



Heart-Mind Online

Hardwiring the Brain for Happiness



👁 6249



Secure and Calm



Alert and Engaged



A 5 minute activity that explores Anxiety, Confidence, Self-Regulation and Stress



Take a second to think about the past week. What stands out to you?

You might find yourself ruminating on the challenging or uncomfortable parts of your week—paying a late bill, having a difficult conversation at work—rather than all the positive moments you’ve had, however small.

If you find it harder to bring up the positive moments of your life, you’re

certainly not alone. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the **negativity bias**. It’s rooted in our evolution, where our ancestors **relied on taking bad news more seriously than good news** in order to survive.

Even though our species (for the most part) no longer has to outrun wild animals, our brains are still hardwired to cling to the bad of life instead of the good. But as many of us know, negative thinking comes with a slew of negative health effects. Plus, science shows that the children in our lives can “catch” and be negatively impacted by our stress, worry and anxiety.

According to neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, however, we can use the science of **neuroplasticity** to train our brains to “take in the good.” In his 2013 book, *Hardwiring Happiness*, Dr. Hanson illustrates how through changing our frame of mind we can, in turn, reframe our brain. From there, our re-trained brain is primed to take on a more positive state of mind, and reap the **physical** and **mental** benefits of positive and present thinking—and, ultimately, **Heart-Mind well-being**.

It is well understood in neuroscience that neurons that fire together wire together—or, in other words, the areas of our brains that we use the most often become stronger. Knowing this, Dr. Hanson writes that we can take advantage of fleeting, everyday positive moments to combat our innate negativity biases.

In *Hardwiring Happiness* Dr. Hanson outlines a four-step method (**HEAL**) to get in the habit of taking in the good:

Have a positive experience. Notice something positive that’s happening to you (say, your colleague invited you for coffee), or create a positive experience for yourself by reminiscing on something that brings your gratitude or joy (for example, recognize a task you’ve completed and are proud of).

Enrich it. Stay with this positive feeling for at least five seconds. Encourage the positive feeling to become intense, recognize how it’s relevant and how it nourishes you.

Absorb it. Let this experience sink into your mind—or as Dr. Hanson writes—“place it like a jewel in the treasure chest of your heart.”

Link the positive experience with something negative. (This step is optional.) Use your current, vivid feeling of positivity to heal old pain. For example, if you’re currently feeling included and liked, you can touch on a past time when you felt lonely.

In *Hardwiring Happiness*, Dr. Hanson offers **four easy steps to help children** take in the good in their lives.

1. Give them the tools

Dr. Hanson suggests discussing with children six and older how the brain is like “Velcro for the bad but Teflon for the good.” Through doing this, they can come to understand that they can act to keep “the bad stuff” out of their brain. For teenagers and children who enjoy being independent, Dr. Hanson suggests explaining the four HEAL steps, and sharing your own experiences with using it.

2. Recognize a happy moment

For example, if your child mentions that they enjoyed sitting with other kids at lunch, spend a moment to reflect with the child on how it felt good to be included. You don’t have to explicitly mention HEAL here—just model the steps of taking in the good.

3. Walk through the steps together

“If we value inner skills,” Dr. Hanson writes, “then we can ask children as much as we can ask them to learn the multiplication table.” We can explicitly teach the HEAL steps while putting a child to bed or at the beginning of the school day. Ask the child or children to reflect on something good, enrich that feeling by letting it grow big and strong inside of them, then absorbing it “like putting a jewel in the treasure chest of the heart,” Dr. Hanson writes.

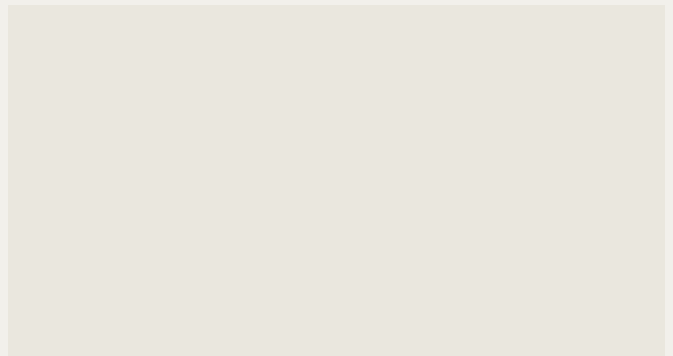
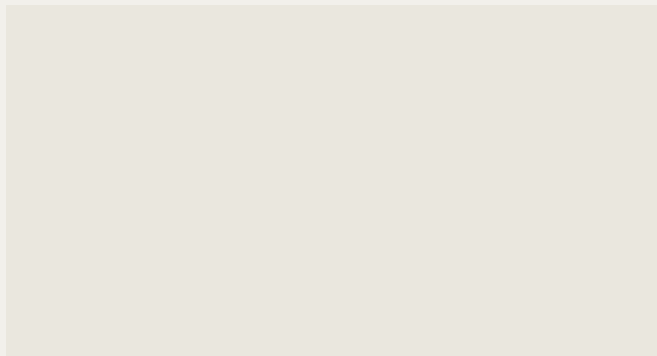
4. Encourage self-HEAL-ing

Once the child understands HEAL or what it means to “take in the good,” encourage them to practice it on their own, like when kids are nice to them at school, or when they successfully complete a task. At the end of the day, ask the child if they took in the good that day. If they did, ask them how it felt—if not, ask them why they decided not to.

Themes: [Anxiety](#), [Confidence](#), [Self-Regulation](#), [Stress](#)

Developmental Age: [Early Years](#), [Middle Years](#), [Adolescent](#)

Related Resources





Strategies to Avoid the "Overwhelm"



Temperament: Parent-Child "Fit"



How to Use Books to Foster Heart-Mind Well-being

Related content

How to Increase a Teenager's Happiness

The adolescent years are a dynamic period of change and the teen brain undergoes intense "re-modeling" during this time. The results of a study published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2012), examined what

How to Stop Negative Thoughts

The best way to help anxious children is by learning how to stop (or at least manage) the irrational thoughts and the thinking traps that play a big role in reinforcing anxiety. In her book *Generation Stressed*, Michele Kambolis describes

predicted happiness during adolescence. [Read more](#)

eleven thinking traps and the methods to overcome them.

[Read more](#)

Lesson Plan: The Power of Breathing

[Read more](#)

Mindful Activities for Families

New research explores how teaching mindful practices to young children may support stress reduction, self-regulation, levels of well-being and increase the capacity for compassion. We already know that these activities make a difference with adults too. [Read more](#)

[About](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Contact](#)

© Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education 2014