



The Science Behind the Secret

©2007 Roxanne Schreiber, Ph.D.

www.empowermenttherapist.com

Unless you have been under a rock for the last six months you have probably heard someone mention “The Secret”. Although originally sold exclusively over the Internet and advertised only by word of mouth, this DVD/book, written and produced by Rhonda Byrne has skyrocketed to the top selling DVD/book in the world.

Featured on Oprah, Larry King, Ellen, the View, and written about in most of the world newspapers, something about this book’s message has resonated strongly with the human population.

What exactly is “The Secret?”

As indicated in the following direct quotes from “The Secret” (Byrne, 2006), the book proposes that people can create what they want and desire in their lives by applying the law of attraction (see bold below for definition) and activating the power of their thoughts.

- *The great secret of life is the law of attraction.*
- *The law of attraction is a law of nature. It is as impartial as the law of gravity.*
- ***The law of attraction says that like attracts like so when you think a thought you are attracting like thoughts to you.***
- *Your current thoughts are creating your future life. What you think about the most will appear in your life.*
- *Your thoughts become things.*

Criticisms of “The Secret”

Although “The Secret’s” message has strongly resonated with the world population, there have also been several criticisms. The first and foremost is the lack of scientific data supporting the book’s claims. The second is the lack of success people are reporting in their ability to manifest the physical (new dream job, successful romantic relationship) through the power of their thoughts.

Purpose of this article

This article addresses these criticisms, first providing a scientific context in which “The Secret’s” premise can be easily understood and supported, and then identifying the missing link that is causing the failures in the application of this theory. Concrete strategies in overcoming this missing link are also provided.

More specifically, utilizing the context of brain science, this article demonstrates how the law of attraction can actually modify the wiring of the human brain, creating different physical results in the world. In fact, the same qualities essential to the Secret's theory—attention, repetition, and time—are the very things that create, modify, and maintain neural pathways in the human brain. Through an integration of the following topics, this article provides a step by step scientific blueprint, that when followed, consistently produces the dramatic and immediate results people are wanting in their lives.

- How the brain makes sense of the world
- Limitations of this brain wiring
- Where “The Secret” fails
- Incorporation of brain wiring to correct that failure
- Blueprint to rewire the brain
- Stunning, immediate, profound, and dramatic results

How the brain makes sense and organizes the world

Neural pathways

Upon birth, the human infant is immediately and continuously bombarded by overwhelming amounts of new information or stimuli (new smells, tastes, sights, sounds etc.). Because the amount of information is so vast, so new, and so overwhelming, one of the brain's primary tasks is to create some type of categorization or meaning-making system that will filter and assimilate this information.

The meaning-making system, partially present before birth, consists of trillions of neural pathways. These neural pathways are developed and modified by life experiences and continue to change throughout the life span. More specifically, life experience or exposure to certain stimuli, determines which neural pathways remain and which ones get “pruned” or destroyed.

Consistent with the law of attraction, the pathways that get attention and reinforcement are kept and those that do not, are eliminated. If the created pathway receives the attention and experience it needs to remain in the brain, it then serves as a “pattern recognizer,” upon which additional information is compared and assimilated. The meaning-making process is the same in humans and animals and is demonstrated in the following examples.

Human infants are born with the ability to hear all sounds of the human language—the French *U* in du, the Spanish *N*, and the English, *Th* and *L*. If an infant does not continue to hear those particular sounds the neural pathways corresponding to those particular sounds are eliminated (e.g., Japanese who have learned English as adults cannot hear or pronounce the English *L*).

Similarly, if kittens are blindfolded during their critical developmental period for vision, they do not receive the necessary visual stimuli needed to maintain their visual neural pathways. Therefore, those pathways get eliminated (pruned) and the kittens remain blind for the rest of their lives.

For comparison purposes, it is important to consider cases in which the brain's meaning-making system does not work. Some theorists believe that the debilitating disorder of Autism is one such example. They posit that an autistic person's brain fails to remove unused neural pathways. This excess of pathways then results in a confusing cacophony of overwhelming information

continuously bombarding that person's brain. Because the amount of information/stimuli is so overwhelming and so nonsensical (no attached meaning), the autistic person is forced to retreat deep within as a way of coping and surviving.

Experiences must be repetitive, distinct, and occur over a span of time

If the brain's categorization system is working, however, the life experiences creating and reinforcing the neural pathway need to be *repetitive; distinct, and occur over a span of time* (the same qualities endorsed by the theory of "The Secret"). The following vignette provides an example of this process.

A man is dropped off in the center of a village marketplace in a 3rd world country. He has no former knowledge or experience of this new country's language, customs, or values. He has no guide, no interpreter. All he has is the meaning making system in his brain.

Upon arriving, the man feels immediately overwhelmed by the constant and jarring presence of unfamiliar sounds, sights, smells, and temperatures. He notices the people gesturing wildly and speaking in loud voices, but he is not able to make out any meaningful words. Several times he is almost run over by carts, bicycles, and motorcycles. Retching when he sees a display of raw food, he begins to wonder what he will eat in this strange place. The heat is overwhelming and he feels faint and light-headed.

A week passes and the man continues to be exposed to the new stimuli. Without warning his brain suddenly begins to recognize **patterns** in certain sounds, movements, and smells. That sound means—*food*, that one—*bed*, that one—*watch out, there is a cart coming!* After repeated observations and near-miss experiences, his brain begins to detect the invisibly marked cart pathway and he becomes adept at avoiding the traffic. Repeated exposure to the various smells, leads to the identification of smells which are associated with foods he likes, and foods he needs to avoid. His body has somehow acclimated to the heat and he no longer feels faint or light-headed.

As his brain continues to categorize all of the new stimuli (that were distinct, repetitive and occurred over a period of time) into meaningful neural pathways, the man feels less overwhelmed, and has more mental space to process additional information. Building upon that framework of understanding, he is then able to learn more about the customs, values, and ways of this new culture, and how he can function effectively within this new environment.

Foundation for all future learning experiences

As neural pathways get reinforced through experience, they serve as the foundation upon which **all** new information is interpreted.

To illustrate this point, think of the first thing a baby does when given a new toy. Yes, she immediately puts it into her mouth. Using their mouths is the primary way that infants experience or explore their new world, taking the new object and comparing and contrasting how this new thing compares to what they sucked/chewed on two hours ago.

Continuing this point, learning to read takes place by building upon successively more and more complex neural pathways (the individual letters, their sounds, then combinations of those sounds) until the process of reading becomes an automatic skill.

The brain's astonishing capacity to not only categorize vast amounts of information; but then to build upon those existing categories for the mastery and storage of increasingly more complex information, allows humans to make sense of a world, that would otherwise be an overwhelming mass of confusing information.

Limitations of this process can be severe

Although building upon existing pathways has been shown to be very efficient in making sense of the physical world, sometimes relying upon past experiences to interpret new information—particularly subjective information—can be damagingly restrictive. This is most clearly evident in the brain's construction of "*personal reality*"—basically what a person believes about himself, other people and the world in general. These subjective belief systems are created, maintained, and stored as neural pathways.

Most theorists assert that belief systems about self, others, and the world are firmly entrenched by the age of seven, and remain strongly resistant to change throughout the life span. Because these beliefs are formulated from a very limited amount of life experience (0 to 7 years) with a very small number of people (immediate family and perhaps daycare), it follows that these belief systems would also be quite narrow in their scope and perhaps not truly representative of self or society as a whole.

(e.g., My father left the family when I was six and my mom began to work two jobs and was never home. It became clear that I wasn't important, no one cared about me, and people leave).

This is a good example of a belief system that might make sense to this six year old but is not necessarily representative of the truth.

The picture only worsens from here. Because the brain is wired to not question its initial categorization of information, these early belief systems get stored as the *reality*, upon which all future information is filtered. In other words, because the brain needs the world to make sense, it is wired to pay attention only to information that confirms or validates what it has decided is the *truth* and to dismiss any information that might be discrepant.

Following, if a six year old has decided that she is not important or not cared about, her brain will be searching for information that proves she is right and will automatically dismiss information that indicates she might be wrong.

(e.g., I knew I wasn't important and it became more and more apparent that I was right because of the way my friends would sometimes ignore me and my teachers never responded to me. My mom tried to make it up to me when she remarried but I knew she was faking it because she felt guilty for not really loving me. My dad eventually came back too, but I knew he would leave again. That's just what people do).

Again, it is important to recall that the more attention, repetition, and time given to neural pathways the more they become reinforced and automatic. Similar to the law of attraction, as the developing child focuses on those early belief systems, looking for outside validation

and confirmation, he/she is **attracting** similar thoughts, until eventually those thoughts get manifested as reality.

(e.g., I knew my so called friends didn't really care about me so I cut off contact just to see what they would do, and sure enough only two of them bothered to find out what was wrong, and they acted like I had done something wrong. I can't trust anyone to truly care).

Although the examples provided in this section are deliberately extreme for demonstration purposes, it is imperative that people understand **all of what they believe and hold to be true is created and maintained within this very faulty system**—that what they have considered and accepted as an **accurate** and valid assessment of reality is actually:

- based on a 7 year olds' mentality and experience
- strongly resistant to examination and thus, change or modification
- subconsciously recreated, and chronically reinforced throughout the life span.

Given that early decisions of reality continuously affect the interpretation of every subsequent event and relationship in that person's life span, it follows that these early realities become self-fulfilling prophecies with little chance for modification or release. Attempting to create something that differs from these core belief systems is very difficult.

In summary, it is clear how the brain's creation, maintenance, and destruction of belief systems can all be influenced by the law of attraction. The brain pays attention to what it believes is the truth; the more that "truth" receives attention, time, and repetition, the more ingrained and hard wired that truth becomes; until eventually that truth is manifested in the world as a physical reality. Similarly, if the "truth" does not receive attention, time, or repetition, it is destroyed, and therefore not manifested in physical reality.

If the law of attraction can influence brain wiring why does "The Secret" fail?

"The Secret" teaches that people can manifest anything they want in their lives through the law of attraction and the power of their thoughts. Although the idea sounds exciting, and for some reason has struck a chord with the world population, there are several reasons why many people fail in their ability to manifest physical results, solely through the power of their thoughts.

The good news is that this failure is easily understood in the context of the human brain, but even more exciting, **success** is also easily understood and readily available within that same context!

First, the struggle:

Because people's belief systems are so firmly entrenched—a lifetime has been spent proving that they are valid—creating something that is discrepant (e.g., becoming a millionaire) from their original beliefs (e.g., I'm not good with money; I'm not worthy), is very difficult, no matter how hard they practice the power of their thoughts.

Research shows that 90% of all lottery winners return to previous socioeconomic status because of lack of changes in their basic belief systems.

Second, because these belief systems are stored in the subconscious as **reality**, accessing, much less modifying them can be quite difficult.

I want to create an amazing relationship with a man but I can't seem to make myself trust them. Something always holds me back, but I don't know what.

Third, and the most important, when applying the strategies taught in "The Secret", **almost all people are trying to create something that is discrepant from their core belief systems**. This is because most people obtain their goals/dreams fairly easily, without a lot of strife, if those dreams do not differ from that person's core belief systems. In other words, they obtain it, because that is what they expect from themselves. It is only when people's goals/dreams differ from their core belief systems that they would need assistance in reaching or obtaining them.

A person who has a core belief that he is smart obtains his Ph.D. with no significant difficulty, however attempts to do well in business are continually stymied because of a subconscious core belief that he is not good with people.

Now for the success: Utilizing brain wiring may be the *real* Secret

As humans understand how the brain creates and stores information, utilization of that very wiring is available to erase old disempowering belief systems, and to create new empowering ones. Equipped with that knowledge, overcoming the brain's hard wiring can happen **quickly, effectively, and permanently**.

The following steps are necessary for initiating and completing the rewiring process. Continuous practice of them produces the dramatic and immediate results people are wanting in their lives.

1. Accept that personal reality is made up or constructed, not the *truth*
2. Create a goal/dream that is rewarding enough to withstand the rigors of change
3. Identify specifically what is wanted
4. Surround self with stimuli that represent the new reality/goal
5. Take the step.

1. Personal reality is constructed/made up

In the first part of the rewiring process people have to understand that their belief systems are not the *truth*, but rather something a seven year old decided based on a limited amount of experience with a limited amount of people. Until that is understood and accepted, old ways of thinking are not open to modification.

This first step is usually the most difficult and also the most necessary. However, when people finally allow themselves to embrace this concept there is a great deal of instant empowerment and freedom.

*For example, in the context of Constructivism Psychology, the emphasis of therapy is not on what happened that was disturbing or hurtful, but rather on the story the person's brain **constructed** or **made up** about what happened (e.g., A woman who was abused as a child may have decided: "I'm damaged; others aren't trustworthy; the world is not a fair or safe place").*

*The moment the woman understands that these core beliefs are simply stories that she made up in response to the abuse, and that they are not representative of her or the truth, her life is **instantly** and **permanently** changed and empowered.*

Identifying and modifying disempowering belief systems is necessary to successfully create something new and positive. Attempts to own a company, or to have one's dream job, are likely to fail if a person fundamentally believes that she is undeserving or unworthy. No matter how positive one thinks, or how consistently they apply the law of attraction, the underlying belief systems will prevail because subconsciously the person is still looking for reinforcements of that fundamental belief system.

2. Goal/dream must be rewarding enough to get through the rigors of change

Although the emotional process of change can be exhilarating, most of the time it is identified as difficult, traumatic, and scary. This is understandable in the context of brain science. Giving up what is known, to create something new requires a great deal of time, patience, and mental energy. It is further complicated by the fact that creating major changes in a person's life (leaving safe corporate job to open private company) can differ dramatically from established core beliefs, therefore causing even more cognitive dissonance or mental unease. In fact, stepping outside of one's comfort zone to pursue something, once thought unobtainable, will occur as quite unsettling.

Who do I think I am trying to open my own company when I couldn't even complete college? I'm just a failure and if I really go for this and fail, then everyone will have been right about me and I'll never be able to face myself.

Because of the high degree of discomfort associated with change, most people are extremely resistant to this process. Therefore, significant changes usually require people being forced from their comfortable nests in dramatic ways. Divorce, death of a loved one, and a major move are all examples of this type of dramatic push, and are identified the top three stressors a person can experience in his/her lifetime.

Therefore, if change is not forced, or if there is not a significantly high reward associated with the change, people are very quick to run back to what is *known* (old neural pathways). This is evident even when what is known, is not necessarily what is safe or beneficial (e.g., battered women returning to their abusive husbands).

On the positive side, most people report being glad that they went through major life-changing experience as it forced them to discover inner strengths that they never knew existed. Many cancer survivors have identified cancer as the worst thing that has ever happened to them, and the best. Divorced women often report being surprised by their new found levels of independence, inner strength, and self-confidence.

In summary, the process of change is often so scary for people, that it requires creation of something that either forces them out of their comfort zone, or creation of something that is so rewarding they will actually go through the rigors that change encompasses.

3. Identification of the new reality/dream needs to be specific and detailed.

People often struggle with identifying what they really want. When asked the following question: *If you were living the life of your dreams what would that look like?* Three specific problems consistently emerge:

- Vagueness
- Rationality/practicality
- Focusing on what isn't wanted

All of those problems are indicative of a need to remain in what is known and safe. Being vague really keeps a person from identifying what they want. Answers of: "I would be successful; a better mother; a better spouse," do not provide the specific information the brain needs to create a new pathway. The description of the desire should be so specific that the brain can actually taste, smell, feel, hear and see that different reality. Failure to give the brain that new information leads to a reliance upon, or a return to what is already known, or a previously established belief systems. An example of a clearly identified want is as follows:

I want to work 4 hours a day and gross \$350,000 this year. I get to spend at least 2 hours a day in quality time with my children, meaning we are doing something together, (shopping reading, arts and crafts) and having meaningful conversations that bring us closer together. I also am vacationing three times a year and will have taken my children to Europe within the next two years.

Another common pitfall is people voicing their dreams and in the next breath giving all of the rational and practical reasons why they can't possibly accomplish it.

(e.g., You know...I've always wanted to write a book but I work full-time and I have 3 children and there is just no way).

It is important to reiterate here that what receives attention, time, and repetition, gets reinforced, validated, and strengthened. Therefore, the more people talk about their excuses, the stronger and more real those excuses become, and consequently, the more difficult those excuses are to overcome.

Similarly, talking or thinking about what **isn't** wanted in a person's life—the 3rd common pitfall—also leads to a reinforcement of that very thing. Because the human brain cannot process "no" or a negative, thinking about things that are NOT wanted actually leads to an automatic reinforcement of them. To demonstrate the brain's inability to understand "no", consider the following exercise.

Do not think of pink elephants in yellow tutus. Don't do it! I said, do NOT think of pink elephants in yellow tutus. What's your brain doing right now? Exactly. It is picturing those pink elephants because it cannot hear the "don't."

4. Surround oneself with stimuli that represent the new reality

Recalling the example of the blindfolded kittens, it is essential that the human brain is provided with stimuli in order to create a new neural pathway. Therefore, if the person has dreams of owning a multi-million dollar home, or buying a horse for his child, or taking that dream vacation, his brain needs to be seeing these objects as often as possible.

Collaging, creating dream boards, in which pictures are taken from magazines, or drawn helps give your brain some visual stimuli. Talking about the new reality, having conversations with

people who are currently living that reality, and continually fine-tuning exactly how it is going to look in your life also provides necessary stimuli.

Utilizing language is crucial in the creation process. For example, instead of saying, “I really wish I could have that promotion at work” say, “I’m creating that I received that promotion at work that it gives me a 20% raise and allows me to only work 30 hours a week.” Clear, precise, positive and present tense language is powerful and will also help build pathways. Surrounding oneself with a support system, who believe in the new reality or what is being created is also a must. Remember the old reality was created, confirmed, and validated by all the people in a person’s life. Creating a new one will require a similar level of validation.

5. Take the step

Again one of the hardest things to do is to take that initial step that puts someone outside of their comfort zone. But change requires action. A person has to be willing to take the steps to fulfill on his/her dream.

Author’s note

I am often approached by people that have difficulty reconciling some of this technology with their views on spirituality. For me the distinction between the two became crystal clear one weekend. I have been reading books about the human brain for the last 3 yrs and books about spirituality, religion, meditation, for my entire life. As I was reading one weekend, I had 17 books on my table about the human brain and about 3 times as many surrounding me about spirituality. When I got so crystal clear that everything in my life is made up from the constructions of my human brain, I immediately equated the human brain with the apple that Eve ate from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. I think that somewhere on a much deeper level there exists a greater knowing than what our fabulous but inefficient brain tries to teach us. Yes, we need to make sense of the world in order to function but what if we went back, afterwards and attempted to deconstruct the reality we created. What if we learned how to tap into something larger than we know ourselves to be and what would happen when we access that? When we go there, there is truth, there is power, there is something that we can’t even imagine and isn’t that what it is all about anyway?