

A background image showing a bright sun setting or rising over a range of mountains, with the sun's rays creating a starburst effect.

The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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Cultivating a Calm Mind for Emotional Overeaters

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Note: The following excerpt is from our chapter, *Emotions*, in the 2nd edition of *Beyond a Shadow of a Diet: The Comprehensive Guide to Treating Binge Eating Disorder, Compulsive Eating and Emotional Overeating*. Please know that while it is essential for people to deal with any emotional components of overeating that may exist, learning the steps of attuned eating, as described our article in the [Wise Brain Bulletin \(Volume 8, 2\)](#) is a prerequisite for implementing the most effective path to resolving these issues.

The material below contains clinical examples from our work. Please adapt them to your owns situation and needs. For the purposes of making this article more personal, we've switched the voice from third person to second person.

Binge and compulsive eating are prevalent forms of self-soothing for people because

Greetings

The *Wise Brain Bulletin* offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

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[Rick Hanson, PhD](#) edits the *Bulletin*. [Michelle Keane](#) is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by [Laurel Hanson](#).

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it works so well. Reminiscent of an earlier time in life when food equaled love, overeating provides a means of trying to help yourself in moments of emotional distress. Like a true friend, food is always there. Many people turn to drugs, alcohol, or gambling when they are unable to regulate intense emotional states - while overeating may have the unwanted side effect of weight gain, in the scheme of possible solutions to psychological conflict, overeating is an understandable choice. Considering this idea promotes a compassionate stance to help you move from berating yourself to understanding your behavior in a different light. At the same time, as much as your overeating helps you through difficult situations, you're likely to be in pain about your eating and weight, and it is important to be compassionate about your distress.

When you reach for food to manage an uncomfortable feeling, you are reaching for comfort. You may describe the food as distracting, calming or even numbing, and count on this function to regulate your feeling. Perhaps you feel overwhelmed by anger, or perhaps you had a thought that was unacceptable to you. At the moment you begin eating, you redirect attention away from whatever created an internal

discomfort and you may lose access to the original feeling. In this regard, your attempt at self-care is misguided. While the ice cream may move you away from whatever truly bothers you, it is no more effective at solving your problem than it would be for you to apply ice cream to a scrape on your knee. The attempt to respond to yourself is admirable, but the use of food is an ineffective response. As you normalize your relationship with food, you must now learn more appropriate ways to deal directly with internal conflicts.

Cultivating A Calm Mind

As useful as it is for you to identify the feelings and underlying dynamics that contribute to your emotional overeating, you can deepen your ability to manage difficult feeling states by learning more about how the brain, body and mind work together. The field of neuroscience, and notably the pioneering work of Dan Siegel in the study of interpersonal neurobiology, offers a wealth of information and practices to foster greater connection

to yourself and to others. By understanding some of the basic facts about the principles of neuroscience, you will experience a greater sense of your own ability to manage your reactions to uncomfortable or overwhelming emotions. In the section below, we offer some examples of how the neuroscience of mindfulness can be extremely helpful if you struggle with binge or compulsive eating. As the field of neuroscience expands the understanding and practice of psychotherapy, these principles can support you on your journey to develop an attuned relationship with food and yourself.

The Importance of Neuroplasticity

According to Dan Siegel, neuroplasticity is the term that describes the “capacity for creating new neural connections and growing new neurons in response to experience. Neuroplasticity is not just available to us in youth: We now know that it can occur throughout the lifespan.” This is a significant departure from previous beliefs that the core elements of personality are formed by young adulthood. Instead, research now shows that through experience, the structure of the brain can actually change, revolutionizing the ways in which people can transform their lives.



Experience activates neural firing, and the notion that neurons that fire together, wire together may already be familiar to you. Neuroscience teaches us that through the power of awareness, a process Dan Siegel refers to as *mindsight*, these firing patterns can literally be changed. For example, Rhonda realized that every time she watched T.V., she automatically grabbed a bag of potato chips or popcorn, regardless of whether she was hungry.

Rhonda: I've been doing it for so long, I can't imagine not eating while I watch T.V. That's just part of the experience. But then I end up feeling so uncomfortable.

Therapist: You've wired those two activities together over time, and it's really hard for you to break that pattern because, as we've been discussing, what fires together, wires together. Think about the winter when you back out of your driveway in the snow and a rut forms. That's what happens when you form a neural pathway - you create that rut. But you can start to create some new pathways that will take you in a different direction.

Rhonda: I get what you mean, but that's really just how I relax at night.

Therapist: It's important to have a way to relax, and watching TV is part of how you do that. At the same time, you've been working really hard to honor your physical hunger - I guess we could say you've been working hard to wire eating with physical hunger! If you think about the need to take care of yourself in the evening, I'm wondering if you can imagine any other patterns that would feel caretaking.

Rhonda: I think I need to move off the couch where I always eat - I could sit in the comfortable chair instead. Also, I really like candles, and now that I think about it, it would feel really nice to light them while I watch T.V. I think that would be very relaxing.

Over the next couple of months, Rhonda purposefully brought her attention to how she went about watching T.V. at night. She learned to check in with herself and ask if she was hungry: if the answer was yes, she chose something that was a good match and decided it would be okay to eat in front of the T.V. However, she frequently discovered that she wasn't hungry and consciously sat in her chair with the candles lit, creating a calm environment for herself. Over time, this pattern became the "new normal" for Rhonda.

The Neuroscience of Mindfulness

People with Binge Eating Disorder, [compulsive eating, and emotional overeating] often describe moments where the feelings they experience become so overwhelming that they feel compelled to turn to food in order to calm themselves. [Earlier in this chapter] we used the metaphor of riding a wave to describe how you can think about the experience of getting through strong feelings; yet at times, you may feel that you are actually being swept away by that wave. Mindfulness practices offer an important tool to help you regulate your emotions and literally change your brain.

[In chapter 3,] we defined mindfulness as bringing awareness to an experience without judgment, distraction or expectation. Mindfulness is not the same thing as spirituality, religion or meditation (although mindfulness can be part of any of those practices.) Mindfulness practices foster the development of new mental skills through purposeful attention, focus and concentration, and research shows that the middle prefrontal regions of the brain - the part of the brain that is in charge of executive function - are thicker in people who practice mindfulness. While compulsive or binge eating is the presenting symptom, there are all kinds of issues people face that require emotional regulation. Mindfulness training provides a means to experience greater balance, regulation and equanimity.



In his book *Mindsight*, Dan Siegel offers a mindfulness practice that is useful for people who struggle with emotional overeating. This visualization uses the image of water and works well as an extension of the metaphor of riding the wave as you connect with a deeper, more peaceful place beneath the ocean. A short excerpt offers a sense of how you can learn to observe your feelings, thoughts and worries, while remaining grounded; (the complete version that also includes a hub of awareness can be found in on pp. 90-92 of *Mindsight*).

[Get settled, close your eyes and focus on your breath. Then, consider the following] “The mind is like the ocean. And deep in the ocean, beneath the surface, it’s calm and clear. And no matter what the surface conditions are like, whether it’s smooth or choppy or even a full-strength gale up there, deep in the ocean it’s tranquil and serene. From the depth of the ocean you can look toward the surface and simply notice the activity there, just as from the depth of the mind you can look upward toward the waves, the brain waves at the surface of your mind, all that activity of mind - thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories. Enjoy this opportunity to just observe those activities at the surface of your mind.



At times it may be helpful to let your attention go back to the breath, and follow the breath to reground yourself in the tranquil place at the deepest depth of the mind. From this place it's possible to become aware of the activities of the mind without being swept away by them, to discern that those are not the totality of who you are; that you are more than just your thoughts; more than your feelings. You can have those thoughts and feelings and also be able to notice them with the wisdom that they are not your identity. They are simply one part of your mind's experience. For some, naming the type of mental activity, like "feeling" or "thinking," "remembering" or "worrying," can help allow these activities of the mind to be noted as events that come and go. Let them gently float away and out of awareness..."

As Candace (a client) talked about her experience of "being beneath the ocean," she related that she was able to feel a deep sense of peacefulness in the moment. She was extremely worried that her job was at risk now that she had a new boss who kept finding fault with her work. The idea that she could lose her job created intense anxiety, leading to her fantasy that she would run out of money and become homeless. As she connected to this deeper, calm place within herself, she could notice her fear above the ocean, without feeling that she was drowning. From this place, which is actually a connection with the prefrontal cortex, she could then also remember that she was typically perceived as an excellent employee, and that even if her job were in jeopardy, she could take steps to update her resume and begin networking with her colleagues. Candace used this visualization as a strategy to calm herself and with regular, daily practice, she discovered that her need to reach for food to numb these feelings diminished over the course of the following weeks.

From Anxious to Calm

Learning how the brain/body connection works can be empowering. There is a good chance that you are familiar with the fight or flight response. If you are camping and a bear comes along, through evolution your body is programmed to go on high alert so that you can take quick action and save your life. Under these circumstances, your sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is activated, releasing the stress hormones that will flow through your body and stimulate your amygdala, the part of the brain that lights up in times of danger. While this response is extremely important when true danger is present, if it occurs repeatedly in response to daily stressors, it takes both a physiological and psychological toll. If you struggle with binge or compulsive eating, your reach for food is often an attempt to calm the

anxiety that you experience as your SNS is activated.

The parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) plays a very different role. According to Rick Hanson, author of *Buddha's Brain*, "The PNS conserves energy in your body and is responsible for ongoing, steady-state activity. It produces a feeling of relaxation, often with a sense of contentment...in contrast to the "fight-or-flight" SNS. These two wings of the [autonomic nervous system] are connected like a seesaw: when one goes up, the other one goes down." Learning how to move from your SNS to the PNS is a useful strategy to cultivate so that you have a means to calm yourself in moments of distress without relying on food. This can be done learning a simple diaphragmatic breathing exercise:

Sitting comfortably with both feet on the floor, place one hand on your chest, and the other hand on your abdomen, so that your little finger is above your navel with your fingers spread open. As you breathe, concentrate on moving the air down into your abdomen, so that your bottom hand moves with each breath, while your top hand remains relatively still. Breathe through your nostrils, keeping your breaths as even in length as possible, so that the "in" breath is the same length as the "out" breath, and keep your breaths as smooth as possible.

You may begin by trying it for 10 breaths or by spending a few



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minutes engaged in this type of breathing. Most people describe a feeling of relaxation or a sense of peacefulness as they focus on their breathing and activate the parasympathetic nervous system. You may also find it helpful to focus on your breathing as a way to cultivate mindfulness; if you find your mind wandering to thoughts, feeling, or worries, you can gently return your focus to your breathing. You may believe you “aren’t doing it right” if your mind leaves the focus of your breath, so

it is important to remember that a wandering mind, referred to as “monkey mind” is natural, and that you are still receiving the benefits of a mindfulness practice.

Anita arrived for a session feeling “all wound up.” She appeared agitated and identified the bodily sensations that accompanied her anxiety, including a tightening in her chest and tension in her neck. Rather than beginning the session by talking about what was bothering her, Anita agreed to start by practicing the breathing exercise described above and immediately felt that she was “calming down.” Since the tension in her neck persisted, she was instructed to close her eyes again, and this time breathe into her neck and let the tension go. Now that she had moved into a more relaxed state, Anita was better able to talk about the source of her discomfort.

She explained that after a lifelong experience of dieting and bingeing, she now experiences a wonderful sense of being in charge of her eating. However, her mother’s constant focus on her weight is a heavy burden, creating tension that she carries in her body. Through the experience of paying attention to her physical sensations and then using a breathing technique to literally move herself from the SNS to the PNS, Anita learned how she could use this skill as a means of calming herself outside of her therapy sessions, rather than turning to food.

Engaging the Prefrontal Cortex

In a variation of this technique, clients in a group setting were instructed to close their eyes for a couple of minutes and practice their diaphragmatic breathing. Then, keeping their eyes closed, they were asked to think of a recent overeating experience that felt uncomfortable. Once they had this image, they were told to return to the diaphragmatic breathing once again - thereby activating the prefrontal cortex with its problem-solving and intuitive functions - and this time to think about one change that would have made the outcome feel better. Marissa reported that she had been at a restaurant where she began by eating the bread that was served when she sat down, and then finished the entire plate of pasta, which left her feeling extremely uncomfortable. She realized that she had been way too hungry when she walked into the restaurant. She identified that the change she needed to make would have been to eat a snack in the late afternoon to honor her hunger, and this led to a discussion of strategies she could use to make sure she had food with her at that time. Keep in mind that when you engage in this type of mindfulness practice, which is only one of the many kinds of mindfulness skills that can be cultivated, you are engaging the prefrontal cortex of your brain, which strengthens your self-attunement.

A Place of Refuge

Another useful mindfulness skill is the practice of visualizing a place of calmness and well-being. As you build your ability to go to this place, it can become a refuge during times of emotional distress and an alternative to reaching for food. During a group session, members were asked to close their eyes and imagine themselves in a place that was relaxing and safe. Phyllis reported that she visualized herself at the shore of a lake where she vacationed with her family as a child. Phyllis added that she expected the instruction to be a place that was relaxing, but when the word “safe” was added, she also saw herself wrapped in a soft quilt. Sammy described an oversized cozy chair in her home in which she loved to curl up and relax. Liza, on the other hand, couldn’t picture a place and added, “anywhere I am there’s no relaxation.” With her eyes open, she was asked to consider where she might possibly imagine a moment of relaxation, and responded, “under a willow tree.” Liza agreed to practice imagining herself under that tree on a daily basis, even if at first, it was only for a few seconds.

Taking In The Good

Up until now, we have explored how brain science can help you develop skills that foster your move away from relying on food as a primary source of emotional regulation. In

Buddha's Brain, Rick Hanson suggests that people can rewire their brain by learning to *take in the good*, thereby strengthening their ability to experience greater happiness and well-being. He explains that the negativity bias of the brain developed as an evolutionary mechanism for our ancestors and primes people to be more attentive to negative than positive experiences for survival; remember, as humans evolved, it was helpful for the brain to focus on the bear that could attack in order to keep out of harm's way, over the other positive experiences that occurred that day. According to Hanson, "In effect, the brain is like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones. That shades *implicit memory* - your underlying feelings, expectations, beliefs, inclinations, and mood - in an increasingly negative direction."

When we attended a presentation offered by Rick Hanson, a participant shared that if she receives workshop evaluations where ten are positive and one is negative, she will focus on the negative one, and from the laughter that followed her comment, it was clear that many audience members could relate to her experience. As an antidote to this negativity bias, Hanson offers three steps to turn positive thoughts into positive experiences, so that rather than washing through like water in a sieve, they become implicit memories, encouraging



the brain to tilt toward the positive. This concept is well-suited for your journey to end emotional overeating and become an attuned eater.

At a recent workshop, participants were asked to close their eyes and think of a time that they were hungry, but ate something that was not a good match for their hunger; people used words such as depriving, unsatisfying and uncomfortable to describe that experience. Next, participants were asked to think of a time that that they were hungry and got exactly what they were hungry for. This time, the words used to describe the experience

included satisfying, content and wonderful. In order to deepen and embody the positive experience, participants followed the three steps of *taking in the good*:

1) With your eyes closed, think about the time you were hungry, ate exactly what you were hungry for and stopped when you were full.

2) Now, savor the experience as you hold it in your attention for the next 10, 20 or 30 seconds rather than getting distracted by something else. Soften and open to the experience; let it fill your mind; give over to it in your body. The longer something is held in awareness and the more emotionally stimulating it is, the more neurons that fire and thus wire together, and the stronger the trace in implicit memory.



3) Intend and sense the experience seeping into you, perhaps as a warm glow spreading through your chest.

We have adapted Rick's exercise for taking in the good to help people build their positive experiences with attuned eating but, of course, you can take in the good with all types of positive experiences, ranging from noticing a beautiful flower to remembering a conversation in which you felt connected, to an accomplishment in your work life that made you feel proud. As you build new internal structures through the process of attuned eating, taking in the good will support you in building emotional equilibrium. As Hanson writes, "any single time of taking in the good will usually make just a little difference. But over time those little differences will add up, gradually weaving positive experiences into the fabric of your brain and your whole being."

Attuned Eating Leads to Attuned Living

As you explore your need to reach for food when you are not physically hungry, the possible explanations are limitless. When mental health professionals combine their therapeutic techniques with knowledge about the dynamics of binge and compulsive eating, they can help people gain new insights into their personal struggles as they develop the capacity to regulate feelings without food. At times, you may also find that the language of the attuned eating approach provides metaphors that can better help you to understand your emotional life or to translate the self-attunement you attain with food into other areas of your life.

Discovering Inner Strengths

Danielle described an experience in which she felt physical hunger and considered what to eat. At first, she thought that she might need to leave her home and find a restaurant that would have the type of meal she craved. However, as Danielle further defined what she wanted, she realized that she already had the cucumbers, hummus and bread that she needed to make the perfect sandwich. Danielle explained that this was an insightful moment for her because in therapy, she has worked hard to figure out what career path to take, including whether to pursue further education. Danielle realized that she already "has what it takes" to be successful inside of her. Although she frequently diminishes her strengths, which her parents failed to mirror, she had recently begun to reconnect with some earlier interests

in fashion design. The image of already having the ingredients for a cucumber sandwich stayed with Danielle as a useful metaphor in moments of self-doubt.

Discovering “I Matter”

Latoya used the attuned eating approach for several years and generally sustained her ability to eat in response to physical hunger. She contacted her former therapist for a consultation when she experienced an increase in overeating that she could not explain.

Latoya: I don't know what is going on. Usually I can figure out what is triggering any overeating that still occurs, and it becomes an opportunity to learn something about myself. This time I feel like it just doesn't matter.

Therapist: Can you explain that more to me?

Latoya: I don't know. It's like I've just stopped caring. I know how good it feels when I'm eating the way I've learned with you, but I just can't seem to get back there.

Therapist: I'm wondering why the words “it doesn't matter” stand out for you right now.



You're someone who has always valued taking good care of yourself. Can you think about whether those words describe anything else going on in your life right now?

Latoya: Well, yes. Just about everything. I'm still in the same situation at work. My boss had all but said I would get a promotion this spring, but it didn't happen. No matter how hard I work, I can't seem to get any further in the company, which affects my income. I was really counting on a big raise.

Therapist: I know that you've felt unhappy at your job for a very long time.

Latoya: Yes. And I haven't told you what happened with Chris. He's been attending AA like he promised, but a few weeks ago I found an empty beer can in the trash. I told him if he ever started drinking again, our marriage would be over. So now, I don't know what to do. I thought everything was going so well for us. I feel so hurt that he did this to us. It's like he's saying that our relationship isn't important. I guess that's when my eating got out of control. I'm just so tired of things not working out for me. I feel like giving up.

Therapist: I can hear how hurt you feel. It sounds like Chris's actions made you feel like you don't matter, and you're expressing that feeling in what you say to yourself about your eating.

Latoya: I think you're right. But I'm not sure what to do.

Therapist: You know from past experience how important it is to make sure that you have plenty of food available and stay in tune with your hunger as much as possible. You may not have control over your husband and your boss, but you can stay in charge of how you feed yourself. I want to remind you that when you take care of yourself with your eating, you've always told me how much better you feel. You have some tough decisions to make about your job and your marriage, and you'll be in a stronger position to deal with these situations when you feel calmer with food. It really does matter that you take care of yourself.

Latoya: I just needed to be reminded of that. I think I'll call the couple's therapist we used to see to help me figure out the situation with Chris.

In a follow up contact two weeks later, Latoya reported that she had returned to her

previous level of calmness regarding her eating. She continued to feel sad about the current situation with her husband, but said that Chris had agreed to resume marriage counseling.

Discovering a Sense of Separateness

Jill's progress with the attuned eating approach helped her separate from an enmeshed relationship with her father. Jill's mother died when she was 14 years old, and as an only child, she took on a feeling of responsibility for her father's well-being. Eating was a focus in their relationship as both she and her father loved to cook. They also dieted together, and on her visits home as a young adult, Jill reported that her father often gave her contradictory messages. One minute he wanted her to eat the special, rich foods that he cooked just for her, and the next minute he criticized her for eating too much.

As Jill worked on developing her attuned eating, she struggled with the internalized voice of her father telling her what she should eat. Over time, Jill understood that her father could not know when she was hungry or what her body craved. As Jill became more comfortable feeding herself according to her body's signals, she found that she could be in



the presence of her father and remain true to herself. She explained her new approach to him and requested that he stop commenting on her food choices.

Several months later, Jill announced that she had signed up for guitar lessons. She explained that she had played for a short time as a child and that her skills were just average. Her parents directed her into dance where she displayed more talent. However, Jill loved music, and found it very relaxing to strum on the guitar. Jill had never returned to this hobby, but now realized that just as her father could not really know what she was hungry for when she ate, he could not know what pursuits were right for her either. She enjoyed the first session of her class so much, that she continued to take lessons, which gave her much pleasure.

Discovering Needs

Like Jill, Blanca translated aspects of her experience with attuned eating into other areas of her life. Through the process of normalizing her eating, Blanca realized that there were many ways in which she ignored her needs. She had settled into a long-term relationship with a man who seemed unwilling to commit to marriage. Although she was financially successful in her career, she was not particularly satisfied with her work. Blanca felt bolstered by her ability to care for herself. As she stopped criticizing her body and ate when she was hungry, Blanca realized that much of her overeating stemmed from the dissatisfaction she felt in her daily routine. Blanca had always dreamed of living in another country and decided that embarking on this adventure would be a “perfect match” for her at this point in her life. She was able to secure a position teaching English at a foreign school. This job would provide her with enough money to support her through the year, while minimizing her stress and allowing opportunities for travel. Blanca left the outcome of her relationship on hold, believing that she could better evaluate her feelings toward her boyfriend once she achieved some distance from him.

As the relationship between dieting, overeating and emotions becomes clear, you will develop your capacity to regulate emotions without the reach for food. The use of the attuned eating approach as a tool is extremely powerful and rewarding. People integrating attuned eating into their lives will find that their relationship to food, themselves, and the world can change in profound ways. While the path for each person will vary significantly, solving your binge or compulsive eating will leave you with a new freedom in relation to food, your emotions, and yourself.

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Books.

Judith Matz, LCSW is co-author of two books on the topics of eating and weight issues: *Beyond a Shadow of a Diet: The Comprehensive Guide to Treating Binge Eating Disorder, Compulsive Eating and Emotional Overeating* and *The Diet Survivors Handbook: 60 Lessons in Eating, Acceptance and Self-Care*. She is the director of the Chicago Center for Overcoming Overeating, Inc. and has a private practice in Skokie, IL. Judith is a speaker at local and national conferences.



Descriptions of her work have appeared in the media including the *LA Times*, *Fitness*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Self, Shape*, *Today's Dietitian*, *Diabetes Self-Management*, *Psychotherapy Networker*, and *NBC News Chicago* with Nesita Kwan, and she appears in the documentary *America The Beautiful 2: The Thin Commandments*.

You can find more info at www.judithmatz.com and www.dietsurvivors.com.



Ellen Frankel, LCSW worked in the field of eating disorder treatment and prevention for over fifteen years. She is a frequent speaker at conferences and has been interviewed on topics related to eating issues, body image and spirituality by national newspapers, traditional and online magazines, as well as national radio programs across the country, and has appeared on local and national television. She has published numerous books including *Beyond a Shadow of a Diet: The Comprehensive Guide to Treating Binge Eating Disorder, Compulsive Eating and Emotional Overeating*:

Second Edition (Routledge 2014) and *The Diet Survivor's Handbook: 60 Lessons in Eating, Acceptance and Self-Care* (Sourcebooks 2006) with co-author Judith Matz. Ellen is also the author of the novel *Syd Arthur* (Pearlson Press 2011) and *Beyond Measure: A Memoir About Short Stature and Inner Growth* (Pearlson Press 2006). With Rabbi Baruch HaLevi she has co-authored *Revolution of Jewish Spirit: How to Revive Ruakh in Your Spiritual Life, Transform Your Synagogue & Inspire Your Jewish Community* (Jewish Lights 2012) and *Carry the Fire: Mourning With Meaning, Purpose and Inspiration* (forthcoming). She currently serves as a hospice bereavement counselor. You can visit Ellen at www.authorellenfrankel.com.

Mindful Conversations

A Benefit Workshop for the Wellspring Institute Saturday, June 14, 2014

Your relationships, both personal and professional, are central to your success and happiness. Conversations are the lifeblood of all relationships.

We'll cover principles of mindful conversations that, when understood and practiced, lead to more joyful, fulfilling, and collaborative relationships—and greater inner peace and resilience.

Grounded in both research and practice, you'll learn effective approaches to:

- **Transform** misunderstandings and potential conflicts into greater opportunities for connecting
- **Plan** important conversations and maximize the probability of successful results
- **Apply** mindfulness and compassion to where it's often needed most: Relationships
- **Learn** a step by step process to initiate important conversations
- **Handle** circumstances in which you feel blindsided by someone initiating a conversation
- **Overcome** the negative impact of the survival brain on making relationships work

The workshop is fast-moving, hyper-focused on super effective things you can actually DO, and lots of fun. Your presenters are Judith Bell, MS, and Daniel Ellenberg, PhD, co-authors of *Lovers for Life* and principals of *Rewire Leadership™* and *Relationships That Work®*.

This workshop will benefit the [Wellspring Institute For Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom](#), which publishes the [Wise Brain Bulletin](#), offers all the great resources at [WiseBrain.org](#) and sponsors [Your Skillful Means](#), a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. Registration is \$50 and 3 CE credits are available for an additional \$20.

For a good cause, this will be a fun, informative, and useful experience that could make a huge difference in all of your relationships. Tell a friend for twice the good karma – putting the word out to others will be a wonderful contribution to the good work of the Institute!

Register online at <http://www.wisebrain.org/mindful-conversations>

Taking In The Good

© Judy Rosemarin

For my mother, Jan Silberstein..

Pale and weak
Strong jaw rising from her pillowed head
Regal nose of supreme elegance
I take in the good in this moment.

Mouth open breathing
In tubed oxygen
Not a grey hair in her eyebrows
Two ice chips placed in her
Parched mouth every half hour as
I take in the good in this moment.

Impossibly strong
Equally fragile
Her spirit inspires me and
Defies all odds in her
93rd year and
I take in the good this moment.

This moment is good
For she bore me
And I bow and bear bare
Witness now
To her regal heart and soul
Both whispering a solid "yes!"
As I take in the good this moment.

We are one despite
The distance between her
Hospital bed and my chair.
One small tick of her eye
And I know her needs
As I take in the good this moment.

Aged hands swollen due to
Motionless weakness
Are each massaged by
My first-born hands filled with all the
Years of loving her
I take in the good this moment.

Twisted blessings
Hospitals and hope
Here thankfully with
Her instead of miles
Of separation
Holding faith in
Tomorrow and
Today
Taking in the good this moment.

Love so wide which boldly blocks
Out trembling tenuous uncertainties
Love so strong which
Blankets beating hearts
And soothes all syncopation while
Taking in the good in this moment...
this ONLY moment.

We have this second
Then it vanishes into the
Next...never the same
But shining in possibilities
Always... as I fall into love
Pure and honest
Filling this hospital room
Filling each corner creating pillows
of love for her resting body

As I take in the ONLY THIS MOMENT GOOD.

A Coach's First Steps Into Positive Neuroplasticity

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After 30 years of offering executive coaching, coupled with a rich mindfulness meditation practice which continually informs my coaching practice, I fortunately came across *Hardwiring Happiness* by Rick Hanson, PhD. What struck me about the book and Dr. Hanson's rich understanding of neuroscience and psychology is that he makes it abundantly clear that our brains have not yet caught up with the speed of social change, and as a result, our brains, for survival's sake, still lean towards the negative.

In the business world, "survival" is pervasive. All too many leaders are managing out of fear and by exception, which in simple language means that they are compelled to stay vigilant and on the lookout for what's wrong, who is at fault, what's missing, who can foul things up, what is off and then simultaneously and desperately seek ways to prevent or mitigate such incorrect things, processes or events.

As a result, there is also a strong tendency to hold onto those often unconscious negative biases, which then impacts and insidiously permeates interpersonal relationships. When this kind of negative biased thinking becomes habitual and unconscious, poor decisions are often made and haste hastens harmful thinking. It is only when leaders stop and rebuild individual self-awareness, as well repairing and rebuilding that of their team, that is there hope for change for the better.

Dr. Hanson's approach to positive neuroplasticity – which he refers to informally as "taking in the good" – is the perfect antidote to this habitual and mindless negative thinking and behavior.

Since our sluggish brains have not caught up with today's realities, taking in the good and helping the brain rewire towards positive experiences seems critical for the business world, especially in the field of coaching. In fast-paced business environments, leaders are more likely to see what is wrong or what could go wrong, and often miss the countless and plentiful opportunities to stop, pause, and "take in" what is also going right and "is good."

Think about the difference between taking some time to savor a delicious meal, verses gobbling it down, thereby missing the taste, texture, and hints of sweet or savory, as it fills your senses with smells, and delights the eyes with colors and contrasts on the plate.

In business, gobbling seems the norm. You might hear a manager say, “Yes, you saved our most precious customer but we need to move beyond that and tackle the next challenge.” On the surface you might think, “That doesn’t seem bad. It’s normal business speak.” But Dr. Hanson is saying something quite different. He is saying that we are not paying attention to the good long enough and with enough concentration and awareness. It would be better instead to stop, take a beat, pause and let the good feelings of a success, whatever size, really sink into the system. This allows the brain to experience the “good” over a longer period of time, setting up multiple neuron firings in the brain to actually rewire it to “tune into the good” more routinely.

I wanted to see if positive neuroplasticity really worked. As a coach, I never do anything with my client that I first have not tried out on myself, so I wondered how that might



happen. I was curious. What would it be like to linger a bit with a pleasant experience and let those neurons fire over again and again? Could it really make a difference? Would it actually create new neural pathways, which in turn would re-sculpt my brain for the positive? Hanson's claim that taking in the good need only take 12-25 seconds certainly appealed to this fast paced New Yorker!

One morning, after having just recovered from the flu, I was standing on the commuter train platform waiting for an arriving train to take me to my New York City office. It was early. No train yet. I was feeling low and weak. My whole body just wanted the train to come, so I could flop into a seat and sleep for the hour commute to Manhattan.

As I stood on the long cement platform, that spans the length of at least 10 railroad cars, with a long red tile roof, I suddenly became aware of a most ordinary thing: a cement column, one of many, which held up the train platform roof. Nothing new. Never noticed before. All the columns had been there. But that morning, I was mindful and took notice. If my coaching approach is, "never do anything with a client you haven't already tried out on yourself," it was time to try out taking in the good for myself. I suddenly became my first "client."

So, just before the 6:37 am train arrived, I really looked at that big round cement column with fresh eyes, and began to see it as very strong, steady and powerful. Normally, I may not have stopped and taken in the column's shape, girth and strength, much less even notice it - I might have simply leaned on it. With my curiosity fully engaged, I kept my focus on that ordinary column for the recommended 12 seconds, counting, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 - breathing in the "strength, steadiness and power" that I felt with each inhale and exhale. As I did it, something began to shift. By the third breath (I was glad the train was not at the station yet) I felt different; stronger and more steady, focused and balanced. As I breathed in I no longer felt weak and woozy. I walked onto the train that had just pulled into the station, took my seat for the one-hour ride and never slept a wink. Throughout the entire day I noticed that I was not dragging, nor lagging behind. I felt upright, strong and alert. Taking in the good from the cement column worked.

The excitement of this process permeated the rest of my day. I wondered what would happen if I were to use this method with a client or two. How could I teach others about this negative brain bias and help them learn how to rewire their brains through positive neuroplasticity? I would have to introduce what might seem like a risky and foreign idea to my corporate clients and would need to draw on the supporting research.

I had taken a new coaching assignment to work with two colleagues in an accounting firm. They had not been able to communicate effectively with one another for quite some time, yet each was valued as an employee. Their dynamic was having a ripple effect in the firm, and their toxic interactions impacted all those around them.

The prior week, I had met each of them, individually, to get to know them and build some rapport, as well as set the stage for our working together. This week, we were meeting together. They hardly looked at each other. Ice seemed to fill the room. It was daytime but it was as if the lights were dimmed. How could I possibly help them to take in the good when

neither person saw any good anywhere?

As a coach, it's critical to hear, see and sense what is going on as well as what is NOT going on with a client, or between clients and yourself. My sense was that I was not sure where we could go since each individual had what seemed like intractable stories about each other, reifying their narratives about being right, or the other person being wrong. They agreed on nothing. I had no idea how we were going to get some movement forward to a better situation.

Coaching conversations engage clients about what is working and/or not working, focusing on the felt needs of the client(s) and management. One of the key components of a good coaching engagement is that with effective, open



conversation and some appreciative inquiries, some kind of agreement can be reached about individual and shared aspirations.

In the individual session, I asked each client to draw on a piece of paper how they would represent their “current state” (what they were experiencing now) and then a “future state” (their hopes for the future) so that each could see what they were feeling now and what the future might possibly look like. I told them that they would be sharing these drawings in our three-way meeting set for the following week. They each agreed and made their respective drawings.

Each person had created images that were pretty direct and pointed when it came to the “current state” yet when they saw each other’s drawings, they surprised themselves (and me) because they came to realize that each was struggling with the same issues and had similar aspirations; to communicate better with each other. As they talked about their drawings, it emerged that the problem was not “them” per se but the organization - they worked in a place that had a very laissez-faire attitude and lacked structure, with poor processes, role redundancies, and lots of gossiping. They were at the mercy of a very kind, but too loose, an organization.



Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this *Bulletin*), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

With surprise in her voice and sparkle in her eyes, Harriet (not her real name) said, “I think we have some common ground here.”

In that instant, spontaneous “good” was happening. Unplanned and unanticipated, there it was, in a room whose ice had melted, a room that had suddenly become brighter. Moments like these happen all too often, but are not “taken in” and are instead taken for

granted or taken in stride...and essentially missed. But not this time. It was good. Now was the moment. Now was the time to try to test this new idea of “taking in the good.”

“Wait,” I said, “I think we need to put this on pause for a minute.” They stopped talking and looked understandably surprised. Since they were recognizing the moment, I had to narrate the pause.

“You both said that you agree that the organization is lacking structure. I would call that a good moment. A moment of agreement. I wonder if we can try an experiment. Let’s just pause a moment with your discovery and awareness for a few seconds.”

They now looked puzzled. Their habitual pattern was clearly interrupted.

“How about if you think about how it feels to each of you to discover and know that you both, right now, in this unplanned moment, agree with each other and share common ground?”

Now they looked curious, leaning in towards me and looking at each other with surprise.

“You both agreed that the office is lacking structure. You called it common ground. That’s something to note, don’t you think? It’s something to pay attention to. Are you game?”

They nodded their heads.

“Ok – let’s extend that nice feeling of agreement about common ground for just 12 seconds. All you have to do is be still with your experience, pay attention to your breathing and I will count down from 12 while you can allow whatever good you are feeling to expand and sink in. Ready?”

I counted slowly, synchronizing with their breaths (as approximately as possible) so each inhale and exhale was on one count. When I reached “1” the room lit up! They looked at each other differently. Eyes softened. Breathing slowed down. They looked more at ease with a sense of delight and surprise. The tone in the room eased, there was palpable energy replenishment, and it stayed quiet, not in a restless way, but in an easy and calm way that seemed to permeate every corner.

The best part was that the process created safe space and room for each to see, hear, and receive the other. It was as if they found themselves in a whole new territory, yet to be explored, leaving behind old trappings that no longer served them, to create a new narrative that was more open, empathic and inclusive. They came to the conclusion, together and on their own, that it was the circumstances and lack of corporate structure that was contributing to their discomfort, and they began a conversation about what they could do - together - to help the organization more clearly design and define employees' roles and responsibilities!



Later the following week, we met together again and in the middle of our conversation, Harriet stopped me mid-sentence because she noticed some “good” in the conversation that she believed needed to be honored. She said, “Hey let’s stop. Pause. Let’s breathe that in for 12 seconds and take in the good here, right now!”

And so there I was, being coached by my client to take time and take it in. I was delighted to see how she embraced this process, made it her own and turned it back to me.

Later, when I asked her how this new way of thinking and being was working for her she beamed, “When I take in the good, it feels deep and puts me in a good mood. And when I give it out to others, it feels broader and bigger, because it then feels reciprocal.”

I think she was describing what I call the “ripple effect” of coaching. When you drop a pebble in the pond, the circles move ever outward as they reach the bank, one influencing the next. People may be like pebbles, when one feels down, dejected, angry, tight, territorial, it affects the circles around him or her. And when one feels better, happier, more open and inclusive, and more at peace with themselves, it impacts those around them in similarly positive ways.



This process has also worked with others. Harry, the president of a major corporation, was loved by his team but tended to marginalize himself or engage in self-deprecating humor about his talents. This had a negative effect on his team, because as a leader, people needed to have him as someone who owned his talents and skills. When he didn't, trust waned and things didn't move along smoothly.

Harry had worked on a do-or-die major presentation and he nailed it, with great accolades from the executive management team. Yet he skimmed over it, looking to plan the next quarter, never leaving a moment to "take in the good."

Since his background was scientific, I explained the neuroscience of "taking in the good." He seemed intrigued. "How about taking 12 seconds to take in the good from the wonderful feedback on your presentation?"

At first he was a bit edgy and seemingly uncomfortable but he tried it. After he did, his eyes lit up, smiles repeated after each other, and he said, "Wow, I never did that before. That felt strange, but good."



Harry learned the method quickly, because about 45 minutes later, when we were talking about something different altogether, he, like my other client, put his hand up, stopped our conversation in mid-stream and said, “Wait, I think there’s another opportunity here” and we both breathed 12, 11, 10...until he took in the good a second time in the same session. I made the suggestion that we introduce the method to his team and he is in the process of doing that right now. Funny, how just simply stopping and pausing, breathing and noticing, can make such a difference.

Some say that we are a “heap of habits” but I can’t imagine anyone not wanting to start a new habit of “taking the good” once they experience how effective it can be.

There is so much positivity implied in just asking the question, “Would you like to take 12 seconds and take in the good?”

It suggests that there actually IS good in the space.

It’s accessible and honest, being in the moment of the now.

It is easy and uncomplicated.

It works for one’s self and others.

It can be used for any age. (I even used it successfully with my 8 year old granddaughter.)

It is “in the moment” coaching, using what is presented right there, right now.

It’s more than just a “technique” but a way of “being” which brings greater happiness, ease and balance to a person.

It can encourage us to stop our racing around.

It’s a way to help people who tend to have a negative world-view.

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For over 30 years, as founder and President of Sense-Able Strategies, Inc, **Judy Rosemarin** has successfully empowered and coached business leaders, entrepreneurs, and C-level executives by helping them bring out their best as well as to bring out the best in others. Judy teaches Intentional Leadership and Humaway StoryTelling for business leaders with a focus on “Taking In The Good.” She is also the Co-Author of *Becoming An Exceptional Executive Coach: Use Your Knowledge, Skills and Intuition to Help Leaders Excel.*

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.