

The Kangaroo Feeding Track

I want you to imagine a baby kangaroo, a joey, which lives at the edge of some dense, wild bush. A clearing is in the middle of the dense, wild bush - that is where it is safe to feed. Each day the joey has to make his way through the dense bush to the clearing to find food.

The very first time he makes his way to the clearing there aren't really any paths to follow. He just bashes his way through the bush, eventually making it safely to the clearing to feed.

The next day, the kangaroo realises that where he hopped yesterday the bush is a tiny bit more open and easier to get through. Why make life hard for himself? He decides to follow the very same path to the clearing - it worked pretty well and kept him safe yesterday, there's no point changing it. So, through he goes.

Soon enough, he slips into a routine. Each day he takes the very same path to the clearing. After a while, a track through the bush starts to form. The bushes and shrubs that might have blocked his path get broken down, until eventually they don't grow there anymore. The snakes and the spiders all learn to make their nests somewhere else, because if they build them there, the joey knocks them over. The bush opens up to a feeding track. The more the joey travels the path, the clearer the feeding track grows, and the easier and more automatic it becomes to travel through.

Meanwhile, the other areas of the bush are getting denser - more overgrown, with more dangerous animals living there, and no clear tracks to follow. The less the other areas of the bush are used, the harder they become to travel through.

Then let's say that, after 3 years we ask the kangaroo to change how he gets to the clearing. Suddenly, we tell him that his feeding track, the track he's been using successfully (and safely) since he was a joey, isn't what we want him to use anymore.

How easy would it be for the kangaroo to make a new track to the clearing to be able to feed? Probably not easy at all! To go a different way, he would need to break through years worth of barriers that have slowly grown in the bush, dense thickets of bush. He would need to break down bushes, fill in potholes, and scare away years worth of snakes and spiders. It would take a long time and lots of effort before a new feeding track started to form.



It would probably be even longer before it became an easy path to follow. And, even after a new track has formed, in moments of crisis - let's say a dingo appears - the kangaroo is still more likely to automatically hop along his first track, because that's the one that he learnt as a joey and that kept him safe all those years.

In the same way, our experiences during our early life - particularly during the first 3 years - become the foundation for millions of 'kangaroo feeding tracks' in our brain. The more we successfully use the same neural pathways, the more engrained and more automatic they become.

Where a child has experienced trauma, the kangaroo feeding tracks that become engrained are ones of responding to fear and danger. That a child develops these tracks is critically important - these patterns of responding help to keep them physically and emotionally safe during scary or unsafe experiences.

When the trauma is over though, we might want to help the child change these kangaroo feeding tracks, particularly if they aren't useful anymore. For example, being hyper vigilant for danger is really helpful when you are living through domestic violence, but not so helpful when you need to concentrate at school or when you are trying to develop trusting friendships with peers.

However, even though the child is now safe, it will take a long time, and lots and lots of repetitions for the child to learn new ways of responding, and for new 'kangaroo feeding tracks' to form. In moments of crisis, we may still see a child automatically 'revert back' to old ways of responding, even when they don't work well anymore.

The kangaroo feeding track metaphor reminds us that while change can happen, it takes time and practice for the brain to 'rewire' and for us to learn to do things differently. We cannot expect this process to be easy and hassle free - there will be challenges along the way and plenty of false starts, where our joeys will fall back into old patterns. Changing the brain is hard work!

So while the brain is rewiring, be patient, consistent, and above all, empathetic - both with your child and with yourself. Your kangaroo is learning to use new tracks too.