

## **DEALING WITH HOLIDAY STRESS:**

### **Practical ways to increase happiness**

Sara Milnes, Sunday November 29, 2015

Well, here it is, the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Some of us had a fabulous time with family and friends, and we're really grateful for it. Some of us.

But if we're like most families, there's frequently something a little stressful about the holidays. Besides all the prep, maybe there's an adult child who can't find her way, or a relative with a substance abuse problem. Maybe it's Uncle Joe, who holds forth with a political view that sets our teeth on edge. Maybe there's a serious illness or emotional rift. Or maybe everything went fine, but compared to our expectations, it fell flat.

And of course, there's another month of holidays to go.

Any of these difficulties may be sufficient to cause us to feel a bit down. But if we look around, we see others who also have difficulties—maybe more serious than ours—and some of them don't seem to let it get to them. What is it about them that keeps them buoyed up in the face of adversity? And more important, what can we do to stay positive—stay happy—in the face of stress?

Let's spend a minute exploring what modern day neurology tells us about how we respond to stress, and what ancient Buddhist practice and modern positive psychology tell us about improving our response to stress, and thereby increasing our happiness.

First of all, it's important to realize that there's a negativity bias built into our brains. As the brain evolved, it was critically important to pay attention to and learn from negative experiences, so we could survive them. If we don't respond quickly to the tiger, he'll eat us, and we won't pass on our genes.

So specialized circuits developed in the brain to immediately register negative experiences in the emotional memory. Negative experiences are registered faster than positive ones, which may not register at all in long term memory. We remember the negative, and tend not to remember the positive.

This negativity bias results in a growing sensitivity to stress—we're on the lookout for the negative—and a tendency towards pessimism, regret and resentment. For example, since the negativity bias is so strong, studies have shown that it generally takes five good interactions in a relationship to make up for one bad one.

Positive experiences, unless very novel or intense, follow standard memory formation, which require us to hold the experience in awareness for many seconds before it transfers from short-term memory to long term memory, and we can remember and recall it. As a result, many positive experiences don't stick in the brain, while negative ones do. And because there's a strong emotional charge to negative emotions, they tend to resurface. Each time we remember them, they become stronger—neurons that fire together wire together.

Dr. Rick Hanson, a neuro-psychologist and Buddhist practitioner, calls the brain tendency to capture negativity the Velcro brain, and the brain tendency that often lets positive experience flow through the brain like water through a sieve the Teflon brain.

But what about the people who seem to survive a great deal of adversity with resilience and good will?

Psychologist Martin Seligman says in his book *Authentic Happiness* that a composite of research on happiness breaks the requirements down into a simplified formula of sorts: The level of enduring Happiness = Set Range + Circumstances + Voluntary Control. Let's look at each one.

Set Range is like your happiness "thermostat", whether you're a "glass half full" or a "glass half empty" person. It has a genetic component, and is likely to be similar to your parents or relatives. At one end of the spectrum is the person who can find a lead-lined cloud in every sunny sky, a "yes, but" to even the most benign circumstance. At the other end is a friend of mine, who after a 19 hour plane trip with the worst headache imaginable, ended up in a hospital at the other end with a life-threatening brain hemorrhage. Her response was enormous gratitude for ending up in one of the best hospitals for treating this, for the kindness and friendliness of the people who cared for her and that she met, strangers to her. But they weren't strangers for long, because she formed friendships. Her attitude was so positive they wrote her up in the newspaper. We can't really affect our basic set range, but we can be happier than our usual set range, through our voluntary efforts.

The second component of enduring happiness is the situation we find ourselves in—our circumstances. These are things like health, wealth, education, social ties and religion. Living in a wealthy democracy, being married, having a rich social network, being religious, and having fewer negative events in your life correlate with (but do not necessarily cause) increased happiness. But surprisingly, making more money (after you reach a level where you can afford basic needs), being healthier or more educated, or living in a more pleasant place don't increase happiness. And besides, most of these circumstances are difficult or inconvenient to change.

And that brings us to the crux of the matter, the happiness factor that we can do something about—our voluntary control. We can change the way we look at events in our life—in the present, and even the way we look at the past and towards the future.

Sounds like a big order, doesn't it? But it's surprisingly simple. Let's start with the present, and a practice Dr. Seligman and others call "recasting."

A recent example from my life: I am number 5 in the grocery line, staring at the sign that says "we value your time and will call another checker when there are 3 people in line." No one is calling another checker. I start ruminating about how they certainly don't mean what they say, I wonder with annoyance why the person in front has waited to the end of the transaction to rummage through her purse for the last penny. I start staring at the trashy magazines at the checkstand, wondering how people can believe this stuff, but looking anyway. My whole mind has become negative as I wait.

But I could have chosen to look at it in a different way. I could have chosen to actually acknowledge the relief I felt for a quiet moment where I could stand and

breathe and do nothing, feel gratitude that I really didn't have to be anywhere else, compassion for the older person who isn't as speedy as I am, appreciation for the checkers who are trying to get everyone through as best they can, while still being pleasant.

In order to change my perception, I have to pay enough attention to the activity in my mind to realize that negativity has taken hold and is making me agitated, and choose to view the situation differently. It's not just "positive thinking"—you know, some nostrum like "every day in every way things are getting better and better". It's actually choosing to see real positive benefits in a potentially difficult situation, and allowing these benefits to take up space in the brain, to be the thoughts and emotions that stay around long enough to be stored in memory.

We also actually have many positive experiences every day, but they often don't leave much impression on us. Instead, the negativity bias colors our underlying expectations, beliefs, action strategies and moods in a negative direction.

Another practice is what Dr. Rick Hanson calls "tilting toward the good". This builds on the fact that we do have many positive experiences each day. Many may be mild—a 1 or 2 on a scale of 10—so mild that we hardly notice them, and certainly don't keep them in mind long enough to create a long term memory of them.

By not noticing these everyday pleasant experiences, we don't install them in the memory systems of the brain. Remember, as a survival method, negative experiences are going to get installed in memory. When we're stressed, we call on our experiences, and for most of us, there's a negativity bias which colors our responses. We need to actually notice and savor the positive experiences of our lives, so that they're available in response to events that come our way.

The practice then, is simple: to actually notice a beneficial experience as it occurs—a beautiful sunset, a pleasant conversation with a friend, the feeling of kindness engendered by graciously allowing another car to go first, a sense of accomplishment in pruning the roses—experiences that as they happen, and which give a sense of ease, connection, gratitude, warmth, enjoyment. Then we choose to hold the experience in our mind and heart consciously, savoring it, exploring how it feels, for 5 or 10 or 15 seconds. By actually holding the experience in consciousness, we allow a set of neurons to fire together and wire together in a positive way. We're tilting the mind towards the good.

What if, because our mind is wired to see the negative, we don't notice any positive experiences? It's not cheating to create beneficial experiences in the mind, such as deliberately thinking of something we're thankful for, of doing something we enjoy, of how we felt when we were there for a friend. This isn't the same as looking at things with rose-colored glasses, or ignoring real problems. It's taking real beneficial experiences and encoding them into the brain, and by doing so, positive emotions and experiences are more available for coping the next time we encounter stress.

A few brief words about our attitudes towards the past and future.

Many of us have felt that our past is our past—good, bad or ugly, that it's unchangeable. And to some extent it's true, the facts of our past are the facts. But

how do we think and feel about the past? Is it with bitterness and regret and disappointment about the negative events that happened to us? Or have we recognized that while there were hard patches, maybe many of them, we've come to terms with them, perhaps realizing that everyone was doing the best they could, even if it wasn't very good. Or perhaps recognizing that those difficulties helped make us who we are today. Even if our past was difficult, we can examine it and recast it in a broader light. To some extent, happiness is giving up all hope of a better past, and of developing a sense of satisfaction or contentment or peace with it.

As to the future, research shows that the people who are happiest find permanent and universal causes of good events and temporary and specific causes for bad events. In other words, they are confident, optimistic and hopeful.

The practice of viewing bad events as temporary and specific has been an extremely important practice for me, and I use it frequently. If my friend is short with me, I might once have thought something like "is this the new way the relationship is going to be now?"—a thought of permanency. Now I look at it and think something like "She's been under a lot of stress" or "He isn't feeling very well," or "I could have handled that interaction more tactfully"—seeing the temporary nature of a bad mood. It's temporary, not a permanent personality flaw. And that allows me to not stress out about it, because it's just temporary.

The other side of the coin is viewing good events as permanent and universal. For example, if I do well at work, I would optimistically say "I'm talented" (universal). The pessimistic view would be "I try hard" (temporary). Now, I personally am not as skilled about attributing permanent and universal causes for good events—there's too much of the realist (or some would say pessimist) in me. But my friend with the brain hemorrhage? Not a problem—when she wins something, she says "I'm lucky", not "I got lucky." While I see the value of this way of looking at good events, my main practice is to see the temporary and specific in negative events, and that goes a long way towards de-stressing situations for me.

There is so much we're learning about how the brain works, and scientists have just scratched the surface. But the most important thing we know is that the brain can be rewired, it has plasticity. It isn't the static brain we may have heard of in our beginning psychology class many years ago, when we were told us that if things didn't go well in our first five years, we might as well forget it. The brain can be rewired after brain injury, and it can be rewired to towards greater happiness.

At any age. I have a friend who has an 80+ year old complaining mother who made an agreement with him that every time she complained, she would add "and I am very blessed", and he reminded her about it until it became habitual. After a few months, the change was so great in her attitude that his sister called him and said "What have you done with our mother?" If you try some of these practices, you may find that the stress of the holiday season, and of life, diminishes. So may it be.