thankful that we are alive; thankful that we live in this country. Thank you! We should be grateful to be who we are! To have all the talents that we have! To have all the people who love us and care for us and support us! For the difference that we make in our family, in our community, and in our world.

We should be grateful we get to learn these fabulous Unity principles at a fabulous place. We should be thankful for the color purple. We should be thankful for all kinds of beautiful things!

We should be thankful that we can see! Thankful that we can hear! Thankful that we have our health. I mean, thankful for joy; thankful for laughter; thankful for all these amazing and wonderful things.

I have a fridge magnet I refer to -- and sometimes need to refer to more often -- and it says, *"Life doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful."* Life doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful!

In the last 10 days, I've had parts of my house -- my laundry room, my garage, and several doors in the house -- repainted. And so there's been plastic and tape. And sanding and dust, and all kinds of stuff all over the house. I had to take everything out of my garage. And I like couches, so I have extra couches in my garage. And so I had to put the garage's in the house; I have five or six couches in the house. They're all over the place! Can't get around that good. Not able to park my car in the garage, so I had to park my car out in the sun. And I couldn't go into my garage; I had to walk around, which is more inconvenient. And then my backyard neighbor -- his yard guy or him, I don't know who -- is blowing their leaves into my backyard [congregation laughs] after I paid X-amount of money to have everything cleaned.

So it all adds up, and it's frustrating. And then my sister is coming Tuesday, and I want all this stuff done and clean ... and it's not getting done fast enough. And gotten little missteps.

So I get in my pool on Friday, just kind of lying there. And I'm thinking, *"You know this backyard's actually kind of beautiful! And those flowers look so pretty! And even though things aren't going as well as I'd like, and things aren't falling into place as fast as I want, I really have a good life. I have a wonderful life and a beautiful home, and people who care for me and help me and support me in so many ways."*

And it sometimes just hits you. Like, it's always there ... but it hit me like I didn't know it. And the funny thing is: We can be grateful before the thing happens; while it happens; and after it happens. I don't have to wait for that list to be done, or for my sister to arrive. I can be happy now and grateful now.

And so what are the things you're grateful for you in your life? And are you willing to remind yourself -- as I will be reminding myself on a more regular basis -- to appreciate and give thanks for this wonderful life I have right now.

You know, when Paul said, *"In all things give thanks, for this is God's will for you,"* it's God's will for you to recognize how blessed you are; how wonderful you are; how loved you are; how supported you are; how many resources you have. Even when things aren't going as perfectly, it is always time to give thanks and to see our lives through the eyes of a grateful mind.

There are all kind of studies I could go on with about how it helps your immune system and so on. I think we all get the point of that. But it also goes to help our mind and our brain function more effectively when we're looking through life through a very grateful mind.

Every one of us wants and deserves to have a better life. Every one of us deserves to improve our lives. And the key is: learn how to manage your mind better. It's a great tool and resource that God has given us. It can transform us if we're willing to use it effectively and consistently.

So remember: Challenge your brain; challenge your mind. Find something you like, and study it as if you're going to do a presentation on it. And exercise that body; it will give you the energy; it will elevate your mood and help you have greater resources to make great, creative, wonderful decisions. Secondly, process: be willing to feel and express in writing all it is that you're going through. And I'll tell you: that willingness to process honestly ... You're not trying to fix it; just write about what's going with you. And that, alone, will begin to liberate it from you. And finally, develop a grateful mind. Be thankful for who you are and all the great things in your life.

Every one of us can have a better life if we are willing to build a better brain and better manage our minds.

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]