

Hardwiring Happiness

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In recent blogs I have written about the 24 strengths, or capacities for virtue, as explained by studies in positive psychology. In addition, I explained how the practice of mindfulness allows us to attend to our awareness in the present moment. In *Hardwiring Happiness*, Rick Hanson explains how the experience of positive moments of beauty, goodness, and love, for the self and the other, develop the brain. It has the ability to seize upon these moments and develop pathways, that allow for further positive experience. The brain grows throughout our life.

The historical development of early human beings developed a brain that had a bias toward negativity (Watch out for what is moving behind that bush). This bias makes it harder for the brain to be encoded with positive experiences. Therefore, we need to be actively aware of how to expand positive experiences to overcome the negative bias. As Hanson writes "each person has the power to change his or her brain for the better."

To shape the brain in a positive manner, Hanson identifies three steps and an optional fourth step: "Step 1. Have a positive experience...., Step 2. Enrich it. Stay with the positive experience for 5 to 10 seconds or longer. Step 3. Absorb it. Intend and sense the experience is sinking into you as you sink into it." The result of this process is for the brain to develop pathways that make it easier to develop further positive experiences. The positive elements of inner strengths, such as care, empathy, compassion, a sense of beauty, and many others, are thus stimulated and grow through the brain's development.

So, for example, at The Principled Academy and other schools, classrooms are bright and filled with beautiful objects. Teachers smile. Students go on field trips to observe the Monarch butterflies. On Valentine's Day students give each other colorful surprise Valentines with appreciative remarks. Almost any positive experience, past, present, or future can impact the brain in a positive manner.

Beyond staying in touch with the present moment, recalling positive experiences in the past can shape the brain. Experiencing beautiful objects in the present can do so. And anticipation of future positive experiences can shape the pathways in the brain in a positive manner.

Children and adults can be successful every day by building positive experiences in the brain and actualizing the strengths within. Hanson refers to these inner strengths as "stable traits, an enduring sense of well-being, wise and effective action, and contributions to others."

Children place their hands over their eyes, ears, and mouths. See no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil. There is much truth to this game. It is said that to overcome this proclivity toward negativity, we need to do many more positive things to build better pathways in the brain. The role of teachers and parents is to enable children to experience and absorb many positive moments during the day. A happy child can grow into a happier adult who contributes to the well-being of others.

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