

Train Your Brain

By Vicky McGrath

Among the challenges I face with ASD, one of the biggest is my communication skills. I am a direct person and speak my mind, usually without much consideration for how this comes across to the person I'm speaking with. Although I don't consider myself to be mean or rude, I do have ideas and opinions and this direct communication style has caused a lot of interpersonal conflict over time.

Recently, I was experiencing an interpersonal conflict and I was feeling a lot of anger associated with this person. My husband suggested that I work through my anger with a professional in the hope of being happier. This led me to speak with a psychologist who specialized in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and she worked with me using this approach for a few weeks. In CBT, the idea is to replace the negative thought pattern with a more beneficial thought process.

I wasn't enjoying the sessions with the psychologist at all and it actually made me feel worse to speak with her about my situation! I decided to find another approach and stumbled across a book that I already owned called "Train Your Brain" by Dana Wilde. I decided to learn more about the book and process Wilde uses and it opened up a new world of what is essentially CBT but in a way that made me happy. In her book and her podcast "The Mind Aware", Wilde talks about the reticular activating system in the brain which is a feedback loop of thoughts and feelings. The key is that Wilde "trains the brain" to cycle happiness and positive expectation. This was a turning point for me! As my brain began to cycle more positive thoughts, in time I was able to make a plan that ended my conflict with this other person.

Although "Train your Brain" and Wilde's programs assist business owners and entrepreneurs, the information she provides is translatable into many aspects of life. As a person living with ASD, it is a relief to have a new approach when I feel interpersonal conflict coming on.

Here are the key strategies I learned to "train my brain" to be happy:

1. Awareness: Notice the thought/feeling that is causing the bad feeling/pain.
2. Choose a happier thought: It doesn't have to be dramatic, you can just say "I am open to learning", or "I am capable" but choose to focus only on something good about yourself.
3. Focus ONLY on the happier thought: If you notice a bad thought or feeling, just say "oops! I choose a happy thought instead!" and start again with the happier thought. Just keep doing this until you feel better and then choose an even happier thought and continue to progress this way until you only feel good about yourself.

About the Author: Vicky McGrath

Vicky McGrath is a 51-year old wife, mom and business owner and was diagnosed with ASD at 50 years old.

She has an undergraduate degree from Trent University and a master's degree from Cambridge University. Vicky spent 20 years in the government sector in the environmental field before making the jump to business ownership. Currently, she is owner of a private home care company, caring for elderly clients in the safety of their own homes.

Vicky is also a runner and triathlete, having completed several marathons, half marathons and triathlons including half Ironman and 3 full Ironman triathlons. It was during a long training ride in 2006, before her (not to be) third Ironman that Vicky crashed her bicycle, broke some ribs, punctured her lung and sustained a concussion and launched her path of self-discovery, resulting in the ASD diagnosis in 2019.

