Mindful Cultivation: Growing Happiness, Compassion, Resilience, and Other Inner Strengths

Center for Child and Family Well-Being
University of Washington
March 22, 2016

Rick Hanson, Ph.D.
The Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom
WiseBrain.org  RickHanson.net
It’s Good to Grow the Good Inside
What Shapes a Person’s Course?

Challenges

Vulnerabilities

Resources
Where Are Resources Located?

World

Body

Mind
Mental Resources: Inner Strengths

- Understandings – insight into self and others
- Capabilities – self-regulation, social skills
- Positive emotions – gratitude, love, delight
- Attitudes – confidence, optimism, tolerance
- Motivations – helping others, wanting to learn
- Virtues – patience, generosity, courage, kindness
Two wolves in the heart
INNER STRENGTHS ARE BUILT FROM BRAIN STRUCTURE
How do you get these inner strengths into your brain?
Self-Directed Neuroplasticity
The Enchanted Loom
Mental activity entails underlying neural activity.
Rewards of Love
Repeated mental activity entails repeated neural activity.

Repeated neural activity builds neural structure.
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
Effects of Meditation on the Brain

Increased gray matter in the:
- **Insula** – interoception; self-awareness; empathy for emotions
- **Prefrontal cortex (PFC)** – executive functions; attention control
- **Hippocampus** – visual-spatial memory; establishing context; inhibiting amygdala and stress hormones

Reduced cortical thinning with aging in insula and PFC
Increased activation of left frontal regions – improves mood, “approach orientation”

Increased gamma-range brainwaves – could help learning, integration

Preserved telomere length – could reduce age-related illness
We can use the mind
To change the brain
To change the mind for the better . . .
To benefit ourselves and other beings.
Positive Neuroplasticity
On average, about one-half to two-thirds of our beneficial traits – our inner strengths – are acquired (i.e., learned) rather than innate.
The Neuropsychology of Learning

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**.
Lasting traits come from internalizing passing states.
Inner strengths are grown from experiences of them (or related factors) – 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.
Installation

Installation

Installation
Most of us are better at activation 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 your 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, and
6. Create vicious cycles with others.
Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias

good experiences

bad experiences
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
Taking Charge of Your Brain
Getting the Good Stuff into Your Brain
Have a Good Experience
Enrich It
How to Enrich an Experience

- Duration
- Intensity
- Multimodality
- Novelty
- Salience
Absorb It
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.
Link Positive and Negative Material
HEAL Yourself

Have a positive experience.

Enrich it.

Absorb it.

Link positive and negative material.
Have It, Enjoy It
Let’s Try It

- **Notice** the experience present in awareness that you are basically alright right now.
  - Have the experience.
  - Enrich it.
  - Absorb it.

- **Create** the experience of gratitude.
  - Have the experience.
  - Enrich it.
  - Absorb 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
Study on the HEAL Process

- With collaborators from the University of California, a 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
Targets of Internalization

- **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
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
HEAL in Classes, Trainings, Families

- Take a few minutes to explain it and teach it.
- In the flow, encourage enriching and absorbing, using natural language.
- Encourage children or adults to use HEAL on their own.
- Do HEAL on regular occasions (e.g., at the end of each school day, meals, just before bed)
Adaptations for Children

- All kids benefit from HEAL. 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
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?
Evolutionary History

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

Avoiding harms for **safety**

Approaching rewards for **satisfaction**

Attaching to others for **connection**
Mental Resources for Challenges

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

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

**Connection** – Belonging, appreciation, friendship, compassion, love
Pet the Lizard
Feed the Mouse
Hug the Monkey
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
Suggested Books

See [www.RickHanson.net](http://www.RickHanson.net) for other great books.


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