

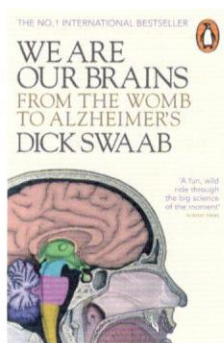
# We are our brains: from the womb to Alzheimer's

**Dick Swaab**

Penquin 2015

£9.99

ISBN 978-0141978239



With a keen interest in the role of neuroplasticity, the brain as a dynamic organ, and the extent to which psychotherapy changes the brain, the title of this book caught my attention and I was interested to read this author's perspective on the role of the brain in a lived experience. I have to say that ultimately I was disappointed, although the book was at times an entertaining read.

The first thing to point out is that this is not an academic text. It does not place research in context, nor does it seek to teach the basics of neurobiology and its role and function in the talking therapies. For psychotherapists and counsellors, Schore's *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self* and Cozolino's *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy* are excellent texts for these purposes. *We Are Our Brains* is a different sort of book, of the popular psychology type – unreferenced and based on personal experience and opinion – yet nonetheless entertaining and informative to a degree.

It is based on a series of columns that the author wrote for the Dutch newspaper NRC, in response to readers' questions. The general thesis of the book is that we are born with our existence shaped and predetermined by our genetic inheritance and development in the womb. According to Swaab, these factors limit us. We are essentially incapable of change once born because our brain has a fixed anatomy that limits and defines us. Environmental influence, according to his argument, is limited to the chemical environment within the womb.

These elements form the basic premise that underlies the

discussion of a range of topics in the book. Chapters include consciousness, aggression, sexual behaviour, sexuality, addiction, schizophrenia, autism, memory, and Alzheimer's, as referred to in the title. Swaab also devotes chapters to other topics which at times seem to have little association with the brain and its function, and feel more like comments on social life and personal choices – his exploration of religion, for example, or euthanasia, assisted death, or even free will, seem to move into the areas of philosophical debate.

The book has plenty of anecdotes and personal stories to illustrate the author's position on the fixity of the brain. These are interesting and give some justification to his thesis, but overall I found that this book and the arguments presented are at odds with my belief in the role, purpose and benefits of psychotherapy. For practitioners, it might be useful as light, entertaining, background reading, but its thesis is not well aligned with the practice of psychotherapy and counselling.

---

**Liz Jeffries** is a transactional analysis psychotherapist in private practice in South Manchester