

Research Clues in on the “How” of Emotional Health in Daily Life

- AWARENESS
- CONNECTION
- INSIGHT
- PURPOSE
- SHARE THESE NEW FINDINGS
- TRY THE HEALTHY MINDS PROGRAM

Center for Healthy Minds researchers explore the “how” of emotional well-being in a new paper published in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*. Such skills are crucial as mental health crises are spiking with the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the continued stressors of racial discrimination and economic hardship.

Let’s Break Down the Findings

What do we mean when we say our minds can actually change for the better?

Take a deep-dive into the science of the four pillars of well-being: **Awareness**, **Connection**, **Insight** and **Purpose**. For the most comprehensive view, you can also check out the **full copy of the paper** or the **write-up on our website**. Our friends at Healthy Minds Innovations, the external nonprofit affiliated with the Center, also share practices below on promoting your well-being.

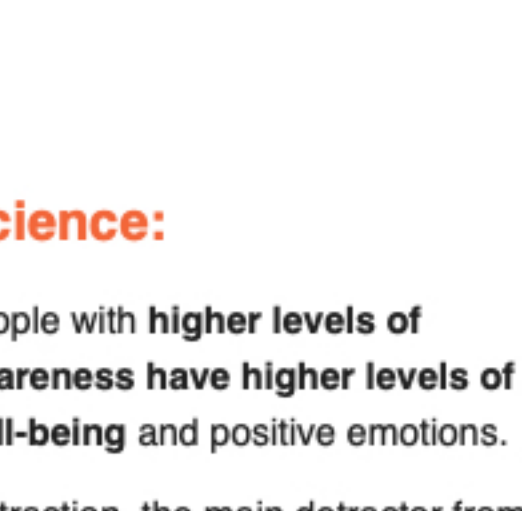
AWARENESS

What it is:

A **heightened, flexible attentiveness** to your environment and internal cues such as bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings. Training in awareness during meditation practices can increase what’s called “meta-awareness” or being aware of what is happening in your mind.

What it looks like:

- Noticing thoughts, feelings, sensations as they arise - commonly called **mindfulness**
- **Catching yourself from being distracted** or in auto-pilot mode while doing daily tasks like cleaning or driving



Distraction

can impair executive function, and ...



The Science:

- People with **higher levels of awareness have higher levels of well-being** and positive emotions.
- Distraction, the main detractor from awareness, can impair executive function ²¹ as well as increase stress and anxiety ²², ADHD symptoms ²³, and depression ²⁴
- Some studies show that **distraction and the effects of perceived stress can harm our health** and produce stress responses in the body related to inflammation and aging
- Bringing awareness to one’s thoughts recruits lateral regions of the prefrontal cortex that form part of the brain’s central-executive network ³⁰

Practice:

Close your eyes and take 10 intentional breaths, counting each silently and noticing how each inhale and exhale feels in your body. What do you notice? Whatever arises is fine. It’s the noticing that matters.

Want a guided practice? Try the **Tour of the Senses Seated 10 Minute practice** from Healthy Minds Innovations.



CONNECTION

What it is:

A **feeling of care and kinship toward other people**, promoting supportive relationships and supportive interactions.

What it looks like:

- Acknowledging people’s differences (like politics or points of view), and trying to understand that person’s unique perspective and **acknowledge that just like you, they are worthy of dignity and respect** as a fellow human being
- **Showing appreciation** to people in your life by acknowledging them and sharing why you’re grateful for them
- Focusing on a shared characteristic when you meet someone for the first time



30 minutes per day... 2 Weeks

compassion meditation

resulted in changes in people’s caring behaviors and measurable changes in the brain

The Science:

- Forming negative first impressions (or even neutral ones in some cases), can potentially lead to apathy, intergroup bias, and perceived social isolation ⁵¹
- **Social relationships are better predictors of health** than some biological and economic factors ⁵²
- Making inferences about someone we perceive to be similar to ourselves activates the ventromedial prefrontal cortex ⁷¹, which is central to the perception of social safety and feelings of social connection
- One Center study has reported that **just 30 minutes of compassion meditation training per day over the course of two weeks** resulted in changes in people’s caring behaviors as well as resulted in measurable changes in the brain ⁶⁷

Practice:

Make a habit of noticing the positive in other people. You do this as a sitting meditation practice by bringing a close friend or family member to mind and recalling things you admire or appreciate about them. Recall situations where they expressed their appreciation. You can then extend this to people you don’t know very well and eventually even to people you find challenging. Then apply this skill in daily life by noticing the positive in the people you see and interact with and expressing your appreciation.

Try a guided practice! Listen to this **Appreciation 10 Minute Seated Meditation** from Healthy Minds Innovations.



INSIGHT

What it is:

Self-knowledge concerning how our emotions, thoughts and beliefs shape our experiences and sense of self.

What it looks like:

- **Recognizing an anxious thought** and being curious whether it’s coming from a fearful expectation or self-criticism
- Clarify and **challenge “unchangeable” beliefs** about yourself and people around you



Growth-Oriented Beliefs about the Self



linked to: lower depression and anxiety, increased academic performance

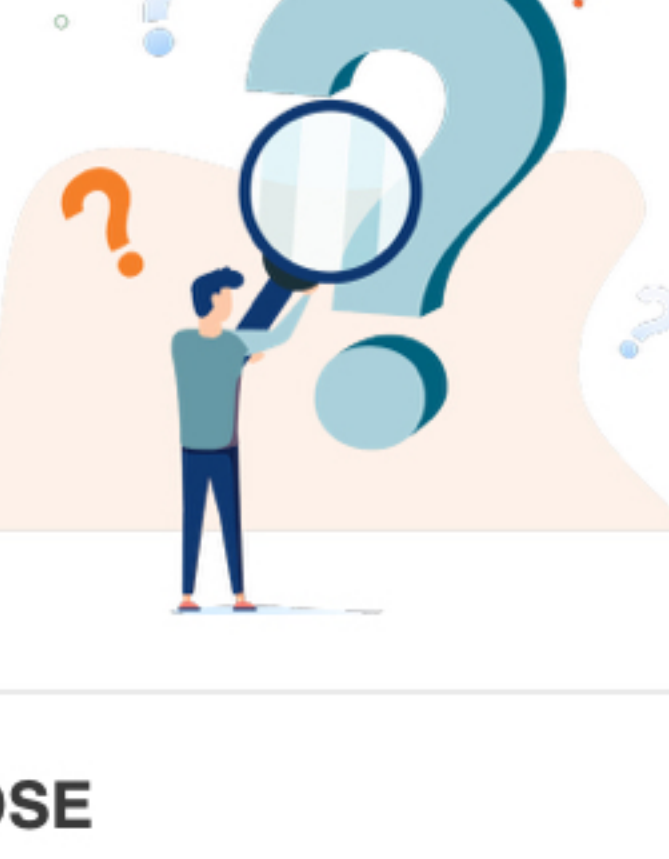
The Science

- Rigid and **negative self beliefs can result in an increase in mental health disorders**, while accepting and growth-oriented beliefs about the self are linked to lower levels of depression and anxiety and even things like improved academic performance ^{7, 93, 94, 95}
- Scientific studies of the self suggest that there does not appear to be a single, unitary network associated with insight in the brain ¹⁰⁸
- Meditators with significant experience who have done insight-related deconstructive meditation appear to show **enduring changes in self-related processing in the brain** ¹²⁰

Practice:

If you’ve ever found yourself already in a bad mood before even joining a meeting, that’s a moment for insight. You can **question your assumptions, and notice them.**

Want to try a guided practice? Listen to **Deconstructing Inner Experience** from Healthy Minds Innovations.



PURPOSE

What it is:

Being clear about your core values and deeper motivation and being able to apply them in your daily life.

What it looks like:

- Being able to **link mundane activities with a meaningful value** or motivation, such as doing the dishes as an act of generosity for the people you live with
- **Viewing challenges and setbacks as opportunities** to learn and grow, including strengthening your connection to meaningful values and goals



Strong Sense of Purpose is associated with:

improved health outcomes & behaviors

cardiovascular events, reduced risk of death, less health care utilization

The Science:

- A **strong sense of purpose is associated with improved health outcomes and behaviors**, including increased physical activity ¹³³, decreased incidence of stroke ¹³⁴, fewer cardiovascular events ¹³⁵, reduced risk of death ¹³⁶, lower health care utilization¹³⁷, and even better financial health ¹³⁸
- In a sample of African Americans at high-risk for psychiatric disorders, **purpose in life emerged as a key factor predicting resilience and recovery** from traumatic events ¹⁴³

A pioneering study found people who prioritized more transcendent values (those that extend beyond themselves) had different activity in the left and right amygdala and left anterior insula ¹⁵⁵, suggesting more transcendent values may reduce defensiveness and promote openness

Practice:

In moments of hardship (like many people around the world are experiencing this year with the pandemic), **identify what is most meaningful to you.** For some whose aspirations might be to create a kinder world, how can you find actionable ways to be kind in this moment?

Guided practice: Purpose Practice: Core Values from Healthy Minds Innovations.



Cited sources can be found in the recently published paper.

SHARE THESE NEW FINDINGS

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TRY THE HEALTHY MINDS PROGRAM



Put this science into practice by downloading the Healthy Minds Program, a guided meditation app featuring awareness, connection, insight and purpose as four separate modules. Learn more and download the program for free through our friends at Healthy Minds Innovations.

GET THE APP

Give Today



Together, we can advance the science of well-being – even amid global challenges like those brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. These funds will allow us to quickly adapt to whatever situation arises so that we can continue promoting well-being and relieving suffering.

SUPPORT THE WORK