The Negativity Bias and Taking in the Good

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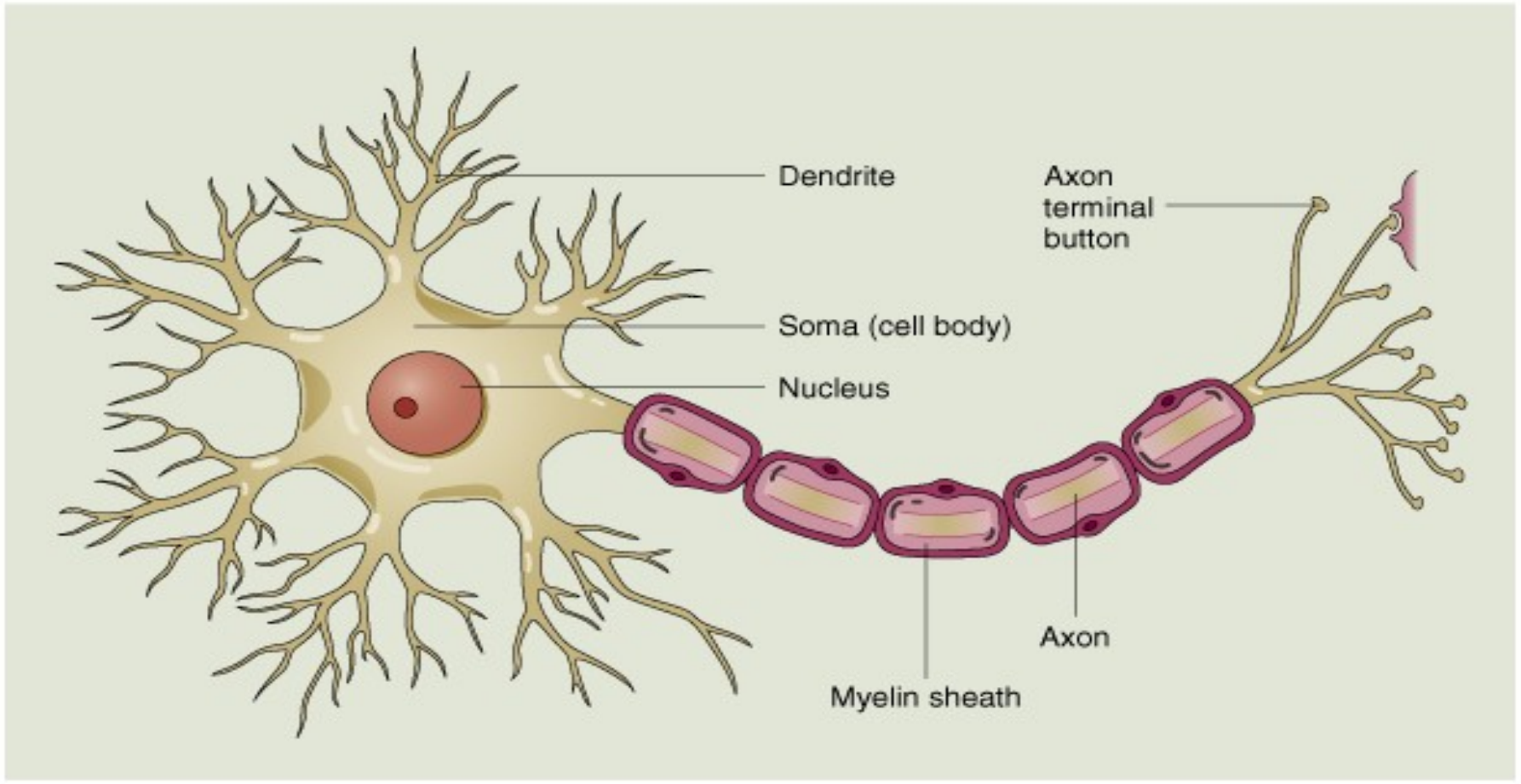
Topics

- Self-directed neuroplasticity
- The evolving brain
- The negativity bias
- Taking in the good
- Coming home

Self-Directed Neuroplasticity

A Neuron



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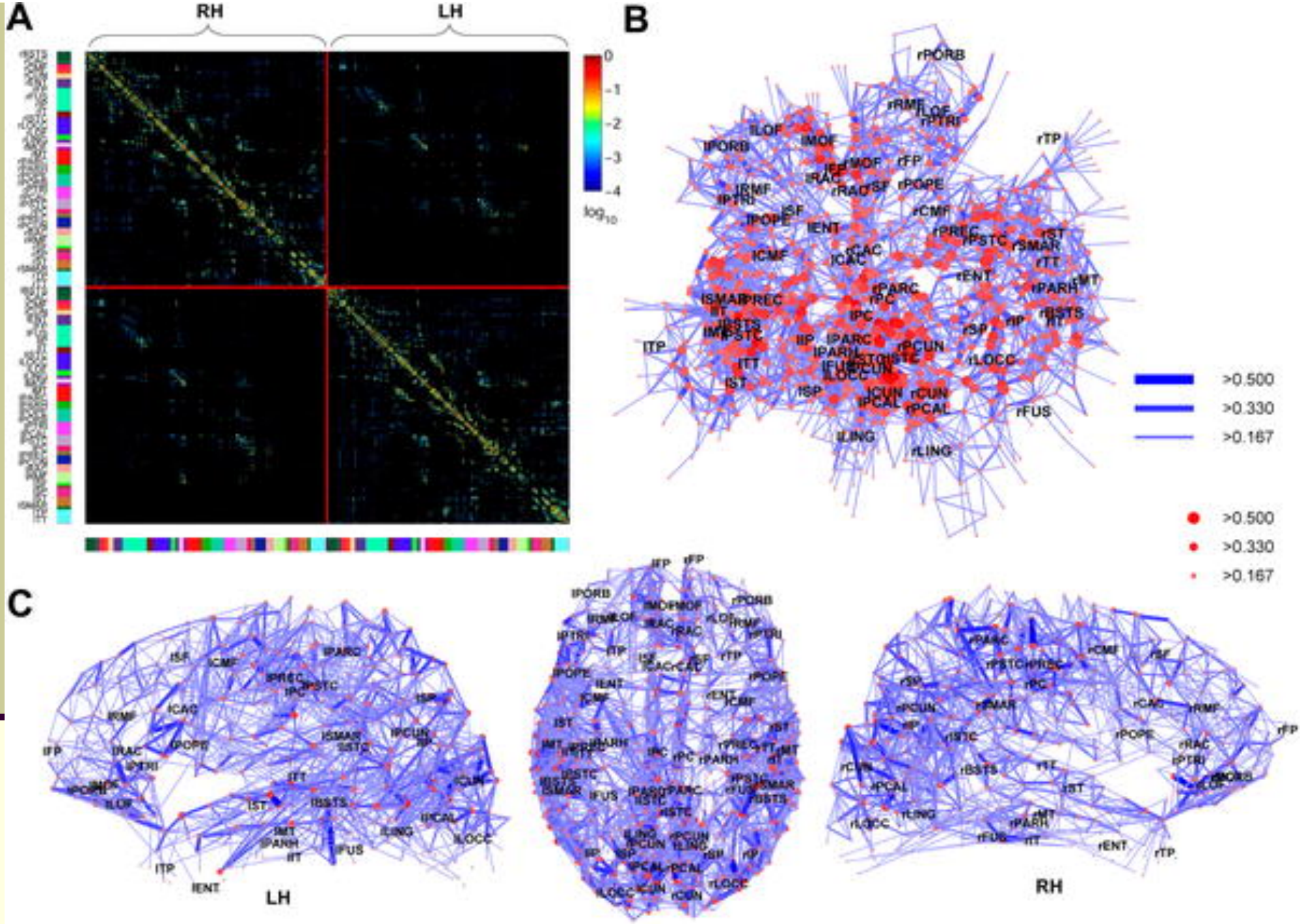
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C
LH
RH

All cells have specialized functions. Brain cells have particular ways of processing information and communicating with each other. Nerve cells form complete circuits that carry and transform information.

Electrical signaling represents the language of mind, the means whereby nerve cells, the building blocks of the brain, communicate with one another over great distances. Nerve cells generate electricity as a means of producing messages.

All animals have some form of mental life that reflects the architecture of their nervous system.

Eric R. Kandel

Fact #1

<u>As your brain changes, your mind changes</u>.

Ways That Brain Can Change Mind

- For better:
  - A little caffeine: more alertness
  - Thicker insula: more self-awareness, empathy
  - More left prefrontal activation: more happiness

- For worse:
  - Intoxication; imbalances in neurotransmitters
  - Concussion, stroke, tumor, Alzheimer's
  - Cortisol-based shrinkage of hippocampus: less capacity for contextual memory

Fact #2

As your mind changes, your brain changes.

Immaterial mental activity maps to material neural activity.

This produces temporary changes in your brain and lasting ones.

Temporary changes include:

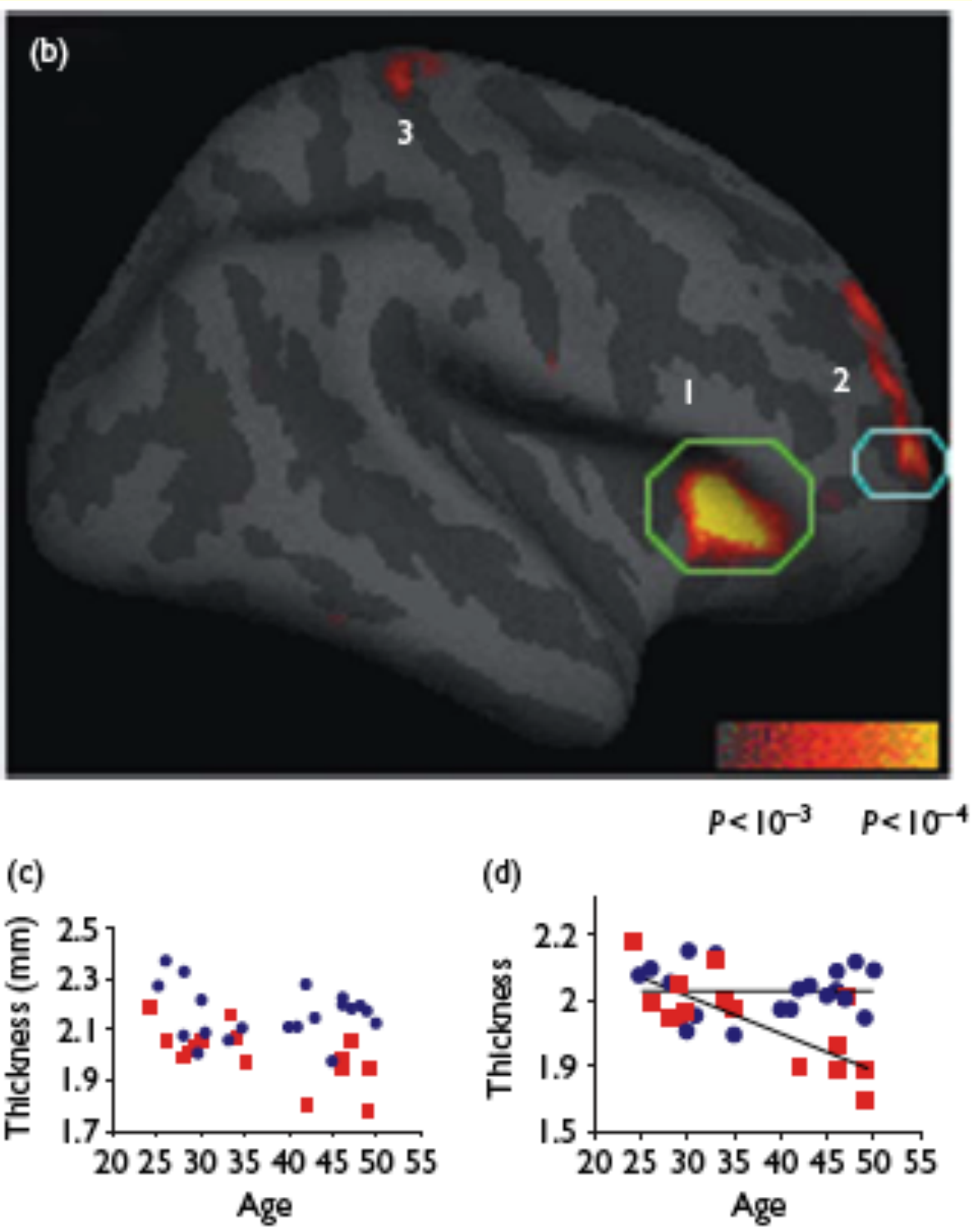
- Alterations in brainwaves (= changes in the firing patterns of synchronized neurons)
- Increased or decreased use of oxygen and glucose
- Ebbs and flows of neurochemicals

Tibetan Monk, Boundless Compassion

Mind Changes Brain in Lasting Ways

- What flows through the mind sculpts your brain. Immaterial experience leaves material traces behind.
- Increased blood/nutrient flow to active regions
- Altered epigenetics (gene expression)
- “Neurons that fire together wire together.”
  - Increasing excitability of active neurons
  - Strengthening existing synapses
  - Building new synapses; thickening cortex
  - Neuronal “pruning” - “use it or lose it”

Lazar, et al. 2005. Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness. *Neuroreport*, 16, 1893-1897.



Fact #3

You can use your mind
to change your brain
to change your mind for the better.

This is self-directed neuroplasticity.

How to do this, in skillful ways?

The Power of Mindfulness

- Attention is like a spotlight, illuminating what it rests upon.
- Because neuroplasticity is heightened for what's in the field of focused awareness, attention is also like a vacuum cleaner, sucking its contents into the brain.
- Directing attention skillfully is therefore a fundamental way to shape the brain - and one's life over time.

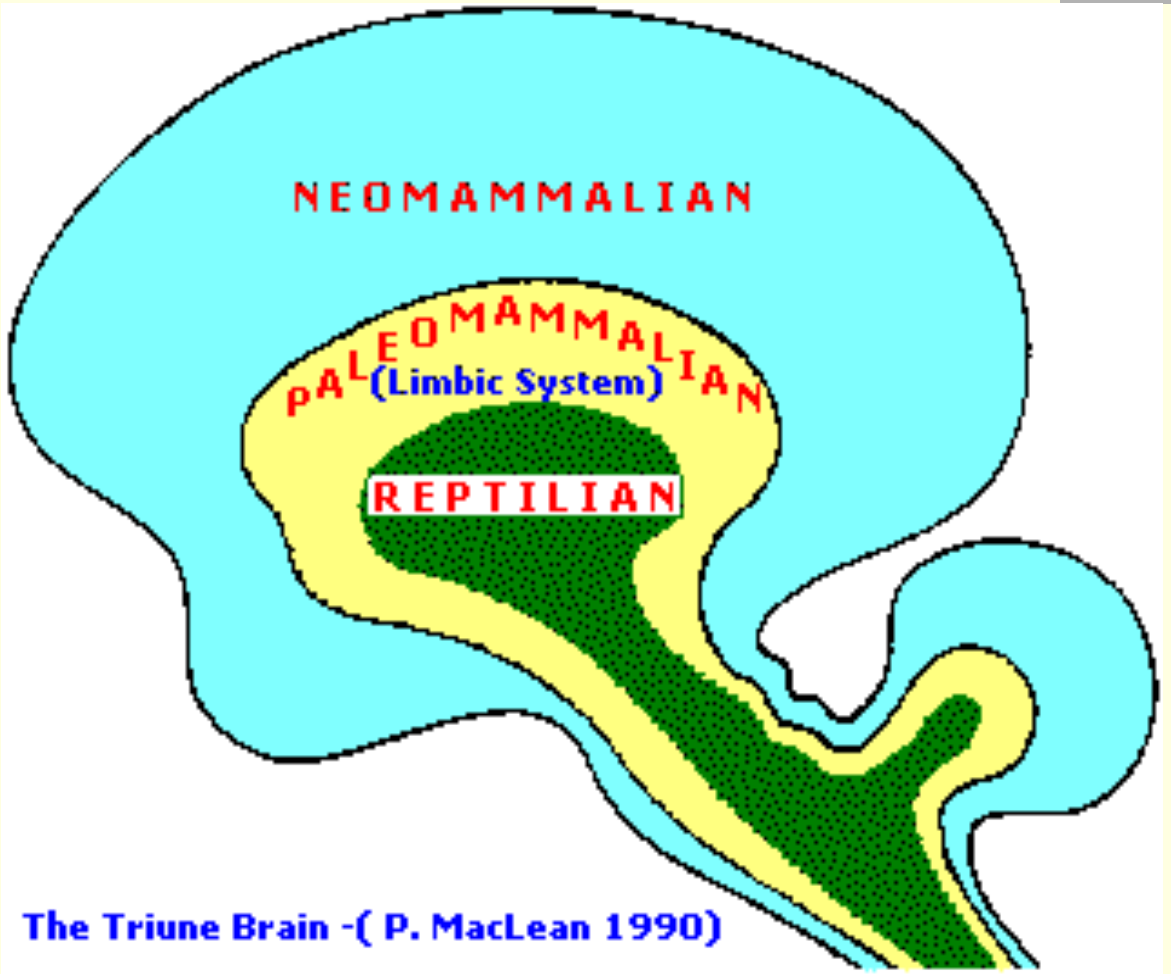
The education of attention
would be an education par excellence.
William James

The Evolving Brain

Evolution

- ~ 4+ billion years of earth
- 3.5 billion years of life
- 650 million years of multi-celled organisms
- 600 million years of nervous system
- ~ 200 million years of mammals
- ~ 60 million years of primates
- ~ 6 million years ago: last common ancestor with chimpanzees, our closest relative among the “great apes” (gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, bonobos, humans)
- 2.5 million years of tool-making (starting with brains 1/3 our size)
- ~ 150,000 years of *homo sapiens*
- ~ 50,000 years of modern humans
- ~ 5000 years of blue, green, hazel eyes

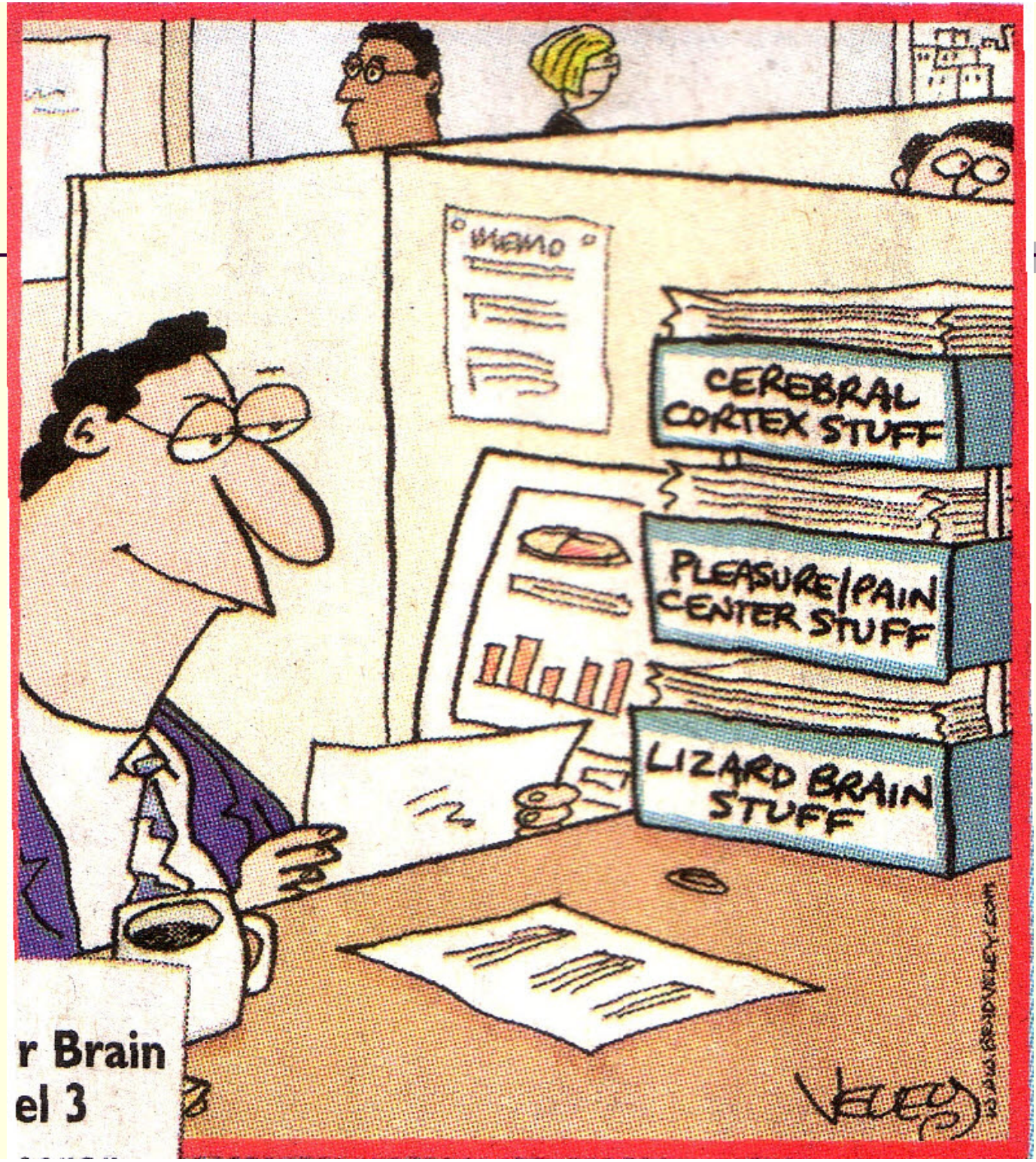
Evolutionary History



The Triune Brain

Three Stages of Brain Evolution

- **Reptilian:**
  - Brainstem, cerebellum, hypothalamus
  - Reactive and reflexive
  - **Avoid** hazards
- **Mammalian:**
  - Limbic system, cingulate, early cortex
  - Memory, emotion, social behavior
  - **Approach** rewards
- **Human:**
  - Massive cerebral cortex
  - Abstract thought, language, cooperative planning, empathy
  - **Attach** to “us”


MEMO
CEREBRAL CORTEX STUFF
PLEASURE/PAIN CENTER STUFF
LIZARD BRAIN STUFF
r Brain
el 3

"With all due respects, I find your disparaging remarks about the 'reptilian brain' unnecessary"

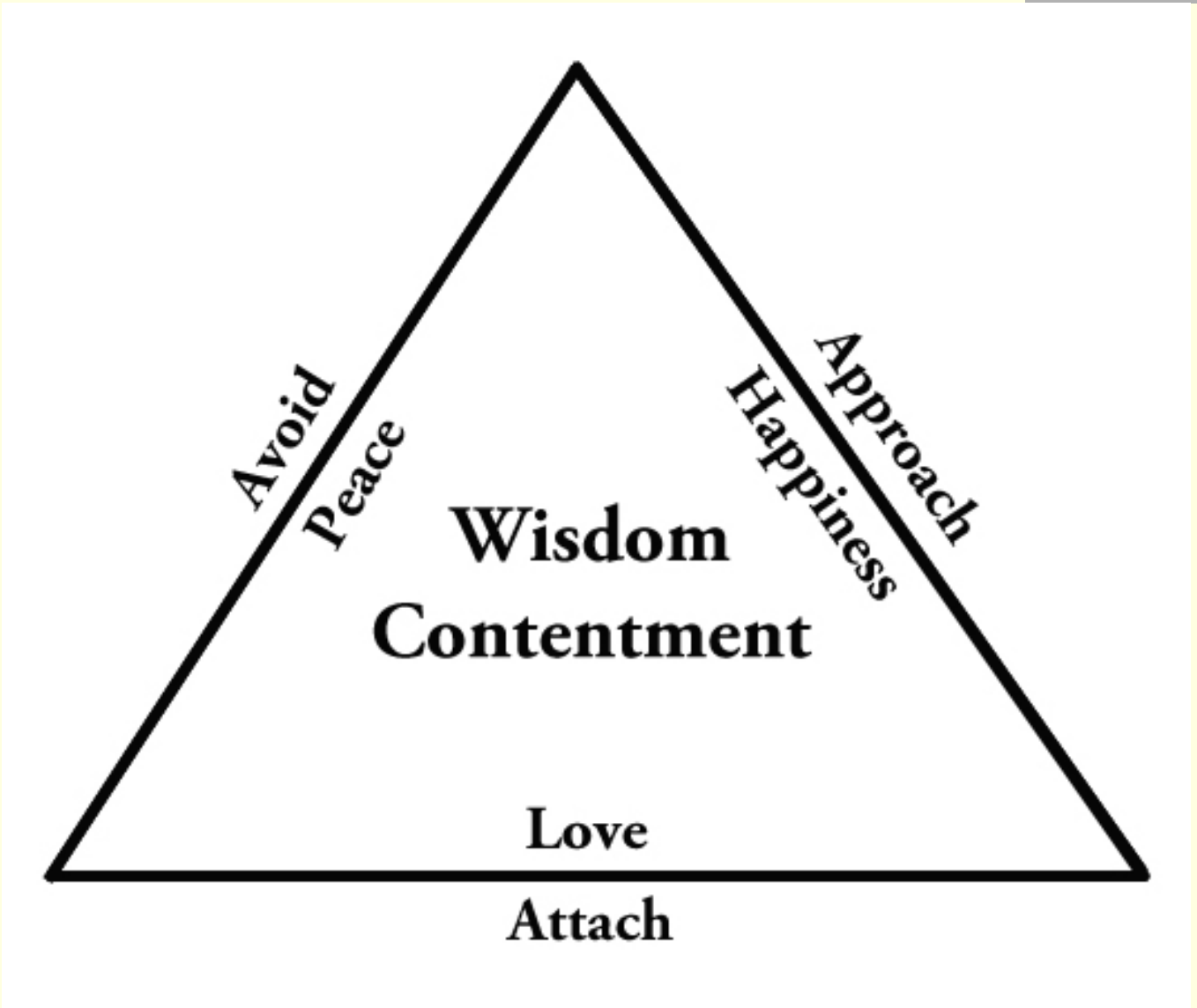
Home Base of the Human Brain

When not threatened, ill, in pain, hungry, upset, or chemically disturbed, most people settle into being:

- **Peaceful** (the Avoid system)
- **Happy** (the Approach system)
- **Loving** (the Attach system)

This is the brain in its natural, ***responsive*** mode.

The Responsive Mode



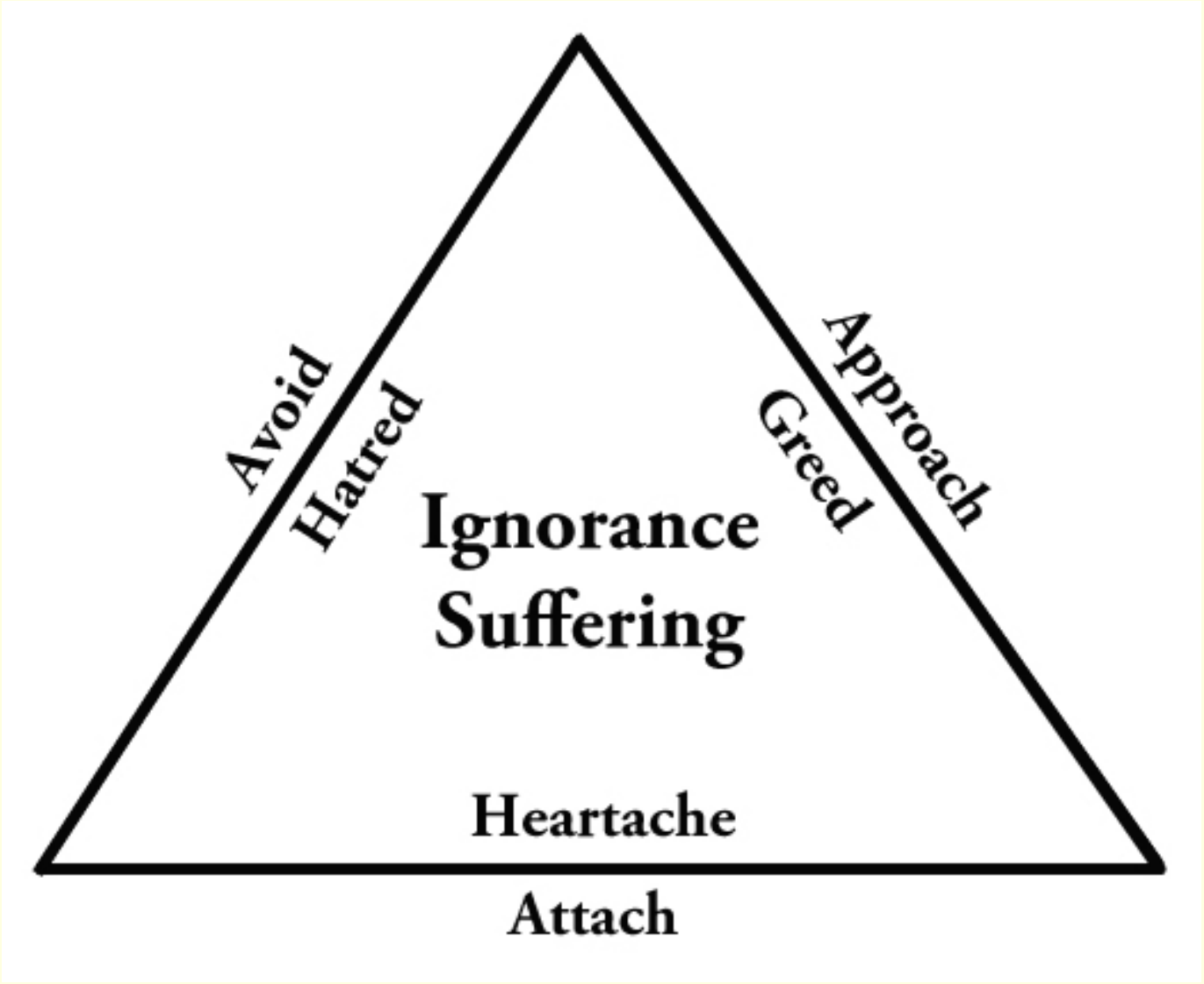
But to Cope with Urgent Needs, We Leave Home . . .

- **Avoid**: When we feel threatened or harmed
- **Approach**: When we can't attain important goals
- **Attach**: When we feel isolated, disconnected, unseen, unappreciated, unloved

This is the brain in its ***reactive*** mode of functioning

- a kind of inner homelessness.

The Reactive Mode



Psychopathology as Reactive Dysfunctions

- **Avoid** - Anxiety disorders; PTSD; panic, terror; rage; violence
- **Approach** - Addiction; over-drinking, -eating, -gambling; compulsion; hoarding; driving for goals at great cost; spiritual materialism
- **Attach** - Borderline, narcissistic, antisocial PD; symbiosis; *folie a deux*; “looking for love in all the wrong places”

The Negativity Bias

Negativity Bias: Causes in Evolution

- "Sticks" - Predators, natural hazards, social aggression, pain (physical and psychological)
- "Carrots" - Food, sex, shelter, social support, pleasure (physical and psychological)
- During evolution, avoiding "sticks" usually had more effects on survival than approaching "carrots."
  - Urgency - Usually, sticks must be dealt with immediately, while carrots allow a longer approach.
  - Impact - Sticks usually determine mortality, carrots not; if you fail to get a carrot today, you'll likely have a chance at a carrot tomorrow; but if you fail to avoid a stick today - whap! - no more carrots forever.

Negativity Bias: Some Consequences

- Negative stimuli get more attention and processing.
- We generally learn faster from pain than pleasure.
- People work harder to avoid a loss than attain an equal gain (“endowment effect”)
- Easy to create learned helplessness, hard to undo
- Negative interactions: more powerful than positive
- Negative experiences sift into implicit memory.

A Major Result of the Negativity Bias: Threat Reactivity

- Two mistakes:
  - Thinking there is a tiger in the bushes when there isn't one.
  - Thinking there is no tiger in the bushes when there is one.
- We evolved to make the first mistake a hundred times to avoid making the second mistake even once.
- This evolutionary tendency is intensified by temperament, personal history, culture, and politics.
- Threat reactivity affects individuals, couples, families, organizations, nations, and the world as a whole.

Results of Threat Reactivity
(Personal, Organizational, National)

- Our initial appraisals are mistaken:
  - Overestimating threats
  - Underestimating opportunities
  - Underestimating inner and outer resources
- We update these appraisals with information that confirms them; we ignore, devalue, or alter information that doesn't.
- Thus we end up with views of ourselves, others, and the world that are ignorant, selective, and distorted.

Costs of Threat Reactivity
(Personal, Organizational, National)

- Feeling threatened feels bad, and triggers stress consequences.
- We over-invest in threat protection.
- The boy who cried tiger: flooding with paper tigers makes it harder to see the real ones.
- Acting while feeling threatened leads to over-reactions, makes others feel threatened, and creates vicious cycles.
- The Approach system is inhibited, so we don't pursue opportunities, play small, or give up too soon.
- In the Attach system, we bond tighter to "us," with more fear and anger toward "them."

A Poignant Truth

Mother Nature is tilted toward producing gene copies.

But tilted against personal quality of life.

And at the societal level, we have caveman/cavewoman brains armed with nuclear weapons.

What shall we do?

We can deliberately use the mind

to change the brain for the better.

Taking in the Good

The Importance of Inner Resources

- Examples:
  - Freud's "positive introjects"
  - Internalization of "corrective emotional experiences" during psychotherapy
  - "Learned optimism"

- Benefits
  - Increase positive emotions: many physical and mental health benefits
  - Improve self-soothing
  - Improve outlook on world, self, and future
  - Increase resilience, determination

Learning and Memory

- The sculpting of the brain by experience is memory:
  - Explicit - Personal recollections; semantic memory
  - Implicit - Bodily states; emotional tendencies; “views” (expectations, object relations, perspectives); behavioral repertoire and inclinations; what it feels like to be “me”

- Implicit memory is much larger than explicit memory. Resources are embedded mainly in implicit memory.

- Therefore, the key target is implicit memory. What matters most are not recollections of positive *events* but implicit residues of positive *experiences*.

In essence, how can we actively internalize resources in implicit memory - making the brain like Velcro for positive experiences, but Teflon for negative ones?

Just having positive experiences is not enough.

They pass through the brain like water through a sieve, while negative experiences are caught.

We need to engage positive experiences actively to weave them into the brain.

How to Take in the Good

1. Look for positive **facts,** and let them become positive experiences.

2. Savor the positive experience:
   - Sustain it for 10-20-30 seconds.
   - Feel it in your body and emotions.
   - Intensify it.

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

Being with, Releasing, Replacing

- There are three phases of psychological healing and personal growth (and spiritual practice):
  - Be mindful of, release, replace.
  - Let be, let go, let in.

- Mindfulness is key to the second and third phase, sometimes curative on its own, and always beneficial in strengthening its neural substrates. But often it is not enough by itself.

- And sometimes you need to skip to the third phase to build resources for mindfulness.

Targets of TIG

- Bodily states - healthy arousal; PNS; vitality
- Emotions - both feelings and mood
- Views - expectations; object relations; perspectives on self, world, past and future
- Behaviors - reportoire; inclinations

Kinds of "Good" to Take in

- The small pleasures of ordinary life
- The satisfaction of attaining goals or recognizing accomplishments - especially small, everyday ones
- Feeling grateful, contented, and fulfilled

- Things are alright; nothing is wrong; there is no threat
- Feeling safe and strong
- The peace and relief of forgiveness

- Being included, valued, liked, respected, loved by others
- The good feelings that come from being kind, fair, generous
- Feeling loving

- Recognizing your positive character traits
- Spiritual or existential realizations

Why It's Good to Take in the Good

- Rights an unfair imbalance, given the negativity bias
- Gives oneself today the caring and support one should have received as a child, but perhaps didn't get in full measure; an inherent, implicit benefit
- Increases positive resources, such as:
  - Positive emotions
  - Capacity to manage stress and negative experiences
- Can help bring in missing "supplies" (e.g., love, strength, worth)
- Can help painful, even traumatic experiences

Promoting Client Motivation

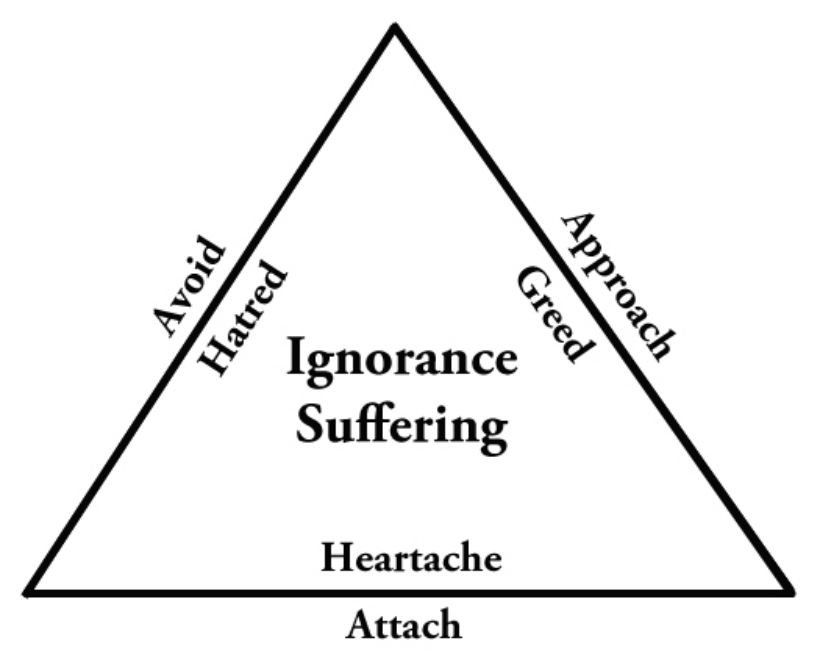
- During therapy, but mainly between sessions, notice:
  - When learning from therapy works well
  - New insights
  - When things happen consistent with therapist's realistic view of you, the world, the future
  - Good qualities in yourself emphasized by therapist
- Then practice three, sometimes four, steps of TIG.
- Can be formalized in daily reflections, journaling
- In general: take appropriate risks of "dreaded experiences," notice the (usually) good results, and then take those in.

TIG and Children

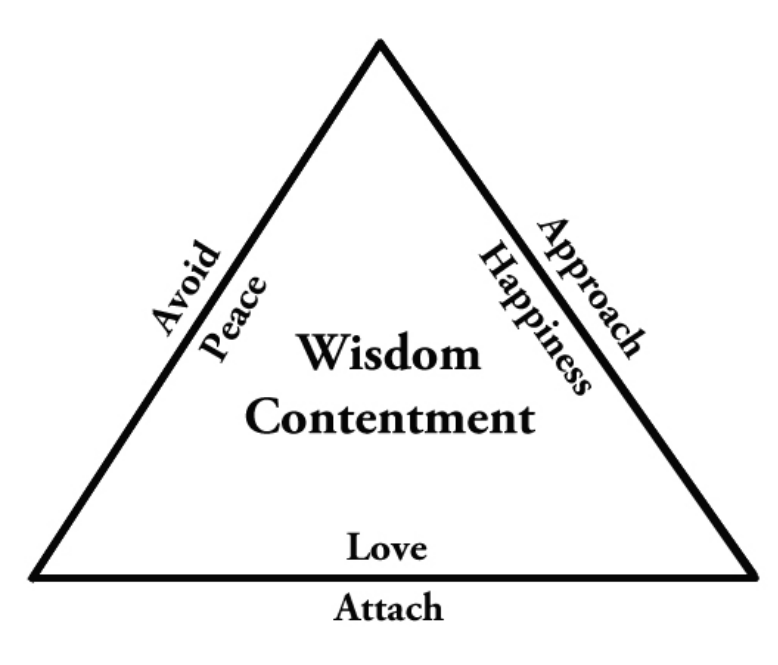
- All kids benefit from TIG.
- Particular benefits for mistreated, anxious, spirited/ ADHD, or LD children.
- Adaptations:
  - Brief
  - Concrete
  - Natural occasions (e.g., bedtimes)

Coming Home

Choices . . .



Or?



Reactive Mode

Responsive Mode

True Nature

Peaceful

Happy

Loving

Penetrative insight

joined with calm abiding

utterly eradicates

afflicted states.

Shantideva

Great Books

See www.RickHanson.net for other great books.

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Key Papers - 1

See www.RickHanson.net for other scientific papers.

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Key Papers - 3

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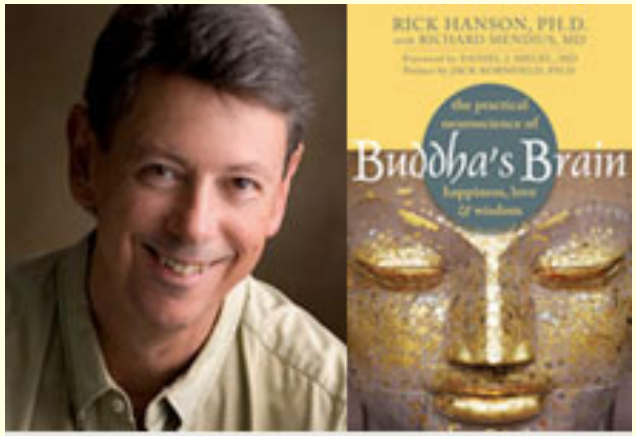
Where to Find Rick Hanson Online

http://www.youtube.com/BuddhasBrain

http://www.facebook.com/BuddhasBrain



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