

Prologue

The brain is our most precious and fragile organ. Our potential to love, solve problems, appreciate a joke, or navigate the complexities of human interactions completely depends on a healthy brain.

– Dr. Joseph M. Serpe, DC, BCN

I haven't taken a science class in thirty years, and I don't understand much of what I hear in the podcasts I subscribe to. But last week a guy was talking about "brain mapping," so I searched the web for "functional neurology" and "ADHD." Soon after, Facebook showed me an ad for the NeuroPlus Institute in Naperville, Illinois.

As I understand it, the brain map, a quantitative electroencephalogram, or qEEG, analyzes brainwaves—alpha, beta, theta, and delta—to show how well your brain is functioning. A forgetful woman who can't seem to get her chores done might show a lower frequency of beta, and maybe she'll have higher theta, which implies intuition and creativity. The doctor, any type who is certified in neurofeedback, uses a brain map to determine treatment.

The Facebook ad convinces me that this physician knows what he's doing as well as any of them do. He's got experience, degrees, certifications—lots of letters following his name. He's got a pleasant face and positive, although probably handpicked, reviews ("literally dozens upon dozens of real patients sharing their stories of positive change and hope"). The office is in a familiar shopping area, two suburbs closer to Chicago.

I decide to give brain mapping a try. On the phone, I learn I'll need to schedule my appointment the day before Thanksgiving. One of the many perks of teaching in a community college is that I get that whole week off, but my three kids will be home on break. Do I want to schedule time away from them?

I have an idea.

In a group text with Bruce and our kids, I write, “I just signed myself up for a brain map. Who wants to join me?” I include a link to the NeuroPlus website: “Discover Brain-Focused Wellness. Like cars, brains need a tune-up!”

Ethan, my oldest, responds immediately from Texas. *Okay. In.* He’s working toward a doctorate in physical therapy from Baylor University. Ethan was diagnosed with ADHD in third grade. I knew he’d be curious.

Annie, the youngest, is a nursing major at the University of Iowa. *Sure*, she replies. When Annie was in high school, she convinced me to take her through the ADHD screening process at our local clinic. I’d resisted because I thought she was perfect already, but when she said she had trouble focusing while driving, I relented. She was diagnosed sophomore year.

Ben, also at Iowa, a senior studying speech and hearing science, says, *Yes*. He, too, wanted to be tested as a teen, but I never brought him in. Lack of attention was not his problem. A bit of anxiety, maybe. Low self-esteem. Not ADHD. And I was sure that if he entered the clinic, he’d leave with a prescription. I’d never known anyone to go through that screening process and come out clean.

Bruce is the last to chime in. *Mmmm*, he writes. *Brain nap*.

In the kitchen I ask him to be serious.

“What is this thing?” he says. “A brain ... map?”

I sit at the island, watching him load the dishwasher. These days we have a system. I place my dirty dishes on the countertop in the precise manner that he has requested: plates cleared and stacked, silverware corralled inside a cup. Nothing in the sink. If I follow these instructions, he will do all the work of loading and unloading, every day. He’s eleven years older than I am, in his sixth year of retirement after a long career as a chemical engineer. He enjoys

being home—mowing the lawn, managing our finances, caring for our two dogs. When the kids are home, Bruce does their dishes and laundry. He has always been better at this stuff than I am.

“Yes, a brain map,” I say. “They cover your head with a nylon cap that holds sensors over certain parts of your brain; they squeeze in some gel and measure electrical activity—brainwaves.”

He continues loading the bowls. “Why would we want to do that?”

I first heard the term “neurofeedback” several years ago. Another mother I knew worked as a technician at a neuro clinic similar, I think, to this one, and she mentioned a few times that her kids had benefitted from treatment—it improved their grades and confidence. I was polite, but I thought she was a kook. The doctors at our ADHD clinic had never said anything about neurofeedback.

“It could be interesting to see what’s really going on in there,” I say to Bruce. “Just for fun.” I pull up the website and read to him: “We don’t use drugs or surgery. Instead, our clinical approach is a scientific, evidence-based method fused to a self-styled combination of alternative and western medicines.”

Bruce knows I’m interested in functional medicine. He knows I’ve lost faith in traditional doctors. “How much is it?” He also knows that functional medicine is often not covered by health insurance. In one of my podcasts, Mark Hyman, a physician at the Cleveland Clinic Center for Functional Medicine, said it takes seventeen years for the latest science to become mainstream.

I discovered these podcasts five years ago when I was one hundred pounds overweight, prediabetic, and taking meds for high blood pressure and ADHD. I found the trend of biohacking, which, according to another podcast guru, Dave Asprey, is “the art and science of

changing the environment around you and inside you so you have more control over your own biology.” The idea of taming the chaos of my particular body appealed to me.

“They’ve got a special deal going,” I tell Bruce. “For eighty bucks you get the scan and a consultation, where they compare your results to a *normal* brain.” Pause. “Of course if they see problems, the doctor offers a treatment plan, which would cost more money.”

He places the silverware in the basket, always with the business ends up. Whenever I attempt to help, he critiques my less methodical ways, handing me an excuse to stay away.

“What kind of treatment?”

“Neurofeedback,” I say. “They use a computer to train your brain, which apparently can fix ADHD, addiction, anxiety, depression, memory problems. They say the changes are permanent.”

I’ve gone too far, too fast. “No thanks,” he says. “I’ve seen *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.”

So it’ll be just me and the kids going for brain maps.

Eighty bucks each. Is it worth it to scratch a weird, pseudo-scientific itch? I just wonder what the scan will reveal.

I continue reading from the NeuroPlus website: “We listen to your medical history and your past struggles. Then, the doctor will step back and try to determine what is slightly out of focus.”

I make the appointments.