

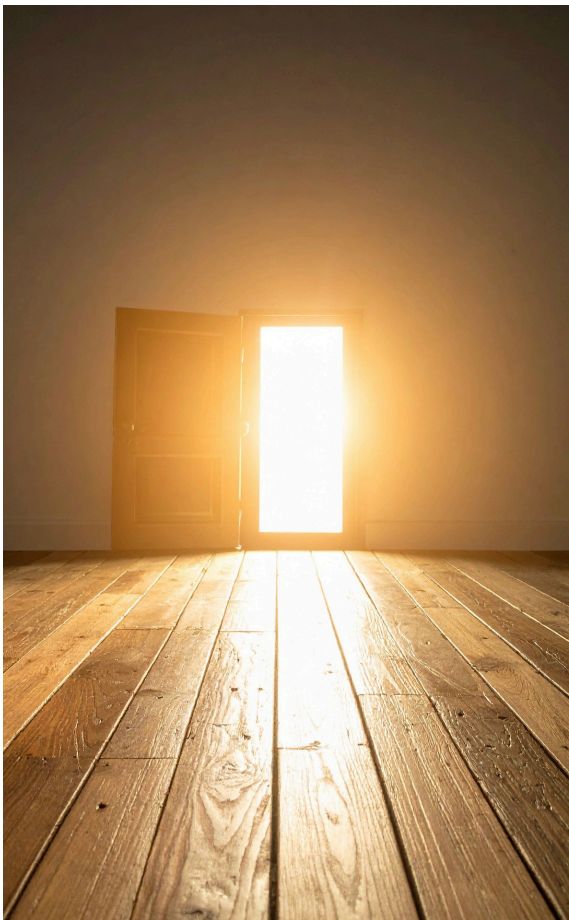


Savoring the Good: Four Skills for Deepening Positive Experiences

by Ben Gaibel, LCSW

Pleasant moments often come and go without being fully taken in. The feeling of accomplishment after finishing a challenging case, a fun conversation with a colleague that ends in laughter, a walk outside with a view of the beautiful Colorado sky. These are moments that are easy to overlook, often overshadowed by attention devoted to solving problems.

The high stress and constant mental activity that are part of the legal profession can make it challenging to slow down and notice what's going right. It's common to become so attuned to risk, worst-case scenarios, or the next task at hand that positive experiences are easily missed. Fortunately, tuning into them is a skill that can be strengthened, leading to greater well-being and resilience.[1]



In a previous article, we introduced four skills for working with challenging emotions. This follow-up article offers four skills for savoring positive experiences. With some practice and intention, pleasant moments can become more frequent and longer lasting.

Intentional reflection of positive experiences can require practice because our brains are more wired for survival than for well-being. As psychologist Rick Hanson explains in *Hardwiring Happiness*, "To survive and pass on their genes, our ancestors needed to be especially aware of dangers, losses, and conflicts. Consequently, the brain evolved a negativity bias that looks for bad news, reacts intensely to it, and quickly stores the experience in neural structure." [2] This bias may protect us, but it can also incline the mind toward stress and focus on the negative.

While accessing well-being may not be a primary instinct, we have the choice and ability to improve it. Dr. Hanson encourages the practice of intentionally noticing and absorbing positive moments, which can help them become more integrated into our brains' wiring. He describes this process of "taking in the good" which can turn passing positive states into lasting inner resources, such as a greater ability to cultivate positive feelings and maintain emotional balance during challenging times.[3]

Whether you are feeling up or down, here are four simple practices that can be done in any moment for a greater sense of well-being:

1. Notice positive experiences while they are happening.

This starts with awareness. Why not keep a look out for the good that is already here? Examples include recognizing the simple pleasure of a cup of coffee, a feeling of connection with a friend or colleague, the feeling of finishing a task, or a few minutes outside noticing any pleasant sights or sounds. They might be brief, but the key is to catch them while they happen. Allow yourself to fully take in these pleasant moments with presence and gratitude. The more you practice looking for what's going right and appreciating it, the more likely you are to catch future positive moments.



2. Let it land in the body.

Once you've noticed something positive, focus on the feeling for a few extra seconds. If there's a positive emotion associated with it, what does it feel like in the body? Perhaps there's a feeling of warmth in the heart area, an ease in the shoulders, or an overall lightness in the torso. Bringing your attention to the felt experience in the body can allow the feeling to expand and help translate the experience more deeply into your mind and body.

If you don't feel much, or anything at all, that's okay. The value of this practice isn't in forcing a feeling, but in simply being present with the moment. Focusing on a pleasant experience helps shift the attention to something other than stress and trains the mind to notice what's good. It can be helpful to simply tune into your senses such as sight, sound, touch, or taste associated with the pleasant experience. This can help you stay grounded and make the experience more vivid and memorable.

3. Give yourself permission to feel good.

It's common to have resistance to feeling good. Focusing on what's wrong might be such a habit that it can be uncomfortable to let go and access well-being. There might be fear of letting one's guard down, waiting for the other shoe to drop, feeling undeserving, or that it's not going to last. These inner patterns can be barriers to experiencing moments of joy, gratitude, or contentment.

Instead, acknowledge if those patterns are present, and then allow yourself to welcome in what's positive. Just as it's beneficial to practice acceptance for difficult emotions, we can also allow ourselves to receive positive ones. This may take practice, but it can become more natural as the benefits grow familiar.



4. Keep looking for something positive during challenging times.

In the midst of a struggle, it's normal to have one's attention contract to tunnel vision on only the problems at hand. Even in the middle of a stressful day or painful experience, there may be small moments of beauty, connection, or gratitude that can still be accessed.

This can involve recognizing something simple like the cuteness of a pet or child, a hug with a loved one, warmth of the sun on your skin, or appreciating the parts of your body that are working properly.



You might also recognize and appreciate the simple absence of suffering. As the Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh taught, we can learn to appreciate a "non-toothache."^[4] Even noticing when you are not in crisis, not miserable, or not in severe pain can bring a sense of relief worth appreciating.

Conclusion

Savoring the good isn't about ignoring hardships or putting on rose-colored glasses. It's about expanding the field of awareness to go beyond just looking at what is difficult. It's possible to have greater balance by opening to the full range of experiences, including something that is going right. Even if anxiety, sadness, or anger is present, it can coexist with something else that is positive and grounding. By practicing any of the four skills mentioned, you can train your mind to notice and absorb the good that's already present in your life.

While there will always be problems that demand attention, every day also contains incredible opportunities for gratitude, connection, and presence.

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For more well-being related strategies visit the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) website at www.coloradolap.org or contact us at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 to request a confidential, free well-being consultation.



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[1] Hanson, R., Shapiro, S., Hutton-Thamm, E., Hagerty, M. R., & Sullivan, K. P. (2021). Learning to learn from positive experiences. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 18(1), 142–153.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2021.2006759>

[2] Richard Hanson, *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* (New York, NY: Harmony Books, 2013), 30.

[3] Hanson, Richard. *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*. New York, NY: Harmony Books, 2013.

[4] Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1991.