

Train Your Brain: The Five Essential Skills

© Rick Hanson, Ph.D., 2005 - www.rickhanson.net

TAKING IN THE GOOD: *Key Points*

"At the banquets of life, bring a big spoon."

What Is Taking In?

- In a profound sense, we are what we remember - the slow accumulation of the registration of lived experience. That's what we have "taken in" to become a part of ourselves. Just as food becomes woven into the body, memory becomes woven into the self.
- Two kinds of memory: Explicit and Implicit.
 - Explicit: Recollections of specific events.
 - Implicit: Emotions, body sensations, relationship paradigms, sense of the world.
- Implicit memory - emotional/somatic memory - is different from remembering ideas or concepts: this kind of memory is in your "gut." It's visceral, felt, powerful, and rooted in the most ancient and fundamental structures of your brain.
- The sense of self, of what it feels like to be you, is rooted in emotional/somatic memory. That's why it's crucial to take real good care of what's contained in those memory banks.

The Importance of Taking In Positive Experiences

- Negative experience is registered immediately: helps survival.
- Positive experiences generally have to be held in awareness for 5 - 10 - 20 seconds for them to register in emotional memory.
- Negative experiences trump positive ones: A single bad event with a dog is more memorable than a 1000 good times.
- Experiments with ~~learned helplessness~~: great illustration of the enduring power of negative experiences compared to positive ones.
- Therefore, it is SO IMPORTANT to ~~consciously, deliberately~~ help the brain register positive experiences so they sink into the deepest layers of your mind. The benefits:
 - Generally positive internal emotional landscape, atmosphere, climate.
 - The fundamental foundation of self-soothing, emotional self-regulation, resilience.
 - Positive expectations about oneself, others, and the future. This is the legitimate basis of "verified optimism."
 - It's also the basis of true faith or confidence in your spiritual path.
 - "Evoked others," the sense of others inside who are nurturing, encouraging.
 - In psychological terms, this is the mechanism of what's understood as the internalization of positive resources.
 - A crucial resource inside and pathway for healing from trauma.
- All this is about being in ~~reality~~, not wearing rose-colored glasses:
 - It's about proportionality, about our sense of the world being consistent with the nature of the world. For example, if the "mosaic" of life is mainly good, shouldn't our sense of living itself be mainly good?!
 - It's about ~~learning~~ from new positive experiences - having them make a difference. It's about using new positive experiences to counterbalance old negative ones.

- From a spiritual perspective, you are helping yourself really sense and then register good experiences on the path, or that come with skillful practice (e.g., the sukha, or deep happiness of peaceful meditation). This has many benefits:
 - Highlight the milestones along the way, so you can know what they feel like and find your way back to them.
 - Build faith and confidence in the fruits of the path.
 - Reward yourself for doing something that's noble but not always easy, and thus support your ongoing motivation.
 - More easily tap into the peace, contentment, and basic well-being that are the preconditions for deep states of concentration and insight.

How to Take in the Good

The Science

Since you are building up records of experiences in your most visceral memory banks, you need to focus on the emotional and body sensation aspects of your positive experiences. Through the mindfulness skills you've already learned, really tune into the embodied sense of the good experience. For example, relax your breathing and extend your awareness into the felt sense of the experience in your body.

General Attitudes

- Being in reality. You are just being fair, seeing the truth of things. You are not being vain or arrogant - which distort the truth of things.
- You've earned the good times: the meal is set before you, it's already paid for, and you might as well dig in!
- Recognize the value to yourself and others of taking in positive experiences. It is a good, a moral, a virtuous thing to soak in good experiences. Even from a spiritual perspective, positive emotional states support practice through freeing up attention, building confidence and faith in the path, and fueling heartfelt caring and kindness for others.

Try to be aware of any attitudes that say it's vain, selfish, sinful, or somehow unfair to feel good -- especially about yourself. Explore those attitudes -- and then let them go by relaxing your body, releasing the emotions embedded in the attitude, and disputing in your mind the illogical beliefs in the attitude.

Specific Actions Inside Yourself

- #1 Help positive events to become positive experiences for you. You can do this by:
- Paying attention to the good things in your world, and inside yourself. This includes pretty sunsets, nice songs on the radio, chocolate!, people being nice to you, the smell of a baby's hair, getting something done at work, finishing the dishes, holding your temper, getting yourself to the gym, feeling your natural goodheartedness, etc., etc. You could set a goal each day to actively look for beauty in your world, or signs of caring for you by others, or good qualities within yourself, etc.
 - Maintaining a relaxed, accepting, spacious awareness.

- Setting aside for the moment any concerns or irritations, or at least nudging them to the background of your attention.
- Sometimes doing things deliberately to create positive experiences for yourself. For example, you could take on a challenge, or do something nice for others, or bring to mind feelings of compassion and caring, or call up the sense or memory of feeling contented, peaceful, and happy.

#2 Extend the experience in time and space:

- Keep your attention on it so it lingers; don't just jump onto something else.
 - Let it fill your body with positive sensations and emotions.
- Savor, relish the positive experience. It's delicious!

#3 Sense that the positive experience is soaking into your brain and body - registering deeply in emotional memory. Perhaps imagine that it's sinking into your chest and back and brainstem. Maybe imagine a treasure chest in your heart.

Take the time to do this: 5 or 10 or 20 seconds. Keep relaxing your body and absorbing the positive experience.

#4 For bonus points: Sense that the positive experience is going down into old hollows and wounds within you and filling them up and replacing them with new positive feelings and views.

These are typically places where the new positive experience is the opposite of, the antidote to the old one.

Like current experiences of worth replacing old feelings of shame or inadequacy. Or current feelings of being cared about and loved replacing old feelings of rejection, abandonment, loneliness. Or a current sense of one's own strength replacing old feelings of weakness, smallness.

The "replaced" experience may be from adulthood. But usually the most valuable experiences to replace are from our youngest years. They are the "tip of the root of the dandelion," the ones we need to pull to prevent the dandelion of upsets from growing back.

The way to do this is to have the new positive experience be prominent and in the foreground of your awareness at the same time that the old pain or unmet needs are dimly sensed in the background.

The new experiences will gradually replace the old ones. You will not forget events that happened, but they will lose their charge and their hold on you.

THIS IS A PROFOUND, FAR-REACHING, AND GENUINE WAY TO HELP YOURSELF GROW. YOU ARE LITERALLY CHANGING YOUR OWN BRAIN.

Important Kinds of Experiences to Take In

Introduction

Everybody has vulnerabilities, particular soft spots or "holes in the heart" which we yearn to be filled to make up for missing experiences (mainly from childhood). Reflect on yourself or ask a trusted friend what those might be for you. Then look specifically for experiences that would address your needs - or even take appropriate steps to evoke such experiences in yourself (e.g., ask a friend to explain a little what led her to say something nice about you). Then, once the experience arrives, you know what to do with it!

Common Key Experiences - and Potential Sources

→ For all of these, look for opportunities to feel them in the moment, and reflect on the past for signs of them as well.

- Safety, security - Settings that feel protected; being with someone who is completely accepting; (for many people) being in nature; if this speaks to you, feeling cradled in God's love.
- Gratitude, appreciation - Even the smallest bit of good fortune; appreciating simple things like a sunset, a smile, or a spoon; reflecting on the good things in your life today or in the past.
- Strength, "I'm a survivor," tenacity, grit, resilience - Any time in a day when you were determined, or moved forward in the face of fear, "spoke truth to power," used your will, pushed back, asserted yourself, etc.
- Feeling loved, cared about, liked, included, attended to, empathized with - Notice when people give you their interested attention, or are warm, or touch you kindly, or are loving, or join with you in any way. Notice when you are included, fit in, are part of the gang. Look for the sense of community, of belonging. Especially look for implicit goodwill toward you within others that may not be actively expressed but is truly present inside their hearts.
- Worth, value, competence, capability, "good enough" - Look both for acknowledgement from others that you matter and have value as well as for signs of this on your own. Like times when you learned something new or did something hard. Any ways that you have contributed to others, like raising a child, volunteering in your community, helped a friend feel better, accomplished something at work, clarified something in a meeting, were kind to a stranger, helped a family member, held back your hand on tongue when you were angry, etc. Simply the sense of validity in existing, in being here - like the Buddha touching the ground when challenged by the forces of darkness to say "I get to be here, as part of this earth" - in having rights as a being to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- Your innate goodness - It's a remarkable fact that the people who have gone the very deepest into the human mind and heart - in others words, the sages and saints of every religious tradition - all say the same thing: the fundamental nature of every human being is pure, conscious, peaceful, radiant, kind, and wise . . . and is joined in mysterious ways with the ultimate underpinnings of reality, by whatever name we give That.

Just look inside. When you are calm and don't feel threatened, what sort of person are you? Of course, like everyone else, you wish the best for other people (and yourself). You can sense your own deepest qualities, even if they're sometimes veiled by the worries and sorrows we all feel. As an inherent property of the nervous system, there's a deep down essence or core in each of us that is awake, present, interested, and quietly happy. And if this sort of language speaks to you, you could also reflect on and deepen your sense of your own soul, innermost being, or Buddhature.

As you access a growing feeling of your innate goodness, let that sink in like any other beautiful experience.