The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

Volume 6,1 (2/2012)

Have Compassion For Yourself

Excerpted from *Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time* by Rick Hanson, PhD, (c) 2011. Reprinted with permission from New Harbinger Publications.

Life is full of wonderful experiences. But it has its hard parts as well, such as physical and mental discomfort, ranging from subtle to agonizing. This is the realm of suffering, broadly defined.

When someone you care about suffers, you naturally have compassion: the wish that a being not suffer, usually with a feeling of sympathetic concern. For example, if your child falls and hurts himself, you want him to be out of pain; if you hear that a friend is in the hospital, or out of work, or going through a divorce, you feel for her and hope that everything will be all right. Compassion is in your nature: it's an important part of the neural and psychological systems we evolved to nurture children, bond with mates, and hold together "the village it takes to raise a child" (Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas 2010).

You can also have compassion for yourself—which is not self-pity. You're simply

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are posted at http://www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin.

Rick Hanson, PhD, edits the Bulletin. Michelle Keane is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by Laurel Hanson.

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recognizing that "this is tough, this hurts," and bringing the same warmhearted wish for suffering to lessen or end that you would bring to any dear friend grappling with the same pain, upset, or challenge as you.

Studies have shown that self-compassion has many benefits (Leary et al. 2007), including:

- Reducing self-criticism
- Lowering stress hormones like cortisol
- Increasing self-soothing, self-encouragement, and other aspects of resilience
- Helping to heal any shortages of caring from others in your childhood

That's a pretty good list!

Self-compassion usually takes only a handful of seconds. And then — more centered and heartened — you can get on with doing what you can to make your life better.

How

Maybe your back hurts, or you've had a miserable day at work, or someone has barked at you unfairly. Or, honestly, maybe you just feel bad, even depressed. Whatever it is, some self-compassion could help. Now what?

Self-compassion comes naturally for some people (particularly those with a well-nurtured childhood). But it's not that easy for a lot of us, especially those who are self-critical, driven, stoic, or think it's self-indulgent to be caring toward themselves.

So here are some steps for calling up self-compassion, which you could blend together as self-compassion becomes easier for you:

• Take a moment to acknowledge your difficulties: your challenges and suffering.

• Bring to mind the feeling of being with someone you know cares about you. Perhaps a dear friend, a family member, a spirit, God . . . even a pet. Let yourself feel that you matter to this being, who wants you to feel good and do well in life.

• Bring to mind your difficulties, and imagine that this being who cares about you is feeling and expressing compassion for you. Imagine his or her facial expression, gestures, stance, and attitude toward you. Let yourself receive this compassion, taking in its warmth, concern, and goodwill. Open to feeling more understood and

nurtured, more peaceful and settled. The experience of receiving caring primes circuits in your brain to give it.

• Imagine someone you naturally feel compassion for: perhaps a child, or a family member. Imagine how you would feel toward that person if he or she were dealing with whatever is hard for you. Let feelings of compassion fill your mind and body. Extend them toward that person, perhaps visualized as a kind of light radiating from you (maybe from your heart). Notice what it's like to be compassionate.

• Now, extend the same sense of compassion toward yourself. Perhaps accompany it with words like these, heard softly in the back of your mind: May this pain pass . . . may things improve for me . . . may I feel less upset over time. Have some warmth for yourself, some acknowledgment of your own difficulties and pain, some wish for things to get better. Feel that this compassion is sinking in to you, becoming a part of you, soothing and strengthening you.

For more on the Self-Compassion practice, see http://justoneminute.net/have-compassion-for-yourself/.

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Appreciative Joy and the "Evil Step-Sister" Envy

© Katherine Roubos

Part 1: Envy
Letting Your Uglies Be Your Guide

You're at a dinner party. Your former coworker is gushing about how much she loves her new job. Her coworkers are hilarious, she says, and so well connected. She feels like it's really great exposure. Not to mention that she loves what she does every day – she's really discovered her passion, she feels. She doesn't mention that now she is also earning twice as much as you, because she doesn't have to. You know. Everyone is hanging on her words, very impressed that she is Becoming Somebody.

I feel rotten in these situations. I do. I resent my former coworker's success; I have even wished her downfall. I feel like all the air is being vacuum-suctioned out of me and I start looking for the nearest thing I can crawl under to hide until everyone's gone home. It's not my best trait. In fact, I've never told anyone I feel this way. Have you? Oh, good, you haven't either. We're not alone.

It's little wonder that Appreciative Joy—a Buddhist principle of rejoicing in the happiness of others—hasn't gotten much press amid the rising awareness of Buddhist psychology in the U.S.; the high standard only gives us one more opportunity to feel lacking. Recently though, I've found that working with Appreciative Joy, and especially her "evil step-sister" envy, has helped me find and

bust through some long standing barricades blocking me in. Envy is so taboo we sweep it under the carpet without a second look, but there is a lot of information there for us about what we want for ourselves. It doesn't lie, either – it's hard to fake envy.

The Evil Step-Sister

What creates envy? Simply put, we are creatures of constant comparison, and yet we never seem to measure up.

Journalists coined the phrase "Facebook Envy" based on a collection of research led by Alex Jordan, a then PhD student at Stanford, which demonstrated that people consistently overestimate happiness and underestimate distress in others. Being flooded with images of people's happiest moments on a website like Facebook is likely to exacerbate that tendency and result in feelings of despondency and inferiority. It's human nature.

The majority of people identify happiness as what they most dearly want in life. That dinner party conversation leads us to believe that our friend has found what we most dearly desire for ourselves – to be happy. Yet the measurable aspects of life, like level of education, geographic location, marital status, or owning property, account for only 10% of people's reported happiness level. Another 50% is attributed to a hereditary baseline happiness level, and 40% to our perceptions and assumptions about ourselves and others. This indicates that our habitual comparisons between "self and other" can add up to a whole lot of unhappiness, if we let it.

Beyond being socially unacceptable, envy is quite an uncomfortable emotion to have. Why does envy feel so bad? The answer takes us back to one of the basic components of our experience: pleasant versus unpleasant feeling. Envy is experienced as pain, according to a recent neuroscience study led by Hidehiko Takahashi. How do we react to pain? We pull away from it. I notice that when I am envious of someone I pull away from them, imperceptibly. It's like there is more of a distance between us; I shrink away from them, and also from my own ugly envy. This reduces my sense of connection with myself - and with others - while reinforcing my own belief that I am lacking something or not good enough.

What's more, Takahashi's study shows that pleasure centers in our brains are activated when an envied person experiences

misfortune. Not only is envy painful, it appears that we have an incentive to inflict pain on others to ease our own. We are wired to celebrate another's downfall.

It's Not All Bad

Despite all this, envy can be a great tool in finding direction. Both Takahashi and Jordan's studies showed that we experience more envy when the "superior" person is more self-relevant, i.e. more like you, or like who you want to become.

You know about radar? Well, think of this as a "want-dar." It is constantly scanning the landscape for others who have what we want. When it lights up, this tells us there is something we WANT there. What good information! Then we can ask: "Do I want this thing from a sense that I am not good enough? Or do I want this from a place of deep yearning, or calling, a place of growth and beauty and truth, or just because everyone else seems to want it?"

Just as a dousing rod quivers when it is held over water buried deep in the earth, envy arises most strongly in the face of our deepest desires and our deepest delusions. Have you ever listened to a friend talk with great enthusiasm and delight about a topic they're passionate about? I find myself thinking, for example, "Oh no! I've studied the wrong thing in life! Really I should have been a zoologist working with mini-giraffes, like you." While it's really not my calling to work with mini-giraffes, what I'm responding to is my desire to feel satisfied and enthusiastic about my work. It's a deep desire. This can't be measured by salary or title or accolades. If I focus my efforts on the accolades, I'm going to end up missing my true desires. In this way, paying attention to envy keeps me on track, understanding and valuing the essence of what I intend to cultivate in my life.

It is easy - even compulsive - to crave what society condones as good or powerful or perfect: a high-ranking position, more money, a beautiful partner, a happy marriage, accolades in your profession. In my non-profit-do-gooder world, we idolize "impact" and "scale" and "social entrepreneurism." I envy anyone who has proven that their work has measurable outcomes in the world, been in charge of lots of money or teams who 'made a difference' or started something of their own. Given that I've ultimately chosen this career path with the intention to contribute to the goodness in the world, it is at cross-purposes to resent or envy another person for seeming to succeed in making their own contribution. And yet I do.

This envy stems from doubt, a belief that my work, my contribution, is not enough. I have implicitly tied my value as a human being to the extent of my contribution to others' wellbeing. If my contribution is not enough, then I am not enough. Perhaps you've tethered your value as a person to your bank account, or to your great relationship, or your constant promotions. But where is the line? Where is enough? If my line is set at "better than my coworker," everything my coworker does suddenly has implications for my own value.

Buddhist teachings encourage a sense of enough-ness with what is. I would argue that they encourage a sense of abundance, too: if success is not "me" or "mine," then I simply seek to be contributing fully to the shared success in the world. Living from a sense of abundance—there is enough love, enough money, and enough time—I can let go of my delusion that another person's success decreases the chances of my own. I can shine with Appreciative Joy for others' good fortune.

The basic premise of Buddhist teachings is that all craving causes suffering, and the only way out is to let go of the craving. But sometimes I think the way to end craving is to go for the thing you crave. The key is separating the craving for power in general, for example, from the desire to be a community leader. Or the craving for a beautiful partner that everyone admires from the desire for a partner who is beautiful to you and whom you admire.

So, the next time you are at a dinner party, pay attention. When do you find yourself saying "oh, I wish I had that in my life!"? For me, it tends to be related to people finding their passion and path in life, or related to making a lot of money. For you it may be related to the prestige of a job, or

having a wonderful relationship. What does this say about who we think we should be, and what we deeply desire in life?

There is nothing like coming in contact with a success story to make us feel our own accomplishments are inadequate. But as the Buddha reminds us, "pleasure, pain, loss and gain, praise and blame, honor and dishonor" come to us all in life, and are not always allotted logically. To get out of the cycle of envy we have to stop believing that we have to be considered Number One to be good enough and we must start championing ourselves exactly as we are, with room to grow.

Part 11: Appreciative Joy
Balancing the Equation

While I can't banish my envy, I can cultivate its opposite emotion. Appreciative Joy - the Buddhist concept of rejoicing in the happiness or wellbeing of others - acts as a wonderful counter-balance to envy. Imagine what your world would be like if you felt—really felt—the joy in the lives of everyone around you? To paraphrase the Dalai Lama, if we learn to place our "bets" on other's happiness in addition to our own, our odds of "winning" go up six billion to one. As for envy, we're less likely to get caught up in it as we feel more joy in the lives of those around us, and in our own.

Joy Just Feels Better

Experiencing more Appreciative Joy can have significant positive effects on our physical wellbeing. A study by Harvard psychologist Dr. Laura Kubzansky demonstrated that optimism led to significantly reduced heart disease rates. In a study of 1,300 men over 10 years, she found that men who were more optimistic were half as likely to be diagnosed with heart disease, an outcome equivalent to the difference between smokers and non-smokers. In a separate study, Duke

psychologist Dr. Laura Richman demonstrated that traits like hopefulness and curiosity were protective against hypertension, diabetes, and respiratory infections.

While it sounds great to just be happier, or more optimistic, it's not that easy in day-to-day life. One of the ways I've found Appreciative Joy to be helpful is in interrupting my "grumpy cycle". Some days I wake up cranky, or something goes awry, and everything else that day just rubs me the wrong way. Or I don't get something I want and I spin off into a cycle of irritation and envy.

Recently, a friend received an award for being an "emerging leader" in her field. I was really envious. Trying to dislodge my unpleasant envy and self-judgement, I went on a walk in an urban park after work. The trail was full of dogs and their people. The dogs were so happy, chasing balls and ignoring their owners, chewing sticks and smelling each other. Their playfulness, and their owner's joy, filled the evening air. I noticed I felt more buoyant, physically lighter, as I observed and empathized with the happy scene. This isn't to say that the delight erased my pain

or changed my friend's award. But rather than staying totally absorbed in envy, in thoughts of worthlessness or despair, my joy broke the spell for a moment. When I was laughing at funny dog antics I was not envious or despairing. It made some space between me and the difficult emotions.

Practice Makes Perfect

The great news is that we can build up our own capacity to experience joy and happiness. Neuroscience research has demonstrated the astounding capacity for our brains to change over time. Similar to working out, repeating even a small activity or thought process over and over will have lasting effects in the neural network of the brain. According to a Harvard medical school study by Neuroscientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone, thought alone has the power to change the physical structure of our brain.

Arriving at the park, upset and envious, I felt stuck in my emotions. I didn't know how to get out, but the joyfulness around me offered an opportunity to learn a new path. And it turns out that practice like this can make a difference; Pascual-Leone found that participants who only imagined playing the piano still developed significant new neural activity compared to people who actually played the piano. This means that if we practice noticing joy in our own lives and appreciating the joy of those around us, we will inevitably build our capacity to experience joy. It's within reach.

If it were as simple as noticing and appreciating the good, however, we all would have done it by now. Our brains aren't naturally inclined to do so; they necessarily filter out a lot of information as we move through the world. It's one of the ways our brains help us function and distinguish between important and unimportant details. However, our brains are also predisposed to over-notice potential threats and under-acknowledge the positive elements of our experience. One of the ways

we can increase our capacity for joy is to teach the brain to let it in through our automatic filter, rather than discarding it as "unimportant" information. Because we can use our thoughts and habits to change our brains, using small practices and intentions to notice joy in our lives and in the lives of those around us can make a significant difference in how much joy gets through our filter over time.

For example, I decided to notice my favorite color, blue, for a week. The sky and the flowers, even the color of people's cars or clothes brought me a lot of delight because I placed attention on noticing and appreciating it. My intention helped to get it past my filter. Another friend of mine took on the practice of noticing stranger's happiness for a week. She said that she hadn't realized how happy passing by a playground can be, or how beautiful it is to see two friends laughing together at a café. Placing your intention on appreciating joy in small, particular areas of life can help build your brain's capacity for joy without it feeling overwhelming or impossible.

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Before that, she worked as a strategy consultant for non-profits and philanthropies with The Bridgespan Group. She is Chair of the Board of The Women's Building of San Francisco, which keeps both her heart and mind engaged. Katherine loves participating in and leading meditation backpacking and hiking trips with her meditation community in the Bay Area.

Your Best Brain – March 10, 2012

A Benefit Workshop for The Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

The mission of the Wellspring Institute is to help people learn new ways to change the brain for the better – for more happiness, love, and wisdom, and for making this world a better place. We are a non-profit institution and rely solely on donations from benefactors since our foundation in 2008.

The annual fund drive for the Institute begins this December and as part of our fundraising efforts, we will be offering a four-hour workshop – Your Best Brain – in San Rafael, CA on January 28, 2012. This will be a fun, down-to-earth presentation by Rick Hanson and Jan Hanson, and will offer ten great ways to change your brain for the better – for more joy, more fulfilling relationships, and more peace of mind and heart.

Grounded in brain science, you'll learn practical, research-based ways to:
- Feed your brain with the right foods and supplements
- Calm down the amygdala for less anxiety and other negative emotions
- Energize the neural networks of compassion, empathy, and love
- Boost acetylcholine to light up the circuits of learning and memory
- Tap into your brain's natural core of happiness
- Increase levels of key neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine without medication – for improved mood, attention, and motivation
- And much, much more

4 CE credits are available for Psychologists, Social Workers, MFTs and Nurses.

If you live in the Bay Area, we hope you will consider joining us for a morning of practical, research-based ways to develop your own brain for the better. Your help spreading the word will also be a wonderful contribution to the good work of the Institute. For more information and registration, visit http://www.wisebrain.org/your-best-brain-benefit-wellspring-institute.

If you cannot attend, we hope that you will consider making a pledge during our fund drive. Your donation is tax-deductible and the Institute tax ID is 26-0328057. To offer your pledge, visit http://www.wisebrain.org and click on the Donate button. We Thank You.

The Now Effect: How this Moment Can Change the Rest of Your Life

Excerpted from *The Now Effect* by Dr. Elisha Goldstein, (c) 2012.
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Introduction

A man lies dying in a hospital bed. He has spent his entire life building for the future, doing what needed to be done to amass wealth and raise his status to a level he thought worthy. Now he has reached the end of his days and finds himself filled with remorse rather than satisfaction. In his final moments, he turns to his doctor and says, "I spent my whole life stepping on people in order to get to where I want to be, and now there's no one left for me. It's only now that I realize it's so simple. It's who you love and how you love and the rest of it—the rest of it never mattered." That is a powerful lesson, yet he has little time left to make use of it.

He came to clarity at the end of his life; what if you could get this clarity now?

The psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl said, "In between stimulus and response there is a space, in that space lies our power to choose our response, in our response lies our growth and our freedom." What if an awareness of that space, that moment, could change the rest of your life? That's the promise that millions of people, including professionals in mental health, medicine, education, business, sports, and even politics, have begun to realize.

We have to wonder why Google, one of the most successful companies in the world, offers a program to help its employees hone the ability to be more present. Why are health care companies instituting courses in engaging with the now for their employees and corporate clients? Why are a growing number of elementary schools teaching their children mindfulness practices? Why is Congressman Tim Ryan of Ohio passionately lobbying for the government to practice being here now? Why did Phil Jackson, arguably the most successful NBA coach of all time, encourage his players to practice mindful basketball? Why are mindfulness programs growing in more than 250 hospitals around the country and many more around the world?

The Now Effect is fast becoming one of the best-researched and most-talked-about phenomena today. Learning how to intentionally engage with the now isn't just a promised pathway to an abstract enlightenment but is becoming a practical way to alleviate stress and pain, cultivate emotional freedom, and even create a stronger, healthier brain.

Research shows that how we pay attention and what we pay attention to have a dramatic effect on how our brain grows. When we're on sensory overload, which happens often in our over-connected culture, we kick into autopilot to find relief. When we're on autopilot, our brain makes choices for us. So if we often entertain anxious thoughts, we're likely to strengthen connections in the brain that facilitate that type of thinking. If we intentionally focus on being present and more compassionate toward ourselves, we're likely to create a brain architecture that supports being kinder and more compassionate. This is real and powerful.

The way you wake up in the morning, do your work, eat your food, interact with your digital devices, and engage with friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers over time all become routine. The ability to make things automatic enables us to function, but when life itself becomes routine, we miss out on the choices, possibilities, and wonders that are all around us.

Cultivating an awareness of the spaces in our lives that are happening right now is more than just moving along a pathway to self-realization, changing your brain architecture, or stopping your destructive behaviors.

In this space there is a rich territory that has the potential to open your mind to possibilities you may have never thought existed before. You can become naturally flexible in your decision making, become able to regulate your body in moments of distress, calm your anxious mind when it's snowballing with thoughts, have greater focus at home and work, feel empathy and compassion toward yourself and others, communicate more effectively, and be more aware of what is most important to you. The secret is in the spaces.

In short, the Now Effect is the "Aha!" moments of clarity in life when we wake up to our truths. It's the moments when we come home after being berated by a customer and see our child running toward us, reminding us of our value. It's when we hear of a friend's family member passing away and reconnect to the loved ones in our lives. It's the moment we see a baby's smile and all our stress drifts away. It was on the sunny day of September 11, 2001, that many people around the world woke up and connected to what was most important. No matter how we get there, we find what is sacred and precious in life when we enter into the spaces of awareness that occur all around us.

Sometimes it seems like a cosmic joke that these spaces of clarity, which reveal the essence of life and our innate wisdom, are so slippery and so easy to become disconnected from.

The simple yet subtle truth is that life is decided in the spaces. However, the power to choose our responses comes only with an awareness of that space. As we practice becoming aware of the spaces in our lives, we soon come to understand that these are actually "choice points," moments in time when we are aware enough to choose a response. One response may be to bring mindfulness to whatever we're doing and break free from the ways of thinking and behaving that don't serve us. Mindfulness is the ability to pay attention, on purpose, while putting aside our programmed biases. In a short time, those spaces of awareness will begin dropping

in on you like moments of grace throughout the day, guiding you with more freedom to live as if it matters.

When you think about it, there is no other time than now. Even our stories and beliefs from the past and our hopes and worries about the future are occurring right now. Through practice, you can begin to notice and engage the spaces in your life and not only experience greater clarity but, throughout the process, create new experiences and stories that positively influence the way you naturally see yourself and the world. You will be changing the way you think before you think, realizing the Now Effect.

To get started, here is a story and practice that helps you gain clarity around what really matters to you in life. The problem is the auto-pilot in your brain is powerful and here you learn a way to manipulate your environment to incline those instant snap judgments and decisions toward walking the walk and a more meaningful life.

The Wisdom in Golf Balls

"It is not too uncommon for people to spend their whole life
waiting to start living." - Eckhart Tolle

A professor stood before a philosophy class holding an empty jar. As the students took their seats, she began filling the jar with golf balls. When they reached the top, she asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was. The professor then took a bag of pebbles and poured them into the jar, and they made their way into the spaces between the golf balls.

Again she asked the students if the jar was full, and they agreed that it was.

But the professor had another trick up her sleeve. She brought out a bag of sand

and proceeded to pour the grains into the jar, filling up more of the remaining space. Again the question came: "It's full now, correct?" The answer was a resounding "Yes."

The professor then took a sip of her coffee and dumped the rest into the jar, filling up spaces that no one thought were there.

"So what does it mean?" the professor asked.

A witty student raised his own coffee mug and asked, "There's always room for coffee?"

The professor, along with the rest of the class, had a good laugh. Then she said, "Imagine that this jar represents the space in your life. The golf balls represent what's most important—family, children, health, friends, things that you're

passionate about—the things that at the end of your life you would be glad you paid attention to.

"The pebbles are essential but less important, such as your house, your car, maybe your job.

"The sand is all of the small stuff in life that we're trying not to sweat.

"The coffee, well, you already answered that one."

The professor continued, "There is room for all of this only if you put the golf balls in first. If you put the sand or pebbles in first, there won't be room for the golf balls. The way we pay attention to our lives works the same way. If you spend your attention or mental space sweating the small stuff in life, you won't have the capacity to pay attention to what is most important to you."

This is a classic story that speaks to becoming more mindful of what really matters. I do the same exercise with my clients and students. Why? Thoughts of what is most valuable fly into and out of our minds all the time, and we don't see the space between our awareness and these thoughts. This exercise provides a physical representation of thinking about what really matters and simultaneously makes us aware of the space in which we have the opportunity to choose a response. The practice of intentionally paying attention to what matters primes the mind to become more aware of what is meaningful.

The biggest question at this stage of the process is, what in life really matters to you? Is it your relationship to your partner, paying attention to your children, taking care of your body, sharpening your mind, being kind to yourself or others, making room for play, or living with greater ease?

Paying attention to the things that you value in life is fundamental to your happiness. We know that our minds have an inclination to follow the path of least resistance, so we need a compass to help us intentionally come back to our priorities.

Now Moment

Creating a way to be aware of our values can help us break out of autopilot and guide us back to what really matters.

1. Sit in a space to take care of the golf balls first—the things that really matter. What are your priorities in life? Let's bring some awareness to them, because at the end of the day, the rest is just sand. Make a list in your mind or write down what truly matters.

2. Sitting exercise: Take a few moments to relax, close your eyes, and practice

"Breathing in, I am aware of what truly matters, breathing out, I let go of living on automatic."

3. Go find a jar and a box of golf balls or some nice stones. Label each golf ball or stone with something that really matters in your life. If you don't have a physical jar, you can draw a picture of a jar on a piece of paper along with golf balls or stones or perhaps just picture them in your mind. Actions speak louder than words, so check to see where in your life you're bringing action to your values. Maybe you're taking your partner out to dinner, responding to people and yourself with greater kindness and compassion, being less judgmental, playing games with your kids, getting back into exercise or yoga, making space for that round of eighteen holes, or spending time in meditation.

4. Put the jar in a prominent place somewhere in your house or office where you can't miss looking at it. Every time you intentionally look at the jar, your mind is more likely to incline toward what truly matters. As you do this, you prime your mind to respond to those values during the spaces of your daily life.

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Skillful Means

The Skillful Means wiki, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more. The following meditation practices can assist in centering oneself in a natural state of calm and contentment.

Disputing Negative Thoughts

Purpose / Effects

By replacing negative thoughts with positive ones, it is possible to greatly enhance your mood and sense of wellbeing.

Human beings have a tendency to focus much more on negative thoughts than positive ones. Sometimes it is rational and necessary to think about negative things in order to improve them, or to avoid repeating mistakes. It is often the case, however, that people are thinking about negative things in an irrational manner. A simple, common example is a thought like, "I always screw everything up." Is it really the case the every time this person has ever attempted anything they have failed? Obviously not. They somehow have managed to make it this far, which means that they have succeeded much more often than not. So the thought "I always screw everything up" is actually an exaggeration.

You may not think this kind of exaggeration is a big deal, but actually thoughts of this kind can cause people to become unhappy, anxious, and depressed. Our thoughts affect our feelings, and negative thoughts that are exaggerated have exaggerated effects. Imagine the emotional effect of the same thought if it changed to something more accurate, such as "I sometimes screw things up." Even this slight change to a more correct assessment already makes the thought less negatively charged.

The idea behind the Disputing Negative Thoughts technique, then, is to "listen" to the thoughts in your head, and to evaluate their accuracy. If a thought is not accurate or rational, you replace it with one that is more positive. Over time, this will make your emotional state more positive in general. It also allows you to respond to situations in a more helpful manner.

Method

Summary

Every time you notice a negative thought, check if it is accurate. If it is not, replace it with a positive thought.

Long Version

If you find that you are feeling angry, depressed, upset, or anxious, take this as a clue to examine your thinking. Make a habit of using your negative feelings as a cue to begin the Disputing Negative Thoughts practice.

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

1. Reality Testing

Check the accuracy of the basic facts behind your thinking.

Ask yourself:

A. What is my evidence for and against my thinking?

B. Are my thoughts factual, or are they just my interpretations?

C. Am I jumping to negative conclusions?

D. How can I find out if my thoughts are actually true?

E. If your thought is a core belief, write it out and ask yourself, "Is this thought 100% true ALL of the time?". Begin creating a list of any and all instances you find that are not true.

2. Look for Alternate Explanations

Ask yourself:

A. Are there any other ways that I could look at this situation?

B. What else could this mean?

C. If I were being positive, how would I perceive this situation?

3. Put Things in Perspective

When you are feeling upset, you are likely to think about things in a way that is much more extreme than the actual situation. This can make the negative feelings a lot worse. Putting things in perspective, can help you to reduce this extreme self-talk.

Ask yourself:

A. Is this situation as bad as I am making out to be?

B. What is the worst thing that could happen? How likely is it?

C. What is the best thing that could happen?

D. What is most likely to happen?

E. Is there anything good about this situation?

F. Will this matter in five years time?

4. Use Goal-directed Thinking

Recognizing that your current way of thinking might be self-defeating (i.e. it doesn't make you feel good or help you to get what you want) can sometimes motivate you to look at things from a different perspective.

Ask yourself:

A. Is thinking this way helping me to feel good or to achieve my goals?

B. What can I do that will help me solve the problem?

C. Is there something I can learn from this situation, to help me do it better next time?

D. Do a cost-benefit analysis of believing your thought. Ask yourself, "How will it help me to believe this thought?" and "How does it hurt me to believe this thought?". Write down your answers and decide if believing this thought is more

harmful than good. If so practice choosing to let it go, or opening to the possibility that your thought is not true.

History

This technique is one of the core practices of cognitive therapy. This direction in therapy was mainly pioneered by Aaron Beck, and popularized by David D. Burns with his book *The Feeling Good Handbook.*

The specific version presented here is a variation of the one created by Dr. Sarah Edelman and Louise Rémond at the Foundation for Life Sciences. It also includes techniques from Dr. Burn's book, *The Feeling Good Handbook*, and from Dr. Nancy Padesky and Dr. Dennis Greenberger's book, *Mind Over Mood: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think.*

Caution

It may be difficult for some people to notice any difference between the Do Nothing meditation and gross "monkey mind," that is, the ceaseless, driven and fixated thoughts of the everyday neurotic mind. If this seems to be the case for you, it may be helpful to do a more structured technique.

Notes

Disputing negative thoughts takes a substantial investment of time and energy in order to be effective. However, the results of long-term application of this practice are quite positive.

External Links

For a more complete version of the Disputing Negative Thinking practice, take a look at the Thinking Errors fact sheet.

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.