

Module Five, Lesson Five

Trust and Your Brain

What happens to your brain when you trust someone? And perhaps even more important, what happens in your brain when you feel trusted?

In a recent study, when participants felt they were trusted, their brains responded by producing oxytocin (known as the love hormone), and the more they felt they were trusted, the more oxytocin was produced.

What's really interesting is that the more they felt trusted, the more they behaved in a more trustworthy manner. The researcher started to call oxytocin the trust molecule.

Experimenters also found that changes in oxytocin related to levels of empathy and that the changes in oxytocin predicted people's feelings of empathy, something we discussed in the previous lesson.

It is empathy which makes us connect to others and connection to others triggers moral behavior, an element of which is to be trusted. We want to help people; this makes us feel good about them and so we act well towards them. We are social beings and therefore share the emotions of others, so if we do something to make someone happy, we share those emotions too.

What that means for us in terms of our mindfulness practice, is that if we learn to trust ourselves, our decisions and our actions, we are more likely to produce oxytocin, and that makes us trust and love ourselves even more. And it makes us happier.

If people trust each other based on certain conditions being met, like keeping a commitment, the ventral tegmental area of the brain activates. This is part of a network of structures that together form the reward system and is involved in reinforcing behavior.

Unconditional trust activates the septal area, which is that part of the brain that functions to give us feelings of anger suppression and pleasure. Trust yourself unconditionally to reinforce the feelings of pleasure in that response.

Trust and fear are inversely related; fear activates the amygdala and trust decreases activation. As a result, trust frees up the brain for other activities like creativity and planning and decision making.

So – trust yourself, be trustworthy, and trust other people more. It is much better for the health of your brain and your mental and emotional health!

