Strengthening Resilience Through Compassion and Gratitude

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Resilience from Compassion and Gratitude
Resilience enables us to cope with adversity and maintain a core of well-being along the way.
Resilience is supported by psychological factors such as mindfulness, grit, sense of purpose, compassion and gratitude.
For example, *compassion* fosters resilience by connecting us with others; self-compassion helps us feel supported, and it buffers against the harsh self-criticism that wears us down.

And *gratitude* antidotes despair, gladdens the heart when things are hardest, and highlights the good that endures.
From States to Traits
We can have passing experiences — states — of compassion and gratitude.

And through “experience-dependent neuroplasticity,” we can turn those states into traits of compassion, gratitude — and resilience.
We become more **compassionate** by repeatedly internalizing experiences of compassion.

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

We become more **resilient** by repeatedly internalizing experiences of resilience – and its related factors.
Gradually Changing the Brain
For the Better
But – experiencing does not equal learning. Experiencing **without internalizing** may be enjoyable or useful, but no trait strengths are developed.

What fraction of our experiences of compassion, gratitude, and resilience foster lasting changes in neural structure or function?
The Negativity Bias
Stone age brains in the 21st century
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.
Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias
Deal with the bad.

Turn to the good.

Take in the good.
Positive Neuroplasticity
Mental resources are acquired in two stages:

- Encoding
- Activation
- State
- Consolidation
- Installation
- Trait
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
Turning States into Traits: HEAL

Activation
1. **Have** a beneficial experience

Installation
2. **Enrich** the experience
3. **Absorb** the experience
4. **Link** positive and negative material  
   *(Optional)*
Have It, Enjoy It
3 Simple Ways to Take in the Good

Stay with the experience for a breath or longer.

Feel it in your body.

Focus on what feels good about it.
Keep a green bough in your heart, and a singing bird will come.

Lao Tzu
Growing Compassion
Elements of Compassion

Empathy for “suffering” (e.g., pain, stress, loss, fatigue, unfulfilled longings, injustice)

Sincerely wishing that the suffering be relieved, with a sense of caring and concern

Often: a movement to help if one can

Sometimes also with respect, love, loyalty, sense of injustice, moral outrage, camaraderie, etc.
Self-Compassion

The same elements of compassion – empathy, benevolence, (often) action – applied to oneself

Self-compassion occurs alongside perseverance, self-guidance, resourcefulness, and other kinds of coping.

We can receive compassion into ourselves – including when we are the ones offering it.
Compassion and Self-Compassion

Bring to mind someone who is easy to feel compassion for.

Know what compassion is like . . .

Be aware of something that is hard for you . . . stressful, tiring, wearing . . . And find compassion for yourself.
Growing Gratitude
Elements of Gratitude

Appreciation for what one has been given . . .

. . . such as good fortune, talents, kindness from others, doors opened, science and culture, the natural world, the Big Bang universe, life itself . . .

Often with related feelings like gladness and awe

Generosity and gratitude form a beautiful circle.
Perspectives on Gratitude

Gratitude is about **facts**; it's not hype or exaggeration.

Alongside gratitude can be sorrow or outrage. Appreciating what is good doesn’t mean overlooking what is bad; gratitude can help us recognize our privilege and be even more motivated to help others.

With gratitude can come a humbling recognition of one’s dependence on so many things.
Resting in Gratitude

Bring to mind some good things you’ve been given
Let this knowing become *feelings* of thankfulness, appreciation, gratitude . . .

Find gratitude for someone at work . . . perhaps even gratitude for the chance to help and comfort and sometimes heal others, despite these stressful times . . .
Thank You!
References
See RickHanson.net for other good books.

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


• Dudai, Y. (2004). The neurobiology of consolidations, or, how stable is the engram?. *Annu. Rev. Psychol., 55*, 51-86.


Suggested References - 5


Supplemental Materials
Every day gives us opportunities to heal a little bit, to grow a little bit, to become wiser and stronger and happier and more loving.

This requires not just having experiences, but **learning** from them.
The brain is good at learning from bad experiences but relatively bad at learning from good ones.

Even though learning from good experiences of inner strengths is how to grow them and have them with you every day.
We focus more on activation more than installation.

This reduces the gains from psychotherapy, coaching, human resources training, mindfulness programs, and self-help activities.
How can we increase the conversion rate of beneficial states to beneficial traits?
In the Garden of the Mind

1. Be with what is there
2. Decrease the negative
3. Increase the positive


“Being with” is primary – but not enough. We also need “wise effort.”
What – if it were more present in the mind of a person – would really help?

How could a person have and install more experiences of these mental resources?
Key Mechanisms of Neuroplasticity

- (De)Sensitizing existing synapses
- Building new synapses between neurons
- Altered gene expression inside neurons
- Building and integrating new neurons
- Altered activity in a region
- Altered connectivity among regions
- Changes in neurochemical activity (e.g., dopamine)
- Changes in neurotrophic factors
- Modulation by stress hormones, cytokines
- Slow wave and REM sleep
- Information transfer from hippocampus to cortex
An Overview of Current Research

Much research on people that psychological practices lead to psychological benefits, presumably via changing their brains.

Much research on other animals that various stimuli lead to many kinds of changes in their brains.

Some research that psychological practices change people’s brains.

Scattered research on deliberate internal mental factors that lead to individual differences in gains from experiences.

“The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”
Learning Factors

Environmental – setting, social support

Behavioral – activities, repetition

Mental – motivation, engagement
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Mental Learning Factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contextual</strong></td>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>Personal relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>Alertness, sense of novelty</td>
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<tr>
<td>View of positive experience</td>
<td>Arousal, enactment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growth/learning mindset</td>
<td>Sense of reward</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Emotion</td>
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<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>Granularity of attention</td>
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<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Interoception</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling supported</td>
<td>Maintenance, repetition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of safety</td>
<td>Meaning, elaboration</td>
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Benefits of Mental Learning Factors

Benefits of both types of factors:
• Increase learning from the present experience
• Prime NS for future beneficial experiences
• Heighten consolidation of past experiences

Engagement factors have additional benefits:
• Regulate experience directly
• Increase initial processes of consolidation
• Are under volitional control
Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness.

It’s Good to Take in the Good

Develops psychological resources:
- General – resilience, positive mood, feeling loved, etc.
- Specific – matched to challenges, wounds, deficits

Has built-in, implicit benefits:
- Training attention and executive functions
- Treating oneself kindly, that one matters

May sensitize the brain to the positive

Fuels positive cycles with others
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.