

# Mindfulness and Neuroplasticity – cultivating joy and wellbeing

by Barry Lee

**Like most people I was initially drawn to meditation because of suffering in my life. Eighteen years ago, I was working as a newly qualified solicitor. It was a stressful job and I experienced acute anxiety. I learned how to meditate, and it helped. I was able to stop and breathe. The inner pressure was more bearable.**

Over the years it completely changed my life for the better, to the point where I ultimately changed career in order to teach mindfulness and compassion full time and share the benefits with others. I have also trained in yoga and psychotherapy.

In the beginning, if someone asked me: Barry, why do you meditate? I would probably emphasise how it helped me to “reduce stress” in my life. That felt like a socially acceptable thing to say. In the corporate world we are all interested in managing stress, aren't we?

There is something stoic about it. We endure stress because we are so busy. I would have been very hesitant to tell the same person how meditation made me more “joyful”. At the time, the word “joy” felt self-indulgent and dare I say, a bit “happy clappy” to me. It didn't feel socially acceptable to say that I just wanted to be happy... that life sometimes felt a bit grim and grey and relentless, and I needed a counterbalance.

I think that this attitude still prevails to a certain extent and it's a pity. What is the point of life if not to experience moments of deep connection and meaning? The good news is that copious research has shown that joy, happiness and gratitude are states of mind that can be practiced and cultivated.

Neuroscience has shown that our brains have a “negativity bias” - we are hardwired to notice and remember unpleasant experiences and disregard ordinary pleasant experiences. If we are aware and we have the right intention, we can bring this into balance.



## It's NOT about looking at everything through “rose tinted lenses”

Cultivating joy and wellbeing doesn't mean that we should look at life through rose tinted lenses. That's a trap. Without ignoring the challenges of life, we can discover that moments of happiness, joy and contentment are still available in the present moment.

When we are able to nourish ourselves in this way, we are less likely to burn out and we are more able to skilfully respond to challenging experiences in our own lives.

We are also able to support others. It's not a self-centred pursuit!

## Understanding the Negativity Bias

Evolutionary biologists would say that as a species, human beings have evolved to focus on the negative. Our hunter gatherer ancestors lived in a world full of real danger. The ones who survived were the ones who were always on the lookout for potential threats... not the ones who stopped to enjoy watching the sun set.

Our brains have evolved to become Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive experiences. Negative experiences stick... we notice and remember them much more easily than ordinary pleasant experiences.

## A thought experiment - Do you have a negativity bias?

In a single day in your life, imagine that ten things happen. Three are positive, six are neutral and one is negative. So, in this imagined day in your life, one thing didn't go very well. Maybe you made a mistake in work, and you feel embarrassed? Maybe you said the wrong thing to a friend or colleague, and you wish you could turn back time? Maybe you were more reactive than you would like to have been? Maybe someone was unkind or didn't treat you very well? Lots of other things happened in that imagined day. Some things went well. Still, what are you thinking about last thing at night when you are tossing and turning, trying to go to sleep? If you are like me and most other human beings, it's probably the thing which didn't go well.

## How Mindfulness Helps

A definition of mindfulness can never fully capture it or do it justice. Jon Kabat Zinn (the founder of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) says that mindfulness is "paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment with an attitude of kindness and curiosity."

When we are aware (i.e. when we are not stuck on automatic pilot), we can choose what we pay attention to. Mindfulness gives us choice. For example, instead of absentmindedly drinking a cup of coffee in the morning while we simultaneously read the news on our phone and ruminate about some problem from the previous day, we can instead choose to pause and really taste and relish that cup of coffee.

We can bring our full awareness to a little pleasant experience. The more we practice, the more we automatically start to notice and savour all the small, pleasant experiences that would otherwise pass us by.

The neuropsychologist, Dr Rick Hanson, offers a helpful analogy. He says that mindfulness is like a 'flashlight' and a 'vacuum cleaner'. It's like a flashlight in the sense that when we pay attention to something, on purpose, whatever we are paying attention to becomes more vivid and detailed.

It's like a vacuum cleaner in the sense that when we "stay" with an experience, for even a few seconds, it's like we Hoover it up, and it lodges in our memory.

Again, it's not about looking at life through rose tinted lenses or being phoney. We are not ignoring or denying the negative experiences that happen but instead we are getting a "truer" more objective picture that includes both the positive and the negative.

## A simple practice

The principle of neuroplasticity holds that our brains are always changing and adapting based on what we experience. This happens throughout our lives... not just when we are very young. If you practice bringing more awareness to pleasant experiences in your life, you are altering neural networks in your brain.

You could start practicing this today. Simply, have an intention to notice and remember one pleasant experience every day for the next week. It doesn't need to be something big or out of the ordinary. Whenever you notice something, stop. Don't rush to the next thing. Stay with it and if you can, savour it for 15 seconds. As Rick Hanson says, 'Hoover it up'. Notice what it feels like in the body. You could also write these experiences down in a journal at the end of the day. After a week, see how you feel and decide if it's something you would like to keep practicing.



**Barry Lee**

*Director of the Mindfulness & Compassion Therapy Centre*

Barry Lee is a director of the Mindfulness & Compassion Therapy Centre and the founder of Mindfulness for Law. He works with groups and with people on a one-to-one basis. He also offers in-house training courses and workshops for organisations in a variety of contexts including law firms, hospitals, universities, finance and the not-for-profit sector.

