

TRAIN YOUR BRAIN #8
POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND TAKING IN THE GOOD
9/11/07

© Rick Hanson, PhD and Rick Mendius, MD
drh@comcast.net jrichardmendius@aol.com

Perspectives on Positive Emotion

Starting with the work of the humanistic psychologists in the 1950's, such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, there has been a growing study of the benefits of positive states of mind. And this has really taken off in the past 10 years or so with the whole "positive psychology" movement, championed by scholars such as Martin Seligman.

So what's so great about feeling good?! Isn't the interest in feeling good just more American narcissism?

Well, actually not.

For most people, the point of living boils down to one or more of these three things:

- Quality of life
- Contribution
- Learning

So if you have been wondering what you're doing here on this earth, you might look to one or more of those categories!

Positive emotions serve all three of them:

- Quality of life – Positive feelings, such as contentment, happiness, satisfaction, pleasure, enjoyment, love, friendliness, curiosity, enthusiasm, gratitude, awe, etc. are at the heart of quality of life.
- Contribution – Depressed people can contribute a lot, to be sure, but on the whole, we are more likely to sustain our contributions over time, and dare great things, the more that we are optimistic and reasonably

happy. For example, studies have shown that people are more inclined to be generous when they feel happy.

- Learning – Whether it's academic content or psychological growth or spiritual awakening, we have more free attention for learning, more capacity to absorb what we learn, and more zest for the long haul process if we feel fairly good.

So, that's the big picture.

More specifically, there's been a lot of research on positive emotions, and it has found seven major benefits:

1. Positive emotions promote energy, vigor, pep, and sheer *aliveness*
2. They counteract depressive mood and anxiety
3. They activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which both (A) downregulates the sympathetic nervous system, reducing production of stress hormones and related, unpleasant feelings, and (B) relaxes the body (especially the smooth muscles of the core).
4. They increase overall resilience, such as recovery from stressful experiences.
5. They promote relationships; we are more inclined to connect with others when our mood is lifted, and frankly, we are more likely to get a positive reaction when we are sunny not grouchy, and optimistic not gloomy.
6. These psychological and social benefits have physical health benefits as well, particularly through supporting immune system function.
7. These various benefits promote contemplative practice. For example, positive emotions help steady the mind through reducing distractions, and quieting it through bringing relaxation and drawing

attention into the body. In a Buddhist context, *"happiness is skillful means."* Joy is one of the seven factors of enlightenment, and two kinds of happiness – rapture or bliss, and joy – are factors for extremely deep states of concentration called "jhanas."

A Happiness Trip

A Word about Experiential Exercises

Just below, we'll be suggesting an exercise you could do. So here are some framing comments about experiential activities in general.

These are designed to train your brain in important inner skills in the context of a course, not psychotherapy; this course is no substitute for professional care of body, mind, or spirit. Even though we aim for gentle and self-nurturing activities, still, sometimes exercises bring things up – especially if a person has had traumatic experiences in the past, or is currently in the middle of a difficult relationship.

Be kind to yourself first and foremost; as they say, *"First of all, do no harm."* Feel free to skip an exercise, pull out of it once it starts, or deliberately take a fairly superficial and safe slice at it. And if anything comes up for you that is significantly difficult, we invite you to talk with us at the breaks, or contact us afterwards.

Also, please know that some of the exercises will suggest that you try to become aware of something, or do something, within your own mind. If you are unable to become aware of or do that something, that is alright. Maybe that is a sign to yourself to be cautious and take your time with that particular material. Or a sign to investigate it further, on your own.

This course also makes reference to contemplative activities. We hold these not in any context of religious advocacy, but as tools for personal well-being and development whose foundation in brain science is being increasingly established. And of the contemplative traditions, the one we are most familiar with is Buddhism, so we tend to write in terms of it. But there is no attempt here to "convert" anyone to anything, and it is fine to relate to the material in the class however you like. As the Buddha

himself said, see for yourself, always judging within your own independent mind what seems to be true and useful.

Introduction to the Exercise

We'll going to suggest various things for you to bring to mind that could evoke positive feelings in you. Whatever comes up for you is fine, but if you can, also try to help yourself feel good.

You may notice some resistance to feeling good, perhaps expressed simply as a tightening in your body, and becoming more aware of that resistance is part of the exercise.

But as much as you can, try to be on your own side and let the good feelings grow inside your mind and heart and body . . . filling you . . . you existing inside a field of good feelings.

Alright, here we go.

Instructions

Get comfortable, eyes open or closed.

Take a moment to notice your body.

Get a feeling for your breath. Notice your body breathing fine on its own. And if there is anything uncomfortable about noticing your breath, you could put your attention in your feet or simply look at some part of this room.

Alright, now if you like, recall or imagine a place you like being . . . Perhaps reading in bed . . . Or being at the beach . . . Or a mountain meadow . . . Anywhere you like . . . Try to open up to the positive feelings that come with being in that place . . . Perhaps a sense of comfort . . . of contentment . . . of belonging . . . of safety . . . of happiness . . .

OK, now if you like, recall or imagine being with someone you like being with, or more than one person . . . Perhaps a friend . . . Or a family

member Or a child . . . Or a partner Or a teacher of some kind . . .
 . Anyone you like . . . Try to open up to the positive feelings that come
 with being with those people . . . Perhaps a sense of comfort . . . of
 contentment . . . of belonging . . . of safety . . . of happiness . . .

OK, now if you like, recall or imagine doing something you enjoy . . .
 Perhaps eating something delicious . . . Or enjoying a smell you like,
 such as wood smoke, or oranges, or sea breeze, or the scent of someone
 you love Or an activity you like a lot, such as cooking, or doing
 something athletic, or lovemaking, or watching the ballet, or playing a
 musical instrument or making art . . . Or any other activities you like . . .
 Try to open up to the positive feelings that come with doing those things
 . . . Perhaps a sense of comfort . . . of contentment . . . of belonging . . . of
 safety . . . of happiness . . .

OK, last, if you like, recall or imagine a sense of different positive
 feelings . . . For example, see if you can get a sense of calm, peacefulness,
 or tranquility . . . If you like, see if you can get a sense of ease, of
 contentment, of things being alright . . . If you like, see if you can get a
 sense of friendliness, or caring, or even love for others . . . If you like, see
 if you can get a sense of happiness, even mild happiness . . . perhaps
 quickening and getting stronger with a vigorous inhalation . . . maybe
 even a sense of strong happiness, perhaps intensifying in your body and
 face . . . even a sense of joy . . .

As you like, take another minute here to explore evoking positive
 emotions yourself . . .

Alright.

What was that like? How do you feel now, compared to when we began?

Did you encounter any inhibition of or resistance to positive emotions?
 How was that experienced by you?

What did you learn about experiencing or evoking positive emotions?

A Taste of Taking in the Good

Introduction

Here is another little exercise, to give you an experience of the conceptual information below about internalizing positive experiences.

Instructions

Relax, and if you like, close your eyes.

Bring to mind and if you can, intensify, the sense of positive emotions you have had . . . Perhaps recalling or imagining the things that made them really strong for you . . .

Now, sustain the sense of positive emotion . . . Letting those feelings fill your body . . . and heart . . . and mind . . . However mildly or intensely you experience them, it's alright . . .

Now, sense that these positive feelings are sinking into you . . . Perhaps like warm sun on your face . . . Or like a golden light settling into your core . . . Or like a treasure going into your heart . . . Or sensations settling into your back or any other part of your body . . . Positive feelings becoming a part of you . . . Positive feelings woven into the fabric of your self . . . Growing resources inside you, a growing part of your inner landscape . . . If you like, continuing to sense these positive emotions sinking into yourself . . .

Alright. Enjoy!

What Is Taking in the Good?

Introduction

That exercise just above was an experience of taking in the good.

First, let's consider why that is so important, and how to do it. Then we will suggest some exercises you can do to practice with a couple different sorts of "good" to take in.

What Builds a Self?

In a profound sense, much of what we are – what the self is – is built up from what we *remember*: the slowly accumulating internalization of lived experience.

There are two kinds of memory: Explicit and Implicit.

Explicit: recollections of specific events, like the time you had to get some stitches.

Implicit: emotions, relationship paradigms, sense of the world. Implicit memory is different from remembering ideas or concepts: this kind of memory is in your "gut." It's visceral, felt, powerful, and rooted in the fundamental and ancient – reptile and early mammal – structures of your brain.

Most memory is implicit, and the self is built mainly of implicit memories. The inner atmosphere of your mind – what living feels like – depends greatly on what is stored in your implicit memory.

So a simple question gets very important: How can we make our implicit memories as good as possible?

To do this, we have to overcome a fundamental challenge: your brain and mine is hard-wired to build implicit memories – and thus the structure of the self – from negative experiences.

The Preferential Registration of Negative Experience

See, it's the negative experiences that signal the greatest threats to survival. So our ancient ancestors that lived to pass on their genes paid a *lot* of attention to negative experiences.

That ancient circuitry is loaded and fully operational in your brain as you drive through traffic, argue with your mate, hear an odd noise in the night, or see in your mailbox an unexpected letter from the IRS.

By understanding this machinery – alive and well right now inside your head! – you start to see how to act upon it to keep it under control and to compensate for it.

So, let's begin with the bad news.

First, the amygdala – the switchboard that assigns a feeling tone to the stimuli flowing through the brain (pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral) and directs a response (approach, avoid, move on) – is neurologically **primed** to label experiences as frightening and negative.

By the way, this neurological circuitry corresponds to what's called the Second Aggregate in Buddhism – the feeling tone of experience – which is the focus of what is called the Second Foundation of Mindfulness. In other words, being mindful of these amygdala-based – really, it's the whole limbic system and stress-machinery of the body we are speaking about – reactions is really important in the Buddha's path of Awakening.

Second, when an event is flagged as negative, the amygdala-hippocampus circuitry immediately **stores it** for future reference. Then it compares current events to the record of old painful ones, and if there are any similarities, alarm bells start ringing. Once burned, twice shy. Your brain doesn't just go looking for what's negative; it's built to grab that information and never let go.

Third, the negative generally **trumps the positive**: A single bad event with a dog is more memorable than 1000 good times. Speaking of dogs, you may know of the studies on learned helplessness from Martin Seligman and his colleagues, which illustrate this point in haunting ways: it took only a short time to induce a sense of helplessness in the dogs, whose brain circuitry for emotional memory is very similar to our own. But it took an extraordinary effort to get them to unlearn that training. It's as if we are predisposed to believe the worst about the world and ourselves, and to doubt the best.

Yes, we can notice positive experiences and remember them. But unless you're having a million dollar moment, the brain circuitry for the positive is just not turbo-charged the way that the circuitry for the negative is.

The net result is that the brain is like velcro for negative experiences and teflon for positive ones.

You can see the effects in your own experience. For example, when you look back at night on a typical day, what do you usually reflect on: the dozens of mildly pleasant moments, or the one that was awkward or worrisome? When you look back on your life, what do you muse about: the ten thousand pleasures and accomplishments, or the handful of losses and failures?

Fourth, your own personal training in the negative – whatever it's been – shapes your view of the world and yourself, and your personality and interpersonal style and approach to life. (In the extreme, such as with a serious history of trauma or depression, the hippocampus can actually shrink 10-20%, impairing the brain's capacity to remember new, positive experiences.)

All that can lead to more of the negative showing up on your radar – either because you are scanning for it preferentially or unwittingly increasing the odds of it coming your way. Which, in a vicious cycle, can make you even **more inclined to see or cause the negative in the future**. Even though the actual facts are that the vast majority of the events and experiences in your life are neutral or positive!

In sum: Every day, the minds of most people render verdicts about their character, their life, and their future possibilities that are profoundly unfair.

What to do about this?

The Importance of Taking in Positive Experiences

Because of your brain's built-in negativity bias, it is SO IMPORTANT to consciously, deliberately help your brain register positive experiences. You have to *compensate* for the hard-wired tendency of your brain to over-value negative experiences.

The benefits:

- Positive internal emotional landscape, atmosphere, climate
- Positive expectations about oneself, others, and the future. Healthy optimism.
- "Evoked others", the sense of others inside, that are nurturing, encouraging, forgiving

All this is about being in reality, not wearing rose-colored glasses.

It's about proportionality, about our sense of the world being consistent with the nature of the world. For example, if the "mosaic" of life is mainly good, shouldn't our sense of living be mainly good?!

It's about learning from new positive experiences - having them make a difference. It's about using new positive experiences to counterbalance old negative ones.

Because most of us have considerable resistance to savoring positive experiences, let alone helping them sink in and shift who we are over time in a positive direction, it is really important to understand why taking in the good is so important.

Which is why we are pounding these points home!

How to Take in the Good

As you know from school – and corroborated by hundreds of studies – you remember something best when you make it as vivid as possible and then give it heightened attention over an extended period.

That's exactly how to register positive experiences in your implicit memory. Which will slowly but surely change the interior landscape of your mind.

Four simple steps:

(1) Help positive events become positive experiences.

You can do this by:

- Paying attention to the good things in your world, and inside yourself. So often, good events roll by our eyes without us noticing them.

You could set a goal each day to actively look for beauty in your world, or signs of caring for you by others, or good qualities within yourself, etc.

- Deciding to let yourself feel pleasure and be happy, rather than feel ascetic or guilty about enjoying life. In particular, release any resistance for feeling good *about yourself*.

You've earned the good times: the meal is set before you, it's already paid for, and you might as well dig in!

You are just being fair, seeing the truth of things. You are not being vain or arrogant - which distort the truth of things.

- Opening up to the emotional and sensate aspects of your responses to positive events, since that is the pathway to experiencing things.
- Sometimes doing things deliberately to create positive experiences for yourself. For example, you could take on a challenge, or do something nice for others, or bring to mind feelings of compassion and caring, or call up the sense or memory of feeling contented, peaceful, and happy.

(2) Extend the experience in *time* and *space*:

- Keep your attention on it so it lingers; don't just jump onto something else. Notice any discomfort with staying with feeling good.
- Let it fill your body with positive sensations and emotions. (That's the space part.)

In sum, savor, relish the positive experience. It's delicious!

(3) Sense that the positive experience is soaking into your brain and body - registering deeply in emotional memory.

Perhaps imagine that it's sinking into your chest and back and brainstem. Maybe imagine a treasure chest in your heart.

Take the time to do this: 5 or 10 or 20 seconds. Keep relaxing your body and absorbing the positive experience.

These were the three steps you did during the "Taste of Taking in the Good," above.

And now, a bonus step that you can add some of the time.

(4) Sense that the positive experience is going down into old hollows and wounds within you and filling them up and replacing them with new positive feelings and views.

These are typically places where the new positive experience is the opposite of, the antidote to the old one.

Like current experiences of worth replacing old feelings of shame or inadequacy. Or current feelings of being cared about and loved replacing old feelings of rejection, abandonment, loneliness. Or a current sense of one's own strength replacing old feelings of weakness, smallness.

The "replaced" experience may be from adulthood. But usually the most valuable experiences to replace are from our youngest years. They are

the "tip of the root of the dandelion," the ones we need to pull to prevent the dandelion of upsets from growing back.

The way to do this is to have the new positive experience be prominent and in the foreground of your awareness at the same time that the old pain or unmet needs are dimly sensed in the background.

The new experiences will gradually replace the old ones. You will not forget events that happened, but they will lose their charge and their hold on you.

THIS FOURTH STEP IS A PROFOUND, FAR-REACHING, AND GENUINE WAY TO HELP YOURSELF GROW. YOU ARE LITERALLY CHANGING YOUR OWN BRAIN.

Important note:

These steps are to be used in daily life, not just in specific meditations! Each time you do that, you are tossing one more brick into the hold in your heart. Even if it's a big hole, over time, with a few bricks every day of feeling strong and of value and loved, then you will gradually fill that hole.

You will actually notice a difference in a few days, and certainly in a few weeks, if you stick with this practice. And over a few months, you should experience a growing and fundamental shift in your experience of living. And over a few years, you should have a far-reaching movement in your character. Really!

Taking in Feeling Strong

Introduction

So let's practice taking in some good things.

We will start with feeling strong.

Just below, you will see suggestions for how you could bring to mind a sense of strength. As always, whatever you experience is fine. Sometimes trying to evoke the positive brings up its opposite; frustrating as that may be, it can also be helpful, both in terms of increasing your self-understanding as well as sometimes clearing out the negative to make room for the positive.

But probably you will be able to create positive experiences for yourself. That's step #1 in the four step process described above.

Instructions

Take a breath and come into yourself. Eyes open or closed.

Now, in your relaxed awareness, see if you can sense the vitality in your own body. And always, if there is anything uncomfortable in the awareness of your body, please shift to something else that seems strong, such as the hills around us, or tall trees, or someone you know – and ideally, evokes a sense of strength within you. That said, I will keep referring to breathing and your body, and just substitute other things if you like.

So, you are sensing how your breathing, itself, is lasting . . . How your breathing has a strength of its own . . . Perhaps sensing your muscles, your capacity to move in whatever direction you choose, toward or away . . . You are doing the first step, now, having a positive experience, this time of your strength

And now we will do the second step, of sustaining the experience and deepening it If you like, recalling a time when you felt really strong . . . Bringing up those feelings of strength right now . . . Present in your strong breathing, energy and strength in your arms and legs . . . The same strength from that time in your powerful heart . . . Whatever you can feel in yourself is fine . . . While continuing to open to the sense that your being is strong, and clear, and determined . . .

And now the third step, of feeling that sense of wholesome strength sinking into you . . . Becoming a part of you . . . The sense of healthy strength sinking into your body . . . Strength settling deeply into emotional memory . . . Strength registering in your breathing . . . in your back . . . in your chest . . . in your face . . . Strength for the good of yourself, and others, and the world, becoming a part of you . . .

And now the final step, of strength sinking into old places inside where you felt weak . . . The sense of strength in the foreground of your awareness, the main thing you are aware of – while the sense of weakness is small and peripheral and in the background . . . Strength like a warm, golden syrup settling into and soothing old places of weakness and hurt . . . Strength the reality . . . strength the present truth . . . strength healing, and infusing, and covering over, and replacing old feelings of weakness Feeling the sense of that thoroughgoing strength in your body, here and now

Alright.

What did you experience?

What did you notice about the steps of taking in the good, this time of a sense of strength?

Taking in Love

Introduction

Now you can practice taking in feeling cared about, taking in love.

This time, we will move through the four steps a little more briskly, like you would in daily life.

In particular, we suggest you really work with the fourth step - taking in to young places inside that have felt shorted or wounded - with this material. Feeling valued, cared about, and loved is a great way to fill up the hole in your heart.

We'll suggest you bring to mind several people, one after the other. If you like, it is OK to bring to mind more people than those suggested, or to stay with just one of them. Whatever is good for you.

Instructions

Take a breath and relax. Eyes open or closed.

Think of someone you know likes you a lot. Evoke a sense inside yourself of being with that person, and bring into awareness warm feelings of being liked by him or her.

OK. Take about 15 seconds per step to move through the four steps with that experience, of feeling liked: Let the thought of the person become an experience of liking . . . let that experience be big and full . . . soak it in . . . have it sink into young places inside that have felt unliked, cast out, rejected . . .

Good. Let that person go, and call to mind another person, this time someone you know loves and care about you a lot.

OK. Take about 15 seconds per step to move through the four steps with that experience, of feeling loved and cared about: Let the thought of the person become an experience of feeling loved . . . let that experience be big and full . . . soak it in . . . have it sink into young places inside that have felt unloved, hated, abandoned . . .

Fine. Let that person or people go. Now call to mind a person or group of people who have clearly really respected you, really appreciated you, really valued you. Perhaps a teacher, a coach, a parent, a friend, a boss, a mentor, a group of co-workers, a group of kids you helped in Costa Rica, the members of a Board you were on, etc.

Alright, as you bring this person or people to mind, use the four steps on your own to have positive experiences of being respected, prized, valued sink in.

Fine. Relax quietly with your eyes open and in a more ordinary state of awareness, help the feelings of being liked, respected, valued, and loved stay with you right here and now.

Nice, huh?

Conclusion

Every day, you've got lots of opportunities to remodel your own brain – and thus your whole being – slowly, gently, and authentically.

All you have to do is to make good experiences – and the positive emotions they engender – a priority for yourself. Sure, there will still be the 10,000 sorrows of life, but who can say that, with a little mindful focus, he or she could not experience more positive feelings each day? Even through simply a change in perspective . . .

Then, make it a second priority to take in those positive experiences so they become a permanent part of yourself. There could be no kinder thing you could do for the person you have the most power over, and thus the most responsibility for: yourself.