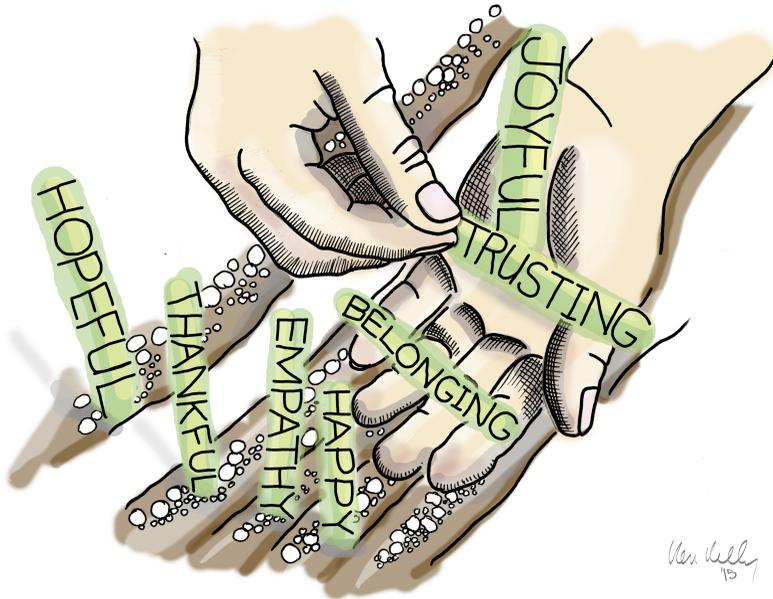


CHAPTER ONE



POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND GRATITUDE

Do we really need to feel good?

Feeling good is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Research clearly shows how often we are stressed and can burn ourselves out unless we proactively cultivate positive emotions.

Do we really need to feel good?

Feeling good can be underestimated as childish or naive, but feeling good is a deciding factor when it comes to our personal happiness and health.

I was brought up not to pay too much attention to my feelings. Life was more about fulfilling daily tasks and 'being good' rather than being happy and fulfilled. Then after a disappointment in a close relationship, someone I trusted asked me 'What do you want?' I suddenly realised that I had never really allowed myself to focus on my personal happiness.

I had supported other people's well-being but had not paid much attention to my personal aspirations and happiness.

Since then I have met numerous people who also find it difficult to allow themselves to pursue happiness for themselves. Pressures to be successful or liked can stop us from paying attention to the feel good factor in our lives.

Barbara Fredrickson² is an American professor who has researched this whole area of positive feelings and emotions. She discovered that positive emotions lead to high energy and

vibrant health. When we feel good we also tend to be more generous and creative. We enjoy every part of our lives – even the challenges. Positive emotions build up our capacity to overcome negative experiences and fight off anxiety and depression.

In Europe and North America depression and anxiety is on the increase, starting at a younger age than ever before (WHO)³. Interviews with young pop stars who have an abundance of fame and money reveal that they often live in a deep state of depression and become chemically dependant on drugs to stimulate the feel good hormones in their bodies. While this works for a while, sooner or later it tears down personal confidence and enjoyment to know that one cannot get through the day without alcohol or drugs.

Life is so much better when we feel good so why don't we just do what it takes to feel good?

Cathal is one of the lucky ones who has survived years of dependency on alcohol and sometimes stronger drugs to deal with his negative feelings. He is thankful that he has found a healthier and more uplifting way of creating positive emotions as he is now a therapist who helps people to relax and enjoy better health. He explains;

I drank to numb the bad feelings but when you drink you numb everything, good and bad. I now realise that my negative feelings and thoughts are memories or a negative interpretation of what happened and not necessarily what other people experienced. I now know I have a choice how I view something and remember it.

Most people that have been on the road I have been on have lost everything. I still have a family, I still have the means of earning a living and I am grateful for that.

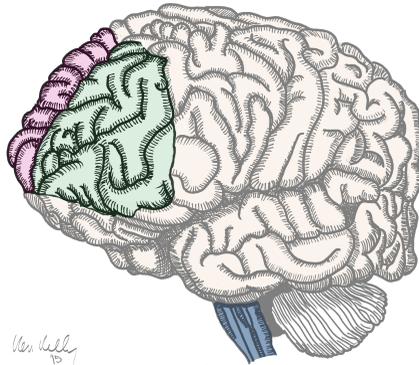
Of course we want to feel good, but sometimes life's chores and wounds seem to prevent us from exploring our potential. We may not realise how much power we have to create a wonderful life for ourselves.

Using our Positive Management Centre

Scientists can now see what physically happens within our brains when we feel good and when we feel bad. Professor Richard Davidson has spent a lifetime investigating exactly what happens in the brain when we experience positive and negative emotions. He discovered a management centre at the very front of our brains called the Prefrontal Cortex. Here he

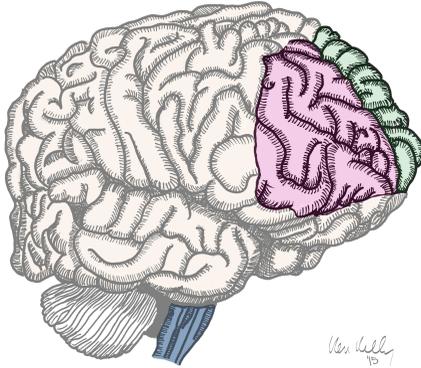
noticed activity in the left or the right area according to whether we feel good or bad and according to whether we focus on positive or negative thoughts.

The amazing discovery is that we can choose which part of our brain to 'feed' and nourish. Whatever type of thoughts we focus on activate either the **Left management centre** (highlighted in green) or the **Right management centre** of the brain (highlighted in red). Why is this important?



Unknown to ourselves we might automatically activate our negativity system. We human beings have a strong survival instinct and the constant stream of negative information from our surroundings activates our negativity bias. We need to counteract this overly activated survival system by deliberately nourishing the positivity home in our brains which will then produce greater well-being.

If we are not careful we keep activating the brain centre that leads to anxiety, worry and depression.

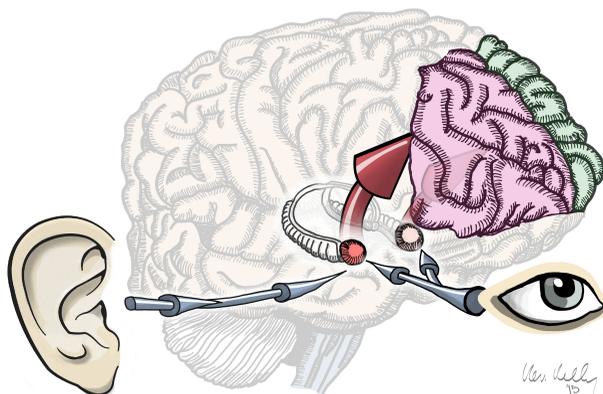


Our right pre-frontal cortex (R-PFC) which is situated on the right at the front of our brains, is the management centre which is activated by negative emotions and negative thoughts (red area).

This part of the brain is especially active when we feel aggressive, depressed or anxious. It is like a negative circuit that produces physical inactivity and isolation. This management centre is superactive in people who feel depressed, as negative thoughts and feelings intermingle and colour life as unsafe and meaningless.

A message is sent to the body that it is not worthwhile making an effort, that one cannot make a difference and that nothing will ever change for the better. Most people experience moments like this but if we are not careful these moments can extend and multiply and before we know it, we are stuck in a negative cycle. The danger is that too much focus is put on the negative part of life and little nourishment is given to the other side, which is linked to positive thoughts and emotions.

Here we see the small primal brain at the top of the spine called the amygdala (red dot) which activates negative brain activity.



We see or hear something and if there is activity already in the R-PFC management centre which expects danger and difficulties, the Amygdala then alerts the body's defence system. Our whole interior gets ready for action.

The mouth gets dry, the heart beats faster, the digestive system is upset and we experience anxiety or restlessness. Our interior organs are now working at their minimal in order to allow the production of adrenaline, the 'fight or flight' response. Adrenaline gives us extra energy to either run away or defend ourselves against whatever it is we feel threatened by; even if it is all imaginary!

Our Minds and Bodies tend to be in over-drive

Our nerve defense system tends to stay activated for much longer than is healthy or necessary.

We may not notice changes in our bodies, all we notice is that we are not feeling great a lot of the time; we are stressed and uncomfortable. These activated stress hormones prevent us from being creative and appreciative of the goodness in our lives.

It has become normal in our society to be bombarded with daily negative news of catastrophies from all over the world; of murders, accidents and deceptions at our own doorsteps. No one seems trustworthy any more, whatever efforts we make seem bound to fail due to all the odds against us; this is a natural conclusion from receiving a stream of ongoing negative news.

Even if we manage to avoid information overload our genetic wiring might also leave us disadvantaged. As a human race we have had to survive physical threats from wild animals, tribal attacks and severe climate changes. We are genetically hard-wired for survival.

On top of that, a great number of people might have had certain traumatic childhood or adolescent experiences. It is as if emotionally we are still back at the time when this bad or very upsetting experience took place, expecting it to possibly happen again.

If we have not had a chance to process negative events in our lives and put them into a helpful perspective, it will darken our present experiences.

Cathal's little boy died only a few days after being born. Cathal did not have the ability to deal with this in a healthy way until later on when he had been treated for his addiction to drink and drugs:

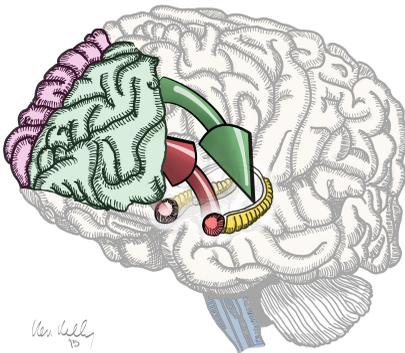
When Neil died my dependency took on a whole new sinister level. I stopped communicating. I felt isolated inside and it was only after having a break-down and going into detox and recovery that I was able to view my life more objectively.

Eventually I realised that my son's short life was a gift, an opportunity to learn. I found that I could actually go back and access hope in the situation and come out with a new perspective.

Now I see all that I have experienced as a means to empathise and be of service. I am able to access deep feelings of empathy with people who have experienced sorrow in their lives.

Positive emotions calm our nervous system and boost our immune system⁴.

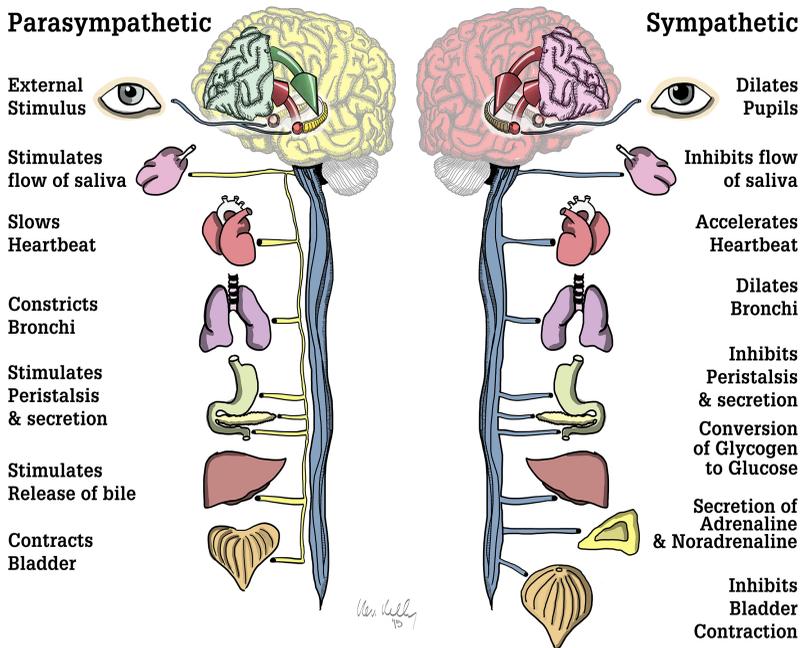
In 1998 a new branch of psychology got funding to investigate what we human beings do when things go right for us, when we feel good, are healthy and feel happy.



What scientists discovered was that when a person is well and happy there is a lot of activity in the front left management centre of the brain, the left pre-frontal cortex (L-PFC), which then slows down the Amygdala distress signals. When this positive activity is strong enough it signals to the Amygdala not to activate the defence system.

When there are activities in this left management centre (green area) the whole body works so much better. The

hippocampus (the yellow area behind the amygdala) builds up long-term good memories which create an environment of relaxation in the brain and helps to activate the Vagus Nerve. The Vagus Nerve runs from the left management centre of the brain down to all the interior organs (left image below).



The Vagus nerve starts vibrating when there is activity in the Left Frontal Cortex. 'Healing' messages are sent to all the organs that everything is well. We relax and feel good. The

inner organs start working at their optimum level.

When our organs function at their optimum our immune system is being strengthened. We feel less pain as our bodies and our brains build up resilience.

The lungs will take in sufficient oxygen and get rid of the carbon dioxide waste, the heart will beat regularly and the digestive system will absorb the nutrition in our food and discard waste⁵. This is called the **para-sympathetic system**; it is activated by

optimistic thoughts and by positive emotions. It is a healing and well-being cycle.

Well-being and Happiness become accessible even if we are stressed.

As we now know the amygdala tends to be stimulated even when there is no danger but the good news is that activity in the L-PFC (the management centre for positive emotions) allows signals to travel freely back and forth to the amygdala (see pages 16 and 17 for visual images). This helps us to assess whether there is an actual danger or not.

Our L-PFC can gauge that everything is okay, when for example the snake we thought we saw in front of us was actually just a little branch. The amygdala is then signalled to stop alerting our defence system. Instead the Vagus Nerve is activated helping us to relax and enjoy our lives. Stress does not built up and we remain healthy and well.

It sounds simple, and it is, as long as we remember to activate our left, rather than right, management system which literally creates our destiny.

Well-being ratio of 4 to 1²

There is one last discovery we need to remember before looking at what we can do to create this super-positive brain activity that will make such a change in our lives.

Research shows that we need a ratio of at least four positive thoughts to one negative thought to operate at our optimum and fully enjoy daily living.

You may have noticed how we tend to focus on the one critical remark in spite of getting ten encouraging remarks. This is our natural survival instinct.

We do not want to get hurt or to look foolish or be rejected by others.

To free ourselves from sensitivity to negative feed-back and information, we have to make a conscious effort to give more attention to the many positive messages that are sent our way. We need at least 4 times more positive than negative information circling around our brains in order to flourish and not fall under the spell of anxiety, worry or anger.

Gratitude multiplies Positive Feelings; it Changes The Brain

Professor Robert Emmons was one of the psychologists who was immediately invited onboard in 1998 when the focus in psychology changed to investigate what brings well-being and happiness. He already had discovered that the ancient qualities of gratitude and appreciation were extremely empowering especially for people who were feeling down or depressed.

It is amazing to realise that gratitude was highly regarded by the Roman author and politician Cicero who lived a century before Christ, as one of the quickest ways to well-being. Emmons⁶ explains gratitude as a realisation that we

have not got to where we are without much help from others. Gratitude is a realisation that we have good experiences. It is an appreciation of life and nature as gifts to be minded.

Gratitude is an intense awareness that good things happen to us, an awareness that we meet good people.

Emmons and his team noticed that people who are grateful tend to be less materialistic, they compare themselves less with others, are less greedy, less angry and more likely to help others. These people cope better with stress and trauma.

Interestingly after the 9/11 twin tower disaster a large number of people used gratitude as a coping mechanism in order to recover from the loss of loved ones⁷.

Survivors of 9/11 were grateful

- to still be alive
- for other loved ones to still be alive
- for the people who had been willing to risk their lives to save others

Gratitude has helped numerous people to recover from depression. It is now used as a prescription by a number of doctors due to its ability to empower people with physical and mental illness and to help them recover more quickly.

Gratitude is so powerful that many psychologists now believe that by the year 2050 it will be quite normal to take regular time out to do mental fitness exercises, such as gratitude writing and gratitude contemplation (see the brain train exercises further on) in order to stay mentally and physically healthy.

Gratitude in Action

Imelda is twenty years old and her mother is a heroin addict. Her father died from cancer and alcoholism. Her grandmother who was her anchor in life developed Alzheimer's Disease and died. Imelda now lives with her other grandmother who tends to be strict and critical but somehow Imelda is a really bubbly and happy person. She uses gratitude to keep herself well;

Often I wake up amazingly bright in the morning but when I go downstairs I would meet this cranky negative granny.

One day I decided to write down all the things I appreciated about her and all that she does for me and I've seen great results from it. Once I started being grateful I saw the little things she was doing for me and I appreciated them more and now we are in a better relationship.

She tends to act like a strict mother so we don't do 'granny' things, I suggested for example that we go for lunch but there was always an argument so I decided to forget about that idea. Then out of the blue she invited me out for lunch. Afterwards she says 'we should do this more often'. I am delighted of course.

What I have realised is that I can't change her, I can only change how I look at her and where I put her in my life. I have decided to be grateful and suddenly she seems to have changed and I love it.

Gratitude stimulates the pleasure hormone dopamine and the mood enhancing hormone serotonin. These hormones also help to regulate sleep and improve our memory. Our brain activity becomes clearer⁸. With persistence a new brain pathway is created which is like a new habit of thinking differently. We are creating an increased awareness that good things happen to us, that we are surrounded by a lot of

goodness and that we can increase good experiences in our lives. When it comes to the brain the principle of 'use it or lose it' very much applies⁴.

Gratitude Apps

There is a number of Gratitude Apps that can be downloaded on a mobile phone or tablet to help us keep up the practise of the following Gratitude Skills.

BRAIN TRAIN

To Be Grateful

Gratitude is not an excuse to ignore daily challenges and negative events but it can give us the strength to cope better. Gratitude can help us to choose our battles, to know where to put our energy. Gratitude works well in harmony with the other well-being skills described in this book, some which help to turn a negative situation into benefit.

Gratitude oils the mechanism of the brain and its positive emotional life.

The following skills can increase your happiness and well-being no bounds, once practised.

1. Recall good events in your life
2. Keep a Gratitude Journal
3. Write a Gratitude Letter
4. Pause for Gratitude Contemplation
5. Say 'Thank You'

1. Recall Good Events in Your Life

In my 6 week course, workshops and well-being getaways I always introduce the gratitude skill early on. Within thirty minutes I am sure to give participants an opportunity to recall something good in their lives. It can be something small or something big, it does not matter. What matters is that a person becomes aware that something good has happened to them recently.

In addition I would ask the participants to think about how they might have contributed to this experience. Sometimes that surprises people, but if for example I dwell on the beautiful sunrise I experienced this morning and how I might have contributed to that I might realise that 'yes' I did go out of my way, I went down by the sea-shore for a little walk rather than stay in bed.

The reflection on what we did to put ourselves in the way of good experiences makes us aware of the power we have to direct ourselves towards many uplifting experiences.

BRAIN TRAIN

The Appreciation formula:

1.

Write down or think about something good that happened to you lately

.....
.....
.....

2.

Write down or think about how you helped to make that happen?

.....
.....
.....

Example:

Something good.. *My brother in Denmark sent me a lovely message on his birthday that he would have loved me*

to be there celebrating with him.

I helped make that happen by: sending him a text congratulating him and telling him how fortunate I feel to have him as my brother.

If one wishes to take this further one might answer the following:

3. Why this event is important to me:

.....
.....
.....

Example:

This is important to me because... I did not see my brother for 16 years as I lived very far away and could not get back home. Still he and his children were the first to collect me at the airport in the middle of a snowstorm the day when I did eventually get to go home. Also, whenever I go home I know he will welcome me and want me to spend time with him and the family.

Sharing the experience

In my workshops I would ask people to share their gratitude reflection with the person next to them. Without fail the atmosphere is suddenly buzzing with chat and laughter.

With a small group I usually invite people to share with the group as this is a very uplifting way of getting to know one another. It also reinforces the idea that good things are happening to all of us - once we open our eyes.

It takes courage to share because we might reveal something personal and meaningful to another but it is as if gratitude is multiplied when everyone shares their story of good fortune. Good things are happening all around even if one or two people choose not to share just then.

In some families at dinner time each person shares the highlight of the day, and sometimes the low point of the day. Sharing the highlights brings everyone closer and more capable of accepting the unavoidable low points of the day. Solutions are more likely to be found in the spirit of optimism.

WWW

In some schools where they are now teaching positive

psychology life-skills, the teacher starts off the day by writing WWW on the blackboard. The pupils are then asked to share 'What Went Well?' either with the class, in groups or with their neighbour.

WWW

What went well since last we met?
.....
.....
.....

This is the story of Stephen, an accomplished musician and his wife Dee:

Dee has a very stressful management job. She would come home and offload all the difficulties she has experienced through the day onto Stephen who would patiently listen but feel incapable of helping.

After taking a class in Gratitude skills Stephen decided to initiate the after-work conversation with Dee by asking her whether something good had happened at work that day. Dee was delighted to report on various events that had gone really well and how she felt she had made a difference. They both felt really uplifted and happy.

Suddenly Dee was able to get a more objective perspective on the difficulties she experienced, which after all were far outweighed by the positive experiences she had.

Three Good Things Once a Week

With adolescents who might be more cautious about sharing out loud, it has been very useful for them instead to write down 'Three good things' that happened to them lately.

It may seem like a drop in the ocean to only write down something good once a week but it is amazing how it starts a whole new thought process making us aware that actually quite a number of good things happen to us.

Three good things that have happened to me lately:

1.....
.....
.....

2.....
.....
.....

3.....
.....
.....
.....

A Gratitude Tree or Box

Some schools have a gratitude tree or a gratitude box in the lobby or in the classroom where one is encouraged to write anonymous little notes about good things that have happened. The principal or teacher might at some point organise an assembly where these notes are read out. This highlights the value of noticing the many good events and people in our lives.

We should not ignore problems or run away from dealing with negative events but even in business it is now recognised that those who focus on what goes well have greater success and find ways to continually reinvent themselves.

In business it is now recognised that those who start a meeting focusing on what went well before looking at problems have a much better chance of finding helpful solutions.

2. Keep A Gratitude Journal

Keeping a regular journal of appreciation for everything that we experience as blessings in our lives is similar to WWW, but broader, as it may include looking deeper into the many ordinary privileges that we experience in our daily living. We might become more aware of

- where our food comes from
- the enjoyment of work
- leisure activities
- family life
- nature
- music etc, etc.

It is very personal how often one wishes to write in the journal of appreciation. A number of people find it more beneficial to write once a week rather than every day, which might make it too much of a chore. To keep up the habit we need to experience the satisfying elements of doing it^{9 & 10}.

Gillian, a care-worker and mother of four, has been struggling to keep herself well and happy for a number of years as she grew up thinking she was never good enough. Gratitude is one of the life-enhancing skills that she uses to create a beautiful life for herself:

When something inside me keeps telling me that I am not good enough I find it helpful to use the affirmation: 'I focus on my many blessings'.

I would write down my feelings first thing in the morning, then make a gratitude list and a list of what I want to attract over the day. This helps me to ease into the day on a positive note.

Advanced Journaling

Gratitude for things that go against us is an advanced well-being skill that can help us to accept adversity and make the best of it.

In Sport

Carl Lewis the multiple Olympic Gold medal winner used gratitude journaling as part of his daily exercise routine to turn his frustration with his competitors into gratitude for them.

Lewis chose to be grateful for the opponents who continually challenged him to do so much better as an athlete because they were so brilliant. He was forced to perform even better.

3. Write A Gratitude Letter¹¹

One of the most successful gratitude practices that Positive Psychology has found conducive to a considerable increase in happiness and well-being is writing a gratitude letter to a person who has made a hugely positive impact on one's life.

Imelda found great benefit from writing such a letter:

At one point I wrote a gratitude letter to my nanny and my dad who have both passed away. It was all about what I missed about them. I got so emotional, it wasn't sad emotions, it was all the good memories that I had, and I wished I had thought of writing this before. I started bawling because I remembered my dad's bad jokes, my nanny's ice-cold hands and her minding me and I am so glad to have these memories.

Writing a gratitude letter to someone who has been good to us or who has inspired us gives us an opportunity to focus intensely on how someone else went out of their way to support us at a particular time in our lives.

Reading this letter out or handing it to the other person can have additional benefits as we are giving someone an insight

into a goodness that we have received from them which has made a lasting impression.

In Schools

In some schools children or young people are asked to write a gratitude letter to their parents and give it to them. Also, the parents are asked to write a letter to their child/teenager telling them what they appreciate about them.

In the classroom pupils can also be asked to write a gratitude letter to someone who they do not necessarily get to meet but who has inspired them in some way or another. It can be to Nelson Mandela, a grandfather who has died or even a dog who has been a faithful friend.

4. Pause for Gratitude

Contemplation¹²

Gratitude contemplation means to write down or think about something or somebody one is grateful for and then, to simply sit and hold on to that memory and feeling for a while. It is sometimes called Savouring or Mindfulness. Holding a feeling of gratitude for a while is a simple way to increase positive emotions.

By holding on to a positive memory for 30 seconds we allow it to establish itself as a long-term memory in the hippocampus which is our memory store.

When we repeatedly dwell on good experiences, little by little we build up a nice store of positive experiences which we then can draw on when we experience problems and meet adversities. This enables us to access an optimistic outlook which might otherwise escape us when we are overcome by

adverse circumstances.

BRAIN TRAIN

Gratitude contemplation :

1. Simply be still while noticing your own breathing for 30 seconds allowing yourself to APPRECIATE BEING ALIVE. Do this a few times over the day.

or

2. Allow yourself to focus on some good event or something you like in your environment and simply, **Sit with that experience for 30 seconds.**

Pausing several times a day whilst focusing on a good event is extremely conducive to creating many new positive pathways in the brain. **This deliberately chosen gratitude pause increases serotonin and dopamine activities which activate our immune system.**

We can experience a wonderful mood lift and build up stamina to deal with life's challenges in the most beneficial manner.

5. Say 'Thank You'

The neuroscientist Richard Davidson recommends to simply looking someone in the eye and say thank you as a way of creating positive emotional brain activity. This connects us to other people in an uplifting and bonding manner. It signals to the brain and immune system that all is well and that the world is a good place.

His research shows that when a person is being thanked they automatically feel like passing on that sentiment to others around them. It is like a chain reaction of positive emotions. It is simple and it works.

BRAIN TRAIN

Saying 'Thank You':

Look out for opportunities to thank people. Look the person in the eye and if appropriate shake their hand or hug them and say 'thank you' for something you appreciate.

The Gratitude Dance

For fun Matt decided to do a crazy little Gratitude Dance in a public place and asked his girl-friend to film it. They uploading it on You Tube and got a lot of hits.

Then somebody funded them to travel to as many countries as possible to perform and film this short, crazy little dance. In this You Tube clip you can see how people joined him in the Gratitude Dance wherever he went.



Gratitude Dance

Treat Yourself to a Gratitude Dance

First thing in the morning, in private if you like, do a little gratitude dance. You might be surprised at how powerful this is.

When I was growing up I loved it when I was alone in the house. I put on music in the sittingroom and danced around. I still enjoy it – when I remember to do it.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION & CHAPTER 1: POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND GRATITUDE

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