

THREE SUCCESSSES A DAY

Change Your Brain's Negativity Bias

BY ROBERT PAL

JESSICA, A 40-YEAR-OLD MOTHER OF TWINS and a lawyer, came to see me for help with challenges she was experiencing at work. During our first session, I asked her to give me a specific example of her problem. She began to describe what would happen when she had to meet a new client.

About an hour or two before each meeting, Jessica would begin thinking about all the things that could go wrong, and the negative impact it would have on her career. These thoughts occurred despite the fact that she was considered to be an excellent lawyer and made a positive first impression on people. Jessica knew she was good, but at times she'd become paralyzed with self-doubt. She wanted to know why she had these thoughts even though she knew she was clearly able to conduct a productive first meeting.

This was an important question, as self-confidence impacts many areas of life. The belief you have in your ability to accomplish your goals is fundamental to your success in your career and relationships. When you have ADHD, you may know that you can successfully accomplish a task, yet you can still experience self-doubt that sabotages your efforts or prevents you from even starting. Many people mistakenly blame themselves for their lack of confidence. This false belief increases anxiety, depression, and self-doubt.

There were two main reasons for Jessica's low level of confidence. First, she was not diagnosed with ADHD until she was 35. As a child, her parents and teachers repeatedly told her that she wasn't trying hard enough. Her strength in certain subjects was used as "proof" that demonstrated she could do better, if only she tried harder. She grew up with a belief (of which she wasn't fully aware), that no matter how hard she tried, it just wasn't good enough. This false belief contributed to her current lack of confidence in her ability to conduct a standard initial client interview at work. The second reason has to do with Jessica's brain. If I was going to help her, I needed to change her brain. Allow me to explain.

The problem is the human brain

The fundamental problem is the way the human brain is wired. The brain is not designed to process positive and negative experiences in the same way; negative experiences are prioritized.

This is called the brain's Negativity Bias, and it is encoded in a part of our memory about which we are unaware. Our brains are wired this way because it was necessary for our survival during prehistoric times, when we had to be on constant alert for danger. We could afford to miss an opportunity for an enjoyable experience, but we could not afford to miss the sound of nearby movement, as it could be a dangerous animal preparing to attack. Avoiding death and pain was the priority. As a result, our brains were constantly scanning for negativity. This negativity bias worked—humans survived as a species.

Despite the fact that we are no longer under constant threat, our brain still prioritizes the negative events in our lives over the positive ones. The resulting unhappiness and stress has a great impact on our relationships, health, and performance. We remember what we did not do, as opposed to what we accomplished.

We constantly overestimate risk and underestimate our strength and resources to resolve problems. As a result, we spend a great portion of our lives worried, irritated, and stressed, instead of happy, secure, and confident. But it doesn't have to be that way.



Through an automatic process called “neuroplasticity”, our brains are constantly changing based on what we experience. Through self-directed neuroplasticity, we can shift our brain from a negative to a positive bias. With a more positive bias, we will start to experience life with increased happiness and self-confidence.

This transformational change can start with a simple exercise (see sidebar). It is based on the “Three Blessings,” created by Dr. Martin Seligman, past president of the American Psychological Association and key creator of positive psychology.

It works!

At first, Jessica wasn't convinced that this simple exercise would make a difference in her self-confidence. Fortunately, she was open to trying it out. After two weeks, she started to notice her successes as they happened during the day, not just in the evening. Her awareness was shifting to what she was doing right, as opposed to feeling her fears about what she might not be able to do well. This resulted in a significant increase in her self-confidence and overall level of happiness.

A large research study done in 2005* showed that the benefits experienced by Jessica were not unique:

- 92 percent of participants reported feeling happier within fifteen days.
- 94 percent became less depressed.
- Participants found that these results lasted at least six months.
- Participants were only required to do the exercise for one week. They could choose if they wanted to continue, which most did.

If you want to improve your mood and feel better about yourself, I suggest that you make a commitment to record your top three daily successes for two weeks—starting tonight. You will be amazed at the difference it will make. 🍀

NOTE

*Seligman, Martin EP; Steen, Tracy A; Park, Nansook; and Peterson, Christopher. “Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions.” *American Psychologist*, Vol 60(5), Jul-Aug 2005, 410-421. <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/amp/60/5/410/>

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“THREE SUCCESSES” EXERCISE

The negative bias of your brain stops you from noticing many of the good things that you accomplish each day. This results in a lower level of confidence and reduced happiness. Consequently, in order to improve the way you value and see yourself, you have to learn how to increase your awareness of the positive experiences that you are responsible for on a day-to-day basis.

This simple exercise will start the process of changing the way your brain interrupts your day.

You will become aware of the positive experiences in your day and your role in creating them, of the abundance of things you do well, and that you are good enough, resulting in increased self-confidence and happiness.

The process of the exercise is simple and requires only about ten minutes at the end of the day.

● **Keep a journal by your bed. Each night, record three successes from the day.**

A success is something you did that you feel good about; it can be big or small.

For example, you might write:

- Had a great conversation with my partner
- Solved a problem a work.
- Had a productive meeting with a new client

● **Take a few minutes and reflect on how you made this happen.** For example,

you can write:

- Had a great conversation with my partner
→ Turned off my phone and really listened to what was being said
- Solved a problem a work
→ Didn't give up
- Had a productive meeting with a new client
→ Reviewed my notes and reminded myself that I can help this client

● **Do this for at least two weeks.** However, many people enjoy the benefits from this exercise and continue to do it indefinitely.