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THE MAGAZINE

THANK GOD I'M BRAIN DAMAGED (I THOUGHT SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH ME!)

Is brain injury is reaching epidemic levels in Canada. The scariest part? It goes mostly undetected.

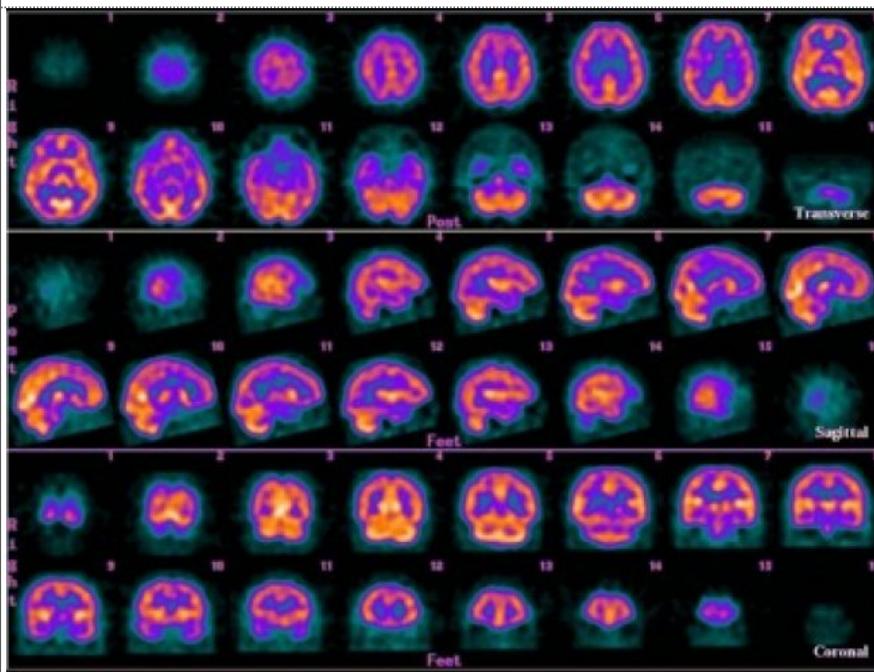
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THANK-GOD-IM-BRAIN-DAMAGED-I-THOUGHT-SOMETHING-WAS-WRONG-WITH-ME-GALLERY00208-01_1

Dim sum, anyone?

So, you wonder, what are the frontal and temporal lobes' functions? Nothing is black and white when you're talking about the brain. It's infinitely complicated. Renowned expert Dr. Daniel Amen marvels, "You have more connections in your brain than there are stars in the universe." However you can attribute generalities and, for me, the findings are like looking in a mirror.

Your frontal lobes help govern: impulsivity ("Hey, let's start a fire!"); judgment (ibid!);



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procrastination (this injury occurred in the 70s); focus and emotional control ("Don't wanna be an American Idiot."); oh yeah, organization goes atop that list.

Yes, we have trouble in the frontal lobes.

Trauma in your temporal region can result in "inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity and mood instability, aggression, mild paranoia, anxiety with little provocation, atypical headaches or abdominal pain, visual or auditory illusions, and learning problems (especially reading and auditory processing)."

Oh dear. Somebody lock me up!

The doctor compares my brain to a power brownout. The underperfuse lobes depend on the energy-producing regions to work overtime. But demand too much of the overtaxed network and the the grid begins to collapse. Suddenly a life of sudden, inexplicable bouts of misbehaviour becomes, well, explicable.

The present

After learning the scan results, I begin to do a bit of research and learn I'm far from alone. Over 11,000 Canadians die annually from traumatic brain injuries (TBI). 6,000 more are permanently disabled. But what about subtler cases? An article in Parkhurst Exchange, an industry forum for Canadian MDs, estimates a staggering 200,000 minor head injuries occur in Canada yearly. And 80,000 of these still manifest symptoms over three months later. No wonder the Brain Injury Association of Canada uses the word epidemic to describe the prevalence of TBIs.

How many of these subtler TBIs are going undiagnosed out there, messing up lives? Dr. Amen makes a decent point: "When the brain works right, you work right. When the brain is troubled, you generally experience trouble in your relationships, work, or within yourself. Since the brain is recognized as the organ of behaviour, it makes sense that brain problems, such as...brain trauma are likely to decrease a person's effectiveness in life. Your success in life is associated with how well your brain works." Not to abdicate individual responsibility but maybe misbehaviour isn't always a matter of choice. Amen's scans continually show a clear connection between aggression – even severe criminality – and malfunctioning brains.

With 200,000 minor brain injuries out there each year, how many can be linked to the clogs in criminal, divorce and traffic courts, unemployment lines and inappropriate areas of the health care system? We don't know because right now, because nobody's looking. But that doesn't mean those injuries aren't expensive and slowing our major institutions.

Perhaps SPECT scans could flush much of the clog. (That and doctors directly asking patients whether they've ever had a bonk to the conch.) Then, basic coping strategies can make a huge difference. If SPECT were used more widely, couldn't medical practitioners quickly diagnose, treat, and radically improve the lives of tens of thousands of Canadians, sparing who knows how many millions of dollars throughout the rest of the system?

The future?

In his book *Scattered Minds*, Dr. Gabor Maté talks about the euphoria he experienced when he realized he had attention deficit disorder (ADD). I can empathize. Last year, after decades of poor decisions, it was a massive relief to learn that maybe there's something physically and not morally wrong with me. The doctor believes my condition to be trauma-induced ADD.

The euphoria wears off quickly, though, because the problems are still there. Diagnosis, I learn, is just the beginning of healing. There's work to be done, but now there's genuine hope, too.

I've incorporated changes that help: vigorous exercise, psychotherapy, meditation, journaling, goal setting, and less alcohol. I fail regularly at these but succeed more often. The depression, anxiety and compulsivity are significantly attenuated. We're scheduling another SPECT scan to do a before/after comparison and see whether the holes have filled in.

I'm not unique, but statistically I'm lucky. Adults with ADD, trauma-induced or otherwise, are more likely to be divorced, underemployed, poor, friendless and without a driver's license. At 42, unlike many brain-damaged adults, I still have all my digits and teeth. I run my own business. I have a beautiful family, the product of my first and still happy marriage. After decades, I can ascribe urges and compulsions to something other than moral defectiveness.

Sure, there's that niggling urge to ask "what if," but why bother. I'm clearly someone who's very fortunate. Hell, I'm brain damaged, not stupid!

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