



What if you could train your brain to think happier?  
You can. Even die-hard glass-half-emptiers, like  
author Kathryn Flett. She explains how it works

*Illustration Chrissie Abbott*

I'M NOT SURE PRECISELY WHEN LIFE'S GLASS STOPPED being half full. There was no one moment when I ceased to be all yay, *woohoo* and *bring it on*, yet at some point I definitely stopped feeling there was an infinite amount of happiness-creating stuff still to do and plenty of time left in which to do it. But maybe that's just part of growing up?

Like so many of us, I was too busy keeping on keeping on (you too, eh?), trying to earn a proper living in the five hours between school runs and attempting to be (with varying degrees of 'success') a mum/daughter/friend/partner... and me.

People who know me think of me as 'capable' and 'efficient', but also a bit 'headless chicken under pressure'. For my part, I was increasingly tired of surfing what felt like near-constant stress, whether real or imagined. But how to change? American

neuropsychologist Dr Rick Hanson's new book, *Hardwiring Happiness*, very swiftly gave me some pointers. Though couched in a warm, easy (Californian but not too 'Californian') style, Dr Hanson's big idea is, in fact, revolutionary: we should retrain our brains to dwell on the positive rather than overreact to the negative stuff.

Even for those of us without an 'ology' to our names, Dr Hanson's thesis is straightforward: from a survival standpoint, our brains have evolved to recognise that 'bad things have more urgency and impact than good ones'. In other words, 'If you fail to get a carrot today, you'll have another chance to get one tomorrow, but if you fail to avoid a stick today - WHAP! No more carrots forever. Consequently, the brain has evolved a hair-trigger readiness to go negative.'

As a modern kind of *modus operandi*, this would make perfect sense - if we still lived in caves. The fact that our brains are constantly on the lookout for potential dangers now simply means that news programmes are by definition bad-news programmes, and that we actually recognise angry faces far more quickly than we do happy >>

ones. Or, as Dr Hanson puts it, our brains have become 'Velcro for bad, Teflon for good'.

I did a sharp intake of breath on reading that phrase; my glass-half-empty mind-set is nothing if not 'Velcro for bad' (for example, I've never met a writer who can't quote their worst reviews word for word). As Dr Hanson puts it, 'The way to build the emotional memories that are the character strengths we need to deal with difficult times is to practise them.' Clearly it was time to see if I could retrain my brain out of the habits of a lifetime, starting by using Dr Hanson's 'HEAL' acronym.

**HAVE A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE** Notice a positive experience that's already present, such as physical pleasure, a sense of determination or feeling close to someone. Or create a positive experience for yourself. Help these ideas become *emotional* experiences; otherwise it's merely positive thinking, which is usually wasted on the brain.

**ENRICH IT** Stay with the positive experience for five to 10 seconds or longer. Open to it emotionally and try to sense it in your body, let it fill your mind, enjoy it... get those neurons firing, so they'll really wire together.

**ABSORB IT** Intend and sense that the experience is sinking into you as you sink into it. Let it really land in your mind.

**LINK POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE MATERIAL** While you have a vivid and stable sense of a positive experience in the foreground of awareness, be aware if there's something negative in the background. For instance, when you are feeling included and liked, imagine this experience making contact with past feelings of loneliness.

ON DAY ONE, I START BY TAKING DR HANSON'S ADVICE to 'notice positive aspects of your experiences that are already present'. I remember that I live in a nice house by the sea with my partner, our four sons - two each from previous relationships - and our pets. The sun has been shining recently, too, so we've been eating in the garden and using our beach hut more. I spend day one endlessly smiling and being perky. By 9pm, my partner has had enough: 'God, you're being so fake!' Hmm...

The next day, I wake up oddly tired (maybe a day spent 'enriching positive experiences' is effectively a workout in the mind-gym). I have to take one of the cats to the vet. He hates getting into the carry-case, so he yowls with misery and it's infectious. There's nowhere to park close to the vet, so I have to carry him further than I'd like, across a park. Somehow, he finds the strength to push his way out of the box. I dive on top of him, but he wriggles free and disappears into bushes.

I spend the rest of the day wandering around the park with a bowl of his biscuits, in tears, calling his name. That evening my partner and I print out 'Missing' posters and pin them to trees. I'm due to speak to Dr Hanson tomorrow, but can't. I send an email, bailing. It's ironic, I know, but I can't find anything positive today. End of. 'He might come back,' texts a friend, 'They often do. It might just take a few days.' I try really hard to hold on to that, but it's not enough.

When we eventually speak on the phone, two weeks after my cat goes missing, Dr Hanson says, 'So sorry to hear about your cat.' I thank him; I am in a much calmer (albeit sadly

still cat-free) place than I was 14 days earlier. What I've been doing, he says, is finding it very hard to 'be', because I was so busy 'doing'. Taking time to live the positive, he says, is 'a very important challenge. I'm not sitting on a mountaintop, I'm busy, I get swept along, too. But it usually boils down to less than half a minute. There you are on the bus, or with your kid, or at the office and you push "send" on that email - then do it!'

'OK. But when I lost my cat I didn't care about my neural pathways, I was just incredibly sad,' I say.

'Of course you were,' he says. 'To use a Californian technical term, it would be bullshit to "look on the bright side" in that moment - there is no "bright side". You just need to honour the pain, be with it and then, eventually, you calm down and there's a little more room in the mind. Then you can begin to access your strengths.'

'Why do you think my partner thought I was faking day one's happiness, when it felt authentic to me?' I ask.

'On that exuberant day, I think you were trying to do a lot of things to create a positive experience - and there's a place for that - but most of my book is about making use of the positive experiences we already have. They're not so easy to prick with a pin the way your partner managed to do.'

Since my abortive first attempt at hardwiring, I've had another go. I'm a week in, and it's definitely easier. What it's *not* about is positive affirmation (says Dr Hanson: 'Affirmations are passing thoughts that don't make much difference to your brain') or the kind of relentless perkiness that so irritated my partner. It's about turning positive experiences you already earn into a rich, *lasting* neural structure.

Unlike, say, playing piano scales, this practice may not always make 'perfect'. I am obviously still feeling very sad (and guilty) about my cat, who seems unlikely to come back. However, when my partner's 12-year-old son had to have an emergency appendectomy two days ago, we managed to surf the wave as two households' carefully crafted work/school/life arrangements all fell by the wayside. Meanwhile, the patient was, of course, fine... and now boasts a cool new scar.

Normally this sort of chaos tips me over the edge, yet this time I took it in my stride. I think it was down to those minutes every day spent very consciously hardwiring. I plan to keep it up; having a glass half full makes it so much easier to ride out those inevitable - and inescapable - half-empty moments. ■  
Kathryn Flett's first novel is *Separate Lives* (Quercus, £7.99). Her second will be published in 2014. *Hardwiring Happiness: The Practical Science Of Re-shaping Your Brain And Your Life* by Rick Hanson, PhD (Rider, £12.99) is out on October 8th

## Grow your happiness habit

Install one of these good experiences in your brain five to 10 times a day, for 10 to 30 seconds at a time

- Notice something nice that you're experiencing - any good feeling.
- Look around for something beautiful you can see.
- Think of something you're glad about, now or in the past.
- Think of someone (or a pet) you like or someone who cares for you.
- Bring to mind a time when you acted in a way you're proud of.