Acquiring Durable Mental Resources
Two wolves in the heart
Resources in the Mind

**Mental resources** – which help us heal, cope, thrive, and contribute – include capabilities, knowledge, positive emotions, attitudes, motivations, and virtues.

Trait resources are durable and reliable.

To a large extent, trait resources are acquired, through emotional, somatic, social, attitudinal, etc. learning.
Four Learning Curves

- **1. Decline**
- **2. No growth**
- **3. Linear growth**
- **4. Exponential growth; learning how to learn**
Experience-Dependent Neuroplasticity

Most human learning begins with and is shaped by our experiences: immaterial consciousness represented by material neurobiology.

Momentary patterns of mental/neural activity are encoded, consolidated, and reconsolidated into lasting changes of neural structure or function – that may also involve other bodily systems as well (e.g., immune, cardiovascular).
Major Neural Mechanisms of Learning

- Sensitizing (or desensitizing) existing synapses
- Building new synapses
- Altered patterns of gene expression in neurons
- Building and integrating new neurons
- Increased ongoing activity in a brain region
- Increased connectivity of brain regions
- Altered patterns of neurochemical activity
- Information from hippocampus to cortex
- Modulation by stress hormones, cytokines
- Slow wave and REM sleep
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
Two Conditions for Learning

**Activation and installation:**
- What we’re learning and how it’s internalized
- State becoming trait

Acquired traits begin with states. But states alone are not enough. Experiencing does not equal learning.

Without installation, there is no learning, no change in the brain.
We are often better at activation than we are at installation.

This is a limitation in much psychotherapy, human resources training, coaching, character education, and mindfulness programs.
Meanwhile, stressful, painful, harmful experiences are being rapidly converted into lasting changes in neural structure or function.
The Negativity Bias

During the 600 million year evolution of the nervous system, avoiding “sticks” was usually more consequential than getting “carrots.”

1. So we scan for bad news,
2. Over-focus on it,
3. Over-react to it,
4. Install it quickly in implicit memory,
5. Sensitize the brain to the negative, and
6. Create vicious cycles with others.
Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias
The brain is good at learning from bad experiences but comparatively bad at learning from good ones.

Even though learning from good experiences of mental resources and related factors grows inner strengths.
Types of Learning Factors

Environmental – setting, actions of others

Behavioral – type or frequency of activities

Mental – intention, self-awareness
## Distal, Proximal Mental Learning Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distal</th>
<th>Proximal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>Personal relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>Alertness, sense of novelty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View of pos. exper.</td>
<td>Arousal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth/Lrng mindset</td>
<td>Valence, valuing, reward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Emotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>Granularity of attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Interoception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling supported</td>
<td>Maintenance, repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of safety</td>
<td>Meaning, elaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Imagery, metaphor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enacted, shared with others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Benefits of Mental Learning Factors

Benefits of both types of learning factors:
- Increase learning from **present** experience
- Prime NS for **future** beneficial experiences
- Heighten consolidation of **past** experiences

**Proximal factors** have additional benefits:
- Regulate experience directly
- Increase initial processes of consolidation
- Are under volitional control
The HEAL Process
Let’s Try It

- **Notice** that you are relaxing as you exhale
  - Have the experience
  - Enrich it
  - Absorb it

- **Create** the experience of compassion
  - Have the experience
  - Enrich it
  - Absorb it
Mindful Cultivation: the HEAL Process

Activation
1. Have a beneficial experience.

Installation
2. Enrich the experience.
3. Absorb the experience.

4. Link positive and negative material. [optional]
1. Have a Beneficial Experience

A beneficial thought, perception, emotion, desire, action, or blend.

Typically enjoyable or otherwise rewarding

Notice an experience already present.
- In the foreground of awareness
- In the background

Or create one. For example:
- Immediate situation or recent events
- The lives of others
- Take action
Two Aspects of Installation

**Enriching**

Mind – big, rich, protected experience

Brain – intensifying and maintaining neural activity

**Absorbing**

Mind – intending and sensing that the experience is received into oneself, with related rewards

Brain – priming, sensitizing, and promoting more effective encoding and consolidation
2. Enrich the Experience

- **Duration** – Maintenance, repetition
- **Intensity** – Arousal
- **Multimodality** – Multiple aspects of experience
- **Novelty** – Alertness, sense of freshness, granularity of attention
- **Salience** – Personal relevance
Multimodality

- **Thought** – Meaning, elaboration, metaphor
- **Perception** – Interoception
- **Emotion** – Valence
- **Desire** – Valuing
- **Action** – Enacted, shared with others
2. **Enrich the Experience**

- **Duration** – Maintenance, repetition
- **Intensity** – Arousal
- **Multimodality** – Multiple aspects of experience
- **Novelty** – Alertness, sense of freshness, granularity of attention
- **Salience** – Personal relevance
3. Absorb the Experience

- **Intend** to internalize the experience (priming).

- **Sense** the experience sinking in (sensitizing).
  - Imagery – water into a sponge; jewel in treasure chest
  - Sensation – warm soothing balm spreading inside
  - Knowing – “I am becoming a little more ____ .”
  - Felt sense of a shift – embodied registration of a change

- **Find rewards** in the experience (promoting encoding and consolidation).
Reflections So Far

Like a fire:
• See it or light it.
• Protect it and add fuel.
• Take its warmth into yourself.

This is the fundamental **how** of “experiential gain” that can be applied to any **what** – any inner resource.

Aspects of Enriching and Absorbing may be in psychotherapy, etc. But systematic, explicit guidance for **installation** is not widespread.
4. **Link Positive and Negative Material**

This step is **optional** since it is not necessary for acquiring beneficial traits, and it has the risk of a person getting flooded or hijacked by the negative material.

It’s common in everyday life (e.g., talking about an upset with a friend) and widely used for personal growth (e.g., replacing harmful beliefs, Coherence Therapy).

The person must be able to:

- Hold two things in awareness
- Keep the positive one more prominent
- Not get hijacked by the negative one

Drop the negative if it’s too powerful; just Enrich, Absorb.²⁸
It’s Good to Take in the Good

 Explicit development of inner strengths
  - General – resilience, positive mood, feeling loved
  - Key resources – for challenges, deficits, wounds

 Implicit benefits:
  - Receptive intimacy with experience; undivided attention
  - Shows that there is still good in the world
  - Being active rather than passive
  - Treating yourself kindly, like you matter
  - Rights an unfair imbalance, given the negativity bias
  - Training of attention and executive functions

 May sensitize brain to positive: like Velcro for good
Keep a green bough in your heart,  
and a singing bird will come.  

Lao Tsu
A randomized waitlist control pilot study on the Taking in the Good course (46 subjects), not yet peer-reviewed.

Course participants, compared to the control group, reported significantly more Contentment, Self-Esteem, Satisfaction with Life, Savoring, and Gratitude.

After the 7-week course and also at 2-month follow-up, pooled participants also reported significantly more Love, Compassion, Self-Compassion, Mindfulness, Self-Control, Positive Rumination, Joy, Amusement, Awe, and Happiness, and less Anxiety and Depression.
Growing Key Resources
What – if it were more present in the mind of a person – would really help with challenges, temperament, or inner wounds or deficits?

How could the person install more experiences of this mental resource?
Meeting Three Core Needs

Avoiding harms for **safety**

Approaching rewards for **satisfaction**

Attaching to others for **connection**
Mental Resources for Core Needs

**Safety** – Grit, determination, seeing threats clearly, relaxation, calm strength

**Satisfaction** – Gratitude, impulse control, accomplishment, frustration tolerance

**Connection** – Feeling cared about, self-worth, compassion, interpersonal skills
Wider Implications
Managing Challenges and Opportunities

Life brings challenges and opportunities re: safety, satisfaction, and connection.

Do we manage them from an underlying sense of deficit and disturbance – Reactive mode – with fear, frustration, and heartache?

Or from a sense of **fullness and balance** – Responsive mode – with peace, contentment, and love?
Growing a “Green Zone” Brain

Repeatedly installing experiences of core needs being met – or experiences of mental resources that help us meet these needs – builds up an increasingly unconditional internal sense of fullness and balance.

Then we are increasingly able to meet challenges and opportunities from the Responsive mode – or recover more quickly – even when others, the world, or parts of our own minds are flashing red.
Societal Benefits

As we develop the neural substrates of the Responsive mode, in terms of our needs for safety, satisfaction, and connection, we become harder to manipulate by appeals to fear and anger, greed and drivenness, and “us” vs. “them” rivalries.
Think not lightly of good, saying, "It will not come to me."

_Drop by drop is the water pot filled.

Likewise, the wise one, gathering it little by little, fills oneself with good._

_Dhammapada 9.122_
Selected References - 1

See www.RickHanson.net/key-papers/ for other suggested readings.

Selected References - 2


Selected References - 3


Selected References - 5


Additional Materials
What Shapes a Person’s Course?

- Challenges
- Vulnerabilities
- Resources
Where Are Resources Located?

World

Body

Mind
Resources in the Mind

- Knowledge – insight into self and others
- Capabilities – self-regulation, social skills
- Positive emotions – gratitude, love, delight
- Attitudes – confidence, optimism, tolerance
- Motivations – helping others, wanting to learn
- Virtues – patience, generosity, courage, kindness
“Upward spirals” of state → state processes (or state → behavior → state or state → environment → state) are not themselves evidence of state → trait development.

These processes are dependent upon preceding states (or behavior or environment), and when these conditions change, so can one’s positive mental states.

Traits are more reliable than states. You take them with you wherever you go.
ACQUIRING MENTAL RESOURCES
The Negativity Bias
Getting the Good Stuff into Your Brain
Have a Good Experience
Absorb It
Link Positive and Negative Material
Have It, Enjoy It It
The Four Ways to Offer a Method

- Doing it implicitly
- Teaching it and then leaving it up to the person
- Doing it explicitly with the person
- Asking the person to do it on his or her own
HEAL in Classes, Trainings, Families

- Take a few minutes to explain it and teach it.
- In the flow, encourage enriching and absorbing, using natural language.
- Encourage people to use HEAL on their own.
- Do HEAL on regular occasions (e.g., at the end of a therapy session, meals, just before bed).
RESOURCES FOR AVOIDING HARMs

Challenge
Weakness
Helplessness
Freezing, immobilization
Inflated threats
Alarm
Tension
Worry, fear
Irritation, anger

Resource
Strength
Agency
Action, venting
Accurate appraisal
Protection, calming
Relaxation
Feeling alright now, making a plan
Big picture, peace
# RESOURCES FOR APPROACHING REWARDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What I don’t have</td>
<td>What I do have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarcity</td>
<td>Enoughness, fullness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointed, sad</td>
<td>Gratitude, gladness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration, failure</td>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bored, numb</td>
<td>Pleasure, excitement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>Loved and loving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving up</td>
<td>Aspire, lived by good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drivenness</td>
<td>Already satisfied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# RESOURCES FOR ATTACHING TO OTHERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Left out, excluded</td>
<td>Belonging, wanted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequacy, shame</td>
<td>Appreciated, respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored, unseen</td>
<td>Receiving empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonely</td>
<td>Friendship, caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to others and oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resentment</td>
<td>Recognize it hurts you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Envy, jealousy</td>
<td>Self-compassion, take action, good will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling stifled</td>
<td>Skillful assertiveness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>