

Avoiding the Negativity Trap: cultivating the garden of the brain

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In [Part 1](#) of “The Negativity Trap” you learned the brain reasons for focusing on the negative as well as some mind methods for balancing out that bias. I shared Dr. Rick Hanson’s beautiful metaphor of cultivating the garden of the brain using the mind to *witness the garden, pull the weeds, or plant flowers* as an approach to creating such balance.

Now let's take a closer look at the three ways to cultivate the garden of your brain using your mind:



1) *Witness the garden*: being with “what is” means tuning in to whatever is present: the good, the bad, and even what may seem neutral. As you survey your garden of experiences, allow your attention to land on both the flowers and the weeds while remaining open and receptive to seeing what is there without trying to change it at first. Next, shift your gaze inward toward *intrapersonal* attunement: what am I thinking, feeling, sensing, remembering, or perceiving in relationship to what I am noticing in my surroundings?

Tara Brach calls this practice making a “U-turn” back toward self, shifting your awareness from what is happening “out there” toward your *internal* state of mind and body. This aspect of mindfulness helps you develop a relationship between what is happening externally with that internally, a practice which activates the process of integration for your mind, brain, and your relationships. An integrated brain helps you *respond* versus *react*, creating a space between stimulus and response for a more balanced way of being in the world.

Consider the following example of a preschool teacher I coached through avoiding the negativity trap by using her mind to cultivate the garden of her brain. After I observed in her classroom that morning, we met as she described in an understandably very agitated manner the behavior of a four-year-old she deemed “out of control”: the child had been turning over tables, cursing, hitting children and staff, running out of the room and failing to follow the classroom's rules in general. As her coach, I spent a good amount of time actively listening to her narrative, asking her questions to help her tell the story of this child, and validating her perspective. *Not* offering solutions/suggestions/considerations/fixes...yet. Everything the teacher told me was about what was happening “out there,” i.e., what she could see happening all around her in the classroom.

After helping her tell the story of this child’s behavior, I asked her to try some *intrapersonal* attunement. I guided her to make the “U-turn” inward: exploring her thoughts, feelings, and body sensations connected to the story of this child. Also, any beliefs or memories linked to this experience. Just notice, what’s “here” for you now? In this way, I gently encouraged her to shift her focus from “out there” i.e., on the

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child, to "in here," i.e., her state of mind and body. I wanted her to witness and experience her **relationship** to this child's behavior: what did his behavior ignite inside her? I showed her how to "be present" with that was happening by showing her how to connect to her mental activity and body awareness, not just external events.

What came to light from this reflective process was how her values, perception, and beliefs about challenging behavior in general, and this child specifically, were linked to experiences and memories from her upbringing as well as her training as a teacher. While she felt she had to scan her classroom for dangerous or negative behavior, she realized that mostly seeing the "weeds" (what was going wrong in the classroom) activated her fight, flight or freeze stress response. She was anxious almost all day around this child. The teacher believed her colleagues, supervisor, and the families would see her as incompetent if she couldn't **control** this child, and she believed she didn't have the skill to handle the behaviors this child displayed.

Her beliefs about challenging behavior as well as her reactive stress response to such behavior led to her current feelings of anxiousness, helplessness, overwhelm, worthlessness and even anger which manifested in sensations of pain in her back and tightness in her shoulders. I validated her perspective and her emotions, encouraging her to offer loving kindness and compassion toward herself instead of judging herself for being triggered. Notice: we are not focusing on "solutions" for "fixing" the child. Or worse, "controlling" the child; instead, I showed her how to notice, name, and tame her mental activity herself first.

The teacher had never stopped to consider the connection between what was happening "out there" in the classroom with what was happening "in here" because she was always in a rush to fix it, to stop the behavior. By pausing to "be with what is here," the teacher acknowledged some of the feelings that kept her trapped in the negative and experienced a slight shift of relief by naming them with me as an attuned other. From there, we could move forward with other aspects of cultivating the garden of her brain to help her balance out the negativity bias.



2) ***Pull the weeds:*** letting go of what isn't serving you, the "bad," starts by noticing both the external and the internal challenges with the intention of retrieving, reflecting, and then releasing...not getting stuck there. Instead of being hijacked by the negative, or feeling like you are "in the weeds," you tune into what is there with presence and purpose giving it the loving kindness, compassion, and non-judgement that creates the balance you need to allow you to release the negative--- to pull the weeds at the root, hopefully! Pulling the weeds with intention not as a reaction.

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As the teacher above continued her narrative of the child with the challenging behavior, I helped her identify what she might like to change/alter in herself first before she looked to changing the child. What outdated software, or beliefs, might she be running about challenging behavior in general and specifically about the expectations for this child that she could let go of, or update, to **help her feel** more balanced, less overwhelmed? Like a computer, our minds need updates in order to for our brains to run efficiently! When we **feel better**, we can **do better**.

In this case, the teacher was overly linked to the child: she was **reacting** to the scary behavior versus **responding** to it due to the thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories this behavior was triggering in her. Because she was not differentiating herself from the behavior or the child, she was in the weeds, hijacked by the pressure she felt to "fix" it. Understandable, yes, but efficient or satisfying, no!

The teacher spent time acknowledging the emotions of worthlessness, overwhelm, helplessness, and anger that were activated as she told the story of her experience as the teacher. She realized these feelings directly related to a set of negative cognitions she developed over the course of her life: to be successful and competent I cannot fail, I must be perfect, I always have to "fix" the problem, my feelings don't matter, and I have to **manage** the classroom by **controlling** the children. All these sub-conscious beliefs contributed to her current feeling state and ultimately, she was angry about it all.

Clearly, there were a lot of "weeds" to be pulled from these internal narratives that were draining her battery. How could anyone expect to live up to the standard of those beliefs? Subconscious beliefs in the mind can activate a stress response in the brain. And yet, many of you likely have a similar set of values, perceptions, and beliefs about yourself and the world. We began to talk about how she could update her software regarding challenging behavior and her role as the teacher, so she can approach the challenges in her classroom from a more balanced state of mind and brain.



3) Grow the flowers: the teacher's negativity bias had her seeing only "weeds" when she surveyed the garden of her classroom, but with mindfulness she was able to tune into her mental activity and realize the connection between the child's behaviors and her brain's **reactivity** regarding those behaviors. Clearly, the child's behavior was dangerous both physically and emotionally for himself, other children, and the staff; and yet, my goal was to help the teacher learn to cultivate a responsive, reflective, integrated state of mind and brain versus being caught in the trap of the negativity bias.

Once we helped her identify, understand, and express her emotions as well as update some of her subconscious beliefs, I asked her to consider the child's strengths: what were some positive things she could say about him and/or her relationship with him? The process of tuning in, reflecting, and mindfully exploring what was "there" with nonjudgement, loving-kindness and compassion for herself allowed her

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to move to this step of extending those same feelings toward the child and recall several strengths. I had her do the same for herself and her co-workers: what strengths did they bring to bear in this situation? At that point, she was in a more integrated state of mind and brain, able to enter the process of creating a support plan for the child.

Your brain is wired to scan for what is missing or what is wrong to keep you safe...thank goodness! And yet, this circuitry may be working overtime when left without the supervision of the mind, activating the reactive circuitry in your brain that leaves you later feeling drained, regretful, stuck, or burned out.

Harnessing the mind's power to direct your attention, we can cultivate the garden of the brain. Noticing the whole garden, pulling the weeds, and planting flowers; in short, attuning to what "is" both around you and within you instead of rushing to fix/change/control. Maintaining an open, reflective stance lends itself to a more efficient, effective, and easeful approach to challenges.

For more about this important topic, please [visit my website](#).