You Have Power Over Your Happy Brain Chemicals

Action Guide

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1. Your Power to Re-wire Your Happy Chemicals

a. Why don't our happy chemicals flow all the time?

Our happy chemicals evolved to promote survival, not to flow all the time for no reason. They 're designed to motivate you with a good feeling when you see a way to meet a survival need. Each happy chemical has a distinct good feeling which rewards you for meeting a distinct survival need.

b. So why do people do things that are not good for survival sometimes?

Your brain defines survival in a quirky way: it cares about the survival of your genes, and it relies on neural pathways built in youth. You are not consciously trying to spread your genes, but natural selection built a brain that rewards you with a good feeling when you do things that could help the survival of your genes. You are not consciously relying on old neural pathways, but they channel the electricity in your brain so effortlessly that we tend to go there. But your old neural pathways can be a poor guide to new realities, which is why we can end up with behaviors that are hard to make sense of in our natural quest for happy chemicals.

c. How can you wire yourself to feel good when you do things that are good for you?

You can build a new neural pathway by repeating a new choice every day for 45 days without fail. At first the new choice may feel wrong because the effortless flow of electricity into old pathways feels right. But if you keep repeating your new behavior or thought pattern, a new pathway will strengthen and your electricity will flow. Old pathways feel good because they got paved by happy chemicals in your past. Anything that turned on a happy chemical in your youth connected all the neurons active at that moment. In the future, anything similar to that moment sends electricity down a highway to your happy chemicals and you expect to feel good. This is why you expect to feel bad when you leave those old roads. You may feel unsafe because the old roads felt safe. A new road can feel safe too, but first you have to do the work of building that road.

My Action Plan

1. I will discover three old roads in my brain by observing my expectations about what will feel good and connecting those expectations to my past experience.

2. I will make peace with my inner mammal by recognizing the survival motives behind my old impulses (including the survival of my genes and a dependent child's perception of survival).

3. I will imagine three new ways that I would like to feel good that are also good for me.

2. Dopamine, Serotonin, Oxytocin, Endorphin

a. What is the good feeling of dopamine and what turns it on?

Dopamine is the excitement of approaching a reward. When you see yourself a step closer to something you expect to meet a need (a physical need, a social need, or the need to avoid harm), your dopamine turns on. Then it turns off and you have to do more to get more. Neurons connect when dopamine flows, which wires you expect more of the good feeling in similar ways. Dopamine is not meant to flow for no reason; it only responds to *new* ways to meet a need.

b. What is the good feeling of oxytocin and what turns it on?

Oxytocin is the nice safe feeling of trust. It is turned on by the expectation of social support, by touch in the context of past trust, and by childbirth. The oxytocin surges of your past built neural pathways that tell you where to expect more of the good feeling today. Oxytocin is not meant to flow for no reason; our brain is designed to make careful decisions about when to trust.

c. What is the good feeling of serotonin and what turns it on?

Serotonin is the calm feeling of social importance. It is turned on by seeing yourself in a position of strength in comparison to others. The mammal brain constantly compares itself to others and reacts with a good or bad feeling because this promotes survival in the state of nature. The urge for social importance is easy to see in others though we often hate to see it in ourselves. You may think it is wrong to feel important, and hate others when they seek it. You can end up hating a lot of people and depriving yourself of serotonin. You are better off finding healthy ways to satisfy this natural mammalian impulse. Each serotonin surge of your past connected neurons that tell you where to expect more of it today. Of course these old expectations are not always right.

d. What is the good feeling of endorphin and what turns it on?

Endorphin is a euphoria that masks physical pain. Pain is important information, so endorphin is only meant for brief emergency spurts. Fortunately, movement and a belly laugh stimulate a little.

My Action Plan

1. I will look for each of these good feelings in myself and others to understand their motivating power.

2. I will learn about my own happy chemicals circuits by stopping for one minute three times a day to discover my expectations about stimulating each happy chemicals in that moment.

3. I will imagine possible new way to stimulate each happy chemical, and consider the long-term consequences of each possibility.

3. Cortisol: Your Emergency Broadcast System

a. Why does cortisol make you feel threatened when you're actually safe?

Cortisol is the body's pain signal. It's designed to get your attention with an urgent bad feeling so you do what it takes to make it stop. Neurons connect when cortisol flows, which wires you to anticipate pain in similar future circumstances. That is your brain's way of alerting you in time to prevent harm. Disappointment triggers cortisol to alert you to the harm of wasting effort. Cortisol tells your brain to scan for information about a potential threat in order to relieve it. More evidence leads to more cortisol, so you can end up in a bad loop. The human cortex evolved the ability to anticipate the future, including the inevitability of its own demise. Thus, as soon as we skillfully relieve a potential threat, we starts searching for the next potential threat.

b. Why does the mammal brain confuse physical pain and social pain?

Social pain triggers cortisol because it leads to physical pain in the state of nature. Social isolation can mean instant death in the jaws of a predator, and social weakness can mean a loss of food or mating opportunity. This is why relatively small social disappointments can trigger big threatened feelings. Pain pathways are surprisingly durable because they're meant to protect you from having to touch fire more than once. The social pain of your past built strong pathways that speed electricity to your threat chemicals without your verbal brain knowing why.

c. How can you reduce your cortisol?

Learn to notice that cortisol alarm and respond with these steps:

- find a distraction to give your body time to eliminate it before scanning for evidence of threat
- then look for what triggered it and take action as needed for your inner mammal to feel safe
- if an old threat pathway is triggering it, build an alternative pathway, as per the next episodes.

My Action Plan

1. I will closely observe my cortisol spurts so I can learn to distinguish minor disappointments from real survival threats.

2. I will notice my automatic search for threat signals so I can find alternative evidence instead of triggering more cortisol.

3. I will imagine new ways to respond when my cortisol alarm is triggered, and new ways to respond before it is triggered.

4. How You Build Pathways In Your Brain

a. Why do old impulses turn on so easily without conscious intent?

Your brain is always receiving patterns of electricity from your senses as they take in the world. That electricity flows effortlessly into channels where it flowed before. You can divert electricity into a new path, but it takes a big investment of energy to activate neurons that are not already connected. That leaves you with less energy for other things, which is why we're tempted to go with the flow. Old pathways give you the safe feeling that you can navigate the world around you because you built them from your actual rewards and pain. Leaving those old paths can feel like you're losing rewards and risking pain, even though you consciously think the opposite.

b. Why is it hard to turn on new feelings and behaviors?

It's hard for electricity to flow down an undeveloped neural pathway. If an electrical impulse is not strong enough to jump across the gap or synapse that separates each neuron, the message just fizzles out. Synapses are easier to cross when they were crossed before, especially if crossed while a happy or unhappy chemical was flowing. Electricity also gets a big boost in neurons coated with myelin, which happens to neurons activated repeatedly before age eight and during puberty. After puberty, myelin plummets and you lose your ability to build new superhighways in your brain. You can still built new synapses, and you can learn to feel comfortable on the back roads of your brain instead of sticking to the myelinated highways.

It's hard to accept the fact that our happy chemicals can't surge all the time. Dopamine only spurts when you approach a new reward. Oxytocin only spurts when you enjoy safety in numbers. Serotonin only spurts when you assert your social importance. You will not have peace if you rush to trigger more of these chemicals as soon as a spurt is over. You'll have more peace in the long run if you get comfortable with the neutral feeling between these spurts.

c. What does it take to build a new pathway in your brain?

It takes a big investment of energy to slash a new trail in your jungle of neurons. And all that hard work is easily lost because a new trail quickly grows over and disappears. But if you slash the same trail every day for 45 days, a path gets established. It's not a superhighway, but it's big enough for your electricity flow comfortably. To accomplish this trail blazing, you need to make your energy available for 45 days instead of spending it elsewhere.

Each of us is born with billions of neurons but very few connections between them. You have been building neural pathways from your moment of birth without noticing it. But the pathways that build effortlessly are the ones that tell you that fire is hot and sugar is sweet. And they're the ones built from the random chance of your early repeated experience. Those pathways are never enough to navigate the complexity of adult life. That's why it's so valuable to know how to design and build new pathways consciously. Which new paths you choose depends on your unique

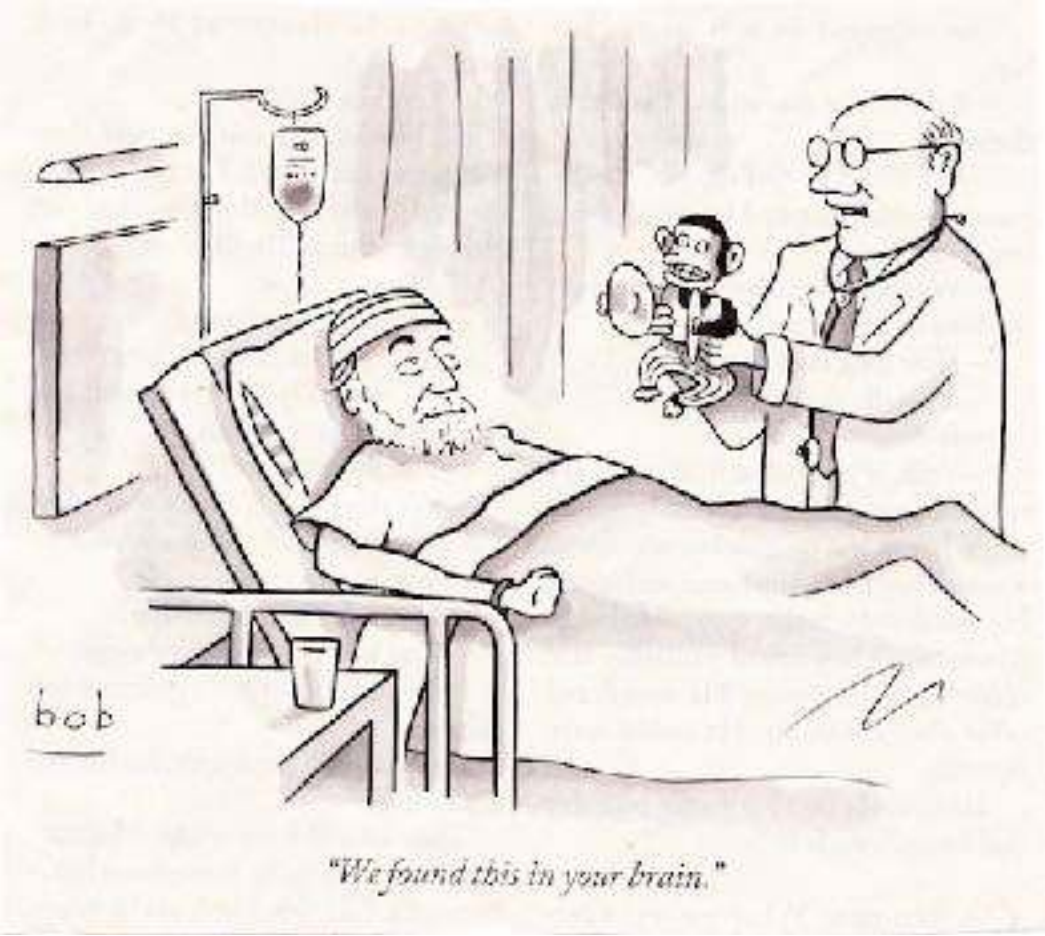
individual experience, since it's always easier to build on the foundations you have. By carefully observing others and yourself, you can design new thought and behavior patterns that feel good when you do things that are good for you.

My Action Plan

1. I will recognize when I am letting my electricity flow into old superhighways. To do that I will observe my frequently repeated thought and behavior patterns, and notice their resemblance to the frequently repeated patterns of my youth.

2. I will learn to recognize my dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin highways by observing my expectations about rewards, respect, and trust.

3. I will develop the skill of building a new neural pathway. I will start with something small, like putting my toothbrush in a new place, just to discover my power to change the initial uncomfortable feeling to a natural flow that I don't even notice. Then I will move on to bigger projects.



5. A Re-wiring Success Story

a. What is a comfort habit?

Anything that changes a bad feeling to a good feeling is a comfort habit. Any time you relieve a bad feeling, your mammal brain thinks you have escaped a threat and saved your life. This is urgent survival information, so a big neural pathway gets built. That makes it easy to return to the thought or behavior pattern the next time you feel bad. You may not even realize you were feeling bad because your electricity flows so quickly into that comfort habit. This is why we can find ourselves repeating thoughts and behaviors that don't serve us despite our best intentions.

b. How can a person build a new comfort habit?

Choose a new behavior or thought pattern to substitute for an old one, and repeat. You could choose a healthy habit, like snacking on vegetables, developing a talent, or focusing on what you have instead of what you lack. But you could also experiment with a neutral habit, like walking backwards for one minute, reading a non-violent novel standing up for five minutes, or stretching while watching ten minutes of a foreign language video. Just find an alternative place to direct your energy, and repeat, so the path flows more easily in a bad moment.

- Don't expect an ecstatic feeling or even an immediate good feeling. Focus on other rewards: enjoying relief from the consequences of your old habit; anticipating the long-term gains from your new habit; and relishing your power over your brain.
- Choose your new habit carefully. The more happy chemicals it triggers in the short run, the more consequences it will have in the long run. You can weigh the trade-offs and find creative ways to feel good in the short run without harming yourself in the long run.
- Open your mind to new ways to wire in a good feeling. You could save your dessert until just after you have acted on your new habit. You can reward yourself with a few minutes of an activity you love whenever you engage in your new habit. You could focus on the feeling of strength a new habit will bring instead of the feeling of weakness you have when you miss the old habit.

c. How can someone expand their power to choose the new habit?

- Learn to recognize the precise moment when you have an urge for comfort so you have time to make a new choice. You can build your awareness of that moment by adding an awkward gesture to your old habit. The awkward gesture is easy to learn if you attach it to the old habit. Then you are wired to notice the moment when you are seeking comfort, so you can activate that new choice.
- It takes a lot of energy to make a new choice, so make that energy available instead of spending it elsewhere. New pathways are easier to activate when you have more energy.
- Happy chemicals help, so find healthy new ways to stimulate them. (Suggestions in the following episode.)

My Action Plan

1. I will attach an awkward gesture to my old comfort habit so I can recognize the moment when I need to activate my new habit.

2. I will accept the uncomfortable feeling of relying on a fragile new circuit so the new path has a chance to build big enough to compete with the old one.

3. I will find the new habit that works for my brain, though it may take some experimenting and some independence.

"And then it hit me: I'm salivating over a goddam bell."

6. Choose Your Re-wiring Project

a. How can a person trigger dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin and endorphin in new ways?

You can stimulate your dopamine by taking small steps toward a goal. You can stimulate your oxytocin by trusting in small steps. You can stimulate your serotonin by focusing on the social power you have instead of the social power you lack. You can stimulate your endorphin with belly laughs, stretching, and frequent movement breaks. Small steps build a path that trains you to expect a good feeling, which is a nice alternative to expecting a bad feeling. Of course each spurt is soon metabolized and you have to do more to get more. And your brain easily habituates to what you have and saves its happy chemicals for new ways to meet needs. So it is not realistic to expect happy surges all the time. You can learn to feel safe in the neutral zone between the surges instead of trying to stimulate them in ways that can hurt you in the long run.

b. What steps are needed to wire in a new happy habit?

1. Choose a new behavior or thought pattern that won't hurt you in the long run and is as pleasant as possible in the short run.
2. Attach an awkward gesture to your old habit to build your power over the moment of choice.
3. Avoid other drains on your energy so you have it available for the challenge of activating a new pathway.

c. Why would a new habit feel good in 45 days if it doesn't feel good now?

Going against the flow feels strange, so the new path must grow big enough to flow before it feels good. Of course we're not consciously aware of our electricity, but when you leave your old pathways, you are leaving your lifetime of knowledge about rewards and pain. It feels like you have no protection from harm, and you'll never get a reward again. You can learn to master this feeling. Even something as simple as putting your shoes in a new place can help you start training your brain to feel comfortable when you leave old roads to build new ones.

My Action Plan

1. I will think of 3 ways to stimulate each happy chemical that are actually doable in my present life.

2. I will choose to one small new happy habit to repeat for 45 days in a row without fail, and commit to making my energy available.

3. I will start building another new happy habit on Day 46.

7. Self-Soothing: The Most Essential Happy Habit

a. What is self-soothing?

Self- soothing is the natural act of meeting a need, whether a physical need or a social need. Our brain is designed to focus on unmet needs and relief of threat because that promotes survival. As soon as your physical needs are met, social needs seem more important. But your mammalian need for safety in numbers and for social importance are hard to make sense of. This is why we easily fall back on neural pathways built by past satisfaction of these needs. Anything that relieved a threatened feeling and met a social need in your past built a big pathway in your brain. Now just thinking about that behavior or thought pattern triggers the expectation of reward, even if you don't consciously think that.

b. Why do self-soothing strategies lose their power over time?

Our brain doesn't waste happy chemicals on needs that have already been met. Water only makes you happy when you're thirsty. The availability of running water doesn't make you happy, though it would have made your ancestors very happy. Our brain is designed to habituate to old rewards, and save the happy chemicals for "new and improved." Frustration can result unless you understand how your brain works. Then you know that you need a wide range of self-soothing skills so you don't pursue your favorite self-soother to the point of self-harm when it disappoints.

c. How can we build a new self-soothing skill?

Choose your new self-soothing skill carefully and repeat it for 45 days, and you will wire your brain to expect relief. There are no easy choices because everything that feels good has consequences. Good feelings exist because their consequences promote survival in the state of nature. You may not want those consequences today, so you have to be strategic with your self-soothing choices. The better you understand the ups and downs of the mammal brain, the better you can build self-soothing tools that help you feel better in the moment while also serving your long-run well-being.

My Action Plan

1. I will carefully observe my self-soothing strategies so I know when I turn them on, what their consequences are, and what needs I am trying to meet.

2. I will write a list of possible new ways to meet unmet needs.

3. I will build one new self-soothing skill in the next 6 months.

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