Hardwiring Happiness:

The New Brain Science of Lasting Inner Strength and Peace

Grand Rapids Center for Mindfulness
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Rick Hanson, Ph.D.
The Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom
Topics

- Self-directed neuroplasticity
- How to grow inner strengths
- The negativity bias

- Taking in the good
- Key resource experiences
- Coming home
- Linking positive and negative material

- The fruit as the path
Waldo goes to India, finds himself.
Self-Directed Neuroplasticity
Two wolves in the heart
What Shapes Your Course in Life?

Challenges

Vulnerabilities

Resources
What Can You Usually Affect the Most?

Resources
Where Are Resources Located?

The World

The Body

The Mind
What Can You Usually Affect the Most?

The Mind
Inner Strengths

- Understandings
- Capabilities
- Positive emotions
- Attitudes
- Motivations
- Virtues
INNER STRENGTHS ARE BUILT FROM BRAIN STRUCTURE
A Neuron
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
Mental activity entails underlying neural activity.
Christian Nuns, Recalling a Profound Spiritual Experience

Beauregard, et al., *Neuroscience Letters*, 9/25/06
Repeated mental activity entails repeated neural activity.

Repeated neural activity builds neural structure.
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
The Opportunity

We can use the mind

To change the brain

To change the mind for the better

To benefit ourselves and other beings.
Self-Compassion

- Compassion is the wish that a being not suffer, combined with sympathetic concern. Self-compassion simply applies that to oneself. It is not self-pity, complaining, or wallowing in pain.

- Studies show that self-compassion buffers stress and increases resilience and self-worth.

- But self-compassion is hard for many people, due to feelings of unworthiness, self-criticism, or “internalized oppression.” To encourage the neural substrates of self-compassion:
  - Get the sense of being cared about by someone else.
  - Bring to mind someone you naturally feel compassion for
  - Sink into the experience of compassion in your body
  - Then shift the compassion to yourself, perhaps with phrases like: “May I not suffer. May the pain of this moment pass.”
“Anthem”

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in
That’s how the light gets in

Leonard Cohen
How to Grow Inner Strengths
Growing Gratitude

- Think of things you feel grateful for . . . Let this become a feeling of gratitude.

- Stay with this experience . . . Open to it.

- Imagine or sense that gratitude is sinking into you . . . As you sink into it.
The Neuropsychology of Learning

Learning – changing neural structure and function – proceeds in two stages:

From state to trait

From activation to installation

From short-term memory buffers to long-term storage
Inner strengths are grown from experiences of them or related factors - activated states - that are installed as traits.
You become more compassionate by repeatedly installing experiences of compassion.

You become more grateful by repeatedly installing experiences of gratitude.

You become more mindful by repeatedly installing experiences of mindfulness.
Most experiences of inner strengths – resilience, kindness, insight, mindfulness, self-worth, love, etc. – are enjoyable.
Without **installation**, there is no learning, no change in the brain.
We’re good at activation but bad at installation.

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

Scott Miller
Installation
Installation

Installation
Meanwhile your painful, harmful experiences are being rapidly converted into neural structure.
The Negativity Bias
Unpleasant Experiences In Context

- Life contains unavoidable unpleasant experiences. Resisting them just adds to the stress, upset, etc.

- Some inner strengths come only from unpleasant experiences, e.g., knowing you’ll do the hard thing.

- But unpleasant experiences have inherent costs, in their discomfort and stress.

- Many inner strengths could have been developed without the costs of unpleasant experiences.

- Most unpleasant experiences are pain with no gain.
The Brain’s Negativity Bias

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

- Negative stimuli:
  - More attention and processing
  - Greater motivational focus: loss aversion

- Preferential encoding in implicit memory:
  - We learn faster from pain than pleasure.
  - Negative interactions: more impactful than positive
  - Easy to create learned helplessness, hard to undo
  - Rapid sensitization to negative through cortisol
Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias
The Negativity Bias
Stone age brains in the 21st century
We can deliberately use the mind to change the brain for the better.
Cultivation in Context

Three ways to engage the mind:
- Be with it. Decrease negative. Increase positive.
- Let be. Let go. Let in.
- Mindfulness present in all three ways to engage mind

While “being with” is primary, it’s often isolated in mindfulness-based practices.

Skillful means for decreasing the negative and increasing the positive have developed over 2500 years. Why not use them?
Join us for
Cultivating Inner Strength - Monastic Daylong [Dana - No Fee Day]
with Ayya Anandabodhi
and Ayya Santacitta
on
Sunday, July 8
from 9:30 am - 5 pm.

(Photo by Ed Ritger)
Taking in the Good
Growing Gratitude

- Think of things you feel grateful for . . . Let this become a feeling of gratitude.

- Stay with this experience . . . Open to it.

- Imagine or sense that gratitude is sinking into you . . . As you sink into it.
Learning to Take in the Good
Have a Good Experience
Elements of Experience

- **Thoughts** – beliefs; expectations; relationship paradigms; perspectives; appraisals; attributions

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

- **Emotions** - both feelings and mood

- **Desires** – values; aspirations; passions; wants

- **Behaviors** - reportoire; inclinations
Enrich It
How to Enrich an Experience

- **Duration** – 5+ seconds; protecting it; keeping it going
- **Intensity** – opening to it in the mind; helping it get big
- **Multimodality** – engaging multiple aspects of experience, especially perception and emotion
- **Novelty** – seeing what is fresh; “don’t know mind”
- **Salience** – seeing why this is personally relevant
Absorb It
How to Absorb an Experience

- **Enriching** makes the experience more powerful. **Absorbing** makes memory systems more receptive by priming and sensitizing them.

- Intend and sense the experience is sinking into you.
  - Imagery – Water into a sponge; golden dust sifting down; a jewel into the treasure chest of the heart
  - Sensation – Warm soothing balm

- Giving over to the experience; letting it change you

- Letting go of resisting, grasping, clinging: “craving”
Link Positive and Negative Material
HEAL by Taking in the Good

1. **Have** a positive experience. Notice it or create it.

2. **Enrich** the experience through duration, intensity, multimodality, novelty, personal relevance

3. **Absorb** the experience by intending and sensing that it is sinking into you as you sink into it.

4. **Link** positive and negative material. [optional]
Have It, Enjoy It
It’s Good to Take in the Good

- Development of specific inner strengths
- Implicit benefits
- Sensitizes brain to the positive
- Creates positive cycles
Keep a green bough in your heart, and a singing bird will come.

Lao Tsu
Study on the HEAL Process

- With collaborators from the University of California, a 2013 study on the HEAL course, using a randomized waitlist control group design (46 subjects)

- Course participants, compared to the control group, reported more Contentment, Self-Esteem, Satisfaction with Life, Savoring, and Gratitude.

- After the course and at two month follow-up, pooled participants also reported more Love, Compassion, Self-Compassion, Mindfulness, Self-Control, Positive Rumination, Joy, Amusement, Awe, and Happiness, and less Anxiety and Depression.
Combined Sample: Depression (BDI) & Anxiety (BAI)
Practical Uses of the HEAL Process
Synergies of TG and Mindfulness

- Improved mindfulness enhances TG.
- TG increases factors of mindfulness (e.g., self-acceptance, self-compassion, distress tolerance).
- TG 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
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
Adaptations for Children

- All kids benefit from TG. Particular benefits for mistreated, anxious, spirited/ADHD, or LD 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
Obstructions to Taking in the Good

- 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
  - Thoughts that TG is craving that leads to suffering
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:

What are some ways that you could use the HEAL process with others?
Key Resource Experiences
Biological 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: ancestor with chimpanzees
- 2.5 million years of tool-making
- 150,000 years of *homo sapiens*
The Evolving Brain

The Triune Brain -( P. MacLean 1990)
"With all due respects, I find your disparaging remarks about the 'reptilian brain' unnecessary"
Our Three Fundamental Needs

Safety

Satisfaction

Connection
Needs Met by Three Systems

Safety – Avoiding harms

Satisfaction – Approaching rewards

Connection – Attaching to others
Pet the Lizard
Feed the Mouse
Hug the Monkey
Some Types of Resource Experiences

Avoiding Harms
- Feeling basically alright right now
- Feeling protected, strong, safe, at peace
- The sense that awareness itself is untroubled

Approaching Rewards
- Feeling basically full, the enoughness in this moment as it is
- Feeling pleasured, glad, grateful, satisfied
- Therapeutic, spiritual, or existential realizations

Attaching to Others
- Feeling basically connected
- Feeling included, seen, liked, appreciated, loved
- Feeling compassionate, kind, generous, loving
Coming Home
The Brain’s Responsive Setting

When not invaded by threat, loss, or rejection [no 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 (the Avoiding system)
- Contentment (the Approaching system)
- Love (the Attaching system)

This is the brain in its homeostatic Responsive, minimal craving mode.
The Brain’s Reactive Setting

When invaded by threat, loss, or rejection [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** (the Avoiding system)
- **Frustration** (the Approaching system)
- **Heartache** (the Attaching system)

This is 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** - Borderline, narcissistic, antisocial PD; “looking for love in all the wrong places”
Choices . . .

Or?

Reactive Mode

Responsive Mode
Coming Home, Staying Home

Positive experiences of core needs met - the felt sense of safety, satisfaction, and connection - activate 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.
Linking Positive and Negative Material
Psychological Antidotes

Avoiding Harms
- Strength, efficacy --> Weakness, helplessness, pessimism
- Safety, security --> Alarm, anxiety
- Compassion for oneself and others --> Resentment, anger

Approaching Rewards
- Satisfaction, fulfillment --> Frustration, disappointment
- Gladness, gratitude --> Sadness, discontentment, “blues”

Attaching to Others
- Attunement, inclusion --> Not seen, rejected, left out
- Recognition, acknowledgement --> Inadequacy, shame
- Friendship, love --> Abandonment, feeling unloved or unlovable
The Tip of the Root

For the fourth step of TIG, try to get at the youngest, most vulnerable layer of painful material.

The “tip of the root” is commonly in childhood. In general, the brain is most responsive to negative experiences in early childhood.

Prerequisites
- Understanding the need to get at younger layers
- Compassion and support for the inner child
- Capacity to “presence” young material without flooding
TG and Trauma

- General considerations:
  - People vary in their resources and their traumas.
  - Often the major action is with “failed protectors.”
  - Cautions for awareness of internal states, including positive
  - Respect “yellow lights” and the client’s pace.

- The first three steps of TG are generally safe. Use them to build resources for tackling the trauma directly.

- As indicated, use the fourth step of TG to address the peripheral features and themes of the trauma.

- Then, with care, use the fourth step to get at the heart of the trauma.

First of all, do no harm.
The Fruit as the Path
Cultivation Undoes Craving

- All life has goals. The brain continually seeks to avoid harms, approach rewards, and attach to others - even that of a sage.

- It is wholesome to wish for the happiness, welfare, and awakening of all beings - including the one with your nametag.

- We rest the mind upon positive states so that the brain may gradually take their shape. This disentangles us from craving as we increasingly rest in a peace, happiness, and love that is independent of external conditions.

- With time, even the practice of cultivation falls away - like a raft that is no longer needed once we reach the farther shore.
The Goal as the Method

Peace

Contentment

Love
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
Thank you
Suggested Books

See www.RickHanson.net for other great books.

Key Papers - 1

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 - 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