Hardwiring Compassion: Helping Clients Heal Wounds of the Heart

FACES
San Diego, February 26, 2015

Rick Hanson, Ph.D.
The Wellspring Institute For Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom
Topics

- Positive neuroplasticity
- Growing inner strengths
- The negativity bias
- Three ways to engage the mind
- Key resource experiences
- Healing old pain
- The law of little things
Positive Neuroplasticity
Positive Neuroplasticity – How to Take in the Good: HEAL

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

Installation
2. **Enrich** the experience.
3. **Absorb** the experience.
4. **Link** positive and negative material. [optional]
Have a Good Experience
Enrich It
A
bsorb It
Link Positive and Negative Material
Have It, Enjoy It
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
Inner Strengths

- Understandings
- Capabilities
- Positive emotions
- Attitudes
- Motivations
- Virtues
INNER STRENGTHS ARE BUILT FROM BRAIN STRUCTURE
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
Learning – changing neural structure and function – proceeds in two stages:

From **state** to **trait**

From **activation** to **installation**

From **short-term** memory buffers to **long-term** storage
Inner strengths are grown from experiences of them or related factors - activated states - that are installed as traits.
You become more compassionate by repeatedly installing experiences of compassion.

You become more grateful by repeatedly installing experiences of gratitude.

You become more mindful by repeatedly installing experiences of mindfulness.
Most experiences of inner strengths – resilience, kindness, insight, mindfulness, self-worth, love, etc. – are enjoyable.
Without **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?
The Negativity Bias
Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias
Negativity Bias

- As our ancestors evolved, avoiding “sticks” was more important for survival than getting “carrots.”

- Preferential encoding in implicit memory:
  - We learn faster from pain than pleasure.
  - Negative interactions: more powerful than positive
  - Easy to create learned helplessness, hard to undo
  - Rapid sensitization to negative through cortisol

- Most good experiences are wasted on the brain: lowers both the results of practice and motivation
The Negativity Bias
Stone age brains in the 21st century
The Three Ways to Engage the Mind
In the Garden of the Mind

1. Be with what is there
2. Decrease the negative
3. Increase the positive

Let be. Let go. Let in.
Mindfulness is present in all three.

“Being with” is primary – but not enough.
We also need “wise effort.”
Self-Compassion

- Compassion is the wish beings not suffer, with warm-hearted concern. Compassion is sincere even if we can’t make things better.

- Self-compassion simply applies this to oneself.

- To encourage self-compassion:
  - Get the sense of being cared about.
  - Bring to mind beings you care about. Find compassion for them.
  - Shift the compassion to yourself.
Key Resource Experiences
Three Fundamental Motivational and Self-Regulatory Systems

- **Avoid Harms:**
  - Primary need, tends to trump all others

- **Approach Rewards:**
  - Elaborated via sub-cortex in mammals for emotional valence, sustained pursuit

- **Attach to Others:**
  - Very elaborated via cortex in humans for pair bonding, language, empathy, cooperative planning, compassion, altruism, etc.
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
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
Healing Old Pain
HEAL by Taking in the Good

1. **Have** a beneficial experience.

2. **Enrich** it.

3. **Absorb** it.

4. **Link** it with negative material. [optional]
How Linking Works

- Activated negative material associates to whatever is also present in awareness.

- When negative material leaves awareness, these associations are reconsolidated in memory.

- This means that 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
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
Conditions for the Link Step

- Divided awareness; holding two things at once
- Not hijacked by negative; if so, drop negative
- Positive material is more prominent in awareness.
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 4\textsuperscript{th} 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

- For the fourth step of TIG, 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
The Law of Little Things
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
Suggested Books

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

Key Papers - 1

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.


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