

Taking in the Good vs. The Negativity Bias

by Rick Hanson, Ph.D.

From: *Do Positive Experiences “Stick to Your Ribs?”*

Also, good video overview: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jA3EGx46r4Q#t=66

Comprehensive Slide Program: www.rickhanson.net/files/slides/FACES_TIG_Mar2012.pdf

Scientists believe that your brain has a built-in “negativity bias.” In other words, as we evolved over millions of years, dodging sticks (threats) and chasing carrots (food), it was a lot more important to notice, react to, and remember sticks than it was for carrots. That’s because – in the tough environments in which our ancestors lived – if they missed out on a carrot, they usually had a shot at another one later on. But if they failed to avoid a stick – a predator, a natural hazard, or aggression from others of their species – WHAM, no more chances to pass on their genes.

The negativity bias shows up in lots of ways. For example, studies have found that:

- In a relationship, it typically takes five good interactions to make up for a single bad one.
- People will work much harder to avoid losing \$100 than to gain the same amount of money.
- Painful experiences are much more memorable than pleasurable ones.

In your own mind, what do you usually think about at the end of the day? The fifty things that went right, or the one that went wrong? Like the guy who cut you off in traffic, what you wish you had said differently to a co-worker, or . . .

In effect, *the brain is like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones.* That shades “implicit memory” – your underlying expectations, beliefs, action strategies, and mood – in an increasingly negative direction. And that’s just not fair, since probably most of the facts in your life are positive or neutral. Every day, lots of good things happen, such as a lovely sunset, someone is nice to you, you finish a batch of emails, or you learn something new. And lots of other good things are ongoing aspects of your world (e.g., your children are healthy, life is peaceful in your corner of the planet) or yourself (e.g., personal qualities like determination, sincerity, fairness, kindness).

Besides the sheer injustice of it, acquiring a big pile of negative experiences in implicit memory banks naturally makes a person more anxious, irritable, and blue. Plus it makes it harder to be patient and giving toward others.

In evolution, Mother Nature cares about passing on genes – by any means necessary. She doesn’t care if we happen to suffer along the way - from subtle worries to intense feelings of sorrow, worthlessness, or anger – or create suffering for others. The result: a brain that is tilted against peace and fulfillment.

But you don’t have to accept this bias! By tilting *toward* (emphasizing) the good – “good” in the practical sense of that which brings more happiness to oneself and others – you’ll still see the tough parts of life. And, you’ll become more able to bear and change them if you tilt toward the good, since that helps you put challenges in perspective, lift your energy and spirits, highlight useful resources, and fill up your own cup so you have more to give others.

And now, tilted toward absorbing the good, instead of positive experiences washing through you like water through a sieve, they'll collect in implicit memory deep down in your brain. In the famous saying, "neurons that fire together, wire together." The more you get your neurons firing about positive facts, the more they'll wire up positive neural structures.

Taking in the good is a brain-science savvy and psychologically skillful way to improve how you feel, get things done, and treat others. It is among the top five personal growth methods I know. In addition to being good for adults, it's great for children, helping them to become more resilient, confident, and happy.

Taking in the Good – Three Simple Steps

1. Look for good (facts), and turn them into good experiences – let them in.

Good facts include positive events – like the taste of good coffee or getting an unexpected compliment – and positive aspects of the world and yourself. When you notice something good, let yourself feel good about it.

Try to do this at least a half dozen times a day. There are lots of good events going on all around you: take opportunities to notice the good things about the world and yourself. Each time takes just a few seconds to do. It's private; no one needs to know you are taking in the good. You can do it on the fly in daily life, or at special times of reflection, like just before falling asleep (when the brain is especially receptive to new learning).

Notice any reluctance/resistance to feeling good. Such as thinking that you don't deserve to, or that it's selfish, vain, or even shameful to feel pleasure. Or that if you feel good, you will lower your guard and let bad things happen. Barriers to feeling good are common and understandable – but they get in the way of you taking in the resources you need to feel better, have more strength, and have more inside to give to others. So acknowledge them to yourself, and then turn your attention back to the good news.

Keep opening up to it, breathing and relaxing, letting the good (facts) affect you. It's like sitting down to a meal: don't just look at it—really taste it!

2. Savor the experience.

Most of the time, a good experience is pretty mild, and that's fine. But try sustain or stay with it for 20 or 30 seconds in a row – instead of getting distracted by something else. Feel it in your body and emotions.

As you can, sense that it is filling your body, becoming a rich experience. As Marc Lewis and other researchers have shown, the longer that something is held in awareness and the more emotionally stimulating it is, the more neurons that fire and thus wire together, and the stronger the trace in memory.

You are not craving or clinging to positive experiences, since that would ultimately lead to tension and disappointment. Actually, you are doing the opposite: by really taking them in and filling yourself up with them, you will increasingly feel less fragile or needy inside, and less dependent on external supplies; your happiness and love will become more unconditional, based on an inner fullness rather than on whether the momentary facts in your life happen to be good ones.

3. Soak in the good experience – let it sink more deeply into your brain and body.

Let the experience register deeply in your emotional/mind-body system. People do this in different ways. Some feel it in their body like a warm glow spreading through their chest like the warmth of a cup of hot cocoa on a cold wintry day. Others visualize things like a golden syrup sinking down inside, bringing good feelings and soothing old places of hurt, filling in old holes of loss or yearning. And some simply know conceptually, that while this good experience is held in awareness, its neurons are firing busily away, and gradually wiring together.

Any single time you do this will make a little difference. And over time those little differences will add up, gradually weaving positive experiences into the fabric of your brain – reshaping it over-time and you with it.

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