

Whole Brain Thinking

By Kristin Yates, DO

I went ziplining with a group of fellow doctors this summer. It was an activity that was part of my Adventure Retreat for Women Physicians, which was a CME awarding retreat that focused on having fun. This may sound extraneous but making time for fun is one of the most impactful things you can do to bring more meaning and satisfaction into your life.

Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor is a neuroscientist who has the most watched Ted Talk of all time. During her talk, she describes her experience of having a massive stroke and how it impacted her life in immeasurable ways. Her most recent book, "Whole Brain Living", outlines the functions of the left and right hemispheres of the brain through, what she calls, the "four characters". Her work has been instrumental in helping me understand how to better incorporate the right hemisphere of my brain into my work as a physician. The more I have done this, the more confident and fulfilled I have become.

Here is a brief overview of the different functions that our brain hemispheres have. Our left hemisphere is responsible for logic, policies, memorization, concepts. It's our memories of the past and projection of future events, but also self doubt, judgement, the voice that tells us we're not enough. It's the voice of comparison. This is the half of the brain that is most valued in medicine and in society in general. As we live through our medical training, we get very efficient at our left-brain functions of memorization, logical thinking and concepts. This is how we become successful and skilled physicians. However, with that left brain overuse also comes increased self doubt, self judgement, worry and anxiety. We can't have the logic without the doubt.

The right hemisphere of the brain is our joy, spontaneity, creativity and fun. It thinks in colors and pictures and the "here and now". It is the love. The functions of the right hemisphere of the brain are not useful to us when we are training to become physicians. In many ways, they are seen as weak, soft and sometimes even destructive. It is no surprise that many of us graduate from residency with no hobbies, no time to focus on ourselves, no creative outlet and the belief that none of it even matters anyway because "we just need to be more productive". We have become convinced that fun and play are nonessential to us and have no place in the life of an attending physician.

That's what I used to think, anyway. It was just 18 months ago that I realized that I had no idea how to have fun. I would convince myself that reading medical journals was "relaxing" and that cooking dinner for my kids was "creative", but I would be lying if I told you that these activities brought me joy. I decided that I would have more fun and that I would convince other physicians that they needed to have more fun too.

The more time that I invested in fun, the happier I became. The most thrilling detail about this transformation is that I was happier everywhere, and this was most obvious at work. I took myself less seriously while remaining professional. I wasn't defensive with my patients, and I stopped assuming that my colleagues were thinking that I wasn't smart enough. The right hemisphere of my brain was beginning to take charge, and the evolution was phenomenal. I was more patient in the clinic, more confident in the operating room, and more present and calmer while on call.

Having fun is a workout for the right hemisphere. We are retraining ourselves to function as we are meant to as human beings, in the present moment, with joy and connection as the foundation. Our amazing left hemisphere is not to be ignored, but it is not meant to dominate our lives. As physicians, so much of what we do is grounded in morbidity and mortality, it is easy to forget that not everything has to be so serious. Making the time for creativity, exhilaration, laughing until it hurts, and true connection are not optional. We must stop believing that they are. These experiences are required if we want to be confident, delighted and actualized. Most importantly, we deserve time to play.