Gray Matters on Resurrecting Common Sense

“You can’t teach common sense.” Not only is this statement inaccurate, but the very notion of it lacks common sense in and of itself.

Let’s start with a clarification. What is common sense, exactly? The Oxford English dictionary defines it as: "*the ability to think about things in a practical way and make sensible decisions*." Sounds pretty straightforward. Why, then, do so many people seem to lack common sense? Let’s break this down a bit.

To *think about things in a practical way* is to purposefully ponder, consider, contemplate…mull over. In other words, it is done *intentionally*. It is accomplished by utilizing our cognitive abilities housed in the pre-frontal cortex which include decision making, impulse control, emotion regulation, long and short-term planning, judgment, and reasoning. These skills allow us access to higher thinking and is primarily what separates us from animals.

*Making sensible decisions* relates to doing what seems reasonable, or morally and socially responsible. It is about seeing the bigger picture beyond the seeming immediacy of the moment. Once you have weighed the options, considered the possible outcomes, tested your theory against similar situations (as well as your own moral compass), a conclusion can be reached with some degree of confidence.

These are all skills and abilities that are learned over time innately through hands-on experiences and through observing others who model these skills by example. When children are given choices and caretakers provide reasonable, age-appropriate information, children develop the ability to think critically about things. As early as 18 months, children are capable of thinking for themselves. Caretakers can further encourage independent thought by acknowledging and praising their accomplishments, thereby encouraging their sense of agency, purpose, and self-confidence.

There are some factors that can impede the development of or access to skills necessary for common sense. Drug and alcohol misuse and abuse impairs the development and function of the prefrontal cortex making it difficult if not impossible to access these important brain functions. Recent research indicates that the pre-frontal cortex does not fully mature in humans until they reach their late 20’s. If substance abuse occurs during those crucial developmental years prior to full maturation, it can impede the brain’s ability to fully develop, even to the point of no repair. Drug and alcohol abuse even in adulthood can greatly impact brain function during and in-between episodes of intoxication. These effects can be permanent, resulting in dementia-like symptoms.

Further impeding the presence of common sense is the speed at which society moves. Again, common sense requires thought. Thought requires time. It also requires patience, curiosity, and motivation. If someone has a low tolerance for frustration, they might make impulsive decisions without *thinking it through*. Ever hear that excuse? “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.” It might appear as a lack of common sense but may actually have more to do with seeking instant gratification.

Speaking of instant gratification, ‘smart technology’ is having an undeniable impact on our ability to *think for ourselves* as it constantly attempts (and largely fails) to think for us. This interferes with the natural curiosity that humans possess that encourages the desire to continuously learn, create, solve problems, etc. (Ever drive past your destination because GPS told you it was ahead on the right…?)

And the signs… don’t even get me started on the signs. The next time you pull up to an intersection, just notice how many signs there are instructing drivers and pedestrians to do this, don’t do that, and so on. Again, depleting humans of opportunities to *think for themselves*. Laws and rules in our society largely exist because people failed to apply common sense (and integrity). What’s worse, many laws and rules lack common sense of their own, making it difficult to know that you are even breaking them.

Children feel accomplished when they solve a problem. How many times have you heard a little one shout, “I did it!” This sense of accomplishment fuels their internal drive to *keep trying*. It gives them a sense of agency, purpose, and value. They feel inclined to figure things out. The hope is that this carries through into adulthood, encouraging them to be productive members of society who are thoughtful, self-aware, and have integrity in the things they do.

Starting today, slow it down. Take your time. Think things through. Pay attention to what you are doing while you are doing it. And breathe. Encourage your children to do the same. There may be intelligent life out there after all. We have far too much collective knowledge available to us as a society to accept anything less from ourselves… and one another.

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