

Positive Neuroplasticity:

The Practical Brain Science of Building Lasting Psychological Resources



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Rick Hanson, Ph.D.
Greater Good Science Center
University of California at Berkeley
www.RickHanson.net

Mental Resources for Resilient Well-Being

Well-Being

Hedonia

Eudaimonia

Shaping the Course of a Life

Challenges

Vulnerabilities

Resources

Location of Resources

World

Body

Mind

Resources for Well-Being

Grit

Mindfulness

Secure Attachment

Self Regulation

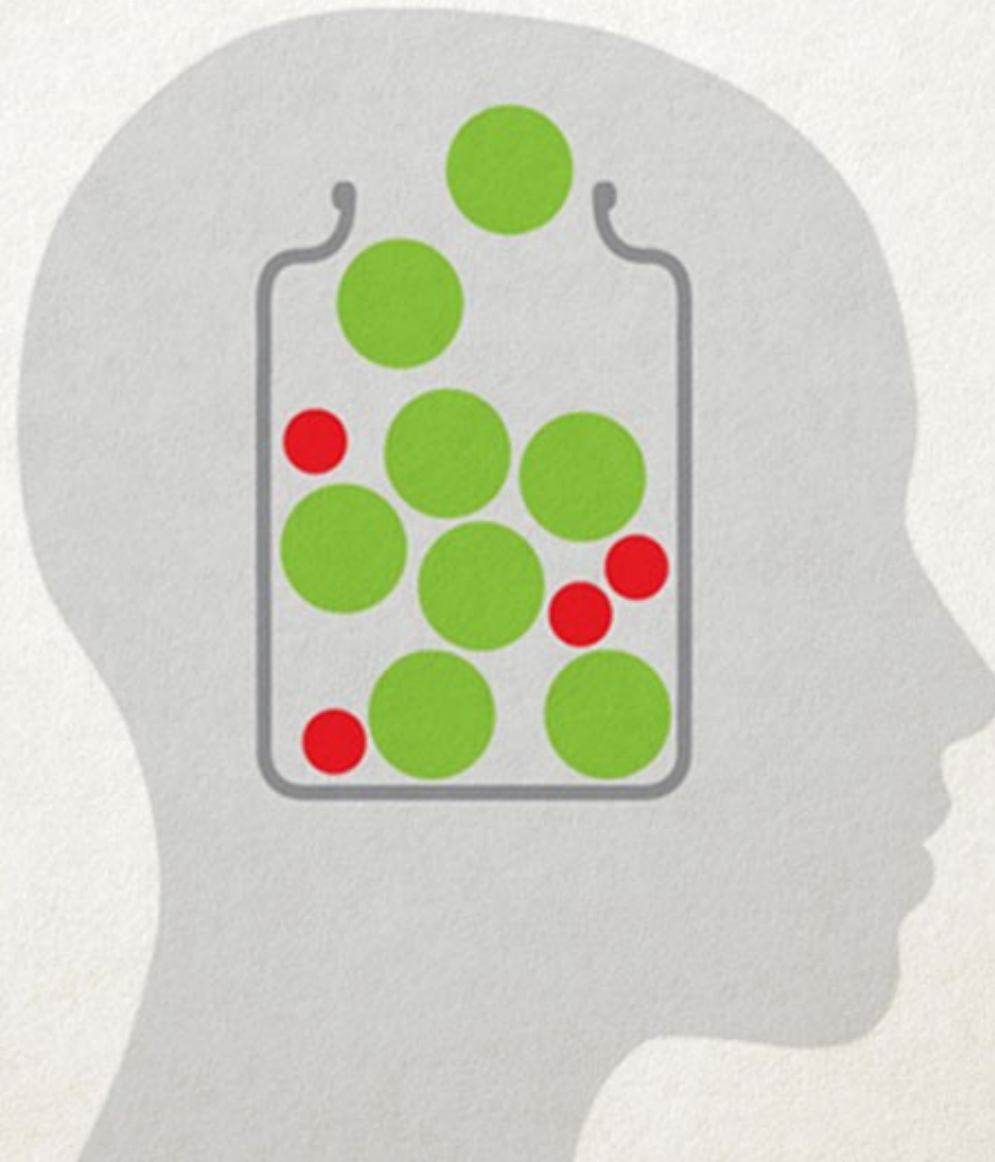
Optimism

Self-Worth

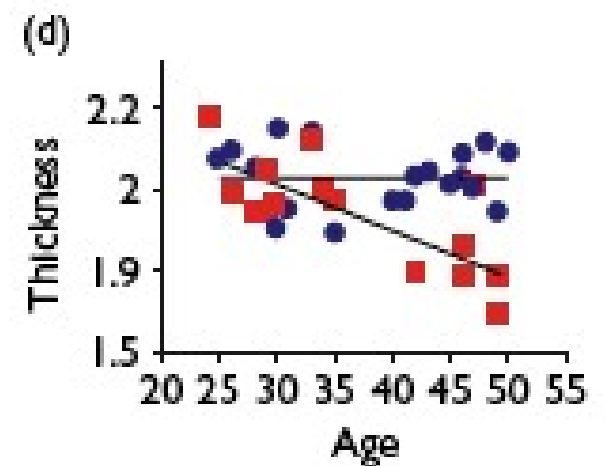
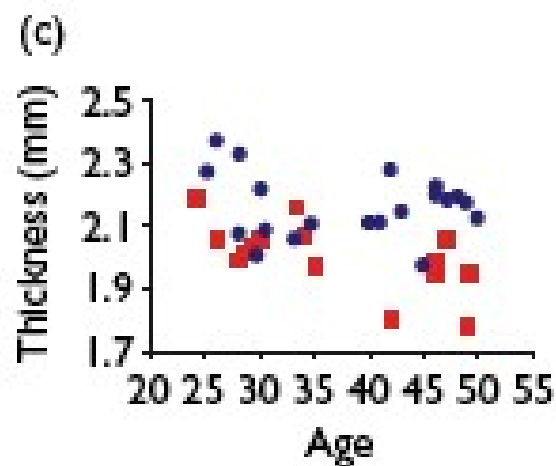
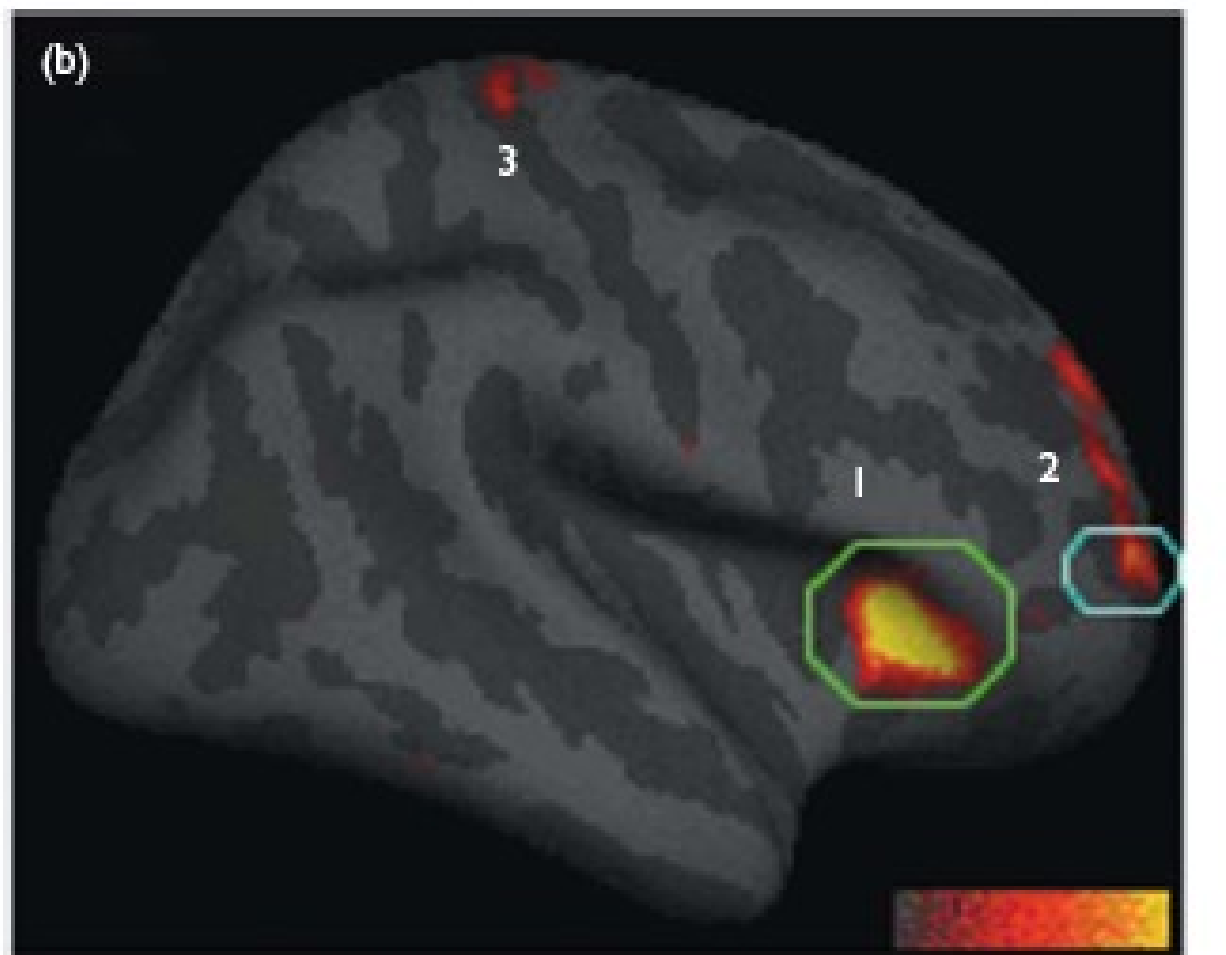
Roughly half to two-thirds of the variation in psychological attributes involves non-heritable factors.

A large fraction of a typical person's mental resources are **acquired** – learned – rather than innate.

Mental Resources Are Acquired Through Changes in Nervous System



Lazar, et al. 2005.
Meditation
experience is
associated
with increased
cortical thickness.
Neuroreport, 16,
1893-1897.



A Taste of Taking in the Good

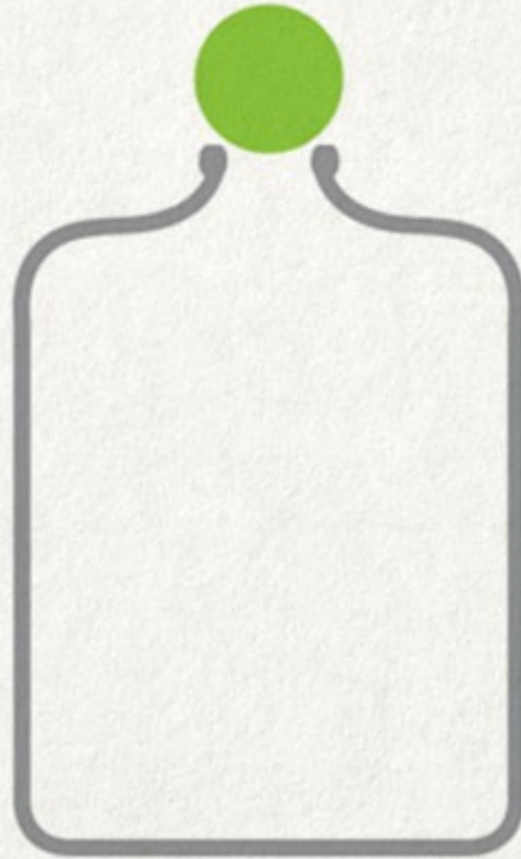
Mindful Cultivation: HEAL Process

Activation

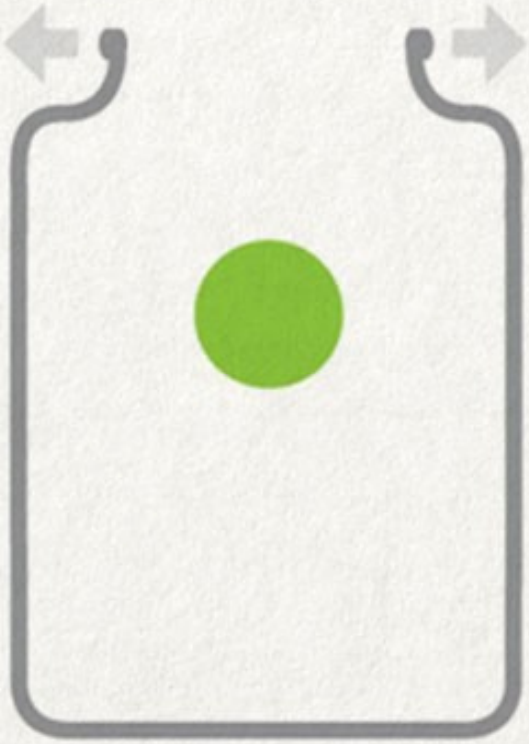
1. **Have a beneficial experience**

Installation

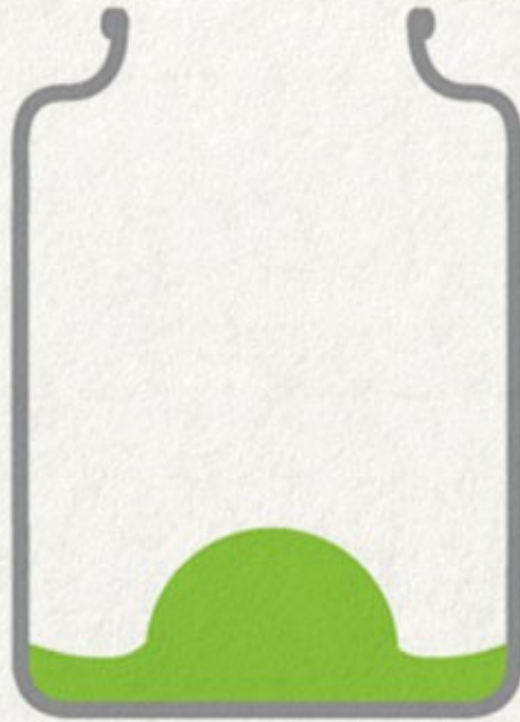
2. **Enrich the experience**
3. **Absorb the experience**
4. **Link positive and negative material**
(Optional)



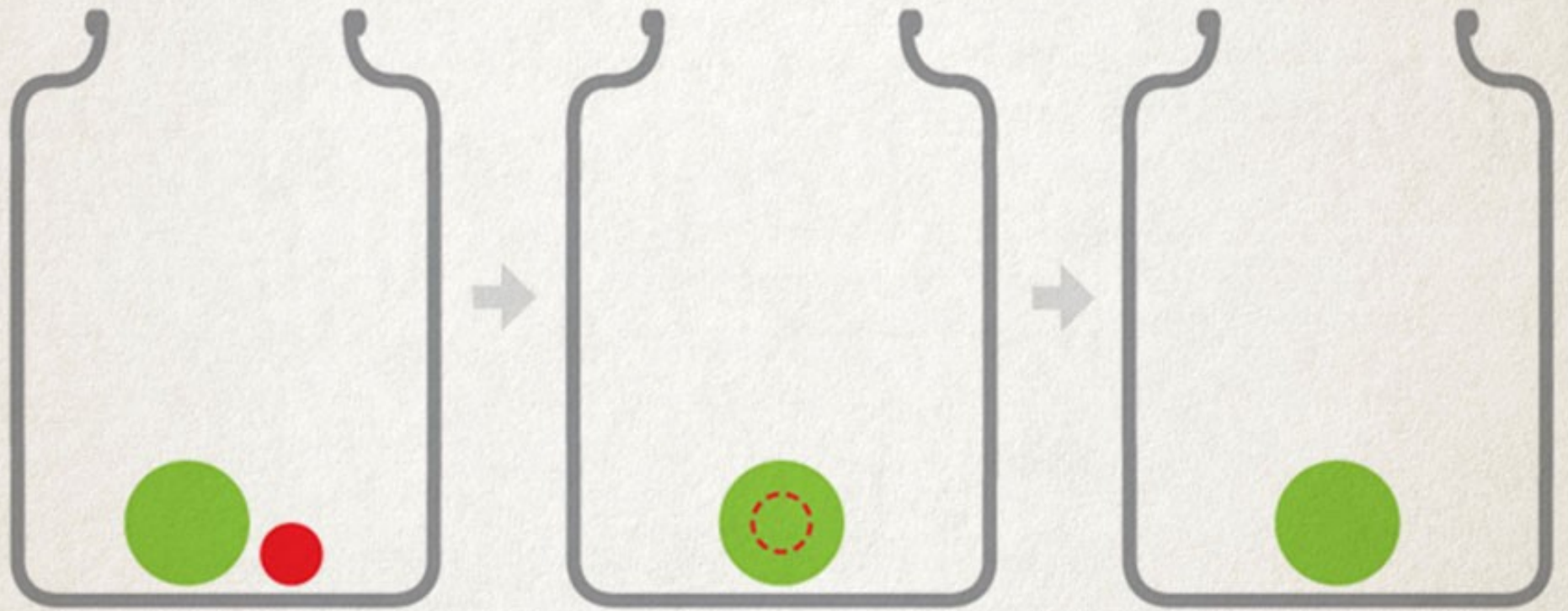
Have a Beneficial Experience



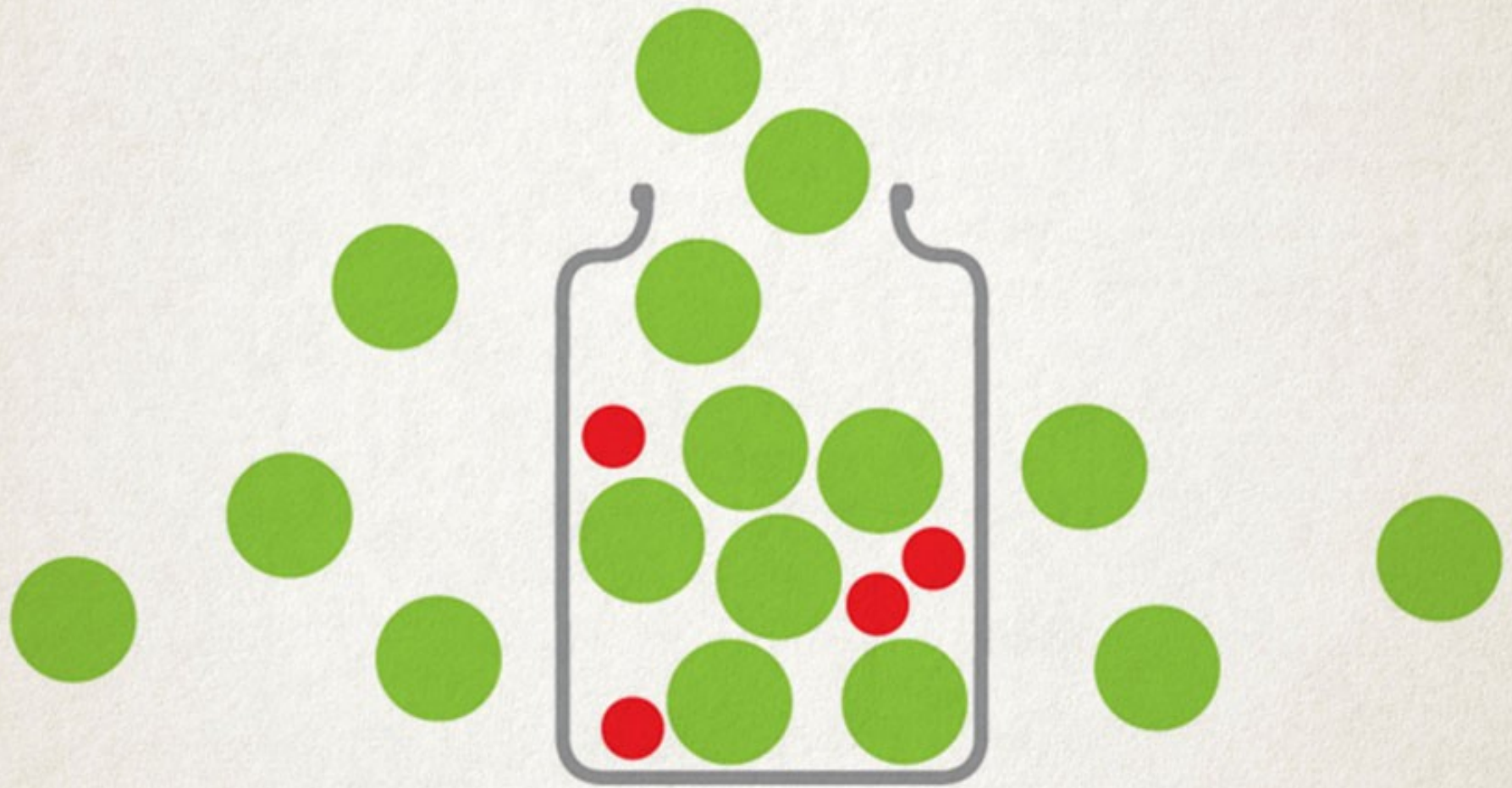
Enrich It



Absorb It



Link Positive & Negative Material



Have It, Enjoy It

Let's Try It

Notice

relaxing
as you
exhale

Create

an experience
of gladness,
gratitude

Create

an experience
of caring
about someone

For each of the above:

Have the experience. Enrich it. Absorb it.

Self-Directed Neuroplasticity

In the Garden of the Mind

1

**Be with what
is there**

2

**Decrease
the negative**

3

**Increase
the positive**

Witness. Pull weeds. Plant flowers.

Let be. Let go. Let in.

Mindfulness is present in all three.

“Being with” is primary – but not enough.

We also need “wise effort.”

Mental resources
are acquired in two stages:

Encoding > Consolidation

Activation > Installation

State > Trait

Major Neural Mechanisms of Learning

(De)Sensitizing existing synapses

Building new synapses

Altered gene expression

Building and integrating new neurons

Increased ongoing activity in a region

Increased connectivity of regions

Altered neurochemical activity

Information from hippocampus to cortex

Modulation by stress hormones, cytokines

Slow wave and REM sleep



Neurons that fire together,

wire together.

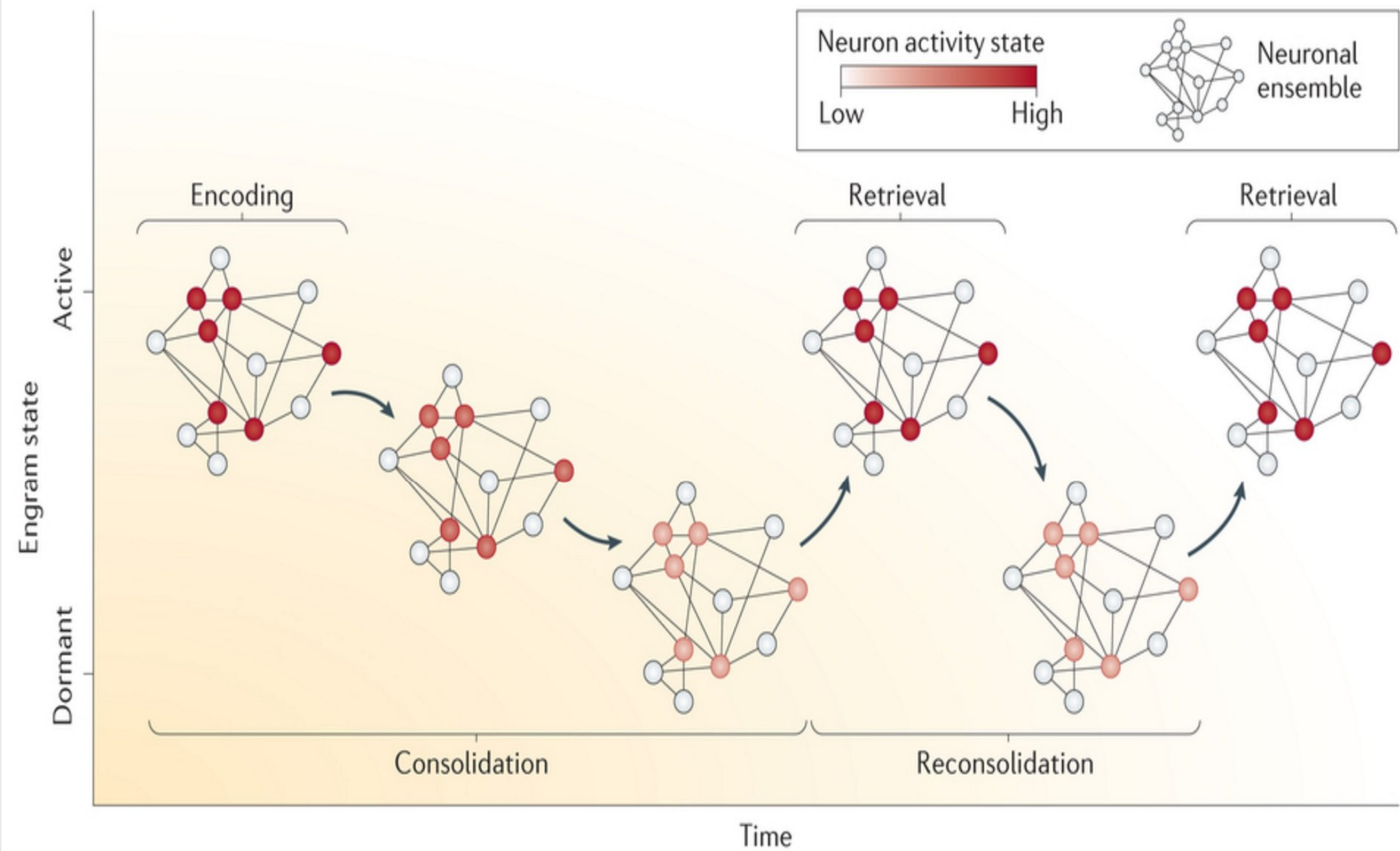
Mental resources are developed through experiences of them or related factors – activated states – that are installed as **traits**.

We become more **compassionate** by repeatedly installing experiences of compassion.

We become more **grateful** by repeatedly installing experiences of gratitude.

We become more **resilient** by repeatedly installing experiences of resilience.

In a positive cycle,
beneficial traits
– mental resources –
foster beneficial states,
which present another
opportunity to reinforce
the beneficial trait.



Most experiences of inner strengths – resilience, kindness, insight, mindfulness, self-worth, love, etc. – are **enjoyable**.

Positive hedonic tone is thus often a marker of an opportunity to develop a psychological resource.



Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A's go first). Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring this question:

If you're alone,
reflect or journal.

What are some of
the good facts
in your life these
days?

As the listener, keep finding
a genuine gladness about
the good facts in the life of
our partner.

The Negativity Bias

Meanwhile,

stressful, painful, harmful experiences

are being rapidly converted
into lasting changes

in neural structure or function.

The Negativity Bias

During the 600 million year evolution of the nervous system, avoiding “sticks” was usually more consequential than getting “carrots.”

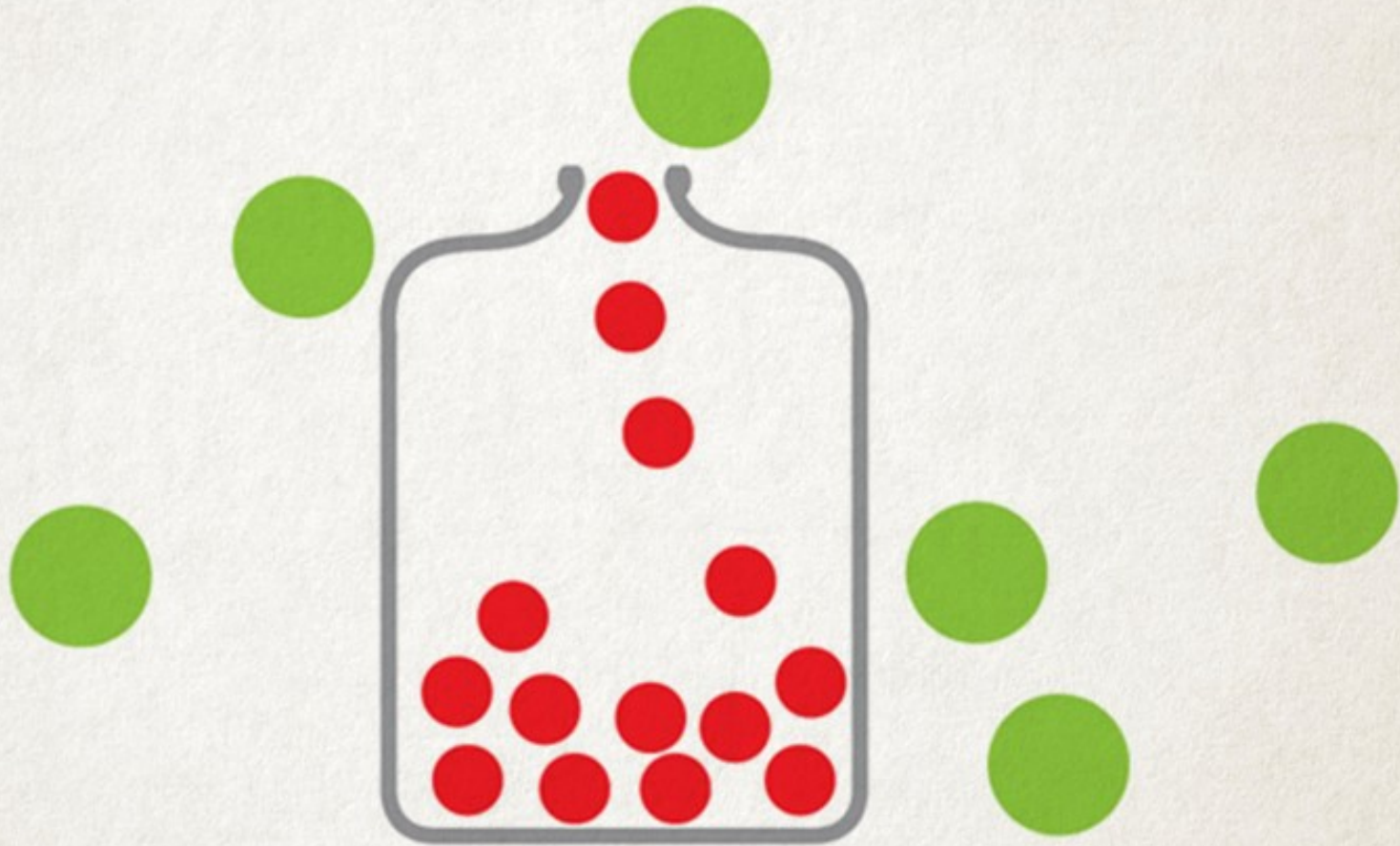
1. So we scan for bad news,
2. Over-focus on it,
3. Over-react to it
4. Install it efficiently in memory (incl. implicit),
5. Sensitize the brain to the negative, and
6. Create vicious cycles with others.

Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias

bad experiences

good experiences



The Negativity Bias

Steepening Personal Growth Curves

Experiencing doesn't equal learning.

Activation **without installation
may be pleasant,
but no trait resources are acquired.**

What fraction of our
beneficial mental states ever
become neural structure?

Professionals and the public
are generally good at activation
but bad at installation.

”

The same research that proves therapy works shows no improvement in outcome over the last 30 or so years.

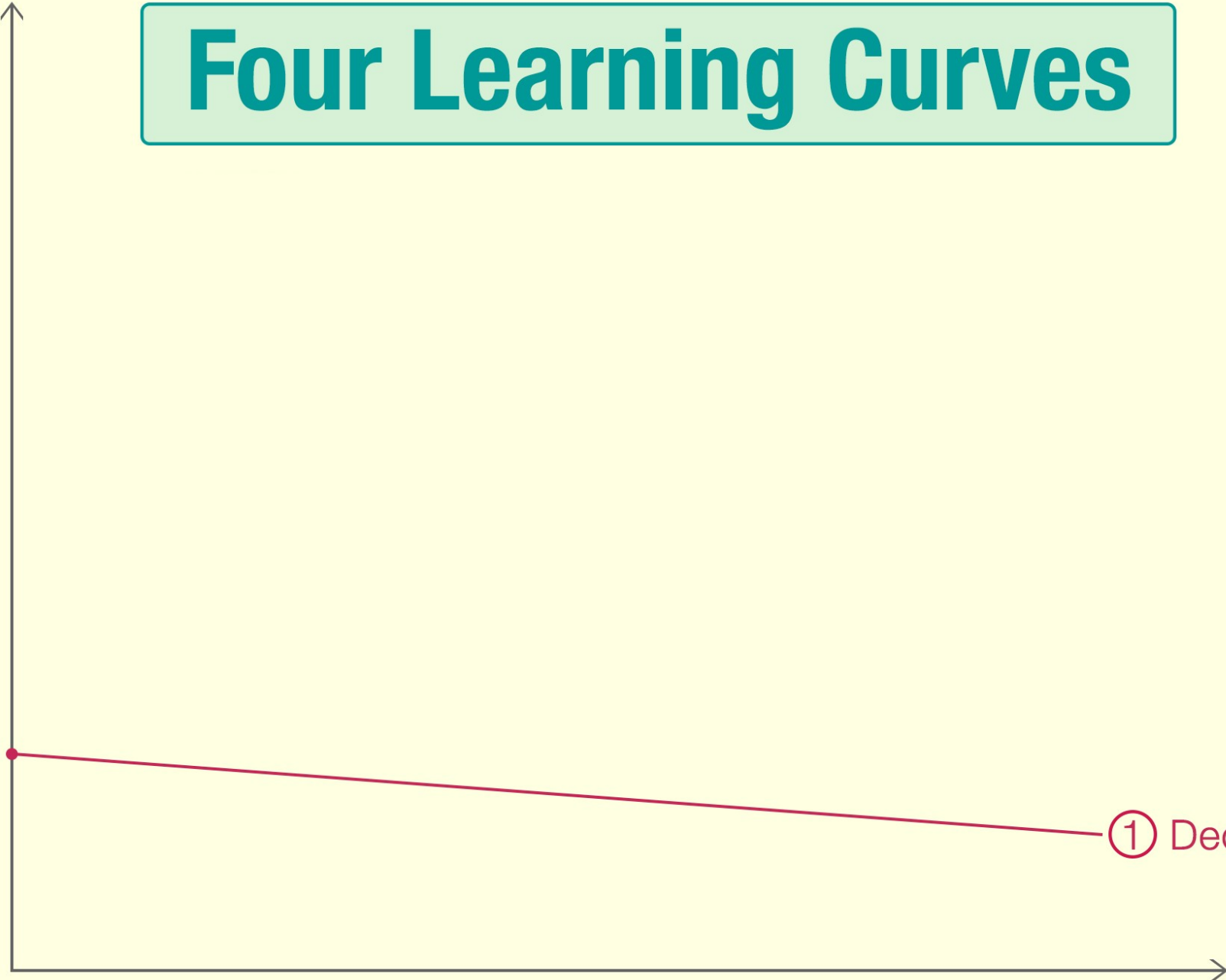
Scott Miller



The **installation** phase of learning is the fundamental weakness – and **opportunity** – in much coaching, psychotherapy, human resources training, and mindfulness programs.

Four Learning Curves

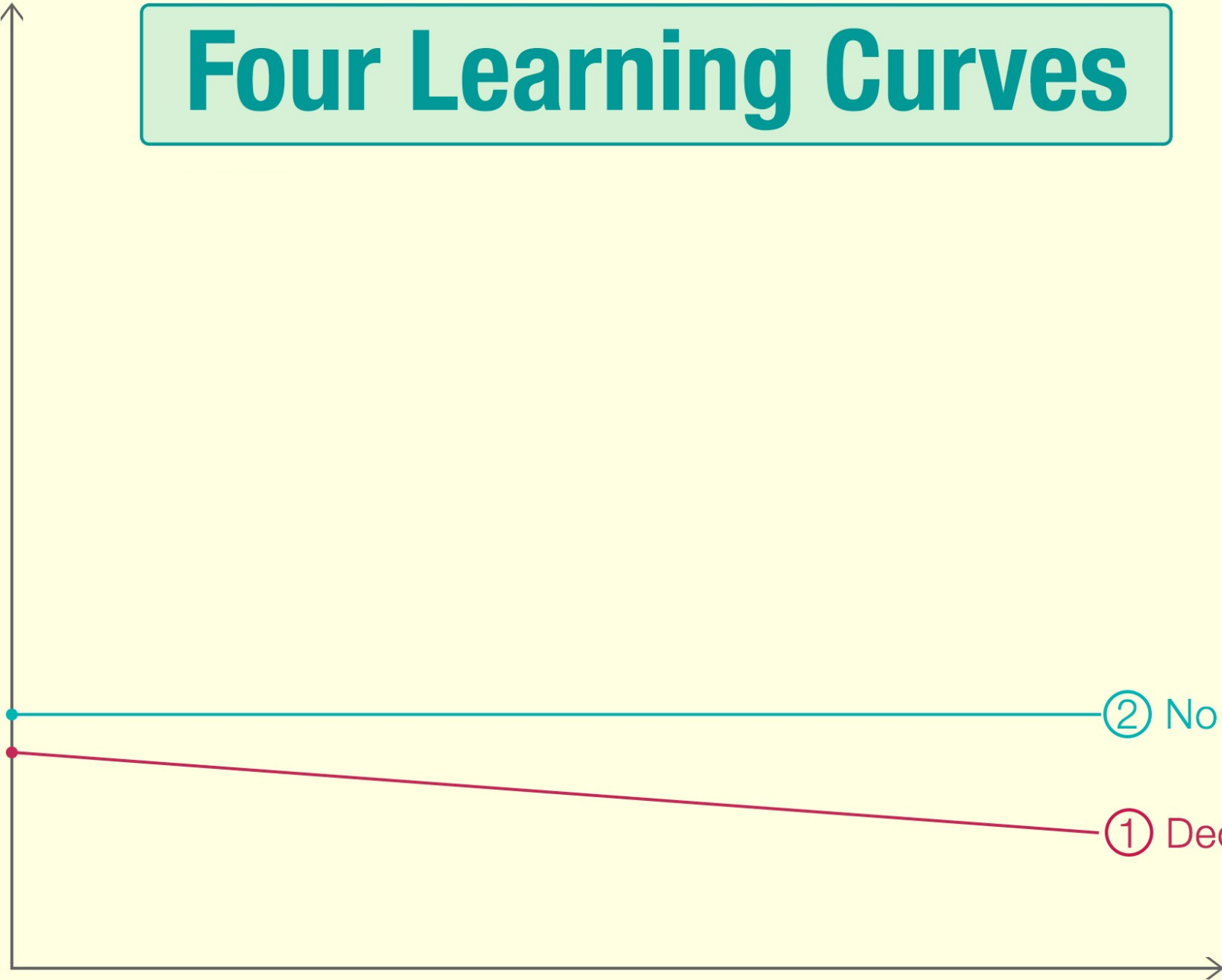
Mental Resources



Time

Four Learning Curves

Mental Resources



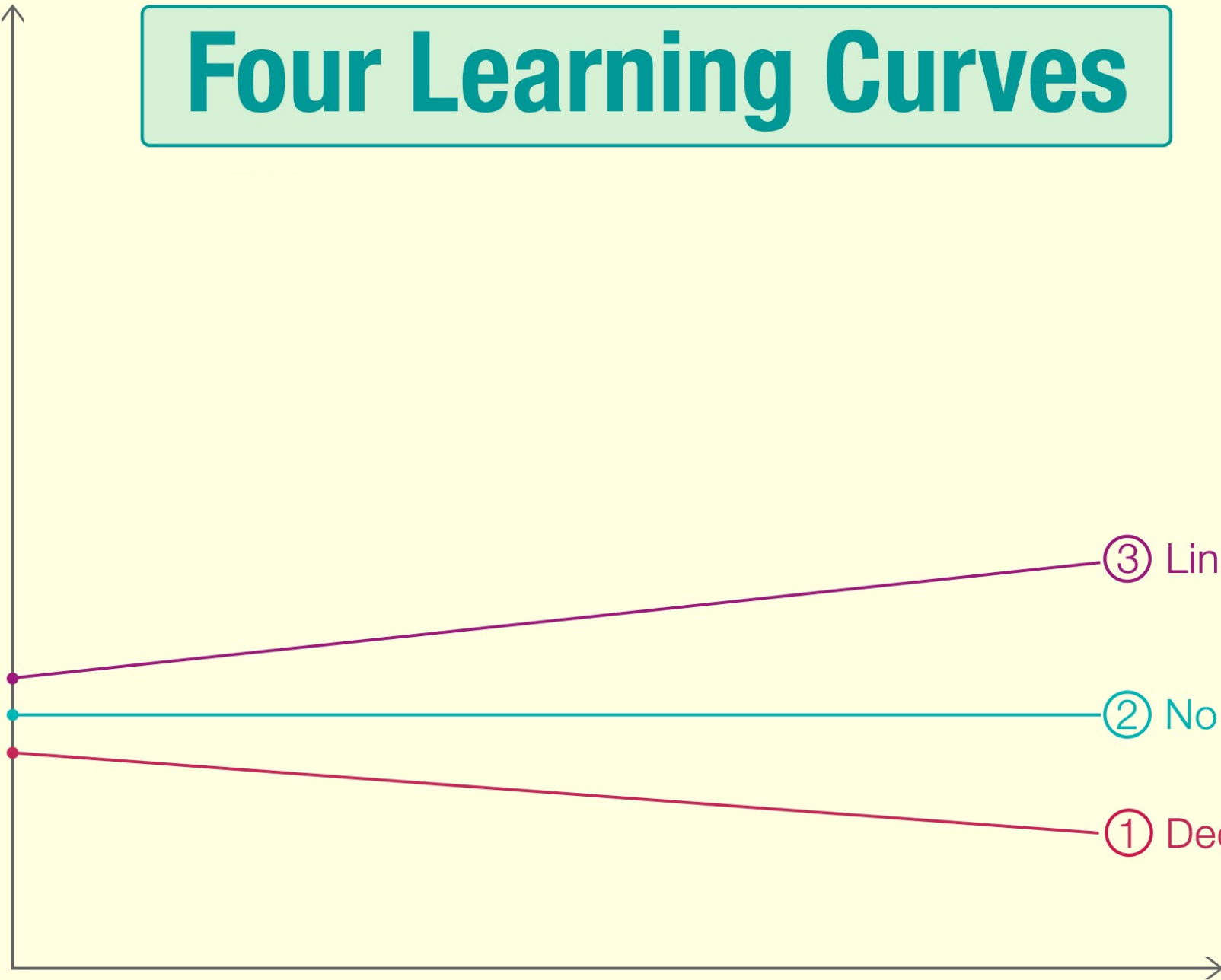
Time

② No growth

① Decline

Four Learning Curves

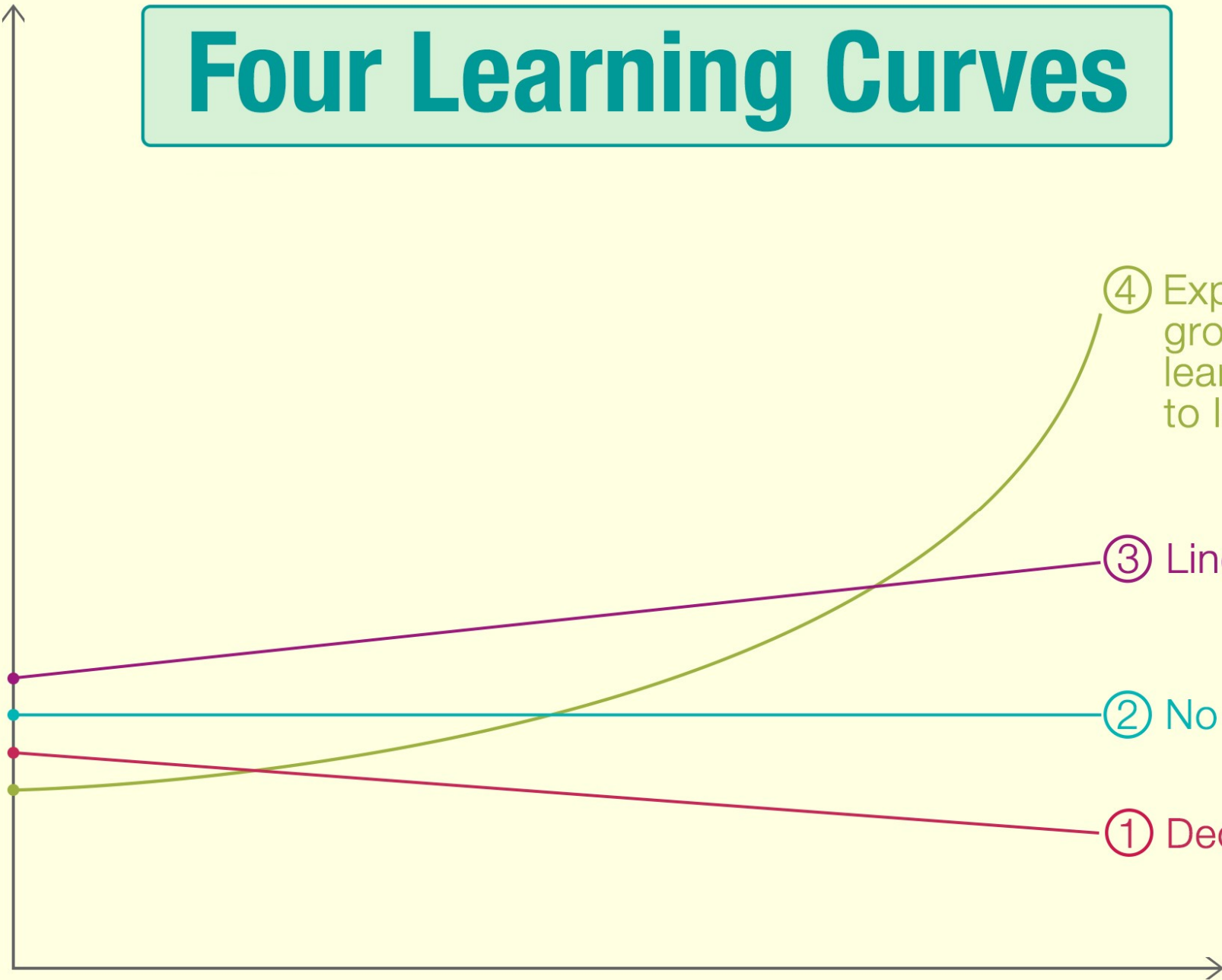
Mental Resources



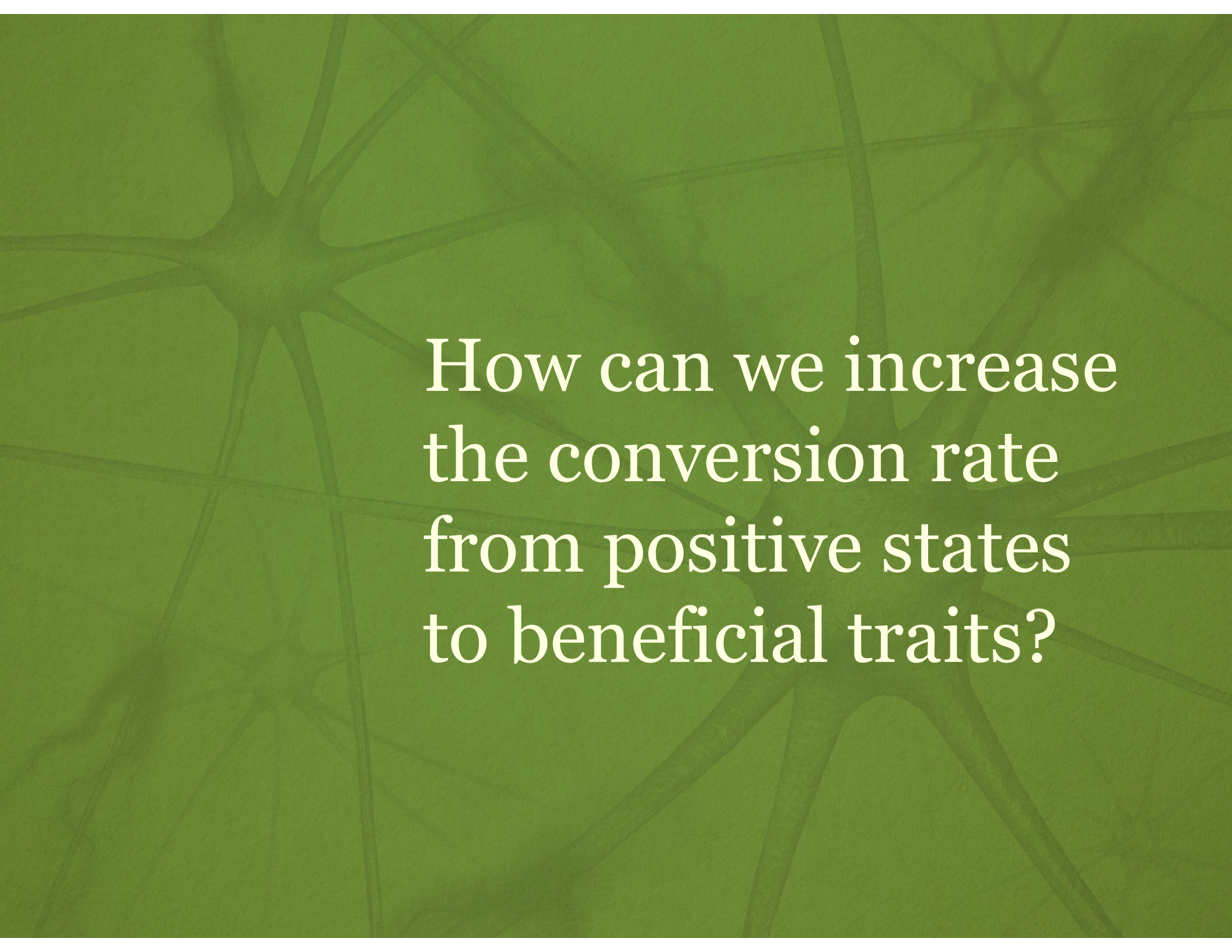
Time

Four Learning Curves

Mental Resources



Time



How can we increase
the conversion rate
from positive states
to beneficial traits?

Learning Factors

Environmental – setting, social support

Behavioral – activities, repetition

Mental – motivation, engagement

Learning How To Learn

Types of Mental Learning Factors

Contextual

Openness
Mindfulness
View of positive experience
Growth/learning mindset
Motivation
Self-efficacy
Self-esteem
Feeling supported
Sense of safety

Engagement

Personal relevance
Alertness, sense of novelty
Arousal, enactment
Sense of reward
Emotion
Granularity of attention
Interoception
Maintenance, repetition
Meaning, elaboration

Benefits of Mental Learning Factors

Benefits of both types of factors:

- Increase learning from the present experience
- Prime NS for future beneficial experiences
- Heighten consolidation of past experiences

Engagement factors have additional benefits:

- Regulate experience directly
- Increase initial processes of consolidation
- Are under volitional control

Mindful Cultivation: HEAL Process

Activation

1. **Have a beneficial experience**

Installation

2. **Enrich the experience**

3. **Absorb the experience**

4. **Link positive and negative material
(Optional)**

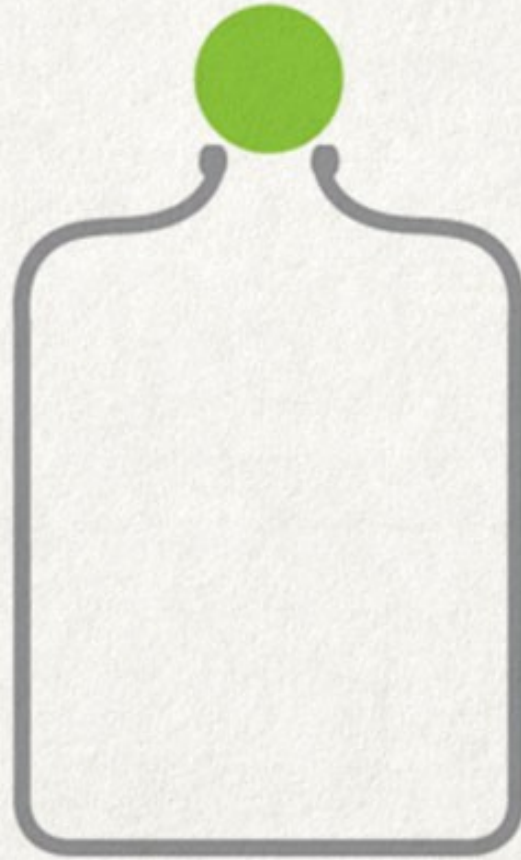
Let's Try It

Notice your own going on being:

- Foreground the experience in awareness
- Stay with it; open to it in your body; keep it fresh
- Be mindful of what is rewarding; sense it sinking in

Create an experience of compassion:

- Wish that beings not suffer, with warm concern
- Let it pervade the mind; find personal relevance
- Give over to it; imagine it spreading inside you



Have a Beneficial Experience

1. Have a Beneficial Experience

Experience: a beneficial thought, perception, emotion, desire, action, or blend

Notice an experience already present, in the foreground or background of awareness

Create an experience, such as:

- Bringing to mind various facts
- Imagining something
- Calling up somatic markers
- Taking action

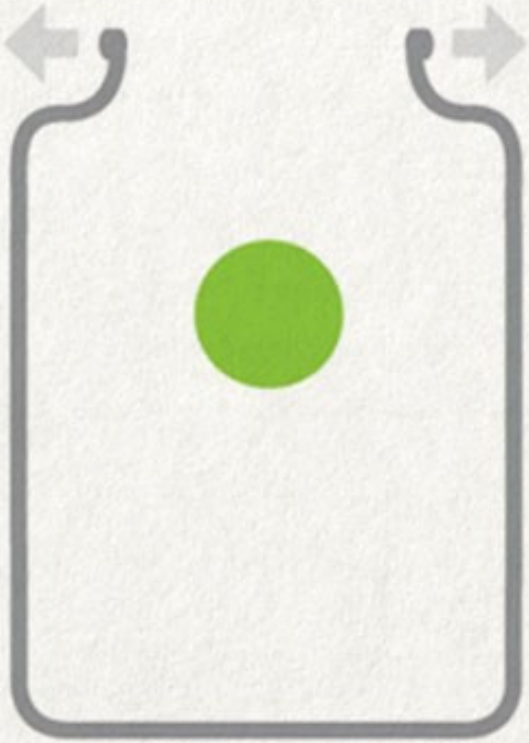
Two Aspects of Installation

Enriching:

- Mind – big, rich, protected experience
- Brain – intensifying and maintaining neural activity

Absorbing:

- Mind – intending and sensing that the experience is received into oneself, with related rewards
- Brain – priming, sensitizing, and promoting more effective encoding and consolidation



Enrich It

Factors of Enriching

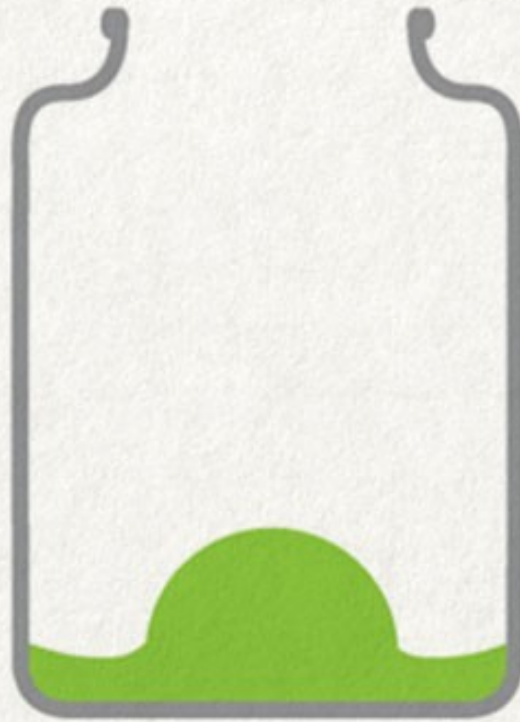
Duration – maintenance, repetition

Intensity – arousal

Multimodality – multiple aspects of experience

Novelty – alertness, sense of freshness, granularity of attention

Salience – personal relevance



Absorb It

Factors of Absorbing

Intend to internalize the experience (priming).

Sense the experience sinking in (sensitizing):

- Imagery – water into sponge, jewel in treasure chest
- Sensation – warm soothing balm spreading inside
- Knowing – “I am becoming a little more _____.”
- Felt sense of shift – embodied registration of change

Find rewards in the experience (promoting encoding and consolidation)

Like a Nice Fire



Let's Try It

Notice

a pleasant
sound or
sight

Create

an experience
of letting go

Create

an experience
of being
in nature

For each of the above:

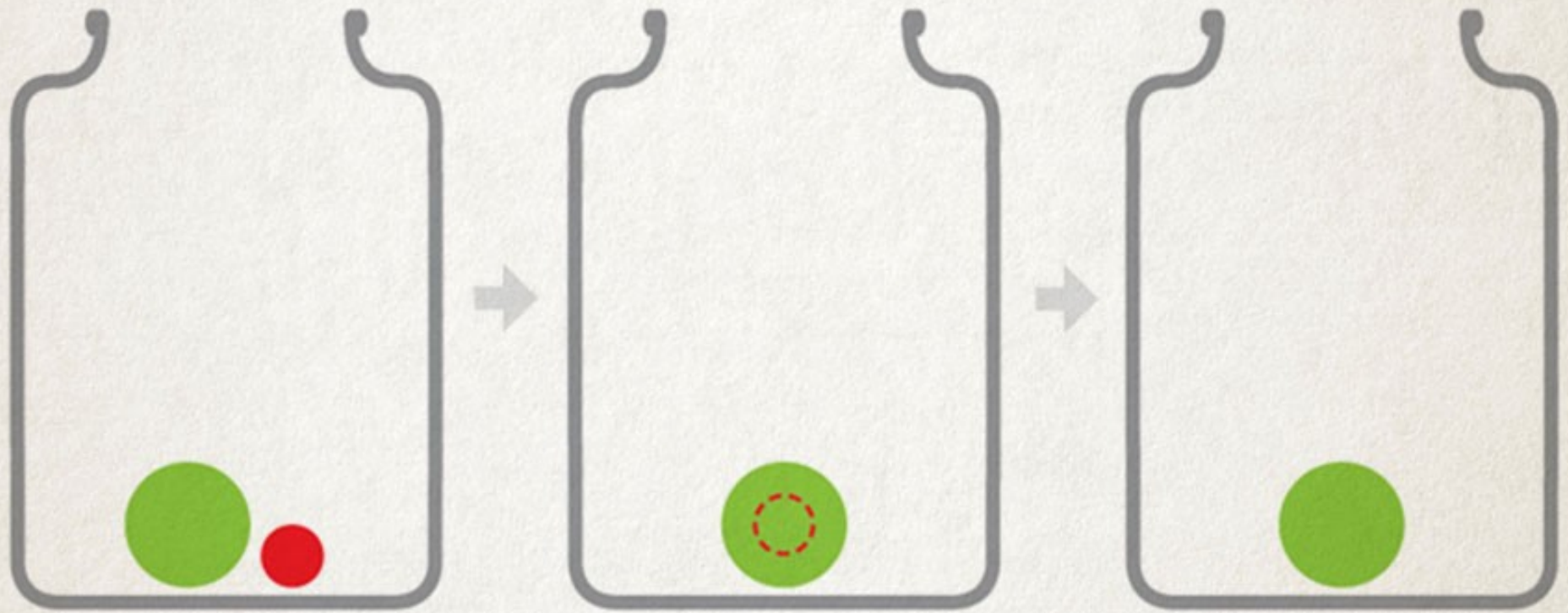
Have the experience. Enrich it. Absorb it.

This is the fundamental how of “experiential gain” that can be applied to any what – any psychological resource (including the results of healing) that a person would like to grow.

Aspects of Enriching and Absorbing are present in any effective psychotherapy, coaching, human resources training, and mindfulness program.

But systematic, explicit guidance for the **installation** phase of learning is uncommon.

And there has been no systematic training in the mental factors of emotional, somatic learning.



Link Positive & Negative Material

Comments on Linking

This step is optional:

- Not necessary for learning
- Risk of flooding, hijacking by negative material

It is common in everyday life and used widely in psychotherapy and related interventions.

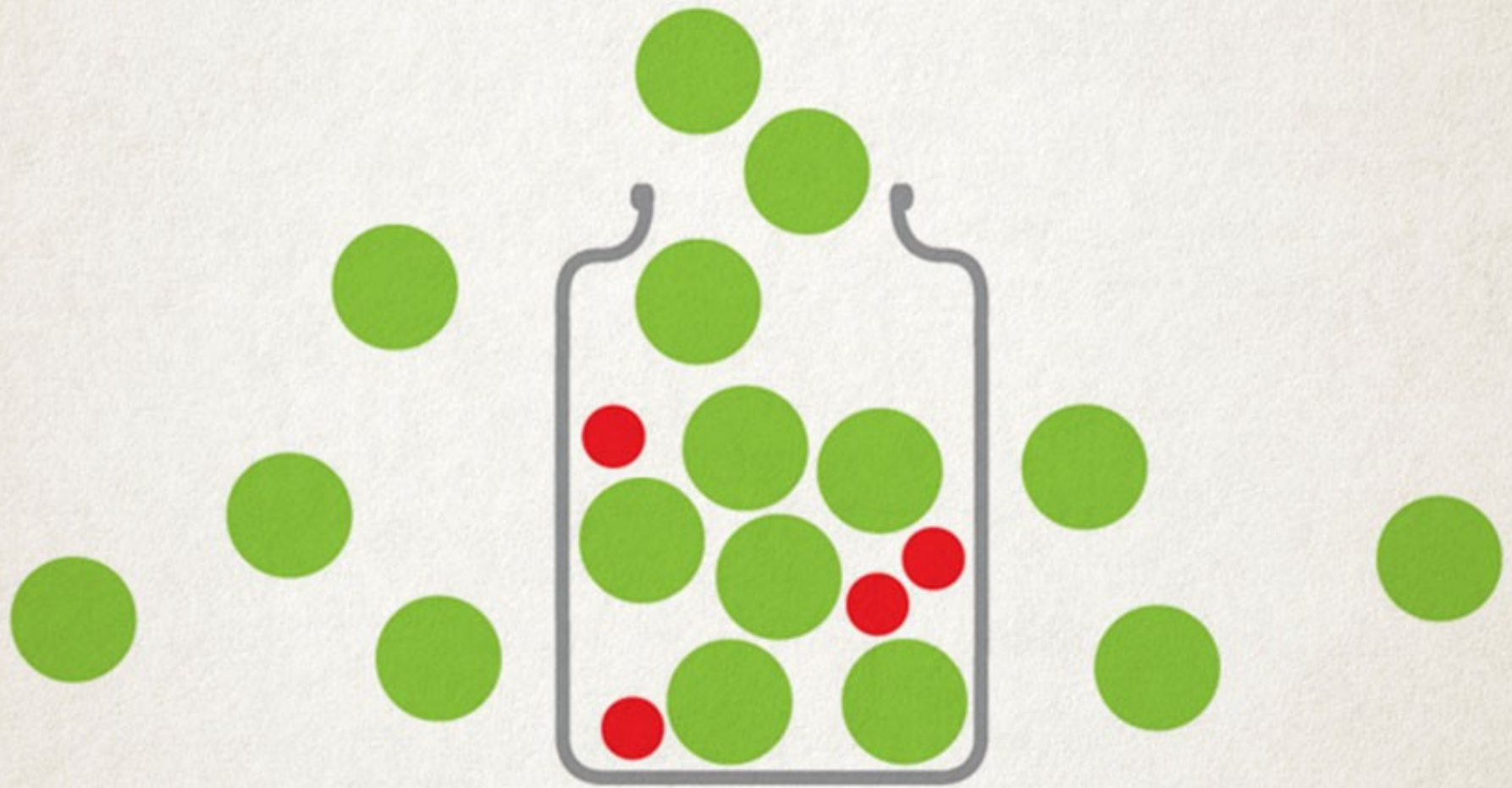
Three conditions:

- Hold two things in awareness
- Keep the positive more prominent
- Drop the negative if it is overwhelming

Degree of Engagement with Negative

- The **idea** of the negative material
- A **felt sense** of the negative material
- The positive material **goes into** the negative material

Throughout, the positive material remains more prominent in awareness.



Have It, Enjoy It

It's Good to Take in the Good

Develops psychological resources:

- General – resilience, positive mood, feeling loved
- Specific – matched to challenges, wounds, deficits

Has built-in, implicit benefits:

- Training attention and executive functions
- Being active rather than passive
- Treating oneself kindly, that one matters

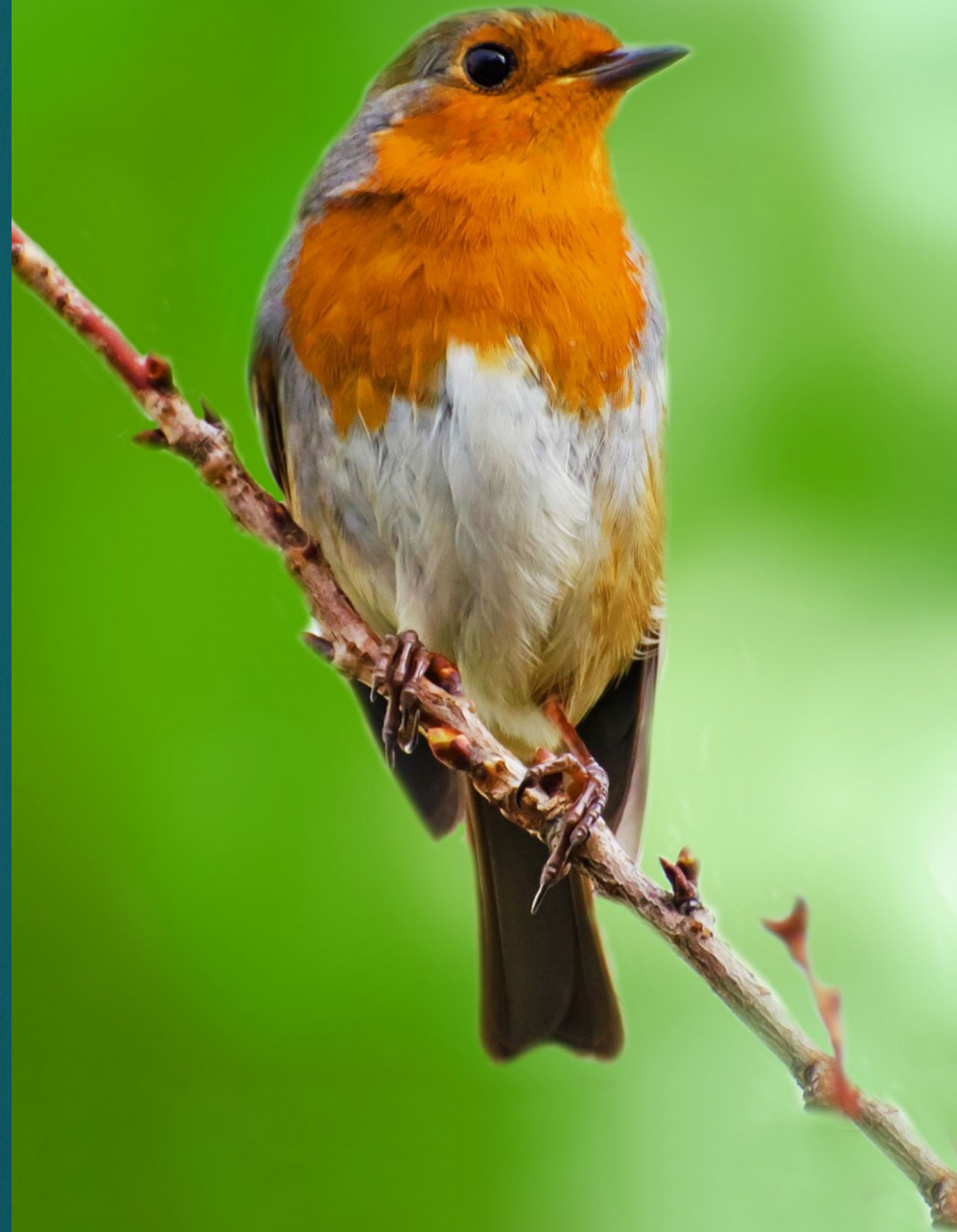
May sensitize brain to the positive

Fuels positive cycles with others

”

*Keep a green bough
in your heart,
and a singing bird
will come.*

Lao Tzu



Pilot Study on a Training in Mental Factors of Learning

Randomized waitlist control group study of the “Taking in the Good Course”

Six 3-hour classes over 7 weeks; 46 subjects; not yet peer-reviewed

Compared to controls, participants reported more Contentment, Self-Esteem, Satisfaction with Life, Savoring, and Gratitude.

After the course and at 2-month follow-up, pooled participants reported less Anxiety and Depression, and more Love, Compassion, Self-Compassion, Mindfulness, Self-Control, Positive Rumination, Joy, Amusement, Awe, and Happiness.

Link with Self-Compassion

Compassion is the wish that beings not suffer, with warm-hearted concern. Compassion is sincere even if we can't make things better.

Self-compassion simply applies this to oneself.

To encourage self-compassion:

1

Get the sense of being cared about.

2

Bring to mind beings you care about. Find compassion for them.

3

Shift the compassion to yourself.

“Anthem”

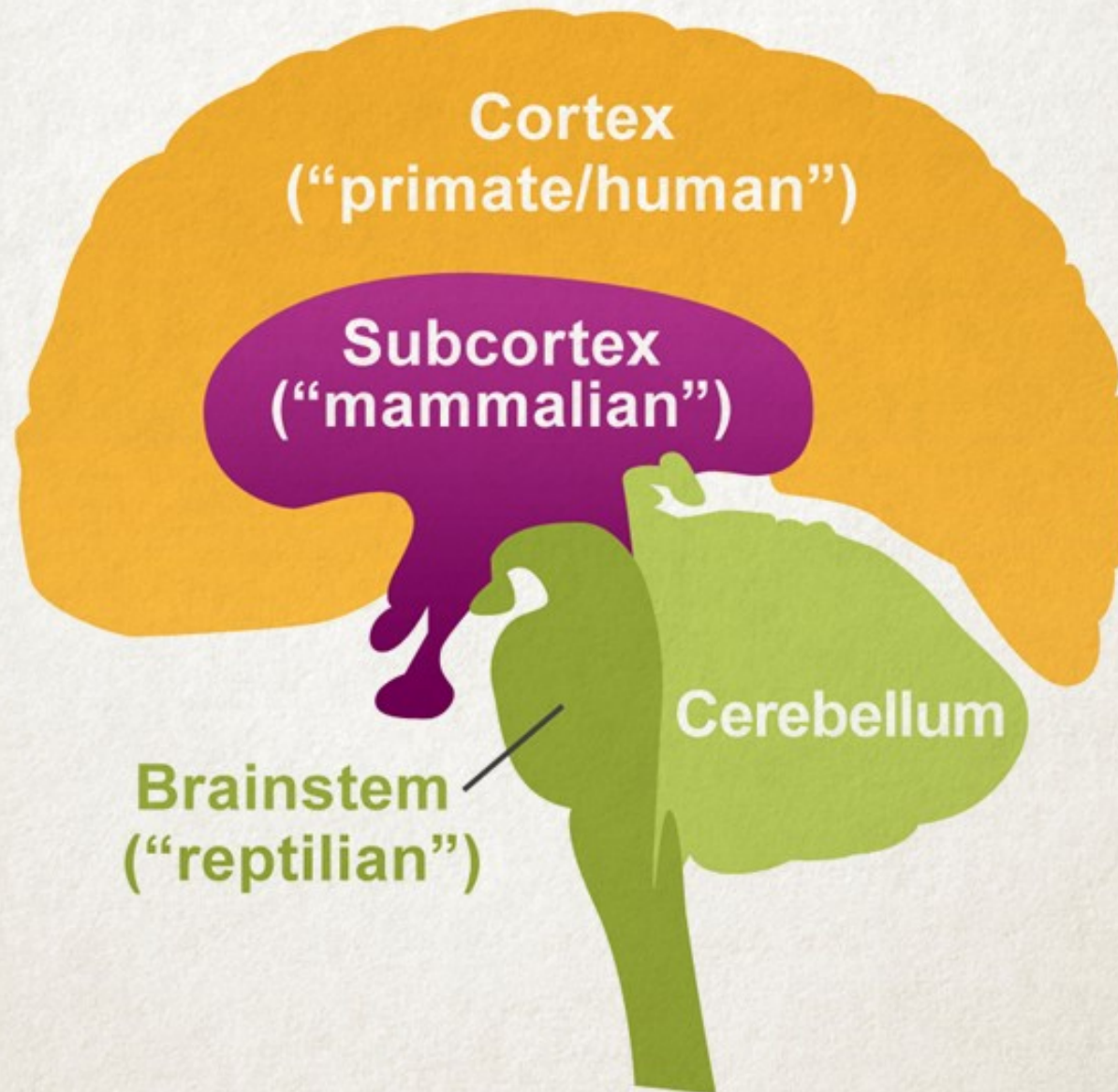
*Ring the bells that can still ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in*

Leonard Cohen



Body and Mind At Rest

The Evolving Brain



Three Fundamental Needs



Safety

**Avoid
Harms**



Satisfaction

**Approach
Rewards**



Connection

**Attach
to Others**

When Needs Feel Met

When there is a core sense of needs met – of **fullness** and **balance** – the brain defaults to its homeostatic resting state.

The body conserves resources, recovers from stress, refuels, and repairs itself.

In terms of safety, satisfaction, and connection, the mind is colored by a sense of **peace, contentment, and love.**

This is the body, brain, and mind in its Responsive mode – the “**Green Zone.**”

When Needs Do Not Feel Met

When there is a core sense of needs unmet – of **deficit** and **disturbance** – the brain is perturbed into an allostatic drive state (“craving”).

The body burns resources, agitates its systems, halts long-term building, and accumulates stress load.

In terms of safety, satisfaction, and connection, the mind is colored by a sense of fear and anger, frustration and drivenness, and hurt and aggression.

This is the body, brain, and mind in its Reactive mode – the **“Red Zone.”**

People have long asked, what is human nature? We have two natures: Responsive and Reactive.

The Reactive mode helped our species evolve in harsh settings, and may sometimes be needed today.

But most of the time, our Stone Age brain in the Red Zone causes much suffering, health problems, and conflict, even war.

Pet the Lizard



Feed the Mouse



Hug the Monkey



Coming Home

Peace

Contentment

Love

Key Resources for Fundamental Needs

What – if it were more present in the mind of a person – would really help with challenges, temperament, or inner wounds or deficits?

How could a person have and install more experiences of these mental resources?



Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A's go first). Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring these questions:

If you're alone,
reflect or journal.

What are some of the challenges in your life these days? (in the world, body, or mind)

What mental resources do – or could – help you with these challenges?

Matching Resources to Needs

Safety

Alertness
Grit
Resolution
Protections
Calm
Relaxation

Peace

Satisfaction

Gratitude
Gladness
Capabilities
Restraint
Ambition
Enthusiasm

Contentment

Connection

Empathy
Compassion
Kindness
Assertiveness
Self-worth
Confidence

Love

The Tip of the Root

In the fourth step of TG, you could try to get at the youngest, most vulnerable layer of painful material.

The “tip of the root” is commonly in childhood. The brain is generally more affected by the negative experiences that occur in early childhood than by ones occurring later in life.

Prerequisites:

1

Understanding the need to get at younger layers

2

Compassion and support for the inner child

3

Capacity to “presence” young material without flooding

Feeling Basically Alright Right Now

- Tuning into the body's signals that all is well right now
- Aware of breathing going fine . . . the heart beating . . . awareness itself keeps on going no matter what arises . . .
- Letting go of the past, not worrying about the future. Noticing that at least in this moment you are OK.
- Being alright, you can let go of any need to struggle with anything unpleasant.
- Feeling alright sinking into places inside that haven't . . .

Explore this setting for things that are beautiful (or otherwise pleasureable) to you: sounds, sights, tastes, touches, smells, and thoughts. Look for little things.

Really **take in** the sense of beauty (or the sense of pleasure in general).

Feeling of Worth

- It is natural and important to feel that you have worth as a person – which does not mean arrogance or ego.
- **You develop this sense of worth through:**
 - Others including, appreciating, liking, and loving you
 - You respecting yourself
- **Take in experiences of being:**
 - Capable, skillful, talented, helpful
 - Included, wanted, sought out, chosen
 - Appreciated, acknowledged, respected
 - Liked, befriended, supported
 - Loved, cherished, special



Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A's go first). Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring these questions:

If you're alone,
reflect or journal.

What have you
learned so far?

What has been
important for you?

While listening, be
as empathic as you can
with your partner.

Using HEAL With Others

Resources for HEAL

Intention; willing to feel good

Identified target experience

Openness to the experience; embodiment

Mindfulness of the HEAL steps to sustain them

Working through blocks

The Four Ways to Offer a Method

Doing it implicitly

Teaching it and leaving it up to people

Doing it explicitly with people

Asking people to do it on their own

HEAL in Classes and Trainings

Take a few minutes to explain it and teach it.

In the flow, encourage Enriching and Absorbing, using natural language.

Encourage people to use HEAL on their own.

Do HEAL on regular occasions (e.g., at end of a therapy session, at end of mindfulness practice)

Promoting Motivation

- Identify what you want to encourage (thought, word, deed); be clear; what would it look like?
- Use HEAL to associate rewards to what you want to encourage:
 - Before doing it
 - While doing it
 - After doing it
- Give over to this new habit, let it carry you along.



Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A's go first). Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring these questions:

What mental resources in others you know could help them?

* How could you encourage greater installation of those resources?

Coming Home

Peace

Contentment

Love

Thank You



References

Suggested Books

See **RickHanson.net** for other good books.

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See www.RickHanson.net/key-papers/ for other suggested readings.

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Supplemental Materials

RESOURCES FOR AVOIDING HARMS

Challenge

Weakness

Helplessness

**Freezing,
immobilization**

Inflated threats

Alarm

Tension

Worry, fear

Irritation, anger

Resource

Strength

Agency

Action, venting

Accurate appraisal

Protection, calming

Relaxation

**Feeling alright now,
making a plan**

Big picture, peace

RESOURCES FOR APPROACHING REWARDS

Challenge

What I don't have

Scarcity

Disappointed, sad

Frustration, failure

Bored, numb

Grief

Giving up

Drivenness

Resource

What I do have

Enoughness,
fullness

Gratitude, gladness

Accomplishment

Pleasure, excitement

Loved and loving

Aspire, lived by good

Already satisfied ¹⁰⁶

RESOURCES FOR ATTACHING TO OTHERS

Challenge

Left out, excluded
Inadequacy, shame
Ignored, unseen
Lonely

Resentment

Envy, jealousy

Feeling stifled

Resource

Belonging, wanted
Appreciated, respected
Receiving empathy
Friendship, caring
to others and oneself
Recognize it hurts you
Self-compassion, take
action, good will
Skillful assertiveness⁹⁷

Implicit HEAL in Therapy

- Creating space for beneficial experiences
- Drawing attention to beneficial facts
- Encouraging positive experience of beneficial fact
- Drawing attention to key aspects of an experience
- Slowing the client down; not moving on
- Modeling taking in the good oneself

Explicit HEAL in Therapy (1)

Teach the method

- Background helps about brain, negativity bias
- Emphasize facts and mild beneficial experiences.
- Surface blocks and work through them.
- Explain the idea of “risking the dreaded experience,” noticing the (usually) good results, and taking them in.

Explicit HEAL in Therapy (2)

- Do HEAL with client(s) during a session
 - Reinforcing key resource states and traits
 - Linking rewards to desired thoughts or actions
 - When learning from therapy has worked well
 - When realistic views of self and world come true
 - Good qualities in client
 - New insights
- Encourage HEAL between sessions
 - Naming occasions
 - Identifying key beneficial facts and experiences

HEAL and Trauma

- **General considerations:**
 - People vary in their resources and their traumas.
 - Often the major action is with “failed protectors.”
 - Respect “yellow lights” and the client’s pace.
- The first three steps of HEAL are generally safe. Use them to build resources for tackling the trauma directly.
- Use the Link step to address peripheral features and themes of the trauma.
- With care, use Link to get at the heart of the trauma.

In Couples, Benefits of HEAL

- “Installs” key resources that support interactions (e.g., self-soothing, recognition of good intentions)
- Dampens vicious cycles
- Helps partner feel seen, credited for efforts
- Increases the sense of the good that is present
- Reduces clinginess, pursuing, or reproach that the other person withdraws from

Using HEAL with a Couple

- Basic steps (often informal):
 - Attention to a good fact
 - Evoking and sustaining a good experience
 - Managing blocks
 - Awareness of the impact on one's partner
 - Debriefing, often from both partners
- Pitfalls to avoid:
 - Seeming to side with one person
 - Unwittingly helping a person overlook real issues
 - Letting the other partner pile on

Uses for Children

- Registering curricular skills and other resources
- Motivation for learning; associating rewards
- Seeing the good in the world, others, and oneself – and in the past, present, and future
- Seeing life as opportunity
- Feeling like an active learner
- Developing child-specific inner strengths

Adaptations for Children

- Kids gain from HEAL – particularly mistreated, anxious, spirited/ ADHD, or LD children.
- Style:
 - Be matter of fact: this is mental/neural literacy.
 - A little brain talk goes a long way.
 - Be motivating: name benefits; “be the boss of your own mind.”
 - Down to earth, naturalistic
 - Scaffold based on executive functions, motivation, and need for autonomy.
 - Brief, concrete

Occasions for HEAL with Kids

- Explicit training in positive neuroplasticity
- Natural rhythms in the day (e.g., start of class, after a lesson or recess, end of day)
- When working with an individual child
- When dealing with classroom issues