

Taking in the Good

Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing joy every day. (Henri Nouwen)

Do you know that your brain is biased toward focussing on negative rather than positive life events? I suppose it may be a good thing that our brains are biologically designed to focus more on potential dangers than pleasures because it has ensured the long-term survival of the human species. But it is also a pretty frustrating fact of life. The fact that our brains have a built-in negativity bias is one key reason why we all find life on earth so stressful. It also means that we naturally tend to remember pain more than pleasure. Moreover, we all tend to worry a lot about future dangers rather than simply opening ourselves up to enjoy the present moment.

The positive news that I really want to share with you this month is that we do not have to retreat to a cave on a remote mountain for years on end in order to tilt our brain towards noticing, and then enjoying, all the good things in life. All we have to do is spend just a little time every day pausing and deliberately 'taking in the good'.

This phrase is taken from the wonderful work of Rick Hanson – a leading light in the modern mindfulness movement – who has explored this whole topic of the human brain's negativity bias in some depth. (If you would like to learn more about this life-enhancing practice from its creator, look up Rick Hanson *Taking in the Good* on You Tube).

In support of his claim that our brains are like Velcro for negative events and Teflon for positive events, Rick Hanson cites a research study that found that in any relationship, it takes 5 good interactions to make up for a single bad interaction. (No wonder so many married couples end up getting divorced!)

Every day, you probably experience a whole load of at least mildly pleasurable moments. However, because your untrained brain is biologically designed to focus more on any threatening events that may occur – however minor – you may well get to the end of the day feeling quite down or frazzled.

Let me give you a trivial example of this negativity bias that happened to me this very day. This morning, I went online to do my usual daily Zoom mindfulness meditation led by wonderful tutors from the Mindfulness Association UK. The tutor was saying 'Good Morning' to everyone so I turned off my mute button to say 'Good Morning' in return. Then, I forgot to turn my mute button on again, and when the tutor began to introduce the meditation, I must have made a noise, because one participant put in the chat box 'Jan will you please mute Peggy'.

For some reason, I felt embarrassed about this and could not let that embarrassment go. Throughout the 20 minute meditation – which ironically was all about focussing on joyful moments - I could feel irritation arising toward the participant who had sent that message publicly rather than privately. It was all so trivial, and hardly any kind of threat to my survival. But my brain certainly stuck to this little negative incident like Velcro!

The good thing about all of this is that we no longer have to accept our brain's biologically based negativity bias. We now have all the tools we need to tilt our brain toward taking in more of the good. Modern science tells us that we can definitely re-wire our brains like this, if we simply make a little persistent effort to do so.

Fortunately, Rick Hanson has not only brilliantly explained why we tend to ruminate about any negative events in our lives – past, present or possible future – he has also given us some simple steps we can take to counterbalance this negativity bias.

First, it is a good idea to wake up every morning and before doing anything else, to briefly set out intention to 'take in the good.' We then make sure that we pause at least six times during our day to absorb something pleasurable that is occurring at that moment. This could be as simple as sipping a warming cup of tea or coffee on a cold winter's morning or seeing a bird through the window soaring up into the sky.

Once you notice something pleasurable, or even joyful, in your immediate world, you then simply take a few deep, slow breaths as you deliberately bring that feeling of pleasure, joy or contentment into your whole being. You might think of this process as the feeling of warm honey or nectar slipping slowly down your throat. If you are a visual

person, you might visualise your joy as a beautiful coloured light illuminating every cell in your body.

Maybe as you 'take in the good' you would prefer to say a few words to yourself about your pleasurable experience, such as, 'Wow this coffee tastes so good this morning!!' However you do it, just find a way that best suits you to absorb the joy of the moment deeply into your whole being. In this way, both your brain and body will get used to tilting toward the positive in life.

I have been practising this recently, and although it is too soon to say that it has changed my whole long-term outlook on life, I am definitely beginning to attune myself more to the beauty of life moment to moment. For example, I am seeing far more beautiful birds and trees all around me in South Manchester – or maybe I am simply pausing a little longer to allow that moment of seeing something beautiful or uplifting to really sink into my consciousness.

The thing I love most about this 'taking in the good' practice is that it is not something that I have to make much of an effort to do. I can so easily incorporate six brief pauses into my daily life, and because each one is a joy, my motivation to keep going with this practice is pretty strong. Even if you are far busier than me this month, I am certain that you too can easily find the time to take 6 brief pauses in your 14 hour day to absorb something good or joyful.

February may not be nature's most beautiful time of year, but once you get your eye in, I am sure that you will spot so much natural beauty this month. However, if the weather gets really bad, you can always focus on taking in the joy of sitting in your warm home listening to some uplifting music or even the joy of popping a chocolate into your mouth and letting it slowly melt on your tongue.

In this particular mindfulness practice, there is really no need to worry about whether a pleasure you pause to take in is 'healthy' or not. As long as it is legal – go for it!!

The other evening for example, I made two Gaelic coffees and Gloria and I both luxuriated in tasting and feeling that delicious combination of coffee, sugar, whisky and double cream. As I was buying more whisky

today, I mentioned this to the checkout lady, and she suggested making the same coffees but with Tia Maria. So now I have a totally new pleasure to look forward to and a new way to 'take in the good.' Thank You universe!

As I look forward to enjoying many small pleasures this month and maybe some truly miraculous moments of deep joy, I sincerely wish that you too will enjoy a wonderful February during which you take in more and more of the good. Simply by doing this, you will definitely be helping to counterbalance all the negativity around you. You will be playing your unique and valuable part in uplifting our human spirit during an undoubtedly challenging and scary time in all our lives.

Peggy Foster
February 2021