

Hardwiring Compassion:

Helping Clients Heal Wounds of the Heart

FACES

Seattle, October 10, 2013

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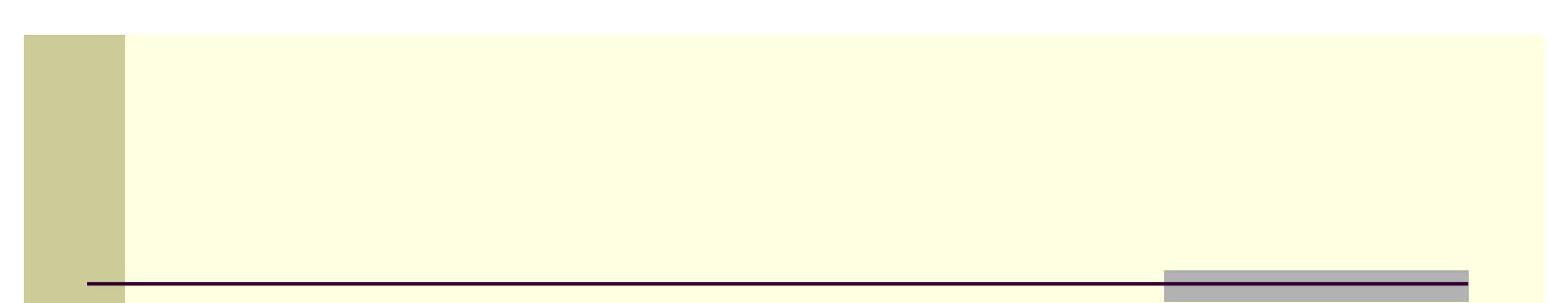
The Wellspring Institute For Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

www.WiseBrain.org

www.RickHanson.net

Topics

- **Cultivate yourself**
- **The negativity bias**
- **Take in the good**
- **Feeling cared about**
- **Key resource experiences**
- **Healing old pain**
- **The law of little things**



Cultivate Yourself

Working with Causes and Effects

Mental and physical phenomena arise, persist, and pass away due to causes.

Causes in the brain are shaped by the mental/neural states that are activated and then installed within it. States become traits.

The neural traits of inner “poisons” (e.g., hatred, greed, heartache, delusion) cause suffering and harm.

The neural traits of **inner strengths** (e.g., virtue, mindfulness, wisdom, resilience, compassion, etc.) cause happiness and benefit for oneself and others.

Inner Strengths Include

- **Virtues** (e.g., patience, energy, generosity, restraint)
- **Executive functions** (e.g., meta-cognition)
- **Attitudes** (e.g., optimism, openness, confidence)
- **Capabilities** (e.g., mindfulness, emotional intelligence, resilience)
- **Positive emotions** (e.g., gratitude, self-compassion)
- **Approach orientation** (e.g., curiosity, exploration)

Learning and Memory

- The sculpting of the brain by experience is memory:
 - Explicit - Personal recollections; semantic memory
 - Implicit - Bodily states; emotional residues; “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. So what matters most is not the explicit recollection of positive *events* but the implicit emotional residue of positive *experiences*.

Cultivation in Context

- Three ways to engage the mind:
 - Be with it. Decrease negative. Increase positive.
 - The garden: Observe. Pull weeds. Plant flowers.
 - 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 Buddhist, nondual, and mindfulness-based practice.
- Skillful means for decreasing the negative and increasing the positive have developed over 2500 years. Why not use them?

Cultivation Undoes Craving

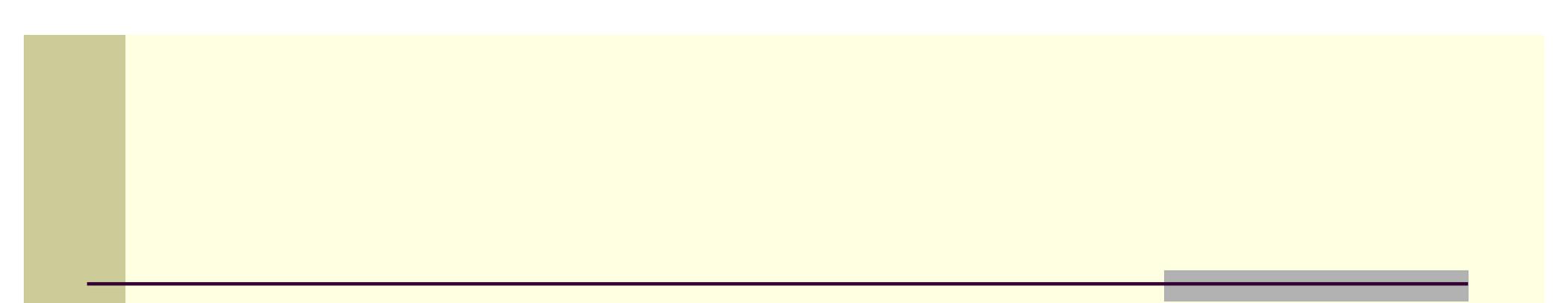
- All life has goals. The brain continually seeks to avoid harms, approach rewards, and attach to others - even that of a Buddha.
- It is wholesome to wish for the happiness, welfare, and awakening of all beings - including the one with your nametag.
- We rest the mind upon positive states so that the 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.

A Bottleneck For Growing Inner Strengths

The problem is that, for survival reasons, the brain is poor at turning positive states into neural traits.

It is bad at learning from good experiences compared to how good it is at learning from bad experiences.

This design feature of the brain creates a kind of bottleneck that reduces the conversion of positive mental states to positive neural traits.



The Negativity Bias

Negativity Bias

- As our ancestors evolved, avoiding “sticks” was more important for survival than getting “carrots.”
- Preferential encoding in implicit memory:
 - We learn faster from pain than pleasure.
 - Negative interactions: more powerful than positive
 - Easy to create learned helplessness, hard to undo
 - Rapid sensitization to negative through cortisol
- Most good experiences are wasted on the brain: lowers both the results of practice and motivation

Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

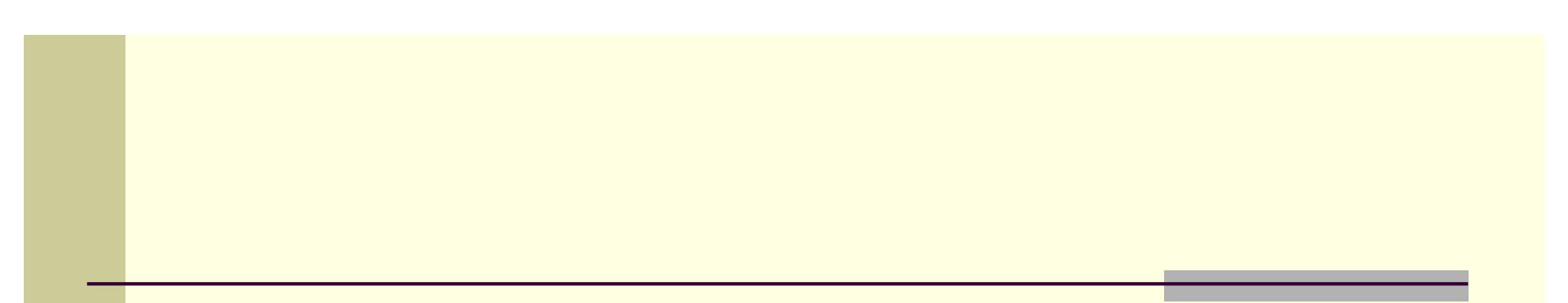
The negativity bias

bad experiences

good experiences

A composite image showing Stone Age people in a park with modern buildings in the background. The scene is set in a lush green park with tall trees and manicured bushes. In the foreground, three Stone Age individuals are crouching in a grassy field. One man in the center has long, dark hair and a beard, wearing a simple animal skin garment. To his left, another man is sitting and looking towards him. To his right, a woman is seen from the back, also wearing animal skin. In the background, several modern high-rise apartment buildings with many windows rise above the trees, creating a stark contrast between ancient and modern life. The text "Stone age brains in the 21st century" is overlaid in white serif font on a dark green horizontal band across the middle of the image.

Stone age brains in the 21st century



Take in the Good

HEAL by Taking in the Good

1. Have a positive experience. Notice 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).

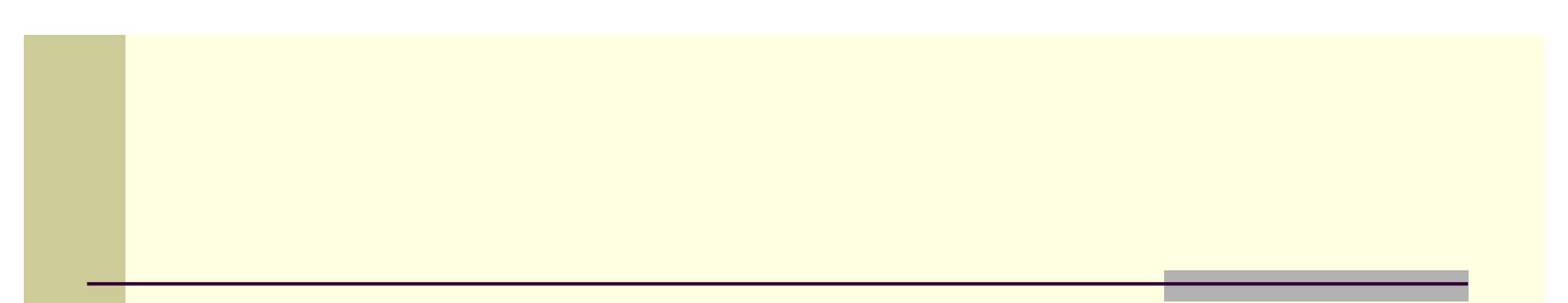
Benefits: Specific contents internalized. Implicit value of being active and treating yourself like you matter. Gradual sensitization of the brain to the positive.



Savor the experience



Sense the experience sinking into you.



Feeling Cared About

Feeling Cared About

- As we evolved, we increasingly turned to and relied on others to feel safer and less threatened.
 - Exile from the band was a death sentence in the Serengeti.
 - Attachment: relying on the secure base
 - The well-documented power of social support to buffer stress and aid recovery from painful experiences

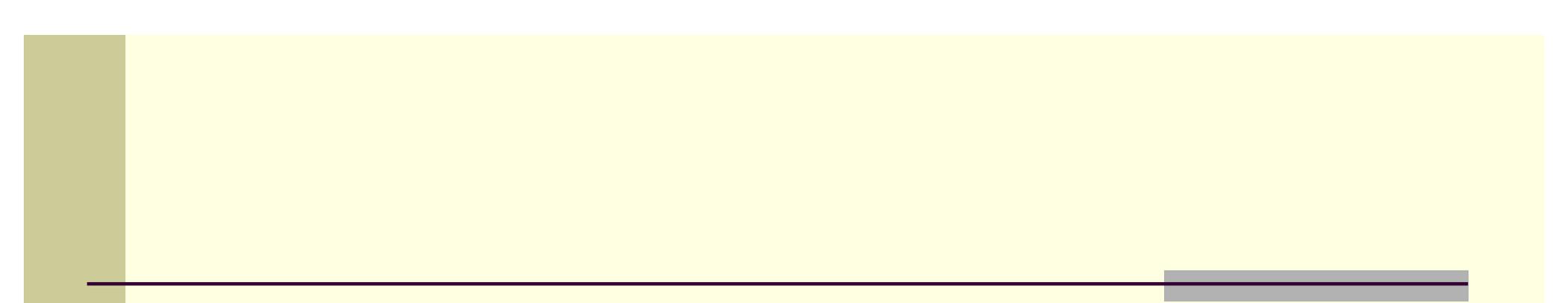
- Methods:
 - Recognize it's kind to others to feel cared about yourself.
 - Look for occasions to feel cared about and take them in.
 - Deliberately bring to mind the experience of being cared about in challenging situations.
 - Be caring yourself.

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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



Key Resource Experiences

Three Fundamental Motivational and Self-Regulatory Systems

- **Avoid Harms:**
 - Primary need, tends to trump all others
- **Approach Rewards:**
 - Elaborated via sub-cortex in mammals for emotional valence, sustained pursuit
- **Attach to Others:**
 - Very elaborated via cortex in humans for pair bonding, language, empathy, cooperative planning, compassion, altruism, etc.

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 pleased, 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

Psychological Antidotes

Approaching Opportunities

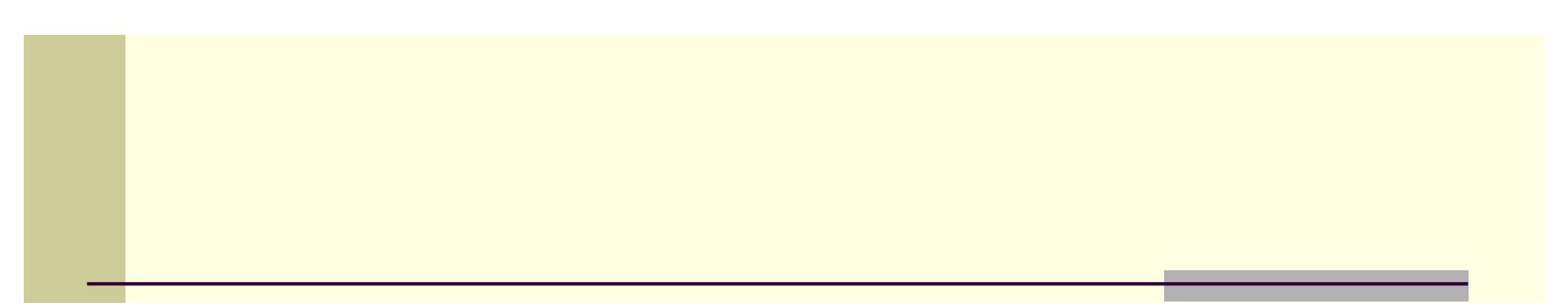
- Satisfaction, fulfillment --> Frustration, disappointment
- Gladness, gratitude --> Sadness, discontentment, “blues”

Affiliating with “Us”

- Attunement, inclusion --> Not seen, rejected, left out
- Recognition, acknowledgement --> Inadequacy, shame
- Friendship, love --> Abandonment, feeling unloved or unlovable

Avoiding Threats

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



Healing Old Pain

Using Memory Mechanisms to Help Heal Painful Experiences

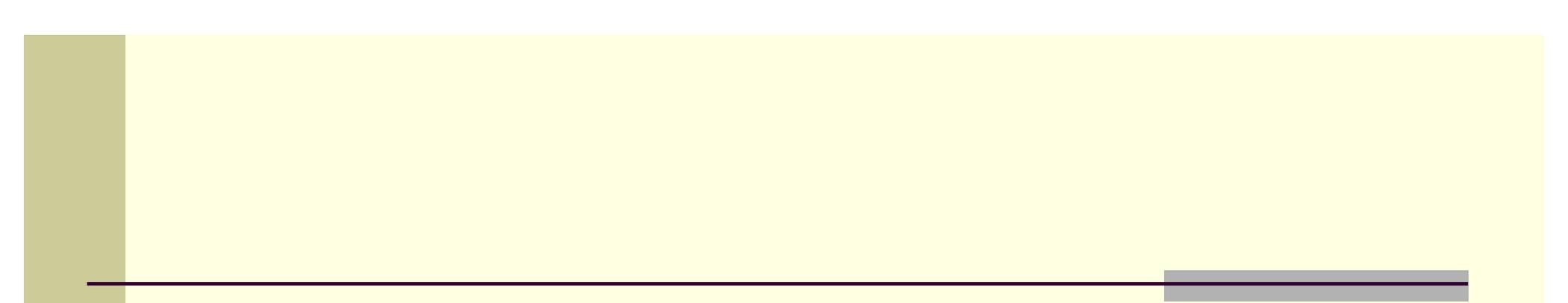
- The machinery of memory:
 - When explicit or implicit memory is reactivated, it is rebuilt from schematic elements, not retrieved *in toto*.
 - When attention moves on, the memory gets reconsolidated.
- The open processes of memory reactivation and reconsolidation create a window of opportunity for shaping your internal world.
- Reactivated material associates with other things in awareness, especially if they are prominent and lasting.
- When memory returns to storage, it takes associations with it.
- You can imbue memory with positive associations.

The Fourth Step of TG

- When you are having a positive experience:
 - Sense the current positive experience sinking down into old pain, and soothing and replacing it.
- When you are having a negative experience:
 - Bring to mind a positive experience that is its antidote.
- In both cases, have the positive experience be big and strong, in the forefront of awareness, while the negative experience is small and in the background.
- You are not resisting negative experiences or getting attached to positive ones. You are being kind to yourself and cultivating positive resources in your mind.

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



The Law of Little Things

*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.*

Great Books

See www.RickHanson.net for other great books.

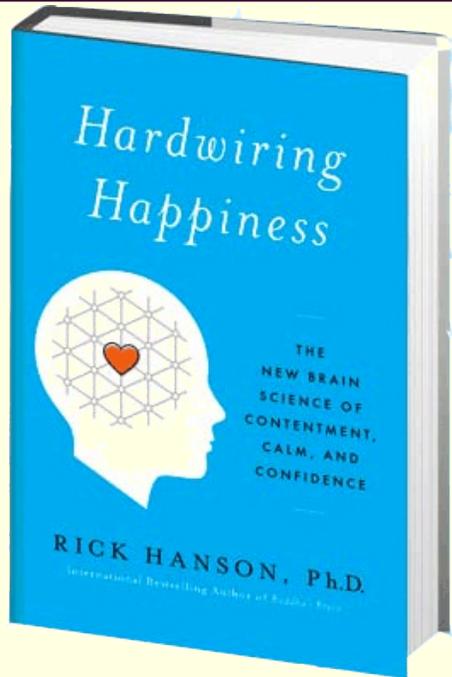
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Key Papers - 1

See www.RickHanson.net for other scientific papers.

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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



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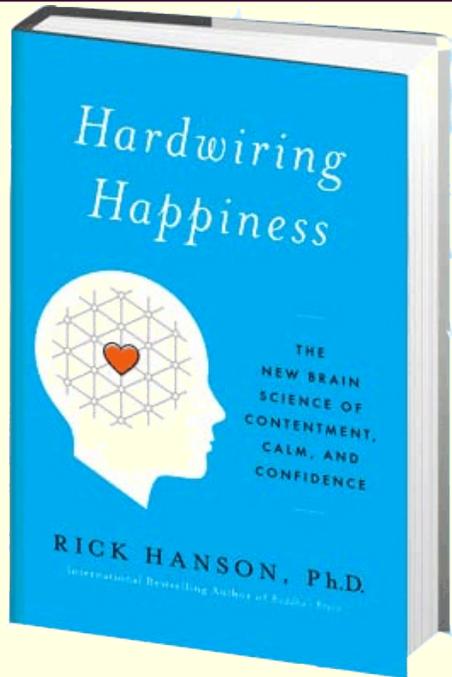
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