Taking in the Good Course:

Turning Everyday Experiences
Into Lasting Inner Strengths

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Part 1:

Having Beneficial Experiences
Introduction
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
Parts

1. Having Beneficial Experiences
2. Enriching and Absorbing Experiences
3. Linking Positive and Negative Material
4. Growing Strengths for Safety
5. Growing Strengths for Satisfaction
6. Growing Strengths for Connection
Identifying Your Resources
What Shapes Your Course in Life?
What Shapes Your Course in Life?

Challenges
What Shapes Your Course in Life?

Challenges

Vulnerabilities
What Shapes Your Course in Life?

Challenges

Vulnerabilities

Resources
What Can You Affect the Most?
Where Are Resources Located?
Where Are Resources Located?

The World
Where Are Resources Located?

The World

The Body
Where Are Resources Located?

The World

The Body

The Mind
What Can You Improve the Most?

The World?

The Body?

The Mind?
What Can You Improve the Most?

The Mind
A Taste of Taking in the Good
How to Take in the Good (TG)

Activation
1. **Have** a beneficial experience.

Installation
2. **Enrich** the experience.

3. **Absorb** the experience.
Let’s Try It

- **Notice** something beneficial in awareness
  - Have the experience – more in the foreground
  - Enrich it – sustain it, feel it in your body
  - Absorb it – receive it, imagine or sense it’s sinking in

- **Create** the experience of gladness or gratitude
  - Have the experience
  - Enrich it
  - Absorb it

- **Create** the experience of feeling cared about
  - Have the experience
  - Enrich it
  - Absorb it
Growing Inner Strengths
Two wolves in the heart
Inner Strengths Include

- **Capabilities** (e.g., mindfulness, insight, emotional intelligence, resilience, executive functions, impulse control)

- **Positive emotions** (e.g., gratitude, self-worth, love, self-compassion, secure attachment, gladness, awe, serenity)

- **Attitudes** (e.g., openness, determination, optimism, confidence, approach orientation, tolerance, self-respect)

- **SOMATIC inclinations** (e.g., vitality, relaxation, grit, helpfulness)

- **Virtues** (e.g., wisdom, patience, energy, generosity, restraint)
Inner Strengths Are Built From Brain Structure
Growing Inner Strengths

Inner strengths are grown mainly from beneficial mental states that are turned into beneficial neural traits.

Change in neural structure and function (learning, memory) involves activation and installation.

We grow inner strengths by internalizing experiences of them and their related factors.
Experiences of inner strengths – resilience, kindness, insight, mindfulness, self-worth, love, etc. – are usually pleasant.
States are temporary, traits are enduring.

States foster traits, and traits foster states

Activated states --> Installed traits --> Reactivated states --> Reinforced traits

**Negative** states --> Negative traits --> Reactivated negative states --> Reinforced negative traits

**Positive** states --> Positive traits --> Reactivated positive states --> Reinforced positive traits
Without this installation – without turning passing mental states into enduring neural structure – there is no learning, no change in the brain.

Activation without installation is pleasant, but has no lasting value.

What fraction of your beneficial mental states ever become neural structure?
Installation
Installation

Installation
Installation

Installation

Installation
Negative Experiences In Context

- Negative about negative --> more negative

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

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

- Could an inner strength have been developed without the costs of negative experiences?

- Many negative experiences are pain with no gain.
Summary of Taking in the Good
Learning to Take in the Good
Have a Good Experience
Absorb It
How to Take in the Good (TG)

Activation
1. Have a beneficial experience.

Installation
2. Enrich the experience.

3. Absorb the experience.
Have It, Enjoy It
Activating Beneficial States
The 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 Take in the Good (TG)

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How to Create A Beneficial Experience

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
Types of Good Facts

- **Events** (e.g., finished a load of laundry, someone was friendly to you, this cookie tastes good)

- **Conditions** (e.g., food, shelter, fresh air, have friends, dog loves you, flowers blooming, ain’t dead yet)

- **Qualities within oneself** (e.g., fairness, decency, determination, good at baking, loving toward kids)
How to Create A Beneficial Experience

Look for good facts in:

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Turning a Good Fact Into a Good Experience

- 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.
How to Take in the Good (TG)

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1. **Have** a beneficial experience.

Installation
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Reflections So Far

Noticing and creating an experience are different.

There are lots of ways to create experiences.

Beneficial experiences are usually based on facts.

Recognizing good facts does not deny bad ones.

Good facts about yourself are facts like any other.
Part 2:

Enriching and Absorbing Experiences
Aspects of Experience

- **Thought** – belief; perspective; expectation; image; memory; idea

- **Perception** – sensation (e.g., relaxation, vitality); sight; sound; taste; smell

- **Emotion** – feeling; mood

- **Desire** – want; wish; hope; value; drive; motivation; purpose; dream; passion; determination

- **Action** – behavior; posture; knowing how to
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
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”
How to Take in the Good (TG)

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Multimodality +
Ways to Create Experiences

- **Thought** – good facts in the past
- **Perception** – directly evoking experience (relaxing)
- **Emotion** – good facts in the lives of others
- **Desire** – good facts in the future (motivation)
- **Action** – sharing about good facts with others
The Humility of Receptivity

It’s easy to be fascinated with the rapid flow of thought.

But the memory-making – neural structure and function changing – processes of the brain, especially for emotional, attitudinal, and motivational learning, are generally slower than cascading thought.

Wiring useful experiences into the brain takes time.
Self-Directed Neuroplasticity
A Neuron
Mental activity entails underlying neural activity.
Steadiness of Mind
Repeated mental activity entails repeated neural activity.

Repeated neural activity builds neural structure.
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
Mind takes the shape of what it rests upon.

The brain takes its shape from what the mind rests upon.

For better or worse.
Self-Directed Neuroplasticity

We can use the mind

To change the brain

To change the mind for the better

To benefit ourselves and other beings.
Being on Your Own Side
The good life, as I conceive it, is a happy life.
I do not mean that if you are good you will be happy;
I mean that if you are happy you will be good.

Bertrand Russell
Care and Concern for Yourself

- Bring to mind someone you are for. Find a sense of caring, seeing suffering and worth, feeling support, being an ally. Know this stance toward someone.

- Apply this stance, this feeling, toward yourself.

- Recognizing your difficulties and burdens. Seeing softness and vulnerability inside like in any other person. Recognizing your stress, worry, frustration, hurt, pain.

- Finding warmth for yourself, the wish that you not suffer and instead be truly happy, determination to have a good life as best you can.
Part 3:

Linking Positive and Negative Material
The Negativity Bias
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
A Bottleneck  
For Growing Inner Strengths  

Unfortunately, the brain is inefficient at turning positive experiences into neural structure.

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

Most positive experiences are wasted on the brain.

This is the fundamental weakness in psychotherapy, mindfulness training, character education, human resources training, and informal efforts at growth.
The Negativity Bias
Stone age brains in the 21st century
We can deliberately use the mind to change the brain for the better.
The Garden of the Mind
Three Ways to Engage the Mind

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

The three work together.

A natural sequence: Be with something negative . . . Release it . . . Replace it with something beneficial.

Mindfulness is to be present in all three.
It’s Good to Take in the Good

- Development of specific inner strengths
  - General - resilience, positive mood, feeling loved
  - “Antidote experiences” - Healing old wounds, filling the hole in the heart

- 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
Research 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.
Dealing with Blocks
Blocks to Any Inner Practice

- Distractibility
- Out of touch with experience
- Uncomfortable bringing attention inward
- Over-analyzing, pulling out of the experience
Blocks to Taking in the Good

- It’s hard to receive, even a good experience
- Concern you’ll lose your edge; fear you’ll lower your guard
- Idea that feeling good is disloyal or unfair to those who suffer
- Belief you don’t deserve to feel good
- Not wanting to risk disappointment
- As a woman, socialized to make others happy, not yourself
- As a man, socialized to be stoic and not care about feelings
- You’ve been punished for being energized or happy
- Good things in you have been dismissed
- Positive experiences associate to negative ones
- “What’s the point in feeling good, bad things will still happen”
- Payoffs in not feeling good
- Not wanting to let others off the hook
- TG is craving that leads to suffering
Three Systems, Two Settings
Our Three Fundamental Needs

Safety

Satisfaction

Connection
Needs Met by Three Systems

Safety – Avoiding harms

Satisfaction – Approaching rewards

Connection – Attaching to others
Needs Feel Met: Responsive Mode

- When we feel basically safe – not disturbed by threat – the Avoiding system goes Responsive, with a sense of peace.

- When we feel basically satisfied – not disturbed by loss – the Approaching system goes Responsive, with a sense of contentment.

- When we feel basically connected – not disturbed by rejection – the Attaching system goes Responsive, with a sense of love.
The Responsive Mode Is Home Base

In the Green Zone, the body defaults to a sustainable equilibrium of refueling, repairing, and recovering.

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.
Needs Don’t Feel Met: Reactive Mode

- When we feel unsafe – disturbed by threat – the Avoiding system goes Reactive, with a sense of fear.

- When we feel dissatisfied – disturbed by loss – the Approaching system goes Reactive, with a sense of frustration.

- When we feel disconnected – disturbed by rejection – the Attaching system goes Reactive, with a sense of heartache.
The Reactive Mode Is Leaving Home

In the Red Zone, the body fires up into the stress response: fight, flight, or freeze; 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 its allostatic, **Reactive, craving** 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.
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
Pet the Lizard
Feed the Mouse
Hug the Monkey
Linking Positive and Negative Material
Rationale for the Link Step

- **Negative material**: wounds and deficits
- **From**: the present but usually the past
- **Consequences**: heightens stress and emotional reactions, lowers mood and self-worth
- **Becomes active**: explicitly but usually implicitly
- **Dynamic**: constructed and reconsolidated
- **Associates**: to whatever else is in awareness
- **Positive material**: can soothe, ease, put in perspective, and even replace negative material
- **Examples**: pain held in spacious awareness; telling a friend about a problem; self-compassion for an upset; feeling cared about alongside feeling hurt
HEAL by Taking in the Good

1. Have a beneficial experience.

2. Enrich it.

3. Absorb it.

4. Link it with negative material. [optional]
Conditions for the Link Step

- Divided awareness; holding two things at once
- Not hijacked by the negative; if it happens, drop negative
- Positive material remains more prominent in awareness
Key Antidote Experiences

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
Degree of Engagement with Negative

- The idea of the negative material
- A felt sense of the negative material
- The positive material goes into the negative material (e.g., soothing balm, filling up hollow places, connecting with younger layers of the psyche)

→ Throughout, the positive material remains more prominent in awareness.
Skills with the 4th Step

- Be on your own side; you want the positive to win. Perhaps imagine inner allies with you.

- Be resourceful. It’s OK to be creative, even playful.

- If the negative gets too strong, drop it; return to positive.

- Get a sense of receiving the positive into the negative.

- End with just the positive.

- Start with positive or negative material.
The Tip of the Root

- In the fourth step of TG, you could 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
Skills with the 4th Step

- Be on your own side; you want the positive to win. Perhaps imagine inner allies with you.

- Be resourceful. It’s OK to be creative, even playful.

- If the negative gets too strong, drop it; return to positive.

- Get a sense of receiving the positive into the negative.

- End with just the positive.

- Start with positive or negative material.
Part 4:
Growing Strengths for Safety
Some General Resources for Safety

- Being on your own side
- Calming down
- Feeling cared about
Specific Resources for Safety

- Feeling strong
- Relaxation
- Feeling protected
- Feeling alright right now
- Sense of agency, efficacy
- Seeing threats and resources clearly
- Finding refuges
- Dropping directly into peace
What is your experience of worry, uneasiness, fear, or other forms of anxiety?

What resources inside you help you feel less anxiety?
Reflections on Fear

- Fear is normal. Avoiding harms is fundamental.
- Much anxiety is unnecessary and unreasonable.
- We tend to overestimate threats and underestimate opportunities and resources.
- People can be afraid . . . to give up fear.
- Remember that you can give up unnecessary anxiety and still remain appropriately cautious, watchful, and strong.
Feeling Protected

- Protections in your setting
- Resources inside you and in your life
- Other beings who could help protect you
- Imagining a wall, a shield, a force field protecting you
- Feeling as safe as you reasonably can
- Needless anxiety falling away . . . No need to struggle with anything unpleasant inside you or out in the world . . .
Feeling Basically Alright Right Now

- Tuning into the body’s signals that all is well right now.

- Aware of breathing going fine . . . the heart beating . . . awareness itself keeps on going no matter what arises . . .

- Letting go of the past, not worrying about the future. Noticing that at least in this moment you are OK.

- Being alright, you can let go of any need to struggle with anything unpleasant.

- Feeling alright sinking into places inside that haven’t . . .
Reactive Approaches to Pain or Threat

- Disturbing and depleting bodily systems
- Overestimating threats and underestimating resources
- Fear, anger, immobilization, helplessness
- Fight, flight, freeze
- Strong sense of I-me-mine
- Vicious cycles in relationships
Responsive Approaches to Pain, Threat

- Sustainable outflow, intensity, pace
- Centered, grounded, in balance
- Fear or anger contained in mindfulness, calm, strength
- Perhaps positive emotions (e.g., confidence, vigor)
- Less sense of I-me-mine
- Assertive, firm; cautious but not cowed
Factors of Responsive Approaches

- Recognizing costs of Reactive mode
- Feeling strong, protected, alright, calm, relaxing
- Feeling grateful and glad about what you do have
- Recognizing how you’ve been successful with challenges
- Feeling cared about, encouraged, supported
- Having compassion, good will, love
Coming Home

Peace

Contentment

Love
Part 5:
Growing Strengths for Satisfaction
Some General Resources for Satisfaction

- Vitality
- Self-compassion
- Feeling appreciated
Specific Resources for Satisfaction

- Noticing something pleasant in your experience
- Gratitude and gladness
- Finding pleasant emotions in different settings
- Motivating yourself by recognizing good facts in future
- Things that make you feel happy
- Sense of accomplishment and success
- Fullness of this moment
- Aspiration without attachment
- Taking pleasure
- Sense of determination
- Finding enthusiasm
- Making good plans
Things to Be Happy about

- Hedonia: sense of pleasure, enjoyment
- Eudaimonia: sense of meaning, fulfillment

- Current situation
- Your life these days
- Your past
- Your future
- Yourself
Sense of Accomplishment

- Includes sense of agency: that you can make things happen, if only inside your own mind; efficacy; antidote to futility and helplessness

- Brings a sense of success: antidote to feeling like a failure

- Small goals count! Including so many things you’ve finished or otherwise put behind you: dishes washed, tasks done, activities completed, credentials earned, things you’ve moved past, ongoing matters you’re taking care of
What is your experience of feeling pressured, compelled, addicted, or driven toward a goal?

What resources inside you help you keep pursuing your goals *without* getting hijacked by drivenness?
Liking and Wanting

Desire (positively or negatively valenced):

- Liking: enjoying, preferring, valuing, “nice to have”
- Wanting: pressure, tunnel vision, insisting, “must have,” addiction, craving; different from simple determination, passion, ambition, aspiration, commitment
- You can like without wanting and want without liking.

Liking without wanting: heaven; wanting without liking: hell.

Dealing with the unpleasant, pleasant, heartfelt, and neutral on the basis of liking without tipping into wanting is the essence of the Responsive mode.
Coming Home

Peace

Contentment

Love
Part 6:
Growing Strengths for Connection
Specific Resources for Connection

- Cared about: included, seen, appreciated, liked, loved
- Caring: compassionate, kind, happy for the good fortune of others, spreading out to the whole world
- Self-compassion
- Healthy boundaries
- Feeling valued and worthy
- Knowing you’re a good person
- Compassionate assertiveness
Feeling Cared about

- Humans, animals, spiritual beings
- Individuals, groups
- In your life today or in the past

- Included, belonging
- Seen, understood; they want to understand
- Appreciated, respected, people are grateful to you
- Liked: warmth, friendliness, fondness, affection
- Loved
Feeling Caring

- Compassion: the wish that a being not suffer
- Kindness: the wish that a being be happy
- “Altruistic joy” – happy at the good fortune of others
- Love

- Extending out to the whole wide world, omitting none
If one going down into a river, swollen and swiftly flowing, is carried away by the current -- how can one help others across?

The Buddha
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.
  - 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
Assertiveness

What it is: Speaking your truth and pursuing your aims in the context of relationships

What supports it:
- Being on your own side
- Self-compassion
- Naming the truth to yourself
- Refuges: reason, love, nature, God
- Taking care of the big things so you don’t grumble about the little ones
- Health and vitality
Cultivation Undoes Craving

- Taking in the good is an openness to positive experience while letting go – allowing the experience in and through you.

- Much suffering and harm comes from “craving” – resisting the unpleasant, grasping after the pleasant, and clinging to the heartfelt – a drive state based on deficit or disturbance of core needs – safety, satisfaction, connection – being met.

- By repeatedly internalizing the felt sense of core needs being met, we gradually reduce the sense of deficit or disturbance, and rest increasingly 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.
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
You May Find This Useful
TG and Children

- All kids benefit from TG.

- Particular benefits for mistreated, anxious, spirited/“ADHD,” or LD children

- Adaptations:
  - Brief
  - Concrete
  - Natural occasions (e.g., bedtimes)
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
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
  - Peace of realizing that experiences come and go

- TG could heighten motivation for mindfulness – especially for those who drop out of mindfulness training or don’t persist with it.
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


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