

The Negativity Trap: the brain's relationship to challenges

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It is true that many people seem to have "...Velcro for the "bad" and Teflon for the "good." This phrase from Dr. Rick Hanson describes the brain phenomenon of the negativity bias: the circuitry that primes humans to notice and cling to the negative more than the positive.



The brain, mind, and body work in concert to scan for what is bad/ what you should move away from; and for what is good/what you should move toward.

While this system for keeping you safe physically and emotionally does indeed serve humanity, many times it gets stuck scanning for, and lingering upon, the negative so you miss or undervalue the positive in your life. If the brain could talk to you, it might say, "The positives will not cause you harm, so why linger there? You better get back to looking for danger."

Research shows that most people tend to notice, and hold on to, negative experiences longer than the positive ones. For instance, if your supervisor gives you three examples of things you are doing well and one example of something you may need to change, your tendency may be to notice, think about, and possibly even be upset about that one thing that needs to change instead of the three things they mentioned you are doing well. You focus on the "negative," not the positive feedback! Does that sound familiar?

So, are you doomed to "be" negative?

No, you are not. Learning a few mindfulness practices to help you **notice and release** the negative while you **notice and install** the positive.

A note of caution here: please do not think that you need to put all your energy into noticing only the positive to compensate for the brain's bias. The approach to balancing our brains tendency for the negativity bias is **not** to race past bad things that happen and **only** notice the good. A mental shift from taking in too much of the negative to **avoiding** the negativity at all costs is like trading seats on the titanic: you have made a change, but you are still on a sinking ship.

The goal instead is to **notice both the good and the bad** with an **open, receptive state of mind** supported by non-judgement, loving kindness, and compassion for self and others. In this way, you maintain a state of balance. This is mindfulness.

How do we do that? We use our minds to change our brains to change our minds for the better. Do not worry, it's not quite as complicated as it sounds.



To start, think of yourself as a gardener. There are three ways to cultivate the garden of your brain using mindfulness practices:

- You can witness your garden, surveying it in its entirety, just noticing what is there (both positive and negative).
- You can pull weeds (release the negative).
- You can plant flowers (install the positive).

Rick Hanson's Garden metaphor gives us *choices* for using the mind to create a balance in the brain. The goal is not necessarily to immediately release (get rid of) the negative, nor is to only install (enrich) the positive. Mindfulness helps you cultivate the ability to notice all that occurs as it arises, both the weeds and the flowers, and to tune in to whether it serves you to release the negative, install more of the positive, or just be with what is.

With mindfulness practices, you strengthen the reflective circuitry in your brain creating an open, receptive state of mind that includes a stance of non-judgement, loving kindness, and compassion for self and others. Instead of being trapped in negativity, you will strengthen your brain's ability to pause and consider:

- What do I notice?
- What might I want to release?
- What might I want to install?

Please read [Part 2 of this series](#) for more about how to cultivate the garden of the brain using the mind, including examples from my work helping teachers trapped in the negativity bias.