

How to be Happy and Gay

*You've got to accentuate the positive
eliminate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
But don't mess with mister inbetween.*
Sam Cooke

If you've ever wondered why it's so easy for you to focus on your inadequacies, and have a hard time noting your natural fabulousness or why you ruminate on the one (or more) negative thing your boss, your partner, or your mother said and have a hard time really taking in their compliments, or why you constantly feel like you are waiting for the shoe to drop, even when things are going well, Rick Hanson, a neuropsychologist at UC Berkeley, and author of *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm and Confidence*, has the answer. We have a tendency to focus on the negative and minimize or ignore the positive because we are hardwired for negativity.

According to Hanson, being fearful kept our early ancestors alive. Our ancestors constantly had to decide whether to focus on going for the carrots such as food or sex or avoid the sticks like predators and bloodthirsty enemies. While both are important, from a survival perspective, sticks always trump carrots. If you miss a carrot, you have a chance to get another one. If you don't dodge a stick, if you don't steer clear of danger, you're done for. So, we evolved to have more neural activity going on in response to things that are threatening. We also react much more quickly. This is why we snap back so quickly when we feel criticized or judged.

Not only do we tend to react more to negative events and experiences, we tend to remember them more. While it takes 12 to 20 seconds to store positive events and experiences in memory, negative events and experiences are stored almost immediately. If you think of your brain as a filing cabinet, what this means is that your brain is much more likely to store those seconds you felt ashamed, inadequate, frightened, rejected, put down, or physically threatened than it is to store the seconds you felt proud, adequate, calm, accepted, complimented or safe. As a result, Hanson says, "the brain is like *Velcro for negative experiences but Teflon for positive ones.*"

So what can you do if you don't want the drip, drip, drip of anxiety or the spin, spin, spin of rumination to rule or ruin your life? Hanson has some easy to write but difficult to execute suggestions.

As with everything else, the first step is awareness. Remember that your brain is ever vigilant for the sticks and give yourself time to assess whether the threat is real. It could just be a paper tiger.

Second, redirect your attention to positive experiences. Rip your attention away from resentment and fear. Practice gratitude. Make it a habit to count your blessings. Note all the gifts you've been given and the positive experiences you've had. Stop taking the fact that you have a roof over your head and enough money to buy food for granted. Rather than complaining that you don't have enough, be thankful for what you do have. Make it a habit to review all the things you are grateful for on a daily basis. Remember to count the small things like the acts of kindness you experienced and the fact that your heart is still beating.

Another thing you can do to accentuate the positive is take time to notice what brings you joy and do more of that. If gardening makes you happy, get out there and garden. No yard – no problem. Create a tiny herb garden for your porch or find a community garden where you can be one with nature. If singing does it for you, find places to sing! Sing in the shower, in the car, at a karaoke event, or join a choir.

And when you have positive experiences, savor them just like you would savor an expensive piece of chocolate. If you felt yourself beam when someone said you did a good job, breathe it in. When you feel moved by the beauty of a sunrise, stop what you're doing and pay attention to it. When you get a chance to pet your cat or read to your child, let that be your entire focus. Hold your attention on these positive experiences for 12 to 20 seconds. These practices will train your brain to latch on to more positive experiences and the happier you will be.

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