

How to Change Your Brain to Change Your Mind

© Beate Trück

I met Rick Hanson in Freiburg in Germany during a 3-day intensive seminar on positive neuroplasticity, organised by Arbor Seminars. The seminar was dealing with ways how you can influence your brain so that you feel happier and can respond to stressful moments from a calmer and more positive perspective.

Rick, what exactly do you mean by “positive neuroplasticity”, and how is it relevant for improving our happiness?

Positive neuroplasticity is about how we can turn positive experiences into long-lasting changes in neural structure and function that can help us to become happier and more resilient. I call this “turning beneficial states into beneficial traits”. The idea is that we need



to learn how to take in the good things in our life so that they become inner strengths. If we have or even create more positive experiences in our life this will give us beneficial states which we can deliberately internalize through the practices I teach to become mental resources which we can draw upon when things get stressful or difficult. Research has shown that our brain has a bias towards more negative thinking. We therefore need to learn to recognize the good things in our life and in particular, make sure we feel them in the body and savor them to increase their encoding in the brain. I strongly believe in the fact that if we are more happy we will become more good and ultimately can contribute to the happiness of the ones around us.

What aspects of your training are relevant for dealing more efficiently with stress?

The natural state of any mammal in this world, including humans, is what I call the “Responsive mode” – or informally, the Green Zone. This is the sustainable equilibrium condition in which bodily resources are conserved, the body repairs and restores itself, and in the mind there is a general sense of peace, contentment, and love (or the lower animal equivalent). In the Responsive state, our three basic needs of safety, satisfaction and connectedness are mainly met and there is minimal craving (broadly defined). But if we experience that one or more of these three needs is not being met, the brain’s Reactive mode is activated: the “flight, flight, freeze reaction” – what could be called the Red Zone. If we have repeatedly internalized psychological resources – inner strengths – on which we can draw, then we can respond to challenges from the “green zone”, and thus reduce the risk of becoming exhausted and burned out. The more positive experiences we internalize as psychological resources, the more we can remain in the responsive mode and be resilient in stressful phases of our life.

Do you think that becoming more mindful can make people happier?

For me, mindfulness means cultivating present-moment awareness. If we cultivate mindfulness skills, we can see things from a broader perspective and disengage from our mental yammering. Broadly speaking, we need to be able to both be with the mind and work with it – and mindfulness helps us do both. I like to compare the mind with a garden: we need to be with what is (look at it), but also reduce the negative (pull out the weeds) and increase the positive (plant new flowers). Or, in a simple format: “let be, let go, let in”. Being



with the mind is a fundamental, beautiful practice, but it is not enough; we also need to engage wise effort with a warm heart – and mindfulness should be present whether we are being with the mind or working with it. To put this a little differently, I think that skillful psychological and spiritual practice is like a stool with three legs – mindfulness, kindness, and cultivation (*sati*, *metta*, and *bhavana* in Pali, the language of early Buddhism) – and if one leg is missing, the stool falls over. These three legs of the stool are a wonderful basis for a happy life.

What do you think is needed for mindfulness to become a skill that people can draw upon?

There are many deeply wise and effective trainings in mindfulness these days, such as MBSR and related programs. As with any mental skill, any psychological resource, the deliberate internalization of the *factors* of mindfulness (e.g., control of attention, clear intention, self-acceptance, distress tolerance) as well as the *experience* of mindfulness can strengthen the neural substrates of mindfulness and thus mindfulness itself.

I think any kind of training, including in mindfulness,

will have greater results if three things occur: a brief explanation of how to turn beneficial states into beneficial traits, informal moments in which a deeper registration of experiences is encouraged, and suggestions that people use practices of internalization between training sessions in order to increase the benefits of the training.



How do you see the current evolution of mindfulness into a more mainstream activity?

If there were a Nobel Prize in clinical psychology, I believe that one of its recipients should be Jon Kabat-Zinn. Mindfulness training can transform people's life. It is important in our stressful society where multitasking and partial attention has become normality, to learn to cultivate present moment awareness, focus and calm. Of course, mindfulness – sustained present moment awareness – is not itself moral virtue, kindness toward others and oneself, wise intention, grit and determination, generosity, or numerous other important psychological resources and characteristics. Mindfulness alone is not enough: we also need to grow other flowers in the garden of the mind.

• • • • •



Beate Trück is a certified mindfulness trainer and co-founder of the Brussels Mindfulness Institute. The Institute gives trainings to international organisations (European Institutions, companies), schools, and individuals, and works to contribute to better mental health and wellbeing as well as to better personal, political, and economic decision-making.

Beate worked in European settings for over 15 years as CEO of various organizations. For the past several years, she has focused on teaching mindfulness to people in the European Commission and European

Parliament. Her approach is based on Mark William's book *Finding Peace in a Frantic World* and inspired by his work with the British Parliament. This mindfulness program has been delivered to more than 120 Members of the British Parliament and led to a report with recommendations on how to make the UK a more mindful nation. The Brussels Mindfulness Institute is advised by Mark Williams and his colleagues regarding the introduction of mindfulness to European institutions, seeking a similar impact in Europe.

For more information, please go to www.brusselsmindfulness.be.