

## Ep #47: Change and Your Brain



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Brooke Castillo

Welcome to the Life Coach School Podcast, where it's all about real clients, real problems, and real coaching. And now, your host, Master Coach Instructor Brooke Castillo.

Hey everyone! What's happening? How are you today? I am doing amazing today. It's just one of those days. I'm just in a great mood, I'm excited, I have lots of energy. I have been researching this podcast for the past few hours and thinking about it, and the name of the podcast is Change and Your Brain.

One of the things that I've been thinking about a lot lately and talking to my clients about a lot lately is why change is so hard for us. Wouldn't it be great if we're like, "Yeah, so I want to start meditating for an hour every day"? Done. "I want to start working out for an hour every day." Done. What if there was no resistance to change? Whatever it is we wanted in our life, we just did it.

It would be so amazing. We could just control ourselves in every way that we want, right? We could just do whatever it is we want. "I want to start training for a marathon, so I'm just going to start running five miles." We didn't have to contend with our own brain, the resistance that comes with our own brain, then we'd be able to do whatever we want, whenever we want. It would be a totally different experience.

I think ... This is the things I think about, you guys, when I'm driving. I think about, "Hmm, why is it so hard to change? Why are we designed in a way where we immediately face resistance as soon as we want to change something? Why is our brain wired that way?" The way that I like to think about all of our lives, my life and change in my life, and you guys; I think about you guys all the time, my clients, my listeners. What is it that is going to make change easier for us? Because most people that come to me and most all of you who write comments in the blog and talk to me, tell me that you just really want to change.

The way that we decide to think about this is really going to determine whether it's easier or harder for us. When I was doing a lot of this research, there are so many words that come up when you start taking about anything scientific. You know, neuroplasticity, cortical mapping, amygdala prefrontal cortex; and I know for some of you, because I've talked to y'all, you're like braniacs. It's like you guys paid attention in school and you went

to college and got your PhDs and you all understand this stuff. Some of you are doctors; I get it. I find that when we start labeling and making it more complicated, then it doesn't help me. It just makes me feel like this is confusing.

I want you to know I'm going to talk about the brain. I do recognize that the wording that I'm going to use and some of the ways that I'm going to describe it are not sophisticated and I want you to know that is by design. I can write down all these words and I can say them on here and sound a lot more intelligent than I am, but I'm not going to do that because I don't think it serves you. I like to think about this from a high level in a high-level way so that we can apply it to our everyday lives in a way that makes sense. Some of you have told me that's what you appreciate about the podcast, is I simplify everything.

I want to let you know, the reason why I do that is that is how my brain works. I need everything simplified. When I was in grade school, I was always asking why. Why do we do it this way? Why is it set up this way? Because I really wanted to understand the meaning behind everything, and the more simplistic it could be, the easier I understood it. If I understood why we were doing it a certain way, that made it even easier for me to remember and understand, so that is how I teach.

Let's talk about your brain and how it is designed. Okay? When you think about how your brain is wired, one of the things that I thought was really interesting in the research is that they were comparing the efficiency, the energy, required for a brain to function compared to other electronic devices. They're trying to design electronic devices and computers to be as efficient as a brain, because it uses so little energy to function. That's a really important fact for us to remember because by design, our brain is designed to be efficient which means it uses the least amount of energy possible to do its work.

The way that it does that is is hardwires; I want you to think about your brain kind of like a computer, all those little neurons going in there; think about those as wires. It hardwires your brain to do things without conscious thought. You get up and you walk, you don't have to think about putting one leg in front of the other. When you go driving, you don't even have to think about putting your foot on the break or on the gas. You don't have to think

about turning your blinker on. Everything becomes automatic. Your brain, when it repeats something, memorizes it, repeats it, memorizes it, repeats it, and then it can kind of just be tucked away so it can just be efficient for us, right?

Now, one of the terms that they talk about in terms of our brain is the basal ganglia. Okay, you don't need to remember that, just forget about it. The only reason that I'm bringing it up is because that's where all of our efficient mechanisms, all of our habits, all of our, unconscious actions, brushing our teeth, all of the things that we do on a regular basis, get tucked away. Because they're super efficient, we already know how to do them, we don't have to think about them. They're just kind of tucked away, okay? All of those repetitive patterns that we have, that the brain has excitedly become efficient at, that it knows it's doing a good job because it's efficient at those things.

Some of the things that are tucked away, that we're really efficient at, that we've practiced over and over, are things that we don't want to be doing, habits we don't want. For those of you who bite your nails, you may not want to bite your nails. For some of you that do a lot of overeating, unconscious overeating, that's something that you've become efficient at that's been tucked away that you don't want to do. For some of you it's overworking, for some of you it's how you are in certain relationships, everything has become kind of autopilot.

Now, autopilot is a beautiful thing. It requires a lot less energy than having to think about it, and it works for us in most cases. But, when you go to change something that's already on autopilot, that's when you find it difficult. You guys know what I mean, right? When you drive the same way to school to drop the kids off at school, or the same way do work every day, and then you have to do a detour, you're going to go to the store on the way or you need to go pick up a friend on the way or whatever, you are going to have to take a mental note and use some mental energy to remember to do that because otherwise you're just going to automatically go to school. How many of you guys have done that? You end up driving a route that you've always been driven and you realize, "Wait a minute. I wasn't supposed to go this way. I was supposed to go pick up Sally Ann down the street." Right? That's because it requires energy from the brain to take it off of its autopilot.

Now, that is really, really important to remember because just up until recently, I mean like the early 80s, they used to think that your brain was fixed, like you couldn't change it. Now, what they're learning and what they know for sure is that the brain is actually changeable. They call it neuroplasticity. You can actually change your brain and you can change the wiring in your brain, which is great news. The not so great news is that it takes a lot of effort to change the brain. It can create new neural pathways and it can alter existing ones. There's this process called synaptic pruning, which I think is awesome. If you think about the little synapses in your brain, the way that the neurons communicate to each other is like a little space in between. If those connections, if they're not firing on a consistent basis, they will be pruned out of your brain. Something that might have been automatic for you in the past, if it's no longer used, right?

Let's say you're used to driving a certain way to work every single day for the past five years, and then you get a new job. Well, pretty much ... Actually, let me use the example of my house. This is so funny. We moved houses and I had been going to the same house for years, driving to the same driveway, dropping myself off, the kids off, picking us up, everything to the same house, right? Then we moved, and we didn't move too far away. We're actually still in the same general area. One night after dinner, couple weeks into living in our new house, I just automatically drove back to the old house. We were in the driveway and we were cracking up. We're like, "Oh my gosh. What are we doing here? We're at the wrong house. We already sold this house. We gotta get out of here."

I don't do that anymore because I've created a whole new neural pathway to my current house, right? The pathway to the old house has completely been pruned because I haven't done it. Okay? If you have the same place you drive to work every day and then you switch jobs, it's going to be the same thing. In the beginning, you're going to have to make that effort to remember to go to the new place. Right? Then you'll forget about it and you won't be trying to go to that old place anymore because all of those neural pathways will eventually lose their efficiency because you won't be doing it.

That really is the secret sauce to change. Right? We want to create new neural pathways that serve us. We want to be efficient at the things we want to do. We don't want to be efficient at overeating. We don't want to be

efficient at driving to the wrong place to go to work or the wrong house, right? We want to be efficient at the things we want to do. The way that I like to think about this is that I have the autopilot space in my brain, where there's so many things there that are serving me efficiently. Then I have the part of my brain that isn't efficient. Right? That's the part where I have to use a lot of energy to think.

When you're learning something new, you're going to be in that prefrontal cortex. You're going to be having to think about something, like if someone's teaching you a puzzle or you're learning a new game or you're going to a place for the first time. Even with that, your navigation system, even when that is telling you what to do you still have to be paying attention, versus if you're driving to the store that you go to every single day, it requires more energy in your brain to think in new ways. Okay? Your brain would much rather be utilizing less energy.

Now, isn't that amazing that your brain is designed that way? Right? It's designed to use less energy so it would rather do the things that it's really good at doing. If it's really good at coming home after work and overeating, it's going to want to repeat that pattern. To do something completely different is going to require so much more energy from us to change.

Now, I think the thing that's important for us to remember is that many times we take that very truth, that our brain likes to be good at what it's good at doing, what it's repeated, and we make it some kind of a character flaw in us. We think, "Oh, because I come home and overeat every single night there's something really wrong with me." Right? "Because that is the pattern that I'm in and I can't change it. There's something wrong with me morally." Right? "I'm just not a good person." Nothing could be further from the truth. Your brain is doing what your brain is meant to do. It's efficient. It's doing a great job.

Now, I want you to think about those patterns that have any kind of intense emotion associated with it. Okay? There's brushing your teeth, there's driving to work, those are repetitive patterns that we're really good at, right? We want to do them because we're efficient. Now, if you add any kind of intense emotion to any of those repetitive patterns it makes them even harder to change. Now, I think this is fascinating. If you associate pleasure to overeating, it's going to be even more challenging to change that than it



would be to change a pattern, like brushing your teeth, that maybe you don't associate a lot of emotion to. Okay?

The patterns that we have, that we associate strong emotion to, and it doesn't matter, actually, if it's positive or negative emotion. Any kind of fueled emotion to those patterns, which means what's driving them is an intense emotion. Which, of course, overeating, for many of us that is that pattern. It's going to be even harder to break. Not only do we have our brain, that's very efficient, but then when there's a lot of emotion that's driving that pattern, right? Our feelings drive our actions, then it's going to be even more challenging. Your brain's designed to be efficient, your emotions are going to fuel that efficiency, right? We wonder why it's so hard to change. We think there's something wrong with us. Okay?

Now, one of the ways that this was described, which I thought was so brilliant, was when we are efficient at a pattern of thinking in our brains, which means that pattern is going to create the pattern of feeling and the pattern of action, right? Those are all connected to each other. We get very comfortable in that and the way that they described it was mental comfort. Right? Your brain is good at doing it, you're comfortable doing it, it's something that you can repeat no problem. There's this idea that we have a cognitive laziness. It's not that we're lazy people, it's that our brain actually cognitively doesn't want to change. Okay? There's a reason for this, right?

Your brain is designed to do things that are familiar to keep you out of danger. Right? It's the way that we evolved. If you don't break patterns, if you're not going into unfamiliar areas, you're going to be able to function at your highest efficiency. Now, think about this back in the day. If you're faced with an unfamiliar circumstance back in the day, you want to be on high alert. You want your brain to highly functioning. You want that prefrontal cortex to be ignited, but it's also going to ignite those fear centers, that amygdala, that area that also brings up that intense emotion.

That requires a lot of energy, right? That requires us to feel a lot more emotion, to change that, to overcome it. That's why the brain is like, "No, no, no, no. Why are we bothering with all of this? Let's just stick to what's familiar. That will keep us safe." Okay? You are hardwired not to change. That's why it's so challenging for us to change. I used to describe this, and I think it's a really helpful way to look at it. If you look at the current neural

pathways in your brain that you're very efficient at, whether they serve you or not, they are super highways. Right? They have been constructed and reused and reused and reused, so the distance from point A to point B is so efficient that sometimes you find yourself doing something before you even realize it. Picking food to eat it, picking up a cigarette, turning on the computer for Facebook, whatever it is you're really good at.

To change means you're basically going to now say, "Oh, instead of taking that super highway, we're going to forge through this really thick, dense forest and make our own trail." The brain's like, "What? No! Let's do this." Right? That's why a lot of us get these great ideas, and we're like, "Oh! I want to change. I want to do this, I want to do that!" We fall back into the old pattern because the brain is like, "Why? Let's do what we're good at." The brain only wants to do what it's good at, and it's designed to do that to keep you safe. Okay. Does that all make sense?

Now, I know what you guys are saying. "Okay. So we get it, Brooke. Change is hard, right? What can we do to change our brain if that's really what we're looking at?" I think that's a really important way to look at. Don't look at your whole life as if you have to change your whole life. Don't look at your body, don't look at your actions, don't look at ... Just look at your brain. Let's just work on a completely cognitive level. That is the source of everything else in your life, right? If you look at your brain, you need to know that there's going to be effort required to change it. Okay? Your brain does not want to change. Not because it doesn't like you, not because it doesn't want to improve, not because it doesn't want to be better, but because of the way it was designed. It likes to be efficient. Okay?

You can approach this now with a very non-judgmental approach. Now, the other thing to remember is that when the brain resists changing itself, think about that. Your brain will resist changing itself. You are going to need energy to get over your own brain that is resisting changing itself. Okay? Now, one of the main things that I hear from a lot of people is that they have really good intentions. They have really good plans that they want to implement. They want to lose weight, they want to eat only when they're hungry, they want to work out; but then they get to that point in their day and they're unable to do that. They're unable to change.



I think that this explanation will help you understand that, because the brain is resisting changing itself. You're at that moment, and you're going to have what might be called brain fatigue, right? You're actually in a space where you're having to use your brain's energy to overcome your own brain when your brain is tired. I mean, think about this, you guys. That is a lot to ask, and it's no wonder that most of us don't change.

I know what you're saying. "What's the answer? How do we do this what are the steps? Give me the formula." I tried to create a formula and it's based on everything I've taught you already, so I'm not going to teach you anything new, but I want you to think about it this way: First and foremost, you have to pay attention and be aware. I know that some of you get mad at me because you're like, "I don't want to just pay attention to everything I'm doing wrong. I want to change it." You have to pay attention first to understand, "Okay. What are the things in my brain that are on autopilot? What do I do consistently every single day?"

Try to do it in a way where you see the things that you do consistently that you like, the habits that you do have, the patterns that you do have that you really appreciate and you appreciate that your brain is really good at doing those things. Okay? They require very little effort. Now, if you have those things that are on autopilot that you don't like that your brain is doing, those are the ones you want to pay attention to. Notice. Every night I come home from work. I go straight to the fridge. I get the food. I eat it. I know that don't want to be doing it, but that is one of my patterns of action that I do. Every night I come home and I start yelling at the kids, or whatever it is you do. Okay?

Look at your patterns of action. Put them in the model. Look at them. Understand them. I can't emphasize enough. That has to be the most important thing. Also, notice the habits, the patterns of action, the patterns of thinking, feeling, action, that you have that have a lot of emotion associated with them. Okay? Because those are going to be the trickier ones to change. That's all you're going to do in step one. Just notice that.

Now, once you have that consciousness, you get to decide what you want to change. Now here's the secret, and this is how you use your own brain to change your own brain. If you wait until you're in that moment to make that decision, your default is going to be towards comfort, familiarity,

efficiency. Okay? Your brain is going to go towards the area where it is the most efficient. But, here's what your brain can do for you that you don't have to make that decision in that moment. You make that decision ahead of time. You guys have all heard about visualization, right? It is the secret sauce of your brain because your brain cannot tell the difference between something you are visualizing and something that you're actually doing.

If you wait till the end of the day, you wait until you're in that emotional moment when your brain is already fatigued, to try and use the energy of your brain to change it, you most likely are going to not have enough brain effort to do it. I've talked about this before in earlier podcasts about that sacred moment, about deciding ahead of time. If you make that decision ahead of time of what you're going to do, then you don't have to use the brain's effort in that moment because you've already decided. Okay? If you decide and visualize yourself making that decision consistently, consistently, consistently, then when you're in that decision-making moment, there is no decision to make because it's already been decided. Okay?

Now, one of the concepts that I really want to help you distinguish between is the difference between making a decision in the moment and making a commitment ahead of time. Okay? When you make that commitment that you will not do something, you don't need willpower in that moment. You don't, because you've already decided. Now, some of you, I know, are probably questioning me. You're like, "Well I don't know about that. I've tried to do this before." Well, if you did, if you tried to do it you were probably trying to use that willpower in the moment and that's why you might have failed.

I remember watching this, and I've talked about Nancy, my mother-in-law, before. She was my husband's mother who lived with us when she was dying and one of the things, and I absolutely loved her, and she had smoked her whole life and as soon as she found out she had cancer she completely quit smoking in that moment. She made that commitment in that moment. Anytime she was offered a cigarette or a cigarette was available to her, the decision had already been made that it was not happening. That's why many people can stop drinking when they're pregnant, stop smoking when they're pregnant, because that commitment is just done.

There's no deciding, there's no wavering, there's no considering, it's just done. That's what we need to do with our brains.

Now, the way to change your brain is repetition. Okay? You pay attention, you make a commitment, and then you repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat. Once you've repeated it enough times, then it doesn't require the effort, right? Because, remember, use your brain. Your brain ... I say use your brain in every sense of the word, right? Your brain wants to be efficient at something. As soon as you get to the point where you're more efficient at driving to work one way than the other, then all the neural pathways, all those synapses that were having you go one way will be pruned.

Now here's what kills me when I watch my clients. The point before you get the new neural pathway and let go of the old neural pathway, that cognitive dissonance that we talk about, where there's more evidence, the evidence is just at that tipping point, that's when most people quit. Most people quit when it requires the most effort to change. When it requires the most effort to change is when you're about to change. It's when it's going to start becoming the more efficient pathway. Right? That's why people say, "Oh, 30 days or however many days," right? 30 days to make a change, 90 days to make a change, whatever. It doesn't have to take that many, right? Depending on how strong your commitment is, you can make that change in that moment.

The question becomes, when does it then require no effort? At what point does my brain get so efficient at the new way of thinking that I don't have to put any effort into it? Okay? I have noticed for me, that's different based on my level of commitment. The more committed I am to changing, the more I'll repeat it, which means the easier it will become to be efficient at something. Okay? People will say to me, one of the things that I teach is, eat when you're hungry and stop when you're sated. We have a scale called the hunger scale, and you eat -2 on the hunger scale to +2 on the hunger scale. Those of my clients who are super committed to doing that and do it consistently find it much easier to stick with it because they've practiced it in their brain. They've practiced the thought, "No, stop. Time to eat, time to stop, time to eat, time to stop, time to eat, time to stop," and then their brain gets good, their body gets used to it. Everything becomes efficient. Then it becomes effortless.

Right now, in my life, I don't have to use any effort to not eat Oreos. It's just a pattern for me now. Right? I don't associate any kind of effort with having to do that, because I've made it a repetitive pattern to say no and not want it genuinely. Right? That's where we need to stay committed long enough to get our brains to that point where it then becomes effortless. This is the same with exercising. People, once they begin an exercise program and they just get up and they go work out and they get up and they go work out, it doesn't mean that there's no resistance to going to work out. It just means that overcoming the resistance has become effortless pattern for them. "Yeah, I hear you. I'm still gonna go work out. Yeah, I know you don't really wanna go, but I'm really gonna go." Right? That's the pattern that you become good at. You get good at what you practice. If you're overeating, if you're smoking, if you're sitting on Facebook for three hours a day, that's what your brain is getting good at doing. It's becoming an expert at that thing, and it's becoming efficient at it.

Okay. You're going to pay attention to the current patterns that you have on autopilot. You're going to decide and make a commitment of those that you want to change. You're going to decide ahead of time. You're not going to wait until your brain is tired at the end of the day to start making decisions about what to eat. You're going to make those decisions ahead of time when you're fresh and you're committed. Then you're going to go into autopilot. Right? You're going to rely on what you've decided ahead of time and then you're going to repeat that pattern over and over and over again until that pattern is the one that becomes effortless. Okay? It's almost like you're relying on your plan instead of your brain until your brain takes over.

Now, it's very important that you don't take it personally when your brain wants to be efficient at something. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. It doesn't mean you need to beat yourself up. It doesn't mean you need to question your moral character. It just means you need to go, "Whoa! My brain is good at this. My brain is efficient at being efficient and that's its job. It's not doing anything wrong." Okay? The breakthrough is going to happen at that point of most fatigue. That's why using your energy ahead of time.

You know they set up grocery stores like this? I think this is so fascinating. I was reading this in one of the studies where they were talking about how when you go into the grocery store you're going to have to make so many

decisions about what brand to buy, what food to buy, what's for dinner, what should I get the kids for lunches, what kind of drinks do I want, right? By the time you get to the counter, you are at what they call brain fatigue. Right? You've made so many decisions. You've made so many choices that you don't have the energy to make another decision, right? Unless you have a list and you've decided ahead of time, that's when you're most likely to pick up the candy and the mints and the chips and the magazines and all that stuff. That's why they put it right there. Those are impulse buys because they know when you get there that you will be done with your ability to make decisions.

When you think about the patterns that you have in the evening time that you don't want to have, right? Maybe you want to start exercising in the evening but by the time you get there the effort to make the decision, to create a new neural pathway, is just not there. Your brain is literally too tired to make that decision. Unless you've made a commitment to that decision ahead of time, unless you've decided and you let that plan that you've created be your autopilot and you don't negotiate with your brain, then you probably won't stay consistent. If you decide ahead of time and you know that you're going to get resistance from your brain, not because there's something wrong with it, but just because it really wants to be efficient, then you can take the action that you've already decided you will take. Okay?

Your brain doesn't want to change. That's how it's designed. That's why it's so hard for us to change. You also, this is the best part, can use your brain to overcome your brain. Isn't that amazing? We can use our brain to pay attention to our own brain; we can use our brain to change our brain that doesn't want to change. The reason it doesn't want to change is because it wants to be efficient for you. Okay? It still gets to be efficient, we just want it to be efficient on something new.

What are your patterns of thinking, of feeling, of action, that you want to change, and are you willing to put the effort in, the big effort in the beginning, and stay with it long enough until it becomes effortless? Until you become a person that doesn't overeat in the evening, until you become a person that doesn't turn on Facebook at the same time every day and stay there, until you become a person that automatically works out, automatically gets their shoes on and goes and works out. Are you willing

to use your brain, the most powerful tool on the planet, to create the life you want?

You can change your brain. Even though it's resistant to it, you can change it to create anything you want in your life. Are you in? Let's do this. I'll talk to you guys next week. Bye bye.

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