You Have Power Over Your Brain

Your brain looks for ways to turn on the happy chemicals

- **dopamine**: Find new rewards that meet your needs.
- **oxytocin**: Find social support and strengthen it.
- **serotonin**: Become special in the eyes of others.

Happy chemicals are released in short spurts and you have to do more to get more.

They evolved to reward survival behavior, not to be on all the time.

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Your brain defines your survival needs in a quirky way

- It cares about the survival of your genes: Your brain rewards you with a good feeling when you do something good for your genes: for your mating prospects or your children’s prospects.
- It learns from the experiences of youth: Whatever met your needs in youth built neural pathways that turn on your happy chemicals today, regardless of what you remember.

Your happy chemicals are inherited from earlier mammals. They motivate an animal to do what it takes to meet survival needs.

Your happy chemicals are controlled by neural pathways you built long ago. You can build new pathways if you try.
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Your brain sends new inputs through old pathways

the electricity in your brain flows like water in a storm, finding the paths of least resistance

You can build a new path by repeating a new behavior for 45 days without fail.

It won’t feel good at first because your brain equates the old path with survival. But if you persist, electricity will flow down your new path, and you will turn on your happy chemicals in new ways.

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#1 Know the job of each happy brain chemical

- **dopamine**
  - the joy of expecting a new reward
  - meets a need
  - “I can get it!”
  - novelty

- **serotonin**
  - the pleasure of gaining a one-up position
  - social importance
  - getting respect
  - pride

- **oxytocin**
  - the comfort of social trust given or received
  - safety in numbers
  - social support
  - touch

- **endorphin**
  - oblivion that masks physical pain
  - evolved for emergencies
  - exercise, laugh

The brain habituates to rewards, which is why we keep seeking new and improved.

We easily see this in others but we hate to see it in ourselves.

The brain releases trust cautiously to promote survival and avoid harm.

Do not inflict pain to get it: it’s a bad spiral. Belly laugh & stretch daily.

Your happy chemicals are inherited from earlier mammals. They’re released in short spurts, so you have to do more to get more.

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#2 Tough choices are the task your brain is meant for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oxytocin vs. Dopamine</th>
<th>Serotonin vs. Oxytocin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A step toward tighter social bonds may be a step away from your individual goals; and vice versa. You get to weigh and choose.</td>
<td>A step toward higher status may be a step away from your social bonds; and vice versa. Outcomes are never certain but you get to choose.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dopamine vs. Serotonin</th>
<th>Cortisol vs. Happy Chemicals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A step toward your personal goals may be a step away from higher status; and vice versa. You can’t get it all but you can choose your steps.</td>
<td>Every step toward meeting your needs could bring risk and stress. But if you don’t take a step, that’s a risk too. Your brain is designed to manage this!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frustration is natural.
When you can’t have it all, don’t blame the world. Natural selection built a brain that seeks more. Celebrate your choices.
Your brain defines your needs in a quirky way. It cares about the survival of your genes as much as your body; and it relies on pathways it built in youth.

#3 Your brain is always trying to get rewards and avoid pain

**move away from pain**
- Unhappy brain chemicals warn you to pull back from possible threats to meeting your needs
  - cortisol

**move toward rewards**
- Happy brain chemicals are released when you see a way to meet a need
  - dopamine
  - serotonin
  - oxytocin
  - endorphin

**mammalian limbic system**

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#4 Your brain defines pain and threat in a quirky way

- It anticipates pain based on past pain
- It confuses social pain with physical pain

The cortisol spurts of your past connected neurons that turn it on today when similar patterns reach your senses.

Social isolation and status setbacks threaten the survival of a mammal’s genes, so the mammal brain treats social threats as survival threats.

Cortisol is pain, fear, stress, and anxiety. Without effort or intent, it alerts you to scan for familiar threat signals.

Consciously, you know a social disappointment won’t kill you, but your mammal brain scans for potential social threats and turns on the cortisol alarm.

Cortisol creates a bad feeling that motivates you to “do something fast!” to make it stop. But it’s metabolized in 20 minutes if you don’t re-trigger.

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#5 Your brain relies on pathways built from early experience

The electricity in your brain flows like water in a storm, finding the paths of least resistance.

What ever triggered your happy chemicals in youth connected neurons that turn on your happy chemicals today.

The pathways built before age eight became the superhighways of your brain because they got paved with myelin.

Puberty brings another myelin surge, which is why the experiences of puberty shape our ups and downs in surprising ways.

Mirror neurons wire you to repeat behaviors observed in youth.

Your brain uses the pathways you have until you give your electricity a new place to flow. It takes lots of repetition after your myelin years.
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#6 Your Pathways Give Meaning to the World Around You

The world constantly floods your senses with more detail than your brain can process. You have to sift and sort to make sense of things. Your existing pathways let you do that effortlessly.

You have ten times more neurons going TO your eyes than FROM your eyes. Your brain tells your eyes what to look for instead of just receiving.

Happy chemicals help you do that. They activate templates of your past rewards. Cortisol lights up templates of your past hurts.

Your brain chemicals are managed by structures that all mammals have in common (like the amygdala, hippocampus, hypothalamus). They help you respond to sensory inputs as “good” or “bad.”

Your mammalian limbic system and your cortex are always working together to interpret the world so you get rewards and avoid pain.

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#7 Repetition can build new pathways in your brain

We all end up with some pathways that lead where we’d rather not go.

You can rewire your brain to feel good when you do things that are actually good for you.

Choose a new behavior or thought pattern and repeat it daily for 45 days.

It will feel unsafe at first because your brain linked your old path to survival.

But electricity will zip down a new path to your happy chemicals if you persist without fail.

InnerMammalInstitute.org can help. We have books, videos, social media, blogs, and slides that will help you step toward the brain you want.

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