The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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# *Lessons for the Healthy from the Land of the Sick*

© Toni Bernhard

Toni Bernhard has been chronically ill since 2001. Her first book, *How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and Their Caregivers* became a surprise international hit. Her new book, *How to Live Well with Chronic Pain and Illness: A Mindful Guide* is more comprehensive in scope; it examines a broad variety of challenges faced by those who struggle with their health. One of the book's principal themes is that cultivating mindfulness, compassion, and equanimity are essential to a life of purpose and joy. As this excerpt demonstrates, these three practices are as valuable to the healthy as they are to the sick.

Excerpted from *How to Live Well with Chronic Pain and Illness: A Mindful Guide* by Toni Bernhard (2015) with permission from Wisdom Publications.

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*Everything has been figured out, except how to live.* —Jean-Paul Sartre

People who are in good health can learn a lot by paying attention to those who are chronically ill. I still hope to regain my health. Should that day come, the lessons I've learned in the land of the sick will accompany me to the land of the healthy.

## 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.

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Rick Hanson, PhD edits the *Bulletin*. Michelle Keane is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by the design team at Content Strategy Online.

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***Expanding your thinking beyond your personal problems helps you accept the life you have.***

I used to think that I'd been singled out because of this illness, as if the world were being unfair to me personally. This gave rise to anger and resentment. Over the years, I've learned the value of going beyond this narrow self-focused thinking. I haven't been singled out; in every household on the planet, in every generation, in every era throughout history, people have experienced unexpected upheavals in their lives. Expanding my thinking in this way has helped me accept my life as it is.

If I recover my health, I'm determined to maintain this broader perspective. My life—just like everyone else's—will be a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant experiences, successes and disappointments, joys and sorrows.

***Your identity need not be tied to a job title.***

When illness forced me to spend my days in the bedroom instead of the classroom, I continued to think of myself as a law professor long after it was clear that this was no longer in the cards for me. I clung to that identity as if it were a life raft, repeating to myself over and over in a panic, "If I'm not a law professor, who am I?"

One day, out of a combination of frustration and exhaustion, I let go of the label "law professor" and the identity that went along with it. To my surprise and relief, I felt liberated, as if I'd put down a heavy load. This left me free to create a new life for myself. Now I look for fulfillment in a broader range of interests and activities, without the need to call myself something that's important-sounding.

Whether you're healthy or not, I hope you won't limit your identity to a job title. Doing so may keep you from exploring the abundance of life's possibilities and lead you to believe that your fulfillment is dependent on what you do for a living.

*Dwelling on the past and worrying about the future are recipes for stress and anxiety.*

I'm not suggesting that you can't learn from the past or that skillful planning for the future isn't worthwhile, but it's wise to be mindful that this type of thinking can become unproductive. For many years after becoming ill, I spent most of my days stuck in regret about a life I could no longer lead or lost in worry about a life I couldn't predict with any degree of certainty. I was miserable.

Then I remembered a book I'd read in the early 1990s: P*resent Moment, Wonderful Moment* by Thich Nhat Hanh. In it, he wrote:

> When we settle into the present moment, we can see beauties and wonders right before our eyes—a newborn baby, the sun rising in the sky.

Encouraged by his words, I began to practice staying in the present moment. I devised an exercise I call "drop it." It's an alternative practice to the four-step approach I've discussed in previous chapters. If it suits you, use it! Here's how it works.

When you become aware that you're stuck in regret about the past, or that you're overcome with worry about what the future holds, gently but firmly say, "Drop it." Then immediately

direct your attention to some current sensory input. It could be something you see or smell. It could be the physical sensation of your feet on the ground or of your breath coming in and out of your body. Dropping a stressful train of thought about the past or the future and relaxing into the present moment is a relief. And adding a slight smile can bring with it a sense of peace and well-being.

Note that there are two parts to this practice. First, saying "drop it," and then, turning your attention to a sensory experience in the present moment. It's important not to forget that second part. Without it, you're just barking a command at yourself; if you're like me, ordering yourself not to think or feel something makes those very thoughts or feelings stick like glue in your mind. That's why, after saying "drop it," it's important to turn your attention to something else in your field of awareness.

Those who are healthy can also benefit from "drop it" practice.

After all, no one is likely to make it through the day without his or her mind hosting a stressful thought or two about the past:

> "I should have been more chatty at lunch instead of sitting there like a dunce."
> "I shouldn't have stayed so long at my friend's house; I'm sure I wore out my welcome."

Notice how thoughts about the past often contain self-critical "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts." These serve only to make you feel inadequate, as if you're not living up to some ideal standard of behavior, but those standards tend to be unrealistically high. Who is ever 100 percent satisfied with everything he or she said at a social function? No one I've ever met. Who is able to perfectly calculate how long to stay at someone's house? No one. Dwelling on the past and adding a negative self-judgment into the mix only add stress and anxiety to life.

You're also unlikely to have made it this far in your day without your mind hosting a stressful thought or two about the future.

I faced this head-on in the fall of 2014 when I suddenly found myself waiting for the results of seven medical tests in a three-week period. Understandably, at times, I felt anxious and worried. I made matters worse, however, when I began spinning stressful stories about the

future even though I could not possibly know what it had in store for me. It amazed me how this mental chatter ranged from the embarrassingly trivial (how will I keep up my Facebook posts if I have to be hospitalized?) to serious considerations (how will this impact my family?).

During those difficult weeks, I relied heavily on "drop it" practice and on tonglen. When I became aware that I was lost in worst-case scenarios about the future, I gently but firmly said, "drop it." Then I immediately turned my attention to something that was going on in the present moment. Sometimes I saw, as Thich Nhat Hanh said, beauties and wonders right before my eyes.

I also practiced tonglen (which is discussed in detail in earlier chapters) by breathing in the worry and anxiety of everyone everywhere who was waiting for test results and breathing out—to them and to myself—all the compassion and serenity I could summon up. This helped me feel connected to the millions of people who were in my same situation. This special bond helped me accept with equanimity that, although waiting for test results is definitely one of life's unpleasant experiences, it's one that almost everyone must endure at one time or another in life. The best we can do is try to keep our attention in the present moment and call on our storehouse of patience and compassion.

I'm grateful that I had "drop it" and tonglen as practices to help me through those challenging weeks. Maybe you're in good health and are waiting for the results of a different kind of test: an entry exam for a job, for example. You need not be chronically ill to benefit from practices that help stem worry and anxiety.

***Taking "I," me," and "mine" out of your thinking can keep you from treating unpleasant physical and emotional states as permanent features of who you are.***

In chapter 24, "The Uncertainty of It All," I wrote about the practice of reformulating your thoughts by taking out self-referential terms, such as "I," "me," and "mine." To do this, you treat how you're feeling at the moment as being the result of the temporary coming together of causes and conditions in your life, as opposed to being due to some permanent quality of yourself.

This perspective can benefit everyone, including those in good health. Here's an example of how I've used this practice.

Because I'm home almost all the time, often by myself, I decided in the spring of 2014 to bring new life into the house. We got a puppy and named her Scout. My husband drove to pick her up when she was twelve weeks old. Because the drive was too long for me, our friend Richard was kind enough to accompany him.

While they were on the road, I lay down for my nap. My plan was to be in as good shape as possible when Scout arrived. But I couldn't sleep. In fact, I couldn't even rest. Unexpectedly, I was overcome with anxiety about what was about to happen. "I can't believe how anxious I am," I thought. The anxiety then triggered an avalanche of stressful stories: "Will I be able to adequately exercise a puppy? Who will train her? How will I ensure a quiet environment for my nap and for sleep at night?"

As I lay there, it became clear that this so-called nap was making matters worse, because lying still in the quiet had become fertile ground for generating these stressful stories. After about a half hour, I decided to try the practice of taking self-referential terms out of my thinking. (Note that all of the stressful thoughts contained the word "I" in them!) And so instead of thinking "I can't believe how anxious I am," I changed it to "Anxiety is happening" and "Anxiety is present." Then I took a moment to explore how anxiety felt—in both my body and my mind.

First, I noticed that my body was tense and that the muscles in my neck were particularly tight. Then I reflected on how several causes and conditions had come together at this moment in time to create the anxiety I was experiencing: the uncertainty of the demands that a new puppy would bring; the unpredictability of my illness from day-to-day; the fact that this was the very day my husband was picking her up; my determination that this nap would put me in good shape to greet her. As I reflected on this, I kept repeating "Anxiety is happening" and "Anxiety is present." There was no need to identify with this anxiety as an intrinsic quality of who I was. It just happened to be what was going on at the moment.

The result of reformulating my thinking in this way was that the anxiety lost its oppressive feel and the tension in my body relaxed. A feeling of spaciousness arose in which the anxiety was nothing more than a fluid emotional state—coming and going, arising and passing—as opposed to being a permanent feature of this person Toni Bernhard. I thought, "Yes, anxiety is present; that's okay. Just let it be." As I lay on my bed, the anxiety eventually gave way to a pleasant feeling of curiosity; instead of feeling anxious, I was suddenly interested in seeing how life with Scout would unfold.

This perspective—that what happens in life is the result of causes and conditions that are ever-changing, out of your control, and need not be taken personally—is helpful in a broad range of settings. It was another practice I relied on during the three weeks I spent waiting for test results. When worry and anxiety arose, I worked on describing them without the

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use of self-referential terms. And so I'd say "Worry is happening" or "Anxiety is present." Doing this kept me from identifying with what I was feeling, and that made it easier for the worry and anxiety to lift and blow away—over and over again.

Whether you're chronically ill or not, I hope you'll try this practice. It can help you "go with the flow," instead of treating an unpleasant physical or emotional state as a permanent feature of who you are.

***Less is more.***

Before I got sick, I was an accumulator. My life was filled with stuff: unopened books and magazines that sat unread; CDs; jewelry; knickknacks and trinkets; clothing and all its accessories (shoes, belts, scarves). Since becoming sick, I've learned that less is more. As a result, if someone admires something, unless it's a special item that I'm saving for my children or grandchildren, I give it away. So be careful if you come to my house; if you say you like something, odds are, it's about to be yours.

I love to give things away. I have less but I feel as if I have more, because I have the satisfaction of knowing that I've made someone happy and that something that was once mine will now be put to better use. If I woke up tomorrow morning with my health restored, I wouldn't change this behavior. It carries with it a newfound sense of freedom.

***Clean is better than neat.***

My house isn't neat, but it's relatively clean. The limitations imposed by my illness have forced me to choose between the two because I can't manage both; I can have neat, or I can have clean. I've chosen clean. This means that if I wipe down a refrigerator shelf, I feel good about it, even though I know its contents will still be in disarray when I'm done. When I do

laundry, if I've managed to get the sheets and some detergent into the washer, I consider it a job well done even if the sheets emerge from the dryer only to be casually shoved onto a shelf (clean but not neat!) until I need them.

***Rushing to judgment about others can lead to painful misunderstandings.***

When I got sick, I rushed to judgment about friends who didn't keep in touch. I assumed they no longer cared about me. As I've written about in earlier chapters, most of my assumptions were way off base. I could have saved myself a lot of suffering if I'd kept that Don't-Know Mind I wrote about in chapter 21. As Korean Zen teacher Seung Sahn said, "If you keep a don't-know mind, then your mind is clear like space and clear like a mirror."

Whether in good health or not, we're all experts at clouding our minds with stressful stories about other people—stories in which we impute motives and intentions that more often than not have no basis in fact. In truth, we don't know what's happening in another person's life unless we inquire about it. Yes, it may be time to let a relationship go and move on, but before doing so, consider asking yourself whether you've rushed to judgment without checking out what might really be going on.

***Paying attention to your body's needs is of utmost importance.***

Before I got sick, I lived mostly in my mind. I thought of my body and mind as separate and disconnected. Like most people, I'd been taught "mind over matter," as if the body were a slave to the mind, carrying out its directives. As a result of that belief, I ignored my body when it sent me signals that would have been beneficial to me, such as to slow down or to get more sleep. Being chronically ill has made me more conscious of the interconnectedness of mind and body. I can feel, for example, how emotions are felt in the body and how mental stress can exacerbate physical symptoms.

Should I regain my health, I'll stay embodied—I'll stay in body. I'll listen to what it's saying to me, and I'll remember to appreciate what an extraordinary organism it is. Even when I'm struggling mightily with this illness, my heart keeps beating, my blood keeps circulating, my lungs keep taking in oxygen.

***The body may be the most wondrous instrument in the world, but it's also fragile.***

When I saw people on television stranded in the heat and humidity on the cement freeway overpasses in New Orleans after the levees broke, I thought, "I would not survive in that situation." When I see pictures of Sudanese refugees walking days on end to find food and water, I think, "They would have had to leave me behind." It's a sobering thought and not, I believe, one that people who are healthy realize is the case.

*Illness is the great equalizer.*

My health care provider serves the indigent in several counties. When I have an appointment, I share the waiting room with the homeless and the affluent. People graciously give up their chairs to others in need. People admire each other's children. They engage in friendly small talk. We know we're in this together.

When you're chronically ill, barriers fall. Illness and pain don't care about your background or your life circumstances: whether you're financially secure or struggling to pay the rent, whether you have an advanced degree or a high school diploma, whether you have plenty of support from others or are utterly alone. Should I regain my health, I'll never lose sight of the fact that, underneath the trappings of society and our particular life circumstances, we're all equals on the path of life.

*Being kind to yourself is the best medicine.*

As I've written about several times in this book, when I first became chronically ill, I was not kind to myself. I thought my body had betrayed me. I thought my mind was weak because I couldn't will myself back to health. My inner critic was in full voice. It took several years, but I finally learned to treat myself with kindness and compassion.

Once I began speaking to myself in a caring voice, I realized how much I could have benefitted from this supportive self-talk before I got sick. In my early years of teaching, I felt inadequate in the classroom. I judged myself harshly even though I worked as hard as I could to be a good professor. I wish I'd known to say to myself something like "Such a dedicated teacher, working so hard to do the best for my students."

Healthy or not, no one's life is without bumps in the road. When the going gets rough, instead of blaming yourself for your difficulties, try to see them as an inevitable part of the human experience. Then take a big dose of that best of medicines: self-compassion. It will

heal your mind and bring you a measure of peace no matter what your circumstances.

***Cosmically, there's no difference between weekdays and weekends, or between regular days and holidays.***

It's just sunrise, sunset, sunrise, sunset. Treasure and enjoy.

Toni Bernhard is the author of the award-winning *How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and Their Caregivers* and *How to Wake Up: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide to Navigating Joy and Sorrow*. Her newest book is called *How to Live Well with Chronic Pain and Illness: A Mindful Guide*. Before becoming ill, she was a law professor at the University of California—Davis. Her blog, "Turning Straw Into Gold" is hosted by *Psychology Today* online. Visit her website at www.tonibernhard.com.

# *How to Change Your Brain to Change Your Mind*



I met Rick Hanson in Freiburg in Germany during a 3-day intensive seminar on positive neuroplasticity, organised by Arbor Seminars. The seminar was dealing with ways how you can influence your brain so that you feel happier and can respond to stressful moments from a calmer and more positive perspective.

***Rick, what exactly do you mean by "positive neuroplasticity", and how is it relevant for improving our happiness?***

Positive neuroplasticity is about how we can turn positive experiences into long-lasting changes in neural structure and function that can help us to become happier and more resilient. I call this "turning beneficial states into beneficial traits". The idea is that we need to learn how to take in the good things in our life so that they become inner strengths. If we have or even create more positive experiences in our life this will give us beneficial states which we can deliberately internalize through the practices I teach to become mental resources which we can draw upon when things get stressful or difficult. Research has shown that our brain has a bias towards more negative thinking. We therefore need to learn to recognize the good things in our life and in particular, make sure we feel them in the body and savor them to increase their encoding in the brain. I strongly believe in the fact that if we are more happy we will become more good and ultimately can contribute to the happiness of the ones around us.

*What aspects of your training are relevant for dealing more efficiently with stress?*

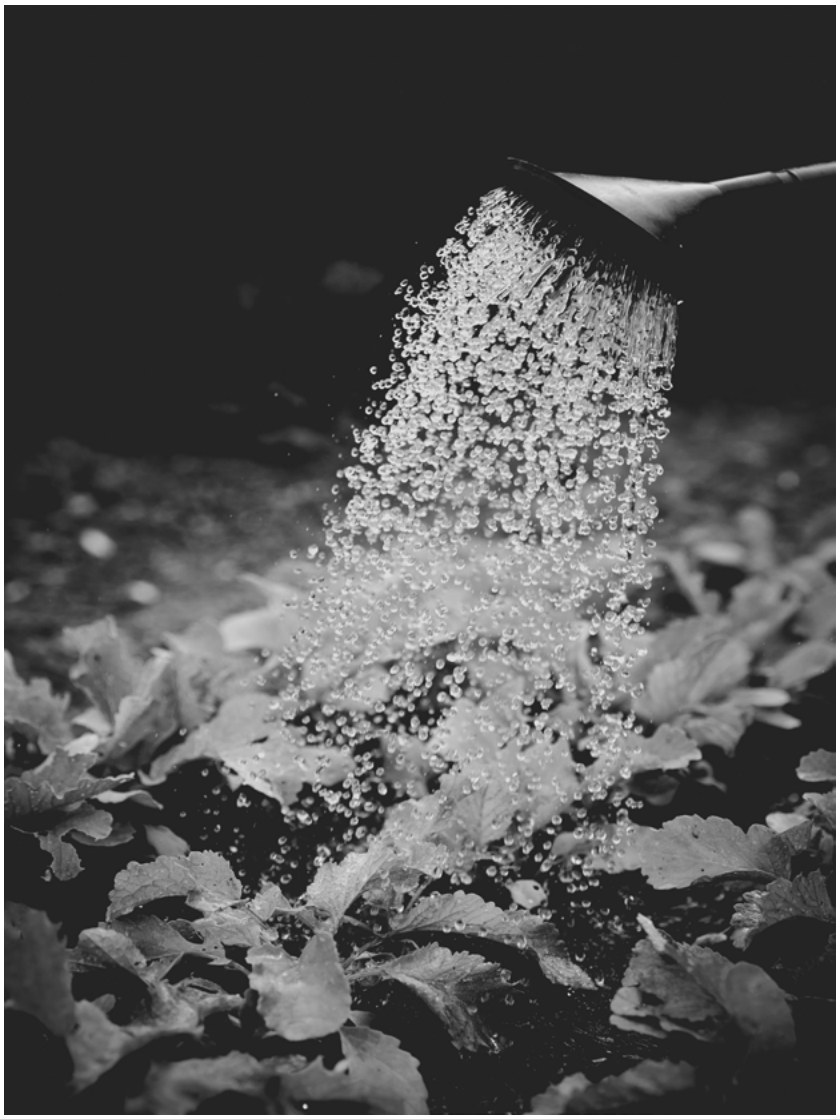
The natural state of any mammal in this world, including humans, is what I call the "Responsive mode" – or informally, the Green Zone. This is the sustainable equilibrium condition in which bodily resources are conserved, the body repairs and restores itself, and in the mind there is a general sense of peace, contentment, and love (or the lower animal equivalent). In the Responsive state, our three basic needs of safety, satisfaction and connectedness are mainly met and there is minimal craving (broadly defined). But if we experience that one or more of these three needs is not being met, the brain's Reactive mode is activated: the "flight, flight, freeze reaction" – what could be called the Red Zone. If we have repeatedly internalized psychological resources – inner strengths – on which we can draw, then we can respond to challenges from the "green zone", and thus reduce the risk of becoming exhausted and burned out. The more positive experiences we internalize as psychological resources, the more we can remain in the responsive mode and be resilient in stressful phases of our life.

*Do you think that becoming more mindful can make people happier?*

For me, mindfulness means cultivating present-moment awareness. If we cultivate mindfulness skills, we can see things from a broader perspective and disengage from our mental yammering. Broadly speaking, we need to be able to both be with the mind and work with it – and mindfulness helps us do both. I like to compare the mind with a garden: we need to be with what is (look at it), but also reduce the negative (pull out the weeds) and increase the positive (plant new flowers). Or, in a simple format: "let be, let go, let in". Being

with the mind is a fundamental, beautiful practice, but it is not enough; we also need to engage wise effort with a warm heart – and mindfulness should be present whether we are being with the mind or working with it. To put this a little differently, I think that skillful psychological and spiritual practice is like a stool with three legs – mindfulness, kindness, and cultivation (*sati*, *metta*, and *bhavana* in Pali, the language of early Buddhism) – and if one leg is missing, the stool falls over. These three legs of the stool are a wonderful basis for a happy life.

***What do you think is needed for mindfulness to become a skill that people can draw upon?***



There are many deeply wise and effective trainings in mindfulness these days, such as MBSR and related programs. As with any mental skill, any psychological resource, the deliberate internalization of the *factors* of mindfulness (e.g., control of attention, clear intention, self-acceptance, distress tolerance) as well as the *experience* of mindfulness can strengthen the neural substrates of mindfulness and thus mindfulness itself. I think any kind of training, including in mindfulness, will have greater results if three things occur: a brief explanation of how to turn beneficial states into beneficial traits, informal moments in which a deeper registration of experiences is encouraged, and suggestions that people use practices of internalization between training sessions in order to increase the benefits of the training.

*How do you see the current evolution of mindfulness into a more mainstream activity?*

If there were a Nobel Prize in clinical psychology, I believe that one of its recipients should be Jon Kabat-Zinn. Mindfulness training can transform people's life. It is important in our stressful society where multitasking and partial attention has become normality, to learn to cultivate present moment awareness, focus and calm. Of course, mindfulness – sustained present moment awareness – is not itself moral virtue, kindness toward others and oneself, wise intention, grit and determination, generosity, or numerous other important psychological resources and characteristics. Mindfulness alone is not enough: we also need to grow other flowers in the garden of the mind.

**Beate Trück** is a certified mindfulness trainer and co-founder of the Brussels Mindfulness Institute. The Institute gives trainings to international organisations (European Institutions, companies), schools, and individuals, and works to contribute to better mental health and wellbeing as well as to better personal, political, and economic decision-making.

Beate worked in European settings for over 15 years as CEO of various organizations. For the past several years, she has focused on teaching mindfulness to people in the European Commission and European Parliament. Her approach is based on Mark William's book *Finding Peace in a Frantic World* and inspired by his work with the British Parliament. This mindfulness program has been delivered to more than 120 Members of the British Parliament and led to a report with recommendations on how to make the UK a more mindful nation. The Brussels Mindfulness Institute is advised by Mark Williams and his colleagues regarding the introduction of mindfulness to European institutions, seeking a similar impact in Europe.

For more information, please go to www.brusselsmindfulness.be.

# *Go Out and Play – Rediscovering the Joy of Life*



For years now I've been studying about what helps create more resilience and happiness within us. I've looked to my own life, the life of my clients and students and toward the psychological and neuroscience research. What I've found is happiness that within each and every one of us are a core set of natural anti-depressants that when we intentionally tap into shifts our brain activity in ways that can lend itself to an anti-depressant brain. One of the most undernourished happiness quotients for adults (and sadly adolescents too) that I've come to find that helps break a bad mood, create positive neural activity and generally a more enduring sense of well-being is Play!

Excerpted from *Uncovering Happiness: Overcoming Depression with Mindfulness and Self-Compassion* by Elisha Goldstein (2015) with permission from Simon and Schuster.

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When Eve was twenty-eight years old, she came to see me because she was struggling with what she called being "generally unhappy." Although she was working to become a designer, she really wasn't sure whether that was what she wanted to do with her life. After a few sessions, I discovered that she'd basically been depressed off and on since she was thirteen years old. As puberty began, Eve felt uncomfortable in her developing body and would give in to peer pressure around drugs and alcohol in order to fit in. She eventually became dependent on the powerful painkiller Vicodin and surrounded herself with fellow addicts. She wanted to change, but didn't know how.

Whenever I meet anyone, I always want to get a sense of (1) who they surround themselves with and (2) what they do during the day. This gives me a good picture of whether their environment is enriching or depleting. We went through an inventory of who she spent her time with, and agreed that she needed to spend more time with nourishing people who supported her change and less time with depleting people who promoted the status quo. The next step was for her to describe what her days looked like. As she brought me through her day, it seemed like she was bringing me down an assembly line: everything was routine;

there was a real lack of joy. When it comes to our bad habits, we often seek artificial boosts through eating, drinking, and checking our smartphones, among other things, not only to avoid what's uncomfortable but also because we lack the natural boosts that come from contentment, a sense of calm, and self-confidence. But if we encourage the natural boosts, we have less need for the artificial ones.

I asked Eve to close her eyes and think about what images came into her mind in connection with the word play. She said she hadn't played in a long time, so I asked her to think back to her childhood. She remembered her parents bringing her to a ranch and her being in awe of the horses. She also recalled a time during her teen years when she worked on a ranch, grooming and riding horses. On the ranch, Eve said, she felt free.

"Then we gotta get you back to a ranch," I said.

That may seem like a simplistic response, but it seemed to be exactly what Eve needed.

As it turned out, Eve had known a woman who owned a ranch. However, I knew that Eve was still caught in the depression loop, and one of the detrimental habits that is a part of that, aside from all the NUTs (see sidebar), is procrastination. I sensed that she needed a little nudge, so I took a risk and asked her if she was open to calling the woman at that moment during the session. She hesitated, but went ahead and did it. The owner was happy to hear her voice and accepted her request to come help out on the ranch.

The first time Eve arrived at the ranch, she was nervous—she had a whole lot of voices in her head shouting their bad advice, telling her to sneak out and leave. But she stuck with it, and in a short time, she began to regain that feeling of just loving being there. Eve was playing again, grooming the horses, riding them, and even helping out as an equine assistant.

WHAT ARE NUTS?

The acronym NUTs is way of bringing humor to those Negative Unconscious Thoughts that arise constantly in the brain, beneath our awareness, and that feed the depression loop. Examples of NUTs include deep-seated beliefs that "I am unworthy," "Something is wrong with me," and "Nothing is ever going to change." When a challenging event occurs in our lives, these NUTs become a filter that clouds the way we look at the world—and as a result, they can actually make us feel a little nuts! As we begin bringing more attention to what our NUTs are, we become more conscious of what they are. And, if you'll excuse the pun, understanding our NUTs also strengthens our ability to "crack them," releasing their hold on us.

It wasn't long before she began to feel better and decided that she wanted to take a big next step in her life and start on the path of becoming a psychotherapist herself. She uncovered a buried purpose of wanting to help others who were suffering and combined that with her love of animals. Today Eve is an equine psychotherapy assistant. This is a rapidly growing field of psychotherapy in which a client is led through interactions with a therapist, an assistant, and horses for emotional and therapeutic growth. All of this continues to lift her and weave a web of resiliency. The day may come when Eve will get hooked by the depression loop again, but this new, nourishing environment builds up her natural immune response, supporting greater resiliency.

As Eve's story shows, play is not just for kids. It's actually an essential ingredient of a happy adult life and a natural anti- depressant. Recent science shows that the absence of play in adults contributes to depression, and adding it back into our lives not only helps make us happier and more resilient but also positively impacts our brains.

In the following pages, I'll show you what play is and why it's such a powerful antidepressant. I'll help you to see why having toys and playmates can build a more resilient brain, and I'll ex- plain ways to bring more play into your life starting now.

## What Is Play?

Children play. Nobody has to show them how to do it; they're just born knowing. But as adults, we become so disconnected from it that we forget what it is and how to do it. So let's start by looking at what play is and what it means for adults to engage in play.

Psychiatrist and clinical researcher Stuart Brown who founded the nonprofit organization National Institute of Play in Carmel Valley California, says "Play is an ancient, voluntary, inherently pleasurable, apparently purposeless activity or process that is undertaken for its own sake, and that strengthens our muscles and our social skills, fertilizes brain activity, tempers and deepens our emotions, take us out of time, and enables a state of balance

and poise." Play is happening when you are so engrossed in something you enjoy that you lose all sense of time and don't want it to end. It's where that inner critic finally shuts up, self-consciousness fades away, and we can open up to new possibilities. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a Hungarian-born psychologist and researcher, calls the experience of play a state of "flow." In flow, while there may be a goal, the activity is its own reward. The degree of difficulty is just enough to keep you interested but not so difficult that you're tempted to give up. This balance of play is a feeling of engagement and satisfaction—the opposite of depression.

When we're depressed, play can seem like a foreign concept. Sometimes when I ask my depressed clients what they envision when I say the word *play*, they look at me with a blank stare. So I decided to conduct an experiment about play with a number of people I worked with, as well as some family and friends. It was simple: I asked them all what play meant to them. I found that many people I spoke with had a hard time conceiving what play is for grown-ups, because it's different from child's play, which was the only kind of play they knew. In fact, in a culture that prizes productivity, adult play seems to be defined as a negative, unproductive, self-indulgent activity—or even something X-rated. I believe that we need to update our definition of play.

My questioning led me to believe that play means different things to different people. For example, after my kids go to bed, I enjoy playing around in the kitchen making homemade granola—but my wife would see this as a decidedly unplayful chore. I enjoy being creative and engaging in the process of playing with different ingredients. For one of my clients, play means getting lost in the book *Fifty Shades of Grey*, while that would be torture to her boyfriend. Another client revealed that one of her "guilty pleasures" was lying down in her pajamas and immersing herself in the TV show *Game of Thrones*, a purposeless yet pleasurable activity. She was surprised to identify that as a moment of play for her, and she no longer felt guilty about it. She had redefined what play was, and soon you will too. But

first, let's talk about how the absence of play can feed a depressive loop.

Play is different for different people. One of my clients discovered that creating origami brought her joy, while for others that may be the last thing on earth they'd want to do.

## All Work + No Play = Depression

You've probably heard the proverb "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." It turns out that this old saw is pretty accurate, for a life without play can be not just dull but depressing. In the 1970s, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the researcher who defines play as "flow," ran a study in which he asked the subjects not to do anything enjoyable, or "noninstrumental" for forty-eight hours, such as taking walks with friends or reading for pleasure. The study's results revealed an essential truth in our human experience.

After just a single day, participants "noticed an increased sluggishness about their behavior." Many people had difficulty concentrating, felt sleepy, or were too restless to sleep. Csizkszentmihalyi wrote that after only forty-eight hours, "the general deterioration in mood was so advanced that prolonging the experiment would have been unadvisable."

Do these symptoms sound familiar? His study shows us that the absence of play in our lives lends itself to depression. This is backed up by Stuart Brown's research. After intensively studying violent criminals for many years, he discovered a stunning common thread that changed the course of his career forever: a lack of play in their lives. Since then, Brown has spent decades collecting more than six thousand "play histories" from a vast array of subjects, including business people, artists, and even Nobel Prize winners. He was interested in seeing the role of play from childhood to adulthood. Brown found confirming evidence that lack of play was an important factor in predicting mood instability and even criminal behavior. In all these thousands of play histories, he also found that the presence of play is a key natural antidepressant. It can reverse the depression loop, pulling us out of melancholic states, rekindling disconnected relationships, enhancing emotional intimacy, and even creating connection and healing between strangers.

## Play Reverses The Depression Loop

The depression loop is fueled by negative emotions, self-judgments, disengagement, helplessness, and isolation. Play inspires the exact opposite qualities and takes away this fuel. The act of play is filled with positive emotions, is engaging, satisfying, connecting, and social, while the depression loop narrows what is possible, making us rigid in our

### 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.

thoughts and actions. Play opens up a more flexible mind, beckoning us to seek out novel thoughts and actions in response to the task at hand. Play builds physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. As we continue to play, we become more flexible and creative in the way that we approach things—even the depression loop—fostering a resilient brain.

In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith, one of the foremost play scholars in the last hundred years argues that the opposite of play is not work, it's depression.

## Diego's Play History

When Diego first came to see me, he was a sixty-two-year-old upper-echelon executive who hadn't experienced pleasure in life for quite some time. "Every morning I say a prayer," Diego told me: "God, please let me find the joy in my life, to be happy, and to find purpose." Diego had come to this country from Spain in the 1970s and had dreamed of success in the film industry. But when he first came to see me, he found himself at a transition point in life. Although he had achieved success working for a well-respected entertainment company, he wasn't happy. When I asked him what play was like for him while growing up, he told me that as a child he had to be careful with play because showing signs of joy in his house was met with criticism and judgment from his mother. It was as if the very idea of playing was tied to being vulnerable and that guarding against vulnerability was key to his survival. Unfortunately, this carried over into his adult life.

As I inquired more into his play history, it turned out that Diego loved art. As a kid, he would collect pictures of his favorite cartoon character. I asked him to tell me about it, so that he could inhabit that experience of playfulness. On a couple of occasions, I caught him smiling as he reflected on these memories, which brought the experience alive again for him in the present moment. As an adult, this translated into a love for film and art. While he collected art books, he never ever opened them — so I suggested that he take a couple of hours a week to just get lost in his art books. When I said this, I saw that his body immediately tensed up because of his deep-seated belief that he didn't deserve play or that play was dangerous in some way. It was hard for Diego at first, but he pushed himself to peruse his art books, and he began to feel good. Eventually he admitted to feeling joy. "I felt my chest expanding, I felt lighter, and I was smiling a lot," he said.

This was only the beginning of his journey into play. Little by little, he began getting out more, going to galleries and buying art. He started listening to the yearnings of his heart rather than the critical voices in his head. He began to bring play into his relationships, challenging himself to be vulnerable with others and sensing a greater intimacy and connection with them when he did. One day he told me, "Something is really changing in me, I feel more open, I'm happier." At the moment, his prayer was answered. When I asked his permission if I could use his story in this book, Diego smiled, laughed a little, and said, "Of course, but only if you reference me as 'the Studly Spaniard.' " Playfulness was clearly alive in him.

In order to rediscover play in your life, it's helpful to look back in your past and see how you played and what gave you joy. Your experiences from childhood are stored as encoded memories that inform your perceptions today. Recalling them can provide clues to what gives you joy now, as an adult.

Take a moment to think about how you played as a kid. Was it alone or with friends? What did you enjoy most? Maybe you engaged in imaginary play with dolls or invisible friends. Or per- haps your most pleasurable time was spent building sandcastles on the beach or making intricate beaded necklaces. You may have spent hours building Lego castles or cities. Or maybe life felt most enjoyable when you were outside playing tag, kickball, or some other sport. Your most playful memories may be of the rain, dancing around, making mud pies, and feeling happy to be as wet as you could be. I think of my young children and how they can just get lost in a drawing with their crayons. In my teenage years, I spent hours doing rough-and-tumble play with my friends, collaborating to beat video games, or shooting baskets.

Of course, what was enjoyable to you as a kid may not be fun for you as an adult. The board game Sorry! may have been a laugh for you in fourth grade but might drive you up a wall today. That's okay. In the next section, you'll get clearer on how this translates into your adult life. For now, just going through the exercise of reminding yourself of what play was like is part of the process of priming the mind, and soon you'll be updating it into a more current "playbook."

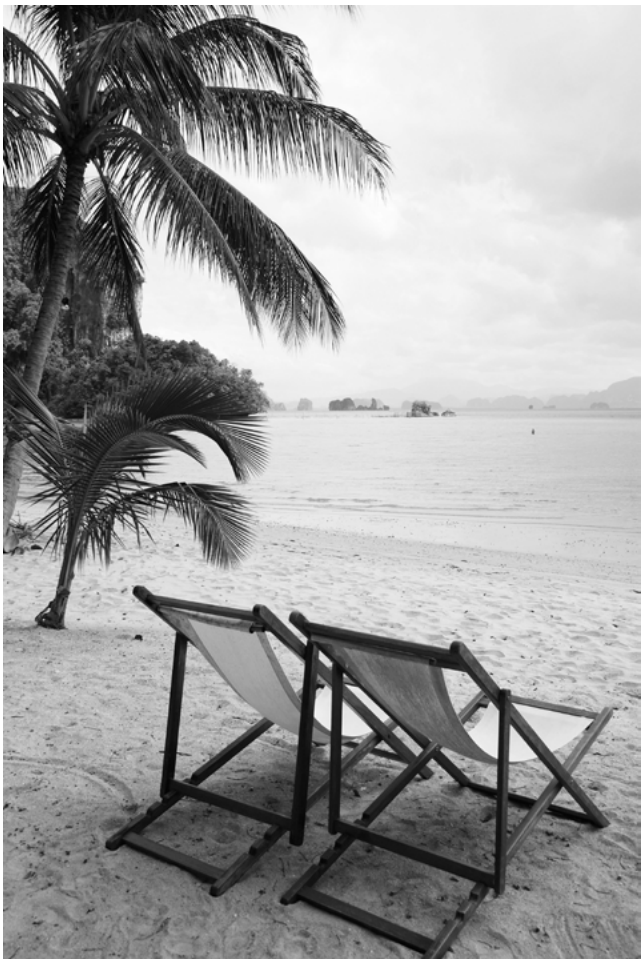
If you like, write down some thoughts and examples of what play was like for you as a kid. Notice if at any point during the reflection of past moments of play a smile arises and the corners of your eyes turn up. This is a natural smile; give yourself permission to linger in it for a few moments.

In order to rediscover play in your life, it's helpful to take a "play history," looking back in your past and seeing how you played and what gave you joy.

## Toys and Playmates

Numerous recent studies have shown that when it comes to play, two elements are both needed to make it a natural antidepressant: toys and playmates. In the 1960s Marian Diamond, a professor of neuroscience and anatomy at the University of California at Berkeley and one of the world's top researchers on neuroplasticity, pioneered research to see what effects "enriched" environments had on the brains of rats. It turns out that the neural development of rodents is similar to that of humans. Diamond and her colleagues took thirty-six rats and split them up into three different groups based on environment: (1) enriched, (2) standard, and (3) impoverished. All the cages had the basics of food, water, and lighting. The enriched environment was the play space with friends and toys. The standard environment was a cage less than half the size with friends but no toys. The impoverished environment was a single rat alone with no toys.

After the experiment ended, scientists examined the rats' brains. The rats who had toys to play with *and* other rats to socialize with had thicker *cerebral cortexes* with more neural connections than the other rats. The cortex is a critical area of the brain responsible for cognitive processing, attention, and awareness. They also found that the greatest neural



change happened in the first thirty to sixty days, cluing us in to the importance of novelty in neuroplasticity. Engaging in novel things in life has also been shown to increase levels of dopamine, the motivational brain chemical, or *neurotransmitter*, that many studies suggest is low when feeling depressed. Diamond's research proved a fundamental breakthrough, showing us that the environment — the toys and playmates — can actually change neural architecture for the better. What's more, the impoverished rats actually showed decreased cortical thickness — implying reduced cognitive processing.

To give you an example of why thicker is better, psychologists have shown that rats living in enriched environments with thicker cortexes ran mazes faster and more efficiently. The takeaway here is that more neural connections — or a thicker cortex — means a greater ability to discern what is best quicker. Not only that, some studies suggest that play may cause the brain to process energy better. The brain, like the rest of the body, depends on the simple sugar known as glucose for energy. The synapses in our brains use glucose to supply their energy. Researchers have found that rats living in enriched environments needed less glucose to function. This suggests the brain is actually more efficient when exposed to more enriching environments. Still other studies found that exposing rats to cognitive, physical, and social play increased survival of nerve cells in the hippocampus, allowing this

critical part of the brain to thrive. With respect to depression, when we can reduce the amount of energy the brain needs to function well and can grow parts that are responsible for learning, memory, and better discernment of optimal choices, we are nurturing a more resilient brain.

Of course, you and I aren't rats. You can't just throw us in a cage together with the same toys and expect positive effects. In crafting an enriching environment for ourselves and uncovering the natural antidepressant of play, you can draw on your play history to take stock of your personal play preferences. What are your toys? How do you create novelty in your life? Who are the playful people you can surround yourself with, and how can you create a more nourishing social environment?

That's what we're going to do right now.

When thinking about an enriched environment of play, you need to consider what your toys are *and* who your playmates are.

## What Are Your Toys?

Years ago, when I was living in San Francisco, I gathered a few people together, and we began a twelve-week expedition into play. We used Julia Cameron's book *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, which instructs you to take two-hour time-outs for yourself once a week and again once a month for an entire day to reflect and engage in things that you find creative. This doesn't have to be anything stereotypically artistic, such as painting or drawing, just something playful. Some people in my group chose to walk around neighborhoods they always wanted to visit, others opted to paint, and others played musical instruments. I noticed that this permission opened up possibilities to things I'd long thought I might like to do but had always thought I didn't have the time to do or weren't important enough. During one of the "Artist Dates," I went on a reflective walk in the woods, brought along a poetry book by E. E. Cummings, laid under a tree, and read this poem:

*somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond*
*any experience, your eyes have their silence:*
*in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,*
*or which i cannot touch because they are too near*

*your slightest look easily will unclose me*
*though i have closed myself as fingers,*
*you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens*
*(touching skillfully, mysteriously) her first rose*

*or if your wish be to close me, i and*
*my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly,*
*as when the heart of this flower imagines*
*the snow carefully everywhere descending;*

*nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals*
*the power of your intense fragility: whose texture*
*compels me with the colour of its countries,*
*rendering death and forever with each breathing*

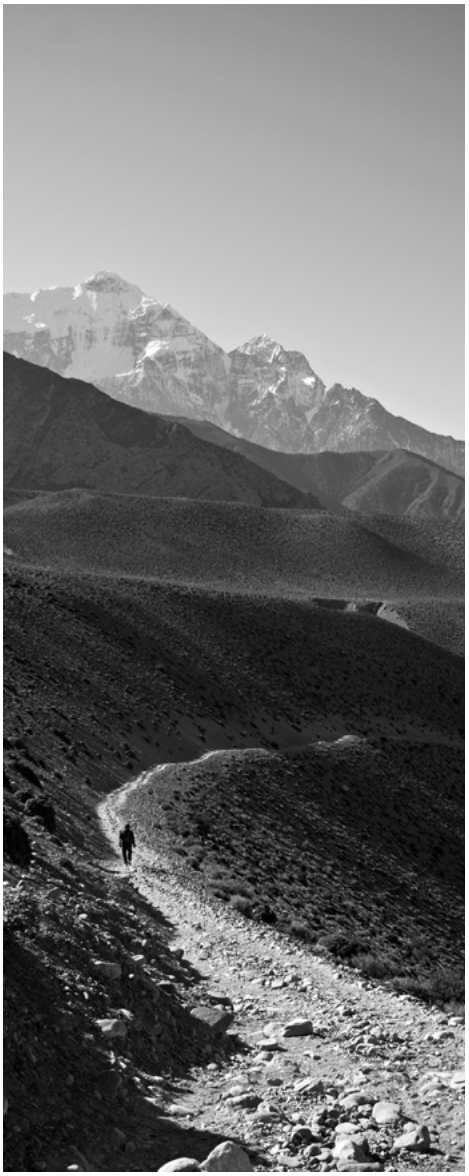
*(i do not know what it is about you that closes*
*and opens; only something in me understands*
*the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)*
*nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands*

I spent the day under a tree reading this and other poems over and over again until I had them memorized so that I could always have them with me. The process was fairly purposeless and deeply enjoyable. I was playing, and the poetry was my toy. Today, having a couple of rambunctious kids makes taking a day to myself to read poetry under a tree seem a remote possibility. But I can access that memory of play by keeping books next to me on my nightstand and spending a few minutes with them here and there.

Getting back in touch with what your toys are and reengaging with play can seem difficult to do, especially if you're not feeling well. That is why I'm going to start you off with "Fifty-two Ways to Play" to spark creative ideas for your mind. There is a continuum of options here, from activities that take very little effort, to others that take more effort. After reading them, see if any of these seem like toys to you. How can you begin integrating them into your life and even switching them up from time to time? As you read the following list, you don't need to just stick to what's familiar as a form of play; keep an eye out for novel ways to play, too. Remember, novelty is essential to enhancing neuroplasticity; it provides challenges that force your brain to grow and adapt in order to process the new information.

## Fifty-two Ways to Play

1. Riding horses
2. Playing video games
3. Making a new dessert
4. Lying under a tree
5. Watching a favorite TV show
6. Having a long dinner with friends
7. Looking at art books
8. Reading poetry
9. Soaking in the bathtub
10. Collecting things (shells, art, coins)
11. Going on a date
12. Going to a movie
13. Listening to music
14. Lying in the sun
15. Doing laughter yoga
16. Reading magazines
17. Spending an evening with good friends
18. Meeting new people
19. Eating good food
20. Cooking new foods
21. Doing yoga
22. Having a quiet evening
23. Having sex
24. Wearing sexy clothes
25. Playing sports
26. Flying kites
27. Taking care of houseplants
28. Camping
29. Hiking
30. Arranging flowers
31. Singing around the house
32. Repairing things in the house
33. Having a day without a to-do list
34. Going to the beach
35. Painting
36. Playing a musical instrument



37. Putting on a dinner party
38. Taking a nap
39. Planning a trip
40. Travelling abroad or within your area
41. Visiting a trendy neighborhood
42. Gardening
43. Going to a park and watching children play
44. Taking a scenic bike ride
45. Kissing
46. Buying new clothes
47. Thinking about what's going well
48. Attending a play, musical, concert, or sports event
49. Dressing up
50. Taking up knitting
51. Going swimming
52. Poetry

Have fun!

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Elisha Goldstein, Ph.D. is cofounder of The Center for Mindful Living in Los Angeles. He is author of several books including *Uncovering Happiness*, *The Now Effect*, *Mindfulness Meditations for the Anxious Traveler*, and co-author of *A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook*, Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn and MBSR Everyday. He also developed the Mindfulness at Work™ program, the premier eCourse Basics of Mindfulness Meditation: A 28 Day Program and co-developed the CALM (Connecting Adolescents to Learning Mindfulness) with his wife Stefanie Goldstein, PhD.

# *Skillful Means*

Your Skillful Means, 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.

## Affirmations

### Purpose/Effects

Affirmations help us to develop a positive mindset and thus break down the barriers that negative thinking puts up in our day-to-day lives. Positive affirmations remind us of the joy of life and affect our subconscious mind in order to grow our capacity to create our own successes and mold our own reality.

### Method

**Summary**

Create a positive statement addressing a desire for change and repeat it daily.

**Long Version**

1. Begin by making a list of the areas of your life in need of improvement; nearly any arena can be positively affected by the use of affirmations, but for demonstrative purposes, we will create affirmations for anxiety and stress reduction.
2. Now create a list of positive statements that reflect this goal: "I am intelligent" instead of "I'm not dumb."
3. The statements should be in the present tense; remember, you are trying to change your present situation, not the future. In our example, it is better to say "I am a calm person, free from worry" than "I will be a calm person, free from worry."

4. You can choose to speak your affirmations. Repeat them throughout the day until they begin to take hold…and continue after that! Like an antibiotic, you shouldn't stop at the first sign of improvement. Some people choose to speak their affirmations in the mirror while looking themselves in the eye because it magnifies the importance of the message. You can even sing your affirmations! Just be sure to say them like you really believe them.
5. You can choose to write down your affirmations. You can write them over and over to imprint them on your mind, or you can write them on a card which you take out and look at throughout the day.

**History**

Affirmations have a long history in the self-help movement, originating in the work of French psychotherapist Émile Coué. His affirmation "Every day, in every way, I'm getting better and better" repeated at the beginning and ending of each day was intended to change the unconscious thought of his patients. This method of autosuggestion was credited with curing a bevy of mental, emotional, and even physical problems. Napoleon Hill's famous book Think and Grow Rich also relies on autosuggestion, as does contemporary thinking on the Law of Attraction.

**Cautions**

Though affirmations are quite powerful, do not be tempted to use them as the only form of therapy for severe emotional or mental issues. An injured brain will have a hard time curing itself.

**Notes**

Affirmations are a crucial part of Self-Hypnosis. If you want to supercharge your affirmations, try using them alongside a hypnosis technique.

**See Also**

Self-Hypnosis
Autogenic Training

**External Links**

Vital Affirmations – a website about affirmations, with many suggested examples

# *Fare Well*

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