Hardwiring Happiness: From Passing States To Lasting Traits

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Topics

- Growing inner resources
- Self-directed neuroplasticity
- The missing link
- The negativity bias
- Getting good at getting better
- Growing key strengths
- Using HEAL with others
- Deeper implications of mindful cultivation
Growing Inner Resources
What Shapes Your Course?

Challenges

Vulnerabilities

Resources
Where Are Resources Located?

World

Body

Mind
Resources in Your Mind

- Understandings
- Capabilities
- Positive emotions
- Attitudes
- Motivations
- Virtues
Two wolves in the heart
INNER STRENGTHS ARE BUILT FROM BRAIN STRUCTURE
How do you get these inner strengths into your brain?
Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A’s go first). Then you’ll take turns, with one partner mainly speaking while the other person listens, exploring this question:

**Speaker**: What are some of the good facts in your life these days?

**Listener**: Find a sincere gladness for the other person.

**Both**: Repeatedly take 5-10 seconds to feel and register enjoyable, beneficial experiences
Self-Directed Neuroplasticity
Mental activity entails underlying neural activity.
Repeated mental activity entails repeated neural activity.

Repeated neural activity builds neural structure.
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
We can use the mind to change the brain to change the mind for the better.
Learning – changing neural structure and function – has two stages:

From **short-term** memory buffers to **long-term** storage

From **state** to **trait**

From **activation** to **installation**.
Learning creates memory, broadly defined: a lasting change in neural structure or function.

**Explicit** memory: recollections, “semantic knowledge” (e.g., what is a bicycle)

**Implicit** memory: “procedural knowledge” (e.g., how to ride a bicycle), expectations, biases, relationship paradigms, emotional residues of lived experience, acquired helplessness or resilience
Inner strengths are grown from experiences of them – activated states – that are installed as traits.
You become more compassionate by installing experiences of compassion.

You become more grateful by installing experiences of gratitude.

You become more mindful by installing experiences of mindfulness.
Most experiences of inner strengths are enjoyable.

They feel good because they are good for us and others.
The Missing Link
An activated state is a necessary condition for learning, but not a sufficient one.

Without installation, there is no learning, no change in the brain.
Most of us are better at activation but than we are at installation.

This is the fundamental weakness in most character education, human resources training, psychotherapy, coaching, and mindfulness programs.
The same research that proves therapy works shows no improvement in outcomes over the last 30 or so years.

Scott Miller
Meanwhile, stressful, painful, harmful experiences are being rapidly converted into neural structure.
The Negativity Bias
The Brain’s Negativity Bias

As our ancestors evolved, avoiding “sticks” was more important than getting “carrots.”

1. So we scan for bad news,
2. Over-focus on it,
3. Over-react to it,
4. Install it quickly in implicit memory,
5. Sensitize the brain to the negative,
Sensitizing the Brain to the Negative

- Amygdala initiates stress response ("alarm bell")
- Hippocampus:
  - Inhibits the amygdala
  - Inhibits cortisol production
- Cortisol:
  - Stimulates and sensitizes the amygdala
  - Inhibits and can shrink the hippocampus
- Consequently, chronic negative experiences:
  - Sensitize the amygdala alarm bell
  - Weaken the hippocampus: this reduces memory capacities and the inhibition of amygdala and cortisol production
  - Thus creating vicious cycles in the NS, mind, and behavior
The Brain’s Negativity Bias

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1. So we scan for bad news,
2. Over-focus on it,
3. Over-react to it,
4. Install it quickly in implicit memory,
5. Sensitize the brain to the negative, and
6. Create vicious cycles with others.
Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias
The brain is good at learning from bad experiences but bad at learning from good ones.

Even though learning from good experiences is the primary way to grow resources in the mind.
The Negativity Bias
Stone age brains in the 21st century
Getting Good at Getting Better
Getting the Good Stuff into Your Brain
Have a Good Experience
Two Ways To Have a Beneficial Experience

**Notice** one you are already having.
- In the foreground of awareness
- In the background

**Create** one.
How to Create
A Beneficial Experience (background)

Look for good facts in:

1. Immediate situation
2. Current or recent events
3. Stable conditions
4. Your character
5. The past
6. The future
7. Bad situations
8. The lives of others
9. Your imagination
10. Care about others
11. Directly evoke a beneficial experience
12. Produce good facts
13. Share about good facts with others
Turning a Good Fact Into a Good Experience (background)

- Bring awareness to your body.

- Soften and open yourself.

- Be a little active in your mind, recognizing aspects of the good fact that naturally elicit an experience.

- Imagine how another person might naturally feel in response to the good fact.

- Have kindness for yourself, encouraging yourself to have a beneficial experience.
Enrich It
How to Enrich an Experience

- Duration
- Intensity
- Multimodality
- Novelty
- Salience
Let’s Try Enriching Gratitude

Bring to mind one or more things you are thankful for or glad about.

Have the experience.

Enrich it through:

- Duration
- Intensity
- Multimodality
- Novelty
- Salience
Absorb It
Let’s Try Absorbing Feeling Strong

- Bring to mind one or more times you felt strong.
  - Have the experience.
  - Enrich it.
- Absorb it:
  - Intend and sense that it is sinking into you, becoming a part of you.
  - Be aware of what is rewarding or enjoyable about this experience.
  - Receive it and let it establish itself in you.
Like a Nice Fire

Have a fire (notice or ignite one).

Enrich it by protecting it and adding fuel to keep it burning.

Absorb its warmth into yourself.
Cautions, Blocks, and Adaptations

- Cautions for people with:
  - severe depression
  - poor executive functions
  - high self-criticism
  - deliberate choiceless awareness

- Blocks are normal (e.g., “I don’t deserve to feel good”) and often a useful focus.

- Adapt target experiences and instructions based on setting, age, culture, etc.
Link Positive and Negative Material
Keys to the Link Step

- It’s common in everyday life (e.g., talking about an upset with a friend) and widely used for personal growth (e.g., replacing harmful beliefs).

- The person must be able to:
  - Hold two things in awareness
  - Keep the positive one more prominent
  - Not get hijacked by the negative one

- Drop the negative if it’s too powerful, and just do the first three (Have, Enrich, Absorb).
Let’s Try Linking Feeling Cared About

- Bring to mind one or more beings who care about you. Open to feeling included, seen, appreciated, liked, or loved.
  - Have the experience.
  - Enrich it.
  - Absorb it.
  - Link it:
    - While feeling cared about, also be aware of a mild sense of not being fully appreciated by someone, off to the side of your mind.
HEAL Yourself

Have a positive experience.

Enrich it.

Absorb it.

Link positive and negative material.
The Definition of HEAL

The deliberate internalization of beneficial experiences in implicit memory
Have It, Enjoy It
It’s Good to Take in the Good

- Development of specific inner strengths
  - General - resilience, positive mood, feeling loved
  - Key resources – For challenges, deficits, wounds

- Implicit benefits:
  - Shows that there is still good in the world
  - Being active rather than passive
  - Treating yourself kindly, like you matter
  - Rights an unfair imbalance, given the negativity bias
  - Training of attention and executive functions

- Sensitizes brain to positive: like Velcro for good
Keep a green bough in your heart, and a singing bird will come.

Lao Tsu
Growing Key Strengths
What – if it were more present in the mind of a person – would really help?

How could the person have more experiences of this mental resource – that are internalized in the brain?
The Evolving Brain

The Triune Brain - (P. MacLean 1990)
# Meeting Three Core Needs

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Pet the Lizard
Feed the Mouse
Hug the Monkey
Mental Resources for Challenges

**Safety** – Grit, protection, relaxation, feeling alright right now, peace

**Satisfaction** – Gratitude, gladness, accomplishment, contentment

**Connection** – Belonging, appreciation, friendship, compassion, love
Using HEAL with Others
In the Garden of the Mind

1. Be with what is there.
2. Decrease what’s harmful.
3. Increase what’s beneficial.

Let be. Let go. Let in.

Mindfulness is present in all three.

“Being with” is primary – but not enough.
We also need “wise effort.”
The Four Ways to Offer a Method

- Doing it implicitly
- Teaching it and then leaving it up to the person
- Doing it explicitly with the person
- Asking the person to do it on his or her own
Using HEAL in Trainings

- Take five minutes to explain its rationale and teach it explicitly.
- In the flow, occasionally encourage enriching and absorbing, using natural language.
- Tell people they can use HEAL outside of class to deepen internalization of what they’re learning.
- Don’t use HEAL when it’s inappropriate (e.g., radically choiceless awareness, highly self-critical about any kind of performance).
Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A’s go first). Then you’ll take turns, with one partner mainly speaking while the other person listens, exploring this question:

How could you use the HEAL steps – explicitly or implicitly – in your settings?
Deeper Implications of Mindful Cultivation
The Buddhist drive theory (summarized in the Four Noble Truths) says that “craving” – resisting the unpleasant, chasing the pleasant, clinging to the heartfelt, ignoring the neutral – causes suffering.

What causes “craving?”
### Meeting Three Core Needs

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The Reactive Red Zone

When there is a presumed or felt deficit or disturbance of safety, satisfaction, or connection:

The body fires up into the stress response; outputs exceed inputs; long-term building is deferred.

The mind fires up into:

- Fear (Avoiding)
- Frustration (Approaching)
- Heartache (Attaching)

The brain in allostatic, Reactive, craving mode
Reactive Dysfunctions in Each System

- **Avoid** - Anxiety disorders; PTSD; panic, terror; rage; violence

- **Approach** - Addiction; over-drinking, -eating, -gambling; compulsion; hoarding; driving for goals at great cost

- **Attach** – Insecure attachment; borderline, narcissistic, antisocial PDs; “looking for love in all the wrong places”
The Responsive Green Zone

With no presumed or felt deficit or disturbance of safety, satisfaction, and connection:

The body defaults to a sustainable equilibrium of refueling, repairing, and pleasant abiding.

The mind defaults to a sustainable equilibrium of:
- Peace (Avoiding)
- Contentment (Approaching)
- Love (Attaching)

The brain in homeostatic, Responsive, minimal craving mode
Choices . . .

Or?

Reactive Mode

Responsive Mode
Coming Home, Staying Home

Experiences of core needs feeling met – the sense of safety, satisfaction, and connection: peace, contentment, and love – restore or deepen healthy equilibrium in body and mind: the Responsive mode.

Activated Responsive states can become installed Responsive traits. Responsive traits foster Responsive states.

Responsive states and traits enable us to stay Responsive with challenges.
Societal Implications of Mindful Cultivation

- For most of the time our human and hominid ancestors have lived, it was not possible to meet the core needs of everyone. But now the resources and know-how exist to do this. How we handle this unprecedented opportunity will be the central theme of this century.

- Improving external conditions is vital – but not enough. Many affluent people dwell in anxiety and anger, frustration and drivenness, and hurt and ill will.

- Repeatedly internalizing Responsive experiences develops a “green brain” that is harder to manipulate with threats and fear, greed and consumerism, and “us” vs. “them” rivalries. A critical mass of “green brains” could help bring a tipping point that changes the course of human history.
Think not lightly of good, saying, “It will not come to me.”

Drop by drop is the water pot filled.

Likewise, the wise one, gathering it little by little, fills oneself with good.

Dhammapada 9.122
Suggested Books

See www.RickHanson.net for other great books.

See www.RickHanson.net for other scientific papers.


Key Papers - 2


- Hanson, R. 2008. Seven facts about the brain that incline the mind to joy. In *Measuring the immeasurable: The scientific case for spirituality.* Sounds True.
Key Papers - 3


Key Papers - 4


Where to Find Rick Hanson Online

*Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*

www.rickhanson.net/hardwiringhappiness

Personal website: www.rickhanson.net

Wellspring Institute: www.wisebrain.org

youtube.com/drrhanson facebook.com/rickhansonphd
Extra Material
Aspects of an Experience That Can Be Internalized

- **Thoughts** - expectations; paradigms of relationships; perspectives on self, world, past and future

- **Perceptions** - sensations; relaxation; vitality

- **Emotions** - both feelings and mood

- **Desires** - values, aspirations, passions, wants

- **Behaviors** - repertoire; inclinations
Obstructions to HEAL

- General
  - Distractibility
  - Blocks to self-awareness in general

- Specific
  - Fears of losing one’s edge or lowering one’s guard
  - Sense of disloyalty to others (e.g., survivor guilt)
  - Culture (e.g., selfish, vain, sinful)
  - Gender style
  - Associations to painful states
  - Secondary gains in feeling bad
  - Not wanting to let someone off the hook
  - Beliefs that HEAL is craving that leads to suffering
Adaptations for Children

- Kids generally benefit from HEAL. Particular benefits for mistreated, anxious, spirited/ADHD, or “learning disabled/different” children.

- Style:
  - Be matter of fact: this is mental/neural literacy.
  - A little brain talk goes a long way.
  - Be motivating: benefits, “be the boss of your own mind.”
  - Down to earth, naturalistic
  - Scaffold based on executive functions, motivation, and need for autonomy.
  - Brief, concrete
Uses for Children

- Registering curricular skills and other resources
- Motivation for learning; associating rewards
- Seeing the good in the world, others, and oneself – and in the past, present, and future
- Seeing life as opportunity
- Strengthening the sense of being an active learner
- Developing child-specific resources
Synergies of HEAL and Mindfulness

- Improved mindfulness enhances HEAL.

- HEAL increases factors of mindfulness (e.g., self-acceptance, self-compassion, distress tolerance).

- HEAL heightens learning from mindfulness:
  - The sense of stable presence itself
  - Confidence that awareness itself is never disturbed
  - Peace of realizing that experiences come and go