Find your footing in the water: Opinion on getting psychotherapists interested in neurofeedback

By Christine Tyrrell Baker, PhD

Most psychotherapists are interested in the mind, not the brain. This is good, because the most substantial changes I see from neurofeedback are related to how the mind filters information. When someone comes into my practice and experiences pIR HEG non-invasive prefrontal neurofeedback, I observe effects in several domains, the least of which is that symptoms improve. Many interventions will instigate improvement in symptoms. What is more interesting from a mind perspective is the impact neurofeedback has on the way people perceive their stressors, resources, and opportunities.

People have the same losses. traumas, difficult relationships, work stress, and health challenges as before but the way they relate to them starts to shift. They begin to see challenging moments as experiences they can navigate, rather than as evidence that they are sinking. One of the most striking changes is the level of stress people can tolerate. It is sometimes hard to tell how overwhelmed people really are until you start paying attention to all the things they avoid in their lives. When nervous systems are dysregulated and overwhelmed, tension relief is an automatic and pressing demand. As such, people engage in experiential avoidance as a main strategy for regulation. They avoid conflict, they avoid emotions, they avoid reflecting, they avoid the decisions they need to make, they avoid social engagements and sometimes even leaving the house. When effects from neurofeedback take hold, these patterns change. They suddenly face things that they have been avoiding or they simply stop saying “no” to them in an automatic, choiceless way. They don’t need pep talks or exposure techniques, their nervous system simply no longer sends the signals that tell them to stop, to move away from the activity that creates stress activation. They can handle it. Rather than seeing themselves as “stuck”, “sensitive” “passive”, “too emotional”, or “overreactive”, they start to see themselves as “steady”, “in control”, and “capable.” The power of this change in self-perception cannot be overstated. It is the difference between swimming and sinking. It is the difference between being able to keep your eyes open as new opportunities present and steer toward them or staying stuck on the island that keeps life small so that tension can be mitigated.

We know from the copious amount of research on attachment that when children feel safe on the inside, they naturally are drawn to exploring their worlds. When brains learn through neurofeedback, nervous systems start to feel safer. And in a natural way, minds become more attuned, more open, freer, and able to locate the oasis of resources in the white caps. What’s more, people develop the distinct confidence to move toward those resources with both the authority and the willingness to persist despite the challenges. New challenges are more likely to be interpreted as learning opportunities, as new horizons to explore. The mind becomes naturally geared to integrate new information into existing maps rather than to block it out. People discover novel problem-solving approaches, leaning into flexibility and curiosity. They can relearn emotional literacy in a new somatic environment where the sirens of danger are less present. Neurofeedback may focus on brain learning, but reflective learning is the thing that will matter most in people's lives. The ability to observe one's own behaviors and learn from their experiences helps them to become accomplished seamen, ready for the unpredictable and able to solve problems as they surface. With a new ability to reflect and learn, their relationships reshape themselves. An enhanced ability to communicate with clarity and live within healthy boundaries creates new possibilities and relief from cyclical relational storms.

Neurofeedback does not solve people's problems but it can promote the mindset that is optimal for solving them. All of these mind changes are common to see within 5-10 sessions of pIR HEG neurofeedback. I know from learning about other neurofeedback approaches and speaking at length with colleagues that these changes in the mind are common across neurofeedback approaches. When the brain engages in new learning (using the brain in a new way with immediate "feedback"), the frontal lobe's power to inhibit the limbic system increases and executive function improves.

Given the impact on how the mind processes stress, invitations for psychotherapists to experience neurofeedback themselves could be an effective strategy. Most of us therapists know the impact our clinical work has on our nervous systems. We witness the swells of emotional pain in our clients, we absorb their panic, helplessness, and at times recklessness. With our schedules jammed, we jump from one shaking dock to the next, hoping not to fall in. In fact, pressure is so great that it is often seen as a luxury to have time to think, plan, and consult with colleagues. We persist despite the headwinds of insurance, tricky conversations, and demands to learn new ethical and evidence-based strategies without any time to do so. Often it may feel like simply "surviving" the whirlpool of these demands. So many of us find ourselves feeling "overwhelmed and alone", a combination that inherently fosters heightened activation in the threat centers of the brain. Every time I give a talk about neurofeedback to a group of mental health professionals, I get a cascade of emails after. Almost none of them say "I want to know more about this for my clients." Instead, most of them express "needing" neurofeedback for themselves or a family member. When I describe neurofeedback's effects on the mind, it resonates with therapists on a personal and intuitive level. Psychotherapists may be able to more clearly see the possibilities for neurofeedback in their practice through their own observed experiences and once their own tide has receded a bit.