



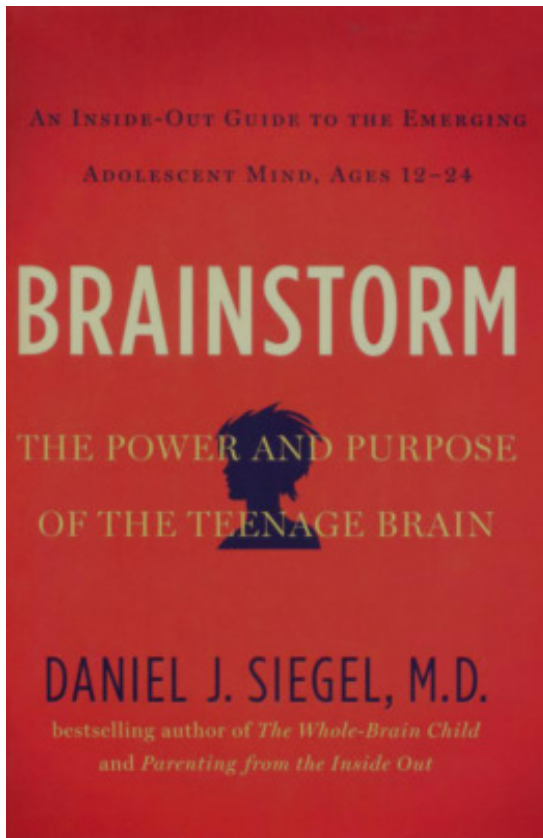
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'Captures the angst of the teenage years'

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"Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain" by Daniel J. Siegel. New York: The Penguin Group, 2014. 321 pages, \$27.95.



“Adolescence is a time of great boundary pushing that can be challenging and create catastrophes; but this pushing-back propensity can also be a remarkably positive, essential part of our lives,” Daniel J. Siegel asserts in “Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain,” his latest bestseller. “Our challenge is to engage and explore ways to push at life’s boundaries without driving a hundred miles an hour down a public street and killing someone in our path.”

Siegel is a professor of psychiatry in the School of Medicine at the University of California at Los Angeles. He also serves as executive director of the Mindsight Institute, an educational center promoting greater understanding, compassion and empathy in individuals, families, institutions and communities. His previous books include “Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation,” “The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are” and “The Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology: An Integrative Handbook of the Mind.” He is also the founding

editor of the Norton Professional Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology. Siegel lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children.

There is little doubt Siegel is knowledgeable about his subject matter. His eloquent prose flows effortlessly off every page into the consciousness of the reader. What he offers as advice makes perfect sense on first pass and resonates with anyone who has had the privilege of dealing with teenagers. On the other hand, there are times when I felt like I was reading one of those self-help books that take up a disproportionate amount of shelf space at the local bookstore. If it were not for his credentials and some prior exposure to his more scholarly pursuits, it would be easy to lump him in with all the other self-proclaimed experts out there who woke up one morning and decided to write a book about something they found interesting.

“Brainstorm” is basically comprised of four rather lengthy chapters that explore Siegel’s chosen subject matter from a fairly comprehensive perspective. He also provides a rather brief conclusion at the end in which the author attempts to tie everything together conceptually. An interesting addition is the inclusion of “Mindsight Tools” scattered liberally throughout the book

– primarily at the end of each chapter. As the author explains, “Mindsight is the ability to truly ‘see’ or know the mind. It’s a word I created years ago in medical school when I found out that many of my professors lacked this ability – or at least didn’t exercise it well with their patients, or their students. In the ‘Mindsight Tools’ sections we’ll explore practical ways you can strengthen your mind, make your brain more flexible and resilient, and improve your relationships.”

I have little doubt many readers probably had the same reaction I did when I first encountered this description of the exercises Siegel added to the book in an effort to make the ideas he presents more meaningful and practical. It is apparent the author wants us to do more than just read and reflect thoughtfully on his insights and suggestions. He wants us to actually experience how these revelations can precipitate positive change and qualitatively enhance our interactions with teenagers.

And although the activities he describes appear to be germane to achieving the deeper understanding Siegel feels is essential to interact more productively with adolescents, they also have a kind of cult-like feel that can be distracting and even disconcerting to some readers. For instance: “A time-in practice that is specifically designed to integrate consciousness is called the Wheel of Awareness. In our daily lives, there are many aspects of our conscious experience, of what we are aware of and the nature of our awareness itself.” Sometimes I had to remind myself I was reading a book by an imminent psychiatrist as opposed to L. Ron Hubbard.

At the same time, I did relate to much of Siegel’s narrative. He manages to capture the angst of the teenage years and the sense of loss when one moves beyond them in a subtle yet poignant manner: “When adults lose the four distinguishing features of adolescence, when they stop cultivating the power of novelty seeking, social engagement, emotional intensity and creative exploration, life can become boring, isolating, dull and routinized. Who would intentionally choose to live like that?”

One glaring omission from Siegel’s tome is an extensive bibliography or reference section listing the literature and research studies on which the ideas presented are built.

In fact, “Brainstorm” contains very few citations and seems purposefully oriented toward the general population – particularly anyone who has to interact with adolescents. It’s not that the information and potential enlightenment Siegel presents is not useful or relevant. As a parent who has raised one teenager to adulthood and is currently working to get his brother to the same place, I found myself agreeing with the author at numerous points throughout the text.

The adolescent brain is one of the true mysteries of human existence, and any recommendations on how to better deal with it are always welcome. Without the benefit of knowing exactly where Siegel derived some of his proposed interventions, however, it was sometimes challenging to decide how much credence they actually deserve.

Still, the book is not without some redeeming value. If you are completely clueless about how to deal with your teenager – or if you are a teenager searching for reasons for your thoughts, feelings and behaviors, you would probably find “Brainstorm” to be informative.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*