

That was Zen: This is Tao

Much as your body is built from the foods you eat, your mind is built from the experiences you have. The flow of experience gradually sculpts your brain, thus shaping your mind. Some of the results can be explicitly recalled: *This is what I did last summer; that is how I felt when I was in love.* But most of the shaping of your mind remains forever unconscious. This is called *implicit memory*, and includes your expectations, models of relationships, emotional tendencies, and general outlook. Implicit memory establishes the interior landscape of your mind – what it feels like to be you – based on the slowly accumulating residues of lived experience.

Some of those residues benefit you and others cause harm. It is ultimately a wiser path to create, preserve, and increase beneficial implicit memories and prevent, eliminate, or decrease harmful ones. The problem is that there is a negativity bias of memory and your brain preferentially scans for, registers, stores, recalls, and reacts to unpleasant experiences. It's like being Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones. Consequently, even when positive experiences outnumber negative ones, the pile of negative implicit memories naturally grows faster. Then the background feeling of what it feels like to be you can become undeservedly glum and pessimistic.

Sure, negative experiences have their benefits: loss opens the heart, remorse provides a moral compass, anxiety alerts you to threats, and anger spotlights wrongs that should be righted. But do you really think you're not having enough negative experiences? Emotional pain with no benefit to yourself or others is pointless suffering. And pain today breeds more pain tomorrow, as we reshape circuits of the brain to make future similar episodes more likely.

The remedy is not to suppress negative experiences; when they happen, they happen. Rather, it is to foster positive experiences – and in particular, to take them in so they become a permanent part of you. Here is how to *internalize the positive* in three easy steps:

1. Turn positive facts into positive *experiences*. Good things keep happening all around us, but much of the time we don't notice them; even when we do, we often hardly feel them. Someone is nice to you, you see an admirable quality in yourself, a flower is blooming, you finish a difficult project – and it all just rolls by. Instead, actively look for good news, particularly the little stuff of daily life: the faces of children, the smell of an orange, a memory from a happy vacation, a minor success at work, and so on. It's like pulling weeds, planting flowers. Whatever positive facts you find, bring a mindful awareness to them -- open up to them and let them affect you. It's like sitting down to a banquet; eat, Eat! Eat in the way all Italian mothers intended.

2. Savor the experience. It's delicious! Make it last by staying with it for 5, 10, even 20 seconds; don't let your attention skitter off to something else. 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.

Focus on your emotions and body sensations as these are the essence of implicit memory. Let the experience fill your body and be as intense as possible. If someone is good to you, let the feeling of being cared about bring warmth to your whole heart area.

Attend to the rewarding aspects of the experience – how good it feels to get a big hug from someone you love. Focusing on these rewards increases the dopamine release, which makes it easier to keep giving the experience your attention, and strengthens its neural associations in implicit memory. You're not doing this to cling to the rewards –which would eventually make you suffer – but rather to internalize them so that you carry them inside you without need to reach for them in the outer world.

You can intensify an experience by deliberately enriching it. Calling up feelings of being loved by others stimulates oxytocin – the “bonding hormone” – and thus deepens your sense of connection.

3. Imagine or feel that the experience is entering deeply into your mind and body, like the sun's warmth into a T-shirt, water into a sponge, or a jewel placed in a treasure chest in your heart. Keep relaxing your body and absorbing the emotions, sensations, and thoughts of the experience.

Positive experiences can also be used to soothe, balance, and even replace negative ones. When two things are held in mind at the same time, they start to connect with each other, according to Drs. Hanson and Mendius in *Buddha's Brain: the practical neuroscience of happiness, love and wisdom*. That's one reason why talking about hard things with someone who's supportive can be so healing: painful feelings and memories get infused with the comfort, encouragement, and closeness you experience with the other person.

You can use your mind to change your brain, which builds a stronger mind and life, with the way in which you attend in the moment. For more details on sculpting your brainwaves, in service to the downstream feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in your experience of life, check out our website: www.affectiveneurosciences.com.