Mindfulness and Taking in the Good:

Using Neuroplasticity
To Weave Resources
Into the Brain and the Self

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Topics

- Self-directed neuroplasticity
- The evolving brain - and its challenges today
- “Taking in the good” (TIG)
Self-Directed Neuroplasticity
A Neuron
A SYNAPSE

Axon Terminal

Presynaptic membrane neurotransmitter released by exocytosis

Mitochondrion produce ATP

Synaptic vesicles contain neurotransmitter

Synaptic Cleft

Postsynaptic membrane has receptors for neurotransmitters

Dendrite of second neuron
Fact #1

As your brain changes, your mind changes.
Ways That Brain Can Change Mind

For better:
- A little caffeine: more alertness
- Thicker insula: more self-awareness, empathy
- More left prefrontal activation: more happiness

For worse:
- Intoxication; imbalances in neurotransmitters
- Concussion, stroke, tumor, Alzheimer’s
- Cortisol-based shrinkage of hippocampus: less capacity for contextual memory
Fact #2

As your mind changes, your brain changes.

Immaterial mental activity maps to material neural activity.

This produces temporary changes in your brain and lasting ones.

Temporary changes include:

- Alterations in brainwaves (= changes in the firing patterns of synchronized neurons)
- Increased or decreased use of oxygen and glucose
- Ebbs and flows of neurochemicals
Tibetan Monk, Boundless Compassion
Mind Changes Brain in Lasting Ways

- What flows through the mind sculpts your brain. Immaterial experience leaves material traces behind.

- Increased blood/nutrient flow to active regions

- Altered epigenetics (gene expression)

- “Neurons that fire together wire together.”
  - Increasing excitability of active neurons
  - Strengthening existing synapses
  - Building new synapses; thickening cortex
  - Neuronal “pruning” - “use it or lose it”
Honoring Experience

One’s experience *matters*. Both for how it feels in the moment and for the lasting residues it leaves behind, woven into the fabric of a person’s brain and being.
Fact #3

You can use your mind
to change your brain
to change your mind for the better.

This is self-directed neuroplasticity.

How to do this, in skillful ways?
Attention is like a spotlight, illuminating what it rests upon.

Because neuroplasticity is heightened for what’s in the field of focused awareness, attention is also like a vacuum cleaner, sucking its contents into the brain.

Directing attention skillfully is therefore a fundamental way to shape the brain - and one’s life over time.

The education of attention would be an education par excellence.

William James
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
The Evolving Brain - and Its Challenges
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: last common ancestor with chimpanzees, our closest relative among the “great apes” (gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, bonobos, humans)
- 2.5 million years of tool-making (starting with brains 1/3 our size)
- ~ 150,000 years of *homo sapiens*
- ~ 50,000 years of modern humans
- ~ 5000 years of blue, green, hazel eyes
Evolutionary History

The Triune Brain

The Triune Brain - (P. MacLean 1990)
Three Stages of Brain Evolution

- **Reptilian:**
  - Brainstem, cerebellum, hypothalamus
  - Reactive and reflexive
  - **Avoid** hazards

- **Mammalian:**
  - Limbic system, cingulate, early cortex
  - Memory, emotion, social behavior
  - **Approach** rewards

- **Human:**
  - Massive cerebral cortex
  - Abstract thought, language, cooperative planning, empathy
  - **Attach** to “us”
Negativity Bias: Causes in Evolution

- “Sticks” - Predators, natural hazards, social aggression, pain (physical and psychological)

- “Carrots” - Food, sex, shelter, social support, pleasure (physical and psychological)

During evolution, avoiding “sticks” usually had more effects on survival than approaching “carrots.”

  - Urgency - Usually, sticks must be dealt with immediately, while carrots allow a longer approach.

  - Impact - Sticks usually determine mortality, carrots not; if you fail to get a carrot today, you’ll likely have a chance at a carrot tomorrow; but if you fail to avoid a stick today - whap! - no more carrots forever.
Negativity Bias: Physiology and Neuropsychology

- **Physiology:**
  - Greater bodily arousal to negative stimuli
  - Pain is produced anywhere; pleasure is circumscribed.

- **Neuropsychology:**
  - Separate, low-level systems for negative and positive stimuli
  - Right hemisphere specialized for negative stimuli
  - Greater brainwave responses to negative stimuli
  - ~65% of amygdala sifts for negative stimuli
  - The amygdala-hippocampus system flags negative experiences prominently in memory: *like Velcro for negative experiences but Teflon for positive ones.*
  - More negative “basic” emotions than positive ones
Negativity Bias: Some Consequences

- Negative stimuli get more attention and processing.
- We generally learn faster from pain than pleasure.
- People work harder to avoid a loss than attain an equal gain ("endowment effect")
- Easy to create learned helplessness, hard to undo
- Negative interactions: more powerful than positive
- Negative experiences sift into implicit memory.
A Major Result of the Negativity Bias: Threat Reactivity

Two mistakes:

- Thinking there is a tiger in the bushes when there isn’t one.
- Thinking there is no tiger in the bushes when there is one.

We evolved to make the first mistake a hundred times to avoid making the second mistake even once.

This evolutionary tendency is intensified by temperament, personal history, culture, and politics.

Threat reactivity affects individuals, couples, families, organizations, nations, and the world as a whole.
Results of Threat Reactivity (Personal, Organizational, National)

- Our initial appraisals are mistaken:
  - Overestimating threats
  - Underestimating opportunities
  - Underestimating inner and outer resources

- We update these appraisals with information that confirms them; we ignore, devalue, or alter information that doesn’t.

- Thus we end up with views of ourselves, others, and the world that are ignorant, selective, and distorted.
Costs of Threat Reactivity (Personal, Organizational, National)

- Feeling threatened feels bad, and triggers stress consequences.
- We over-invest in threat protection.
- The boy who cried tiger: flooding with paper tigers makes it harder to see the real ones.
- Acting while feeling threatened leads to over-reactions, makes others feel threatened, and creates vicious cycles.
- The Approach system is inhibited, so we don’t pursue opportunities, play small, or give up too soon.
- In the Attach system, we bond tighter to “us,” with more fear and anger toward “them.”
Health Consequences of Chronic Stress

- Physical:
  - Weakened immune system
  - Inhibits GI system; reduced nutrient absorption
  - Reduced, dysregulated reproductive hormones
  - Increased vulnerabilities in cardiovascular system
  - Disturbed nervous system

- Mental:
  - Lowers mood; increases pessimism
  - Increases anxiety and irritability
  - Increases learned helplessness (especially if no escape)
  - Often reduces approach behaviors (less for women)
  - Primes aversion (SNS-HPAA negativity bias)
A Poignant Truth

Mother Nature is tilted toward producing gene copies.

But tilted against personal quality of life.

And at the societal level, we have caveman/cavewoman brains armed with nuclear weapons.

*What shall we do?*
We can deliberately use the mind to change the brain for the better.
Taking in the Good
There are three phases of psychological healing and personal growth (and spiritual practice):
- Be mindful of, release, replace.
- Let be, let go, let in.

Mindfulness is key to the second and third phase, sometimes curative on its own, and always beneficial in strengthening its neural substrates. But often it is not enough by itself.

And sometimes you need to skip to the third phase to build resources for mindfulness.
Just **having** positive experiences is not enough.

They pass through the brain like water through a sieve, while negative experiences are caught.

We need to engage positive experiences actively to weave them into the brain.
How to Take in the Good

1. Look for positive facts, and let them become positive experiences.

2. Savor the positive experience:
   - Sustain it for 10-20-30 seconds.
   - Feel it in your body and emotions.
   - Intensify it.

3. Sense and intend that the positive experience is soaking into your brain and body - registering deeply in emotional memory.
Targets of TIG

- Bodily states - healthy arousal; PNS; vitality
- Emotions - both feelings and mood
- Views - expectations; object relations; perspectives on self, world, past and future
- Behaviors - reportoire; inclinations
Kinds of “Good” to Take in

- The small pleasures of ordinary life
- The satisfaction of attaining goals or recognizing accomplishments - especially small, everyday ones
- Feeling grateful, contented, and fulfilled

- Things are alright; nothing is wrong; there is no threat
- Feeling safe and strong
- The peace and relief of forgiveness

- Being included, valued, liked, respected, loved by others
- The good feelings that come from being kind, fair, generous
- Feeling loving

- Recognizing your positive character traits
- Spiritual or existential realizations
Why It’s Good to Take in the Good

- In general, adds positive contents to implicit memory
- Internalizes psychological growth (e.g., it usually feels good and goes well to speak from my heart)
- Associates rewards to good steps; boosts motivation
- Brings in missing “supplies” (e.g., love, worth) to help remedy deficits and heal painful experiences
- Encourages prosocial experiences and actions
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
Benefits of Positive Emotions

The benefits of positive emotions are a proxy for many of the benefits of TIG.

Emotions organize the brain as a whole, so positive ones have far-reaching benefits, including:

- Promote exploratory, “approach” behaviors
- Lift mood; increase optimism, resilience
- Counteract trauma
- Strengthen immune and protect cardiovascular systems
- Overall: “broaden and build”
- Create positive cycles
Potential Synergies of TIG and MBSR

- Improved mindfulness from MBSR enhances TIG.

- TIG increases general resources for MBSR (e.g., heighten the PNS activation that promotes stable attention).

- TIG increases specific factors of MBSR (e.g., self-acceptance, self-compassion, tolerance of negative affect)

- TIG heightens internalization of key MBSR experiences:
  - The sense of stable mindfulness itself
  - Confidence that awareness itself is not in pain, upset, etc.
  - Presence of supportive others (e.g., MBSR groups)
  - Peacefulness of realizing that experiences come and go
Healing Old Pain
The machinery of memory:
- When explicit or implicit memory is re-activated, it is re-built from schematic elements, not retrieved in toto.
- When attention moves on, elements of the memory get re-consolidated.

The open processes of memory activation and consolidation create a window of opportunity for shaping your internal world.

Activated memory tends to associate with other things in awareness (e.g., thoughts, sensations), esp. if they are prominent and lasting.

When memory goes back into storage, it takes associations with it.

You can imbue implicit and explicit memory with positive associations.
The Fourth Step of TIG

- 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.
TIG4 Capabilities, Resources, Skills

Capabilities:
- Dividing attention
- Sustaining awareness of the negative material without getting sucked in (and even retraumatized)

Resources:
- Self-compassion
- Internalized sense of affiliation

Skills:
- Internalizing “antidotes”
- Accessing “the tip of the root”
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
Penetrative insight

joined with calm abiding

utterly eradicates

afflicted states.

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

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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.


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