

Have you ever notice that barely any positive information is presented on the evening news? Why is this so? The truth is that we like to hear bad information; we have what is known as negativity bias. Since the beginning of humanity, we've always been drawn to negative news. However, do not worry! We can conquer this bias and we can learn how to become happy.

In these chapters, you will learn about your in-built ability to pay attention to everything that worries you and to overlook everything that makes you smile. Also, you will learn about how the organization of your brain can make for happy or sad thoughts, and how using some simple methods can enhance positive thinking and strengthen happiness.

Having happy or sad thoughts is determined by the structure of your brain; however, people tend to concentrate on the “bad.”

While growing up, did you relate with everyone and easily blend in? Or were you always on the sidelines, getting harassed and withdrawing inward? It is likely that you have similar traits with those people who easily feel excluded even if you were famous in school.

The reason for this is because bad experiences initiate stronger and more memorable emotions than good ones.

For instance, consider the last job evaluation you got: It may have been full of praises and positive feedback. However, if it had just one small criticism, you are most likely to end up focusing on it, rather than all that praise.

This is how it is for the majority of the people because humans have an inbuilt ability to concentrate on negative things instead of the positive.

As a matter of fact, in 2001, Roy Baumeister a psychologist found that people concentrate more on angry faces than the happy ones. Hence, when someone stares at you, subconsciously you instantly pick up on the hostility.

With all that being said, your ability to concentrate on happy or sad thoughts depends on a specific part of your brain. Some people have what is known by scientists as a “happy amygdala,” and the amygdala is part of the brain that controls emotional responses.

It has been shown by research that a happy amygdala greatly arouses the nucleus accumbens which is the part of the brain that pushes us to accomplish our goals. People with happy amygdalas have the tendency of becoming optimistic, concentrating on opportunities instead of difficulties. In turn, these positive feelings can strengthen our desire to take action and fulfill our goals, hence, creating happy experiences and creating positive feedback to the brain.

Unluckily, most of the people have a “sad amygdala.” This causes fear-based reactions that produce cortisol and adrenaline in the bloodstream and it makes us feel anxious and tense.

In the next chapter, we’ll look at this unhappier brain type and learn what can change a frown upside-down.

The human brain is continuously developing and it can change for the better or for the worse.

There are possibilities that you’ve seen pictures of a human brain: It’s that flexible organ in our head that kind of resembles a weird cauliflower. As you certainly know, this weird-looking thing is very complicated, continuously learning and developing.

Far from a static being, the brain is developing every time. As a matter of fact, it evolves with each experience we have.

Let's look at the study that was conducted in 2000 by Eleanor Maguire a neuroscientist: She noticed that London taxi drivers have a particularly large lump in their hippocampus which is the part of the brain that is in charge of memory and visual and spatial orientation.

No, the lump wasn't a brain tumor. It was truly a sign of the part being overdeveloped as a result of the amount of memorization taxi drivers undertake in order to traverse across the streets of London. The drivers were regularly training particular neurons in this part of the brain and just like a muscle; it ultimately became bigger and stronger.

Exercises like these enable our brains to grow and develop, and by doing that as well, we can also train our brain to be happy.

Wil Cunningham a psychologist found out in 2013 that children who grow up with parents that fail to give them a warm and loving environment can develop the "sad amygdala" we learned about in the last chapter.

Luckily, these brains can relearn happiness.

Psychologists like Stanley Schachter assist patients through mental exercises in which they visualize being surrounded by a loving family and getting positive reinforcement. By repeating exercises like that, it can slowly adjust the structure of the brain by strengthening its ability to feel happiness and then change the sad amygdala into a happy one!

Hence, if our brain can be rewired for happiness, why is modern society filled with a lot of sad people? Let's find out about this in the next chapter.

Evolution has made a brain that zooms in on all the small stressors of the present life.

If you were ever the last person selected for a soccer game during school recess, then you may be aware with what occurs as a result: The bloodstream gets filled with stress hormones, the heart races fast and it feels like it's a situation of life or death, not a childish popularity contest.

Such excessive human responses essentially date back to when feelings of panic regularly saved lives.

During the violent time of human history, the threat of death made human beings to pay more attention to anything negative.

During the ancient eras, human beings were constantly under threat of violent attack, either by another person or by a wild predator. Our survival was regularly at risk.

As crazy as this may sound, soldiers who fought during WWI or WWII had more chances of survival than our hunter-gatherer ancestors from 10,000 years ago. During the two world wars, only one soldier out of every 100 died while, 10,000 years ago, one person out of every eight met a violent end.

Currently, our brain holds on the traces of these frightening times, and it has developed to find reasons for anxiety all around us.

This explains why a hostile face, a loud noise or a speeding car might scare us because we still focus on things that could possibly have a negative impact.

However, that's not all. The permanent stress of modern life continually triggers our human fear of death.

Whether we are being attacked by an armed robber or a stressful deadline, the precise same neural connections are triggered. This shows that we are really stressed out all the time; we are either bothered about money, our occupation, politics, relationships or anything!

For our brain, it's like spending the entire day being pursued by a 10,000-year-old saber-toothed tiger. Basically, we work as if our life is continually under threat, and this makes us concentrate on all the things that are negative.

Human beings have a negativity bias that greatly has an impact on them; however, happiness can cause relaxation.

To this point, we've learned a lot about how and why our brain concentrates on the negative parts of life.

However, this trend is really common that there is a name for it. It's known as the negativity bias.

We can even see this bias in the evening news. Each episode starts with eye-catching bad news. We're basically engrossed by stories of tragic earthquakes or violent criminal acts.

However, this bad news doesn't only affect nightly news ratings; it also, is has a great impact on our happiness.

Every time we are faced with a negative idea, our nervous system becomes alerted. As a matter of fact, our bodies will respond as if the crimes and calamities we see are really happening to us.

This negative input triggers a fight-or-flight response and stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol are produced in the bloodstream and energy resources are drained, making us ready to immediately respond to the perceived threat. Normally, our mind goes into an anxious state.

Due to this, we have the tendency to respond to negative input such as bad news, road traffic, and problems at work with fear or anger.

This is how we end up with road rage, anxiously hooting the car horn and shouting. Or we might even end up yelling at our co-workers when things are not going well.

In contrast, we can use positive response to help us move into a healthier, more relaxed state.

One of the author's patients would fight panic attacks by going to her garden. Anytime she experiences any panic attack, she would go out for a just few minutes to calm herself and be calmed by nature.

These calming experiences enable her to relax the nervous system by reducing the heart rate, reducing blood pressure and also aiding good digestion. All of this helps decrease the stressed-out, aggressive mentality.

We'd all want to be healthier and less nervous, so what else can we do to fight our negativity bias? Let's see how we can do that in the next chapter.

There are means in which you can consciously be on the lookout for the positive parts of life.

Have you ever enjoyed a rare minute of happiness and seeing things you hadn't seen before? You might unexpectedly see that the birds are chirping, flowers are blooming, and life looks all perfect again. Well, such pleasing moments needn't be so rare.

It is very easy to bring positive input into your daily life and this can really be done very fast.

For instance, when you finish a wok, even small ones like replying to an e-mail, don't just go to the next thing. Pause for a minute and see that you've achieved a goal and let yourself feel good about it.

Also, you can take a moment for yourself in the morning to open the window and breathe in some fresh air. Let the positive input sink into you, then consciously begin the day with that happiness and let yourself maintain that frame of mind all through the day.

Firstly, you might have to set some reminders to help you identify positive input.

One way is to begin a "Good Year box." At the end of each day, take time to ponder on at least one positive thing that occurred, jot it down on a piece of paper and put it in the box.

At that point, this will teach your brain to identify reasons to be happy. Also, at the end of the year, you can open the box, go through your notes and happily reflect on all the good experiences that you have had.

Also, another useful practice is to begin every morning by taking some time to concentrate on something positive. It may be as simple as accepting the fact that you're in good health, or that you're waking up in a quiet and harmless environment.

This will enable you to let go of any negativity you may be feeling and teach your mind to concentrate on things you can be grateful for.

We can overcome our negativity bias by reinforcing our positive experiences.

Have you ever seen a very beautiful landscape or admired a gorgeous sunset and felt the urge to stop time in order to keep that moment forever? Well, you should! Certainly, we can do just this with all our positive experiences, even the tiniest ones.

Although positive thinking isn't a new notion, current research shows that we can renew our brain's negativity bias into a positivity bias by reinforcing our positive experiences.

Also, any positive experience can be strengthened by simply taking the time to recreate and savor it.

Attempt this exercise: bring up the memory of you eating your best food. It might be as huge as a dinner you had at a great restaurant or as simple as your best vanilla ice cream. Then, try to visualize the pleasure you get from that food.

As you're doing this, continue this mental experience for as long as you can. Retain that delicious and happy feeling; if you get distracted, try to bring yourself back to that. This exercise can help you strengthen any positive experience and move toward a positivity bias.

We've known how our mind selects negative input, therefore, we have to consciously work on remaining positive.

It's a lit bit similar to ice-skating where maintaining positivity is like balancing on the ice. Strengthening that experience and remaining with this happiness is like skating around and skating a figure eight.

In order to further fortify your positive experiences, you should change your attitude and create time for good things.

For instance, let's say you struggle to wake your kids and prepare them for school. Instead of getting upset and shouting at them, try a positive method. Lie down with them on the bed and playfully sweet-talk them out of bed and into the day.

This isn't just more fun and positive alone, it's also more effective as it produces the type of happy experience that you and your children can strengthen and hold onto.

Happiness can help heal previous traumas and amend feelings of pain and misery.

Let's be realistic: life can be tough. Experiences like a tough childhood or the traumatic loss of a loved one – these are painful to live with. However, there is hope. Even a little time moment spent with a beloved pet can actually help heal past wounds.

Stale but true: new positive experiences can enable us to overcome old traumas, even the ones that have haunted us since we were a child.

For instance, one day while the author was dogsitting a pair of Cardigan Welsh corgis. While they were playing, he would lie down and the dogs would run to him and playfully lick him, much to the author's pleasure.

As a matter of fact, this was such a joyful incident for him that he decided to put it to good use.

He used a positive experience to overcome a painful childhood memory. When the author was four years old, his grandmother locked him out of the house and she told him that the cows would eat him while he was stuck outside!

However, after his dogsitting experience, he started to fuse the two events, connecting the happy moments with the corgis to the old trauma. Now, whenever he remembers his grandmother, instead of having negative thoughts, he habitually thinks of the positive experience with the corgis.

Even in life's worst conditions, happiness can help heal pain and grief.

The author tells a different story of a woman who lost her favorite cat. Initially, she was, naturally, distressed, spending days full of pain and grief. Then she began to look for ways to be positive.

She brought up all the positive memories experiences she had with her cat and enjoyed them, allowing them to sink in for like 30 seconds. By doing that, she was reinforcing the incidences, and this slowly healed the wounds caused by the loss.

A different example is when the author was diagnosed with cancer. Even then, he realized that there was positivity to be gotten from this experience. He recognized how delicate life can actually be and could value and enjoy his time even more.

By making new positive experiences, your life will be happier and much more exciting.

Different from the view of some, happiness is not in short supply. The truth is that there is no boundary to the number of positive experiences you can make for yourself to help renew your mind toward happiness.

If you want a positive experience to strengthen, you could make one by visualizing yourself in a place you've always wanted to go to or surfing the perfect ocean wave. You could also increase your probability of getting a new experience by walking in a way you've never taken before and noticed new things.

As a matter of fact, finding pleasure in the information you've never noticed is a good method of creating positivity.

For instance, while the writer was writing, he found new gratitude for the clever design of his keyboard. Certainly, this positive experience was a very little one. However, any positive experience, providing that it makes you happy, needs to be valued.

Also, these experiences can assist us in defeating our fears.

The author also found it hard to enter college: He was shy and troubled with his past experiences of being bullied at school. Hence, when his roommate invited him to hang out with girls, he wasn't really excited.

However, he forced himself to go and the evening ended up great, making a new positive experience that enabled him to conquer his fear of social conditions. For the next days, he would recall the incident to strengthen it and help him remain happy.

Occasionally, these experiences come from good intents.

Jorge Moll a Neuroscientist noticed that people who give money for a good reason end up happier. The study he conducted in 2006 revealed that the reward centers in the brain are firing at a higher rate in altruistic people than in the people who are stingy with their cash.

As it turns out, there are a lot of advantages to being altruistic. Feeling happy for a friend who has a positive experience, instead of feeling jealous or threatened, will increase your own happiness.

Nevertheless, it's much more exciting to share happiness than to attempt to keep it.

Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence by Rick Hanson Book Review

We have to rewire our brains so that we can concentrate on the positive. Our brains still have the characters of our old ancestors. Back then, it was a ruthless fight for survival and it was important for us to concentrate on the negative because it could have been a threat. Currently, in a period of relative peace, we need to restructure our brains to see the positive things that surround us. We let ourselves to enjoy life by concentrating on the positive.

Share your happy experiences with your friends.

Don't restrain a positive experience by keeping it to yourself alone. A good method to revive the good feelings related to something that makes you happy is to share it and recreate it through your friends and loved ones.

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