



Managing Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

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DISCLOSURE

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Objectives:

- Discuss evidence-based neuroscientific research on the health benefits of mindfulness and contemplative practices.
- Demonstrate how a sustained personal contemplative practice enhances brain health to protect against compassion fatigue and burn out.
- Facilitate an audience discussion to find 'real world' examples of applying practices in personal and professional settings.

Neuroscience of the Brain²

Unknown potential threat sequence:

External Stimulus → Occipital Cortex

Prefrontal Cortex
(sophisticated analysis)

Hippocampus
(quick evaluation)



Fight/Flight Neural-Hormone Cascade

Key Neurochemicals²

Primary Neurotransmitters

- Glutamate- excites receiving neurons
- GABA- inhibits receiving neurons

Neuromodulators

- Serotonin- regulates mood, sleep, and digestion.
- Dopamine- involved with rewards and attention; promotes approach behaviors.
- Norepinephrine- alerts and arouses.
- Acetylcholine- promotes wakefulness and learning.

Key Neurochemicals²

Neuropeptides

- Opioids (endorphins)- buffer stress, provide soothing and reduce pain, produce pleasure.
- Oxytocin- promotes nurturing behaviors toward children and bonding in couples; associated with blissful closeness and love.
- Vasopressin- supports pair bonding; in men may promote aggressiveness toward sexual rivals.

Other Neurochemicals

- Cortisol- released by adrenal glands during the stress response; stimulates the amygdala and inhibits the hippocampus
- Estrogen- the brains of both men and women contain estrogen receptors; affects libido, mood, and memory.

Wired for Survival²

- Vigilance and Anxiety- ancestral baseline state
- Sensitivity to Negative Information- the brain is drawn to bad news and typically detects negative information faster than positive information.
- High-priority Storage- negative events are stored carefully for future reference by the hippocampus.
- Negative Trumps Positive- negative events generally have more impact than positive ones.
- Lingering Traces- negative events leave an indelible trace, ready to reactivate if you ever encounter a similar event.
- Vicious Cycles- negative experiences create vicious cycles by making you pessimistic, overreactive, and inclined to go negative yourself.

Enhancing Positive Thought Patterns¹

- Kill the ANTs- automatic negative thoughts
- Step 1: realize that your thoughts are real and have an impact on how you feel and how you behave.
 - You have a thought, your brain releases chemicals, an electrical transmission goes across your brain, you become aware of what you're thinking.
- Step 2: Notice how negative thoughts effect your body.
 - Every time you have an angry, unkind, sad or cranky thought- your brain releases chemicals that make your body feel bad (activate of limbic system)
- Step 3: Notice how positive thoughts effect your body.
 - Every time you have a good, happy or hopeful thought- your brain releases chemicals that make your body feel good (suppress limbic system)

Enhancing Positive Thought Patterns¹

- **Step 4:** Notice how your body reacts to every thought you have.
 - Limbic system is responsible for translating our emotional state into physical feelings of relaxation or tension.
- **Step 5:** Think of bad thoughts as pollution.
 - Every cell in your body is affected by every thought you have.
- **Step 6:** Understand that your automatic thoughts don't always tell the truth.
 - If you never challenge your thoughts, you just 'believe them' as if they were true.
- **Step 7:** Talk back to ANTs.
 - Train your thoughts to be positive and hopeful, but must first be aware of them.

Enhancing Positive Thought Patterns¹

- Step 8: Exterminate the ANTs.
 - ANT 1- “Always/never” thinking
 - ANT 2 (red ant)- Focusing on the negative (seeing only bad in a situation)
 - ANT 3 (red ant)- Fortune-telling (predict the worst outcome)
 - ANT 4- (red ant)- Mind reading (believing you know what is in another’s mind)
 - ANT 5- Thinking with your feelings
 - ANT 6- Guilt beating
 - ANT 7- Labeling (attaching a negative label to self or others)
 - ANT 8- Personalizing (investing innocuous events with personal meaning)
 - ANT 9 (most poisonous red ant)- Blaming (blaming someone else for your problems)



Positive v. Negative Perspective *Cultivation*

- “When your mind changes, your brain changes, too. In the saying from the work of the psychologist Donald Hebb: when neurons fire together, they wire together- mental activity actually creates new neural structures (Hebb 1949; LeDoux 2003).”²
- Two wolves in the heart:
 - “In my heart, there are two wolves: a wolf of love and a wolf of hate (anger/aggression).”
 - Whichever wolf is given more attention (fed), will determine which one grows stronger.

Lifestyle Hygiene

- Nutrition- foods that are balanced and provide nutritional value to body and brain
- Exercise- enhance regular synthesis and release of endorphins and enkaphalins
- Recognize importance of physical contact
 - People and pets
- Develop a mindfulness practice
 - Meditation, prayer, gratitude ritual, 'quiet time'
- Diffuser or candles- surround yourself with pleasant smells
- Sleep- critically important to establish a routine to obtain adequate quality sleep
- Peaceful Music- listen to calming and 'soft' music often as possible.
- Aesthetics- keep surroundings clean, organized, and mementos that cause positive feelings.



Supports for Everyday Mindfulness²

- Slow Down
- Talk Less
- When you can, do one thing at a time. Reduce multi-tasking.
- Focus on your breath while doing activities.
- Relax into a feeling of calm presence with other people.
- Use routine events- such as phone ringing/drinking water- as “temple bells” to return to your sense of centeredness.
- At meals, take a moment to reflect on where your food came from.
- Simplify your life; give up lesser pleasures for greater ones.

Living by Being Here Now⁴

- “What is at rest is easily managed. What is not yet manifest is easy to prevent. The brittle is easily shattered; the small is easily scattered.
- Act before things exist; manage them before there is disorder. Remember: A tree that fills a man’s embrace grows from a seedling. A tower nine stories high starts with one brick. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
- Act and destroy it; grasp it and lose it. The sage does not act, and is not defeated. He does not grasp and therefore does not lose. People usually fail when they are on the verge of success. So give as much care at the end as at the beginning, and there will be no failure.
- The sage does not treasure what is difficult to attain. He does not collect precious things; he learns not to hold to ideas. He helps the 10,000 things find their own nature but does not venture to lead them by the nose.”

References and Recommended Resources:

- 1) Amen, D. (1998). *Change Your Brain Change Your Life, The Breakthrough Program for Conquering Anxiety, Depression, Obsessiveness, Anger, and Impulsiveness*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- 2) Hanson, R. and Mendius, R. (2009). *Buddha's Brain*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- 3) Siegel, D. (2007). *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-being*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- 4) Wayne, D. (2007). *Change your Thoughts- Change Your Life*. New York, NY: Hay House, Inc.
- 5) Smartphone App: Insight Timer (free)



Concentration Meditation (guided experience)

