From the Buddhist Lovingkindness Sutra

Wishing: In gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease.

Omitting none, whether they are weak or strong, the great or the mighty, medium, short, or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born and to-be-born: May all beings be at ease.

Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings; radiating kindness over the entire world: spreading upwards to the skies, and downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill-will.

One should sustain this recollection.

This is said to be the sublime abiding.
Hardwiring Compassion: 
Strengthening 
The Neural Substrates 
Of Love 

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Topics

- Self-directed neuroplasticity
- Our loving nature
- Love and the brain
- Two wolves in the heart
- Being on your own side
- Empathy
- Feeding the wolf of love
Self-Directed Neuroplasticity
Three Facts about Brain and Mind

- As the brain changes, the mind changes.
  - Mental activity depends upon neural activity.

- As the mind changes, the brain changes.
  - Temporary: brainwaves, local activation
  - Lasting: epigenetics, neural pruning, “neurons that fire together, wire together”
  - Experience-dependent neuroplasticity

- You can use the mind to change the brain to change the mind for the better: self-directed neuroplasticity.
Our Loving Nature
The Social Brain

- Social capabilities have been a primary driver of brain evolution.

- Reptiles and fish avoid and approach. Mammals and birds \textit{attach} as well - especially primates and humans.

- Mammals and birds have bigger brains than reptiles and fish.

- The more social the primate species, the bigger the cortex.

- Since the first hominids began making tools ~ 2.5 million years ago, the brain has roughly tripled in size, much of its build-out devoted to social functions (e.g., cooperative planning, empathy, language). The growing brain needed a longer childhood, which required greater pair bonding and band cohesion.
All sentient beings developed through natural selection in such a way that pleasant sensations serve as their guide, and especially the pleasure derived from sociability and from loving our families.

Charles Darwin
If there is anything I have learned about [people], it is that there is a deeper spirit of altruism than is ever evident.

Just as the rivers we see are minor compared to the underground streams, so, too, the idealism that is visible is minor compared to what people carry in their hearts unreleased or scarcely released.

(Hu)mankind is waiting and longing for those who can accomplish the task of untying what is knotted, and bringing these underground waters to the surface.

Albert Schweitzer
Love and the Brain
Rewards of Love
Oxytocin

- It promotes bonding between parents and children - and between mates and friends, keeping kids alive.

- In women, it triggers the let-down reflex in nursing, and tend-and-befriend behaviors during stress.

- In both sexes, it dampens the stress response; it feels pleasurable, relaxed, a “rightness.”

- It is stimulated by:
  - Breastfeeding, nipple stimulation, orgasm
  - Physical contact (especially skin to skin)
  - Moving together harmoniously (e.g., dancing)
  - Warm feelings of rapport or love; devotion
  - Imagination of these
Two Wolves in the Heart
Two wolves in the heart
Us and Them

- Core evolutionary strategy: within-group cooperation, and between-group aggression.

- Both capacities and tendencies are hard-wired into our brains, ready for activation. And there is individual variation.

- Our biological nature is much more inclined toward cooperative sociability than toward aggression and indifference or cruelty. We are just very reactive to social distinctions and threats.

- That reactivity is intensified and often exploited by economic, cultural, and religious factors.

- Two wolves in your heart:
  - Love sees a vast circle in which all beings are “us.”
  - Hate sees a small circle of “us,” even only the self.

Which one will you feed?
In between-family fights, the baboon’s ‘I’ expands to include all of her close kin; in within-family fights, it contracts to include only herself.

This explanation serves for baboons as much as for the Montagues and Capulets.

Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth
Being on Your Own Side
Self-Goodwill

- Moral teachings tell us to be compassionate and kind toward all beings. And that whatever we do to the world affects us, and whatever we do to ourselves affects the world.

- You are one of the “all beings!” And kindness to yourself benefits the world, while hurting yourself harms the world.

- It’s a general moral principle that the more power you have over someone, the greater your duty is to use that power wisely. Well, who is the one person in the world you have the greatest power over? It’s your future self. You hold that life in your hands, and what it will be depends on how you care for it.

- Consider yourself as an innocent child, as deserving of care and happiness as any other.
“Anthem”

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in
That’s how the light gets in

Leonard Cohen
Feeling Strong

- Feeling the strength in awareness itself, never disturbed or stained by what passes through it
- Sense the vitality in your body.
- Recall a time you felt really strong. Energy and strength in your breathing . . . your body . . . your whole being . . .
- A spacious strength that lets others flow through
- In relationship and at peace
- Relaxed in a spacious world; no need for struggle
Empathy
What Is Empathy?

- It is sensing, feeling, and understanding how it is for the other person. In effect, you *simulate* his or her inner world.

- It involves (sometimes subtly) all of these elements:
  - Bodily resonance
  - Emotional attunement
  - Conceptual understanding

- Empathy is usually communicated, often tacitly.

- We can give empathy, we can receive it, and we can ask for it.
Neural Substrates of Empathy

Three *simulating* systems:
- **Actions**: “mirror” systems; temporal-parietal
- **Feelings**: resonating emotionally; insula
- **Thoughts**: “theory of mind”; prefrontal cortex

These systems interact with each other through association and active inquiry.

They produce an automatic, continual re-creation of aspects of others’ experience.
Empathy Skills

- Sustain attention.
- Be open.
- Read emotion in face and eyes.
- Sense beneath the surface.
- Detach from aversion (judgments, fear, anger, withdrawal).
- Investigate actively.

Express empathic understanding:
- Reflect the content
- Resonate with the tone and implicit material
- Questions are fine
- Offer respect and wise speech throughout
If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each [person's] life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm any hostility.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
Feeding the Wolf of Love
Neurons that fire together,

wire together.
A human being is a part of a whole, called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein
Growing Compassion

- Compassion is the wish that a being not suffer, usually with feelings of warmth and concern.

- Beings: benefactor, friend, neutral, self, difficult

- Factors:
  - Distress tolerance, can allow “suffering with”
  - Not caught up in feeling threatened
  - Seeing commonalities with the other being
  - Separating compassion from moral judgment
  - Seeing the child in the other person
Great Books

See www.RickHanson.net for other great books.

See [www.RickHanson.net](http://www.RickHanson.net) for other scientific papers.


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


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

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