Think not lightly of good, saying, “It will not come to me.”

Drop by drop is the water pot filled.

Likewise, the wise one, Gathering it little by little, Fills oneself with good.

Dhammapada 9.122
The Strong Heart:
Kindness, Assertiveness, and 
Resilient Relationships

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Rick Hanson, Ph.D.
Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom
www.RickHanson.net
Cultivating Inner Resources
Shaping the Course of a Life

Challenges

Vulnerabilities

Resources
Location of Resources

World

Body

Mind
Some Inner Resources

Mindfulness
Character Virtues
Positive Emotions
Compassion, Love
Interpersonal Skills
Patience, Determination, Grit
In the Garden of the Mind

1. Be with what is there
   - Let be. Let go. Let in.
   - Mindfulness is present in all three.

2. Decrease the negative

3. Increase the positive

“Being with” is primary – but not enough.
We also need “wise effort.”
Two Wolves in the Heart
People focus on identifying and using resources such as character strengths – but what about developing them in the first place?
The harder a person’s life, the more challenges one has, the less the outer world is helping – the more important it is to develop inner resources.
The majority of our inner resources are acquired, through emotional, somatic, social, and motivational learning – which is fundamentally hopeful.
And Which Means Changing the Brain For the Better
Changing the Brain For the Better
Inner resources are acquired in two stages:

- Encoding
- Activation
- State

- Consolidation
- Installation
- Trait
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
Mechanisms of Neuroplasticity

- (De)Sensitizing existing synapses
- Building new synapses
- Altered gene expression
- Building and integrating new neurons
- Altered ongoing activity in a region
- Altered connectivity among regions
- Altered neurochemical activity
- Information from hippocampus to cortex
- Modulation by stress hormones, cytokines
- Slow wave and REM sleep
We become more **compassionate** by repeatedly installing experiences of compassion.

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We become more **grateful** by repeatedly installing experiences of gratitude.

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We become more **mindful** by repeatedly installing experiences of mindfulness.
What fraction of our beneficial mental states lead to lasting changes in neural structure or function?

But – experiencing doesn’t equal learning.

Activation without installation may be pleasant, but no trait resources are acquired.
Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias
As the nervous system evolved, avoiding “sticks” was usually more consequential than getting “carrots.”

1. So we scan for bad news,
2. Over-focus on it,
3. Over-react to it,
4. Turn it quickly into (implicit) memory,
5. Sensitize the brain to the negative, and
6. Create vicious cycles with others.
The Negativity Bias
Four Learning Curves

Mental Resources

Time

Decline
Four Learning Curves

- ① Decline
- ② No growth
Four Learning Curves

- 1. Decline
- 2. No growth
- 3. Linear growth
Four Learning Curves

1. Decline
2. No growth
3. Linear growth
4. Exponential growth; learning how to learn
What can you do to steepen your growth curve?
Learning is the strength of strengths, since it’s the one we use to grow the rest of them.

Knowing how to learn the things that are important to you could be the greatest strength of all.
Let’s Try It

Notice
Relaxing as you exhale

Create
Gratitude, gladness

Create
Warm feelings for someone

For each of these:
Have the experience. Enrich it. Absorb it.
The Neuropsychology of Personal Growth
HEAL: Turning States into Traits

Activation

1. **Have** a beneficial experience

Installation

2. **Enrich** the experience
3. **Absorb** the experience
4. **Link** positive and negative material (Optional)
Have a Beneficial Experience
Enrich It
Absorb It
Link Positive & Negative Material
Have It, Enjoy It
Keep a green bough in your heart, and a singing bird will come.

Lao Tzu
Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A’s go first).

Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring this question:

What are some of the good facts in your life these days?

As the listener, keep finding a genuine gladness about the good facts in the life of our partner.
Meeting Your Needs
Our Three Fundamental Needs

Safety
Satisfaction
Connection
Meeting Our Three Fundamental Needs

**Safety**
Avoiding harms (threat response)

**Satisfaction**
Approaching rewards (goal pursuit)

**Connection**
Attaching to others (social engagement)
The Evolving Brain

- Cortex ("primate/human")
- Subcortex ("mammalian")
- Brainstem ("reptilian")
- Cerebellum
Pet the Lizard
Feed the Mouse
Coming Home

Peace

Contentment

Love
A Secure Base
Balancing Autonomy and Intimacy

- Two great themes: independence/dependence, separation/joining, me/we

- They serve each other: autonomy helps you feel safe in the depths of intimacy, and intimacy nurtures the sense of worth and “secure base” that helps you explore life and dare greatly.

- When you feel autonomous and strong inside, you’re more able to manage differences and conflicts with others from the “green zone” without going “red” into fear, anger, and aggression.
Calming the Visceral Core

• A brief explanation of heartrate variability

• Relax.

• Gently lengthen exhalations . . . As long as or longer than inhalations . . . Then letting breathing be soft and natural.

• Bring attention into the chest and area of the heart.

• Be aware of heartfelt feelings . . . Perhaps love flowing in and flowing out in rhythm with the breath.
Feeling Alright Right Now

• Aware of the body going on being . . . Enough air to breathe . . . The heart beating fine . . . Basically alright . . . Now

• You may not have been basically alright in the past and you may not be basically alright in the future . . . But now you are OK . . . Still basically OK . . . Now

• Letting go of unnecessary anxiety, guarding, bracing

• Reassurance, relief, calming is sinking into you . . . Still basically alright . . . Now
Feeling Strong

• Bring to mind times that you felt strong, determined, enduring . . . Focus on feeling strong . . . Use HEAL to take in this experience.

• Bring to mind someone you are for. Find a sense of support, loyalty, perhaps fierce compassion . . . Know what this feels like – and apply it to yourself . . . Use HEAL to take in this experience.

• Imagine experiencing strength while dealing with a challenge . . . Let the sense of this sink into you.
Self-Compassion

• Bring to mind beings who care about you . . . Focus on feeling cared about. . . Use HEAL to take in this experience.

• Bring to mind beings for whom you have compassion . . . Receive the sense of compassion into yourself . . . Know what compassion feels like.

• Be aware of your own burdens, stresses, and suffering – and bring compassion to yourself . . . Get a sense of caring, warmth, support, compassion sinking deeply into you.
“Anthem”

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

Leonard Cohen
Warming the Heart
Resting in Love

• Bring to mind beings you care about . . . Friends, family, pets, people who have helped you . . . Compassion for suffering . . . Kindness and friendliness . . .

• Focus on feelings of caring and love . . . Use HEAL to take in this experience.

• Bring to mind beings who care about you . . . Focus on feeling cared about. . . Use HEAL to take in this experience.
Feeling of Worth

- It is natural and important to feel that you have worth as a person – which does not mean arrogance or ego.

You develop this sense of worth through:
- Others including, appreciating, liking, and loving you
- You respecting yourself

Take in experiences of being:
- Capable, skillful, talented, helpful
- Included, wanted, sought out
- Appreciated, acknowledged, respected
- Liked, befriended, supported
- Loved, cherished, special
A Confident Heart

• Feeling caring . . . And cared about.

• Stepping back and seeing yourself objectively . . . Recognizing your capabilities . . . Your good intentions . . . What you have been through and dealt with and overcome.

• Finding the respect for yourself that you would have for a person just like you . . . Letting go of needing to prove yourself or impress anyone . . . Recognizing your decency and efforts . . . Your good heart . . .
Empathy
A human being is a part of a whole, called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

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

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

~ Albert Einstein
What Is Empathy?

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

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

• Empathy is usually communicated, often tacitly.

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

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

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

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

• Pay attention.
• Be open.
• Read emotion in face and eyes.
• Sense beneath the surface.
• Drop aversion (judgments, distaste, fear, anger, withdrawal).
• Investigate actively.
• Express empathic understanding.
Unilateral Virtue
Wisdom is . . . all about understanding the underlying spacious and empty quality of the person and of all experienced phenomena.

To attain this quality of deep insight, we must have a mind that is quiet and malleable.

Achieving such a state of mind requires that we first develop the ability to regulate our body and speech so as to cause no conflict.

~ Venerable Ani Tenzin Palmo
If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each [person's] life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm any hostility.

~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
There are those who do not realize that one day we all must die. But those who do realize this settle their quarrels.

~ The Buddha
If you let go a little, you will have a little happiness.

If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of happiness.

If you let go completely, you will be completely happy.

~ Ajahn Chah
Right Speech

- Well-intended
- True
- Beneficial
- Timely
- Expressed without harshness
- And - ideally - wanted
Benefits of Unilateral Virtue

• It simplifies things: all you have to do is just live by your own code, and others will do whatever they do.

• It feels good in its own right.

• It minimizes inflammatory triggers, evokes good treatment, empowers you to ask for it.

• It stands you on the moral high ground.
Healthy Assertiveness
Healthy Assertiveness

What it is:

Speaking your truth and pursuing your aims in the context of relationships.
Healthy Assertiveness

What supports it:
• Being on your own side
• Self-compassion
• Naming the truth to yourself
• Refuges: Three Jewels, reason, love, nature, transcendental, awareness, practice
• Taking care of the big things so you don’t grumble about the little ones
• Health and vitality
Healthy Assertiveness: How to Do It - 1

• Know your aims; stay focused on the prize; concede small points to gain on large ones

• Ground in empathy, compassion, and love

• Practice unilateral virtue
• Communicate for yourself, not to change others
• Wise Speech; be especially mindful of tone
• NVC: “When X happens, I feel Y because I need Z.”
• Dignity and gravity
• Distinguish empathy building (“Y”) from policy-making
Healthy Assertiveness: How to Do It - 3

• If appropriate, negotiate solutions.
• Establish facts as best you can (“X”)
• Find the deepest wants (“Z”)
• Focus mainly on “from now on”
• Make clear plans, agreements
• Scale relationships to their actual foundations
“Us” and “Them”
Us and Them

• Within-group cooperation, and between-group aggression.
• Our biological nature is much more inclined toward cooperative sociability than toward aggression and indifference or cruelty. We are just very reactive to social distinctions and threats.
• That reactivity is intensified and often exploited by economic, cultural, and religious factors.
• Two wolves in your heart:
  – Love sees a vast circle in which all beings are “us.”
  – Hate sees a small circle of “us,” even only the self.

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

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

~ Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth
Feeding the Wolf of Love

- Don’t over-identify with “us.”
- Release aversion to others.
- Focus on similarities between “us” and “them.”
- Recognize and have compassion for the suffering of “them.”
- Consider “them” as young children.
- Recognize good things about “them.”
- Keep extending out the sense of “us” to include everyone.
So that all cubs are our own . . .

All beings are our clan . . .

All life, our relatives . . .

The whole earth, our home . . .
Hug the Monkey
See **RickHanson.net** for other good books.

See www.RickHanson.net/key-papers/ for other suggested readings.


Suggested References - 2


Suggested References - 3


Suggested References - 6


