The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness

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It’s Good to Be Happy
What Is Happiness?

Hedonia

Eudaimonia
Benefits of Happiness

- Feels good (duh)
- Better health
- Longer life
- Greater resilience
- More success
- Stronger relationships
- More cooperative, giving, and loving toward others
How to Be Happy
What Shapes Your Course?

Challenges

Vulnerabilities

Resources
Where Are Resources Located?

World

Body

Mind
Resources in Your Mind

- Understandings
- Capabilities
- Positive emotions
- Attitudes
- Motivations
- Virtues
Two wolves in the heart
INNER STRENGTHS ARE BUILT FROM BRAIN STRUCTURE
How do you get these inner strengths into your brain?
Self-Directed Neuroplasticity
Mental activity entails underlying neural activity.
Rewards of Love
Christian Nuns, Recalling a Profound Spiritual Experience

Beauregard, et al., Neuroscience Letters, 9/25/06
Repeated mental activity entails repeated neural activity.

Repeated neural activity builds neural structure.
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
We can use the mind

To change the brain

To change the mind for the better

To benefit ourselves and other beings.
Positive Neuroplasticity
Learning – changing neural structure and function – has two stages:

From short-term memory buffers to long-term storage

From state to trait

From activation to installation.
Inner strengths are grown from experiences of them – activated states – that are installed as traits.
You become more compassionate by installing experiences of compassion.

You become more grateful by installing experiences of gratitude.

You become more mindful by installing experiences of mindfulness.
Most experiences of inner strengths are enjoyable.

They feel good because they are good for us and others.
The Missing Link
Without **installation**, there is no learning, no change in the brain.
We’re good at activation but bad at installation.

This is the fundamental weakness in most patient education, human resources training, psychotherapy, coaching, and mindfulness training.
The same research that proves therapy works shows no improvement in outcomes over the last 30 or so years.

Scott Miller
Meanwhile your painful, harmful experiences are being rapidly converted into neural structure.
The Negativity Bias
The Brain’s Negativity Bias

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

1. So we scan for bad news,
2. Over-focus on it,
3. Over-react to it,
4. Install it fast in implicit memory,
5. Sensitize the brain to the negative, and
6. Create vicious cycles with others.
Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias

bad experiences

good experiences
The brain is good at learning from bad experiences but bad at learning from good ones.

Even though learning from good experiences is the primary way to grow resources in the mind.
The Negativity Bias
Stone age brains in the 21st century
Getting the Good Stuff into Your Brain
Have a Good Experience
Enrich It
How to Enrich an Experience

- Duration
- Intensity
- Multimodality
- Novelty
- Salience
Link Positive and Negative Material
HEAL Yourself

Have a positive experience.

Enrich it.

Absorb it.

Link positive and negative material.
Have It, Enjoy It
Let’s Try It

- **Notice** the experience present in awareness that you are basically alright right now.
  - Have the experience.
  - Enrich it.
  - Absorb it.

- **Create** the experience of gratitude.
  - Have the experience.
  - Enrich it.
  - Absorb it.
Growing Key Strengths
Evolutionary History

The Triune Brain - (P. MacLean 1990)
Meeting Our Three Core Needs

Avoiding harms for safety

Approaching rewards for satisfaction

Attaching to others for connection
Mental Resources for Challenges

Safety – Grit, protection, relaxation, feeling alright right now, peace

Satisfaction – Gratitude, gladness, accomplishment, contentment

Connection – Belonging, appreciation, friendship, compassion, love
Pet the Lizard
Feed the Mouse
Hug the Monkey
Peace

Contentment

Love
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.

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.
Key Papers - 3


Key Papers - 4


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