

# 10 BRAIN FRIENDLY HABITS for Happiness & Wellbeing



Learn practical daily habits to optimise your brain's performance and boost your level of wellbeing.



# Introduction

We all want to form lasting habits that improve our health and wellbeing. So why does it feel so hard to break routines and establish new behaviours?

New developments in neuroscience and positive psychology are revealing some of the ways habits are formed in the brain, what you can do to form healthy habits, and how you can make them more sticky.

This eBook introduces you to some of the most brain-friendly habits you can apply to boost your happiness and wellbeing.

These positive practices and routines are designed to optimise your brain to make it easier for you to adopt them as habits so they can become part of your every day life.

You will learn:

- Simple shortcuts to harness neuroplasticity—our brain’s capacity to adapt and learn.
- Ten brain friendly habits you can practice at home or work.
- Tips to apply these practices so they become part of your daily routine.

We look forward to inspiring you to create positive, brain-friendly habits!

**Langley Group team**



"I change myself,  
I change my world."

M. K Gandhi

# Changing habits

Our brains gear us for life-long learning and growth. We are constantly creating new connections and adapting to experience.

Yet we need focussed attention to create new neural connections and train our brain. The part of the brain that applies conscious thought to learn something new requires concerted and persistent effort. When we feel tired, stressed or inundated with complex decisions, our ability to try and keep healthy habits flags, despite best intentions.

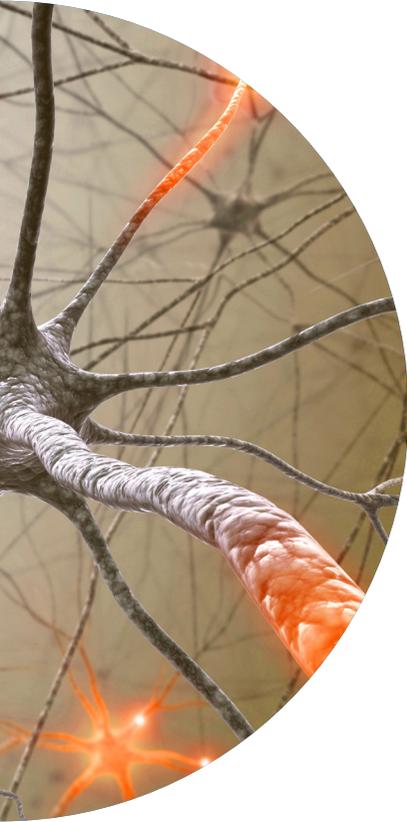
To create a change that lasts we need some simple shortcuts to harness neuroplasticity—our brain's capacity to adapt and learn. One of the best techniques to optimise your brain and make it open to learning is to increase the duration and intensity of our 'ups' and reduce the duration and intensity of our 'downs'. These practices are designed to help you do just that.

Whichever positive practice you decide to try—from this ebook or any other from the smorgasbord available—choose what appeals to you most. Test healthy habits and activities on yourself and if they work, keep doing them!

Remember that changing the brain and reshaping habits takes time. Boosting your brain day to day with positive habits helps you move positively and productively toward your goals.



## 10 BRAIN FRIENDLY HABITS



- 1 Keep your brain fueled
- 2 Be intelligent with emotions
- 3 Look after your body
- 4 Find time to imagine
- 5 Get curious
- 6 Practice gratitude
- 7 Smile often
- 8 Strike a power pose
- 9 Cultivate kindness
- 10 Be mindful



“By opening our hearts and minds  
positive emotions allow us to  
discover and build new skills,  
new ties, new knowledge and  
new ways of being.”

**Barbara Fredrickson**

## KEEP YOUR BRAIN FUELED

Your brain needs fuel—certain neurochemicals that give you the energy to function at your best.

When we feel threatened, uncertain or exhausted from a day of complex decisions, our thinking processes are reduced. When we feel upbeat after receiving great feedback or bonding with our team, our brains release energy that allow us to make good decisions, think creatively or try new behaviour.

Think of a fuel gauge for your brain. If your fuel is low it's not the best time to make a big strategic decision, have a difficult conversation or lengthy planning session. When your fuel is high, it's a great time to get started on a new project or idea, knowing you can last the distance and get great results.

When you need to engage your team or motivate them to adopt new behaviours, consider what conditions would make them more likely to listen and take action. Schedule meetings that require big picture thinking and decisive action earlier in the day when the brain has the

most fuel. Set a positive tone or boost your team's energy and performance by asking everyone to share one really good thing that happened recently.

Positive emotions are a valuable resource for refueling our brains. Research shows that positive emotions boost the neurochemical dopamine. This enables the brain to perform at its best and gets us in the right state of mind to create healthy habits.

When we do something we enjoy and feel good doing it, we're more likely to think positively about it later. This in turn inspires us to do it again, setting up an upward spiral of positive behaviour that helps us adopt a life-style change.

So if you are looking to try something new or create some healthy habits, find ways to generate more positive emotions daily to help you achieve your goals.



"The quality of your life  
is directly related to the quality  
of your emotions."

Sue Langley

## BE INTELLIGENT WITH EMOTIONS

Neuroscience shows us that emotions play a critical role in influencing and guiding our thinking and behaviour.

According to expert Paul Ekman, emotions evolved to mobilise us to deal quickly with important interpersonal or threatening events. They occur quickly and automatically, usually without conscious thought.

When our pre-frontal cortex (thinking) and limbic (emotional) system are not communicating effectively, we may behave emotionally rather than intelligently, or fail to consider the emotional implications of our behaviour.

Emotional intelligence is about harnessing these two aspects to ensure we are managing our own emotions rather than allowing our emotions to manage us.

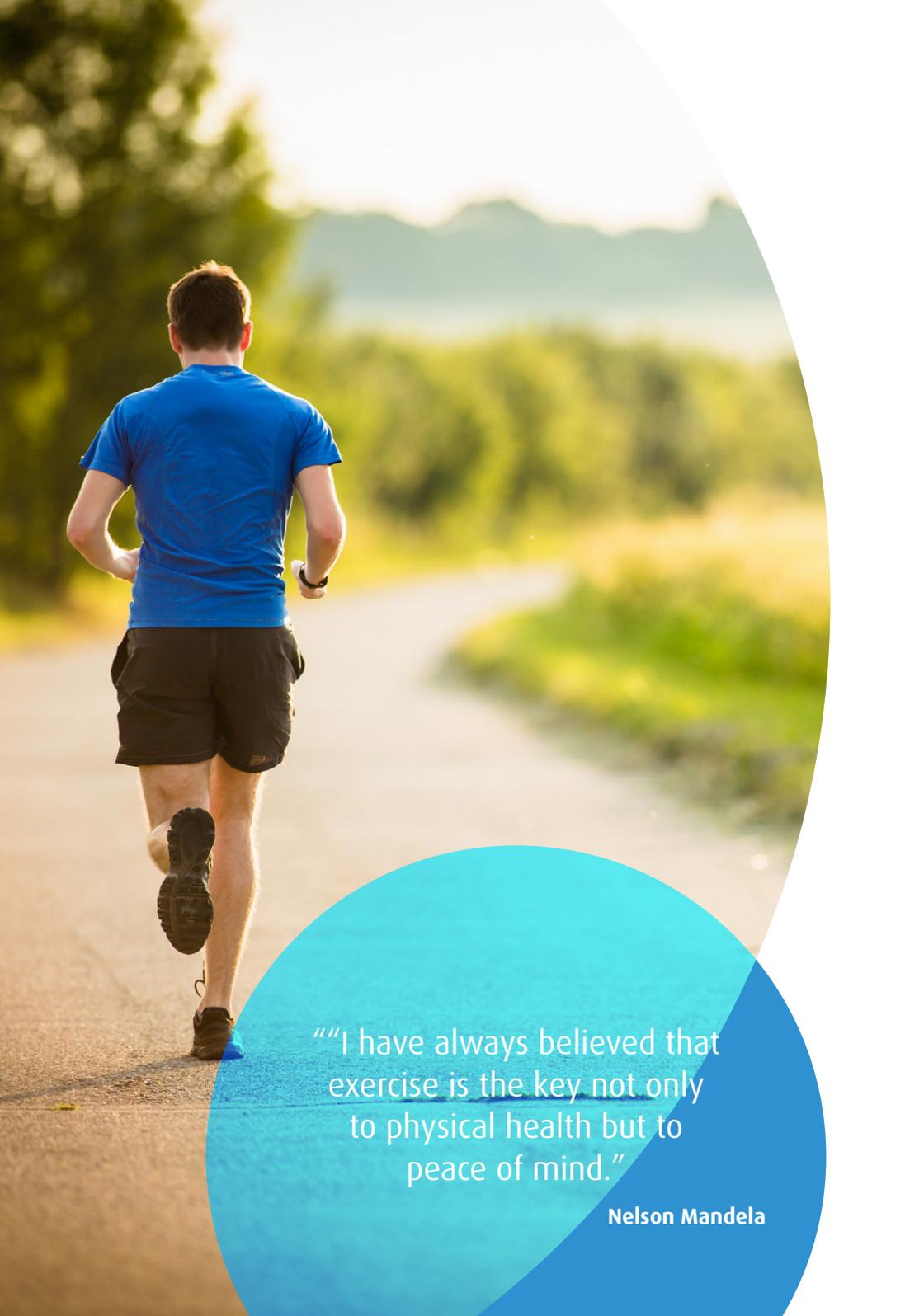
When you become more aware of an emotion, perhaps before it escalates, and accept it without judgment, you can employ more conscious choices. This may mean shifting the emotion or improving how you handle it.

We can also pick up emotions at a physiological level. Tension in our shoulders or hands may be hinting at rising anger; while the desire to get up and move may indicate excitement.

You can also be proactive in how you use or manage emotions. Consider the tasks you have to perform in the day and check in with your emotions. Do you need to engage your team or motivate them to adopt new behaviours? What emotions would make them more likely to listen and take action? High-energy positive emotions inspire action.

Are you due for a coaching session? Try a mini mindfulness exercise or take 20 slow breaths to achieve a state of calm before entering the room.

Will you be reviewing a report that requires care and detailed attention? Neutral and slightly negative emotions tend to get higher quality results.



““I have always believed that exercise is the key not only to physical health but to peace of mind.”

**Nelson Mandela**

## LOOK AFTER YOUR BODY

Our brains and bodies form an integrated system and failing to take care of it may lead to poor performance and decrease our health and wellbeing.

Diet, sleep and exercise are all vital ingredients to refuel your brain and perform at your best.

Any activity that generates positive emotions and helps you rejuvenate and gain focus is useful, especially if you enjoy doing it. For example, if you love running, then look for ways to build this into your weekly routine. If running is not your thing and it doesn't add to your motivation levels, then perhaps it is not a sustainable practice for you.

Here are some simple daily activities.

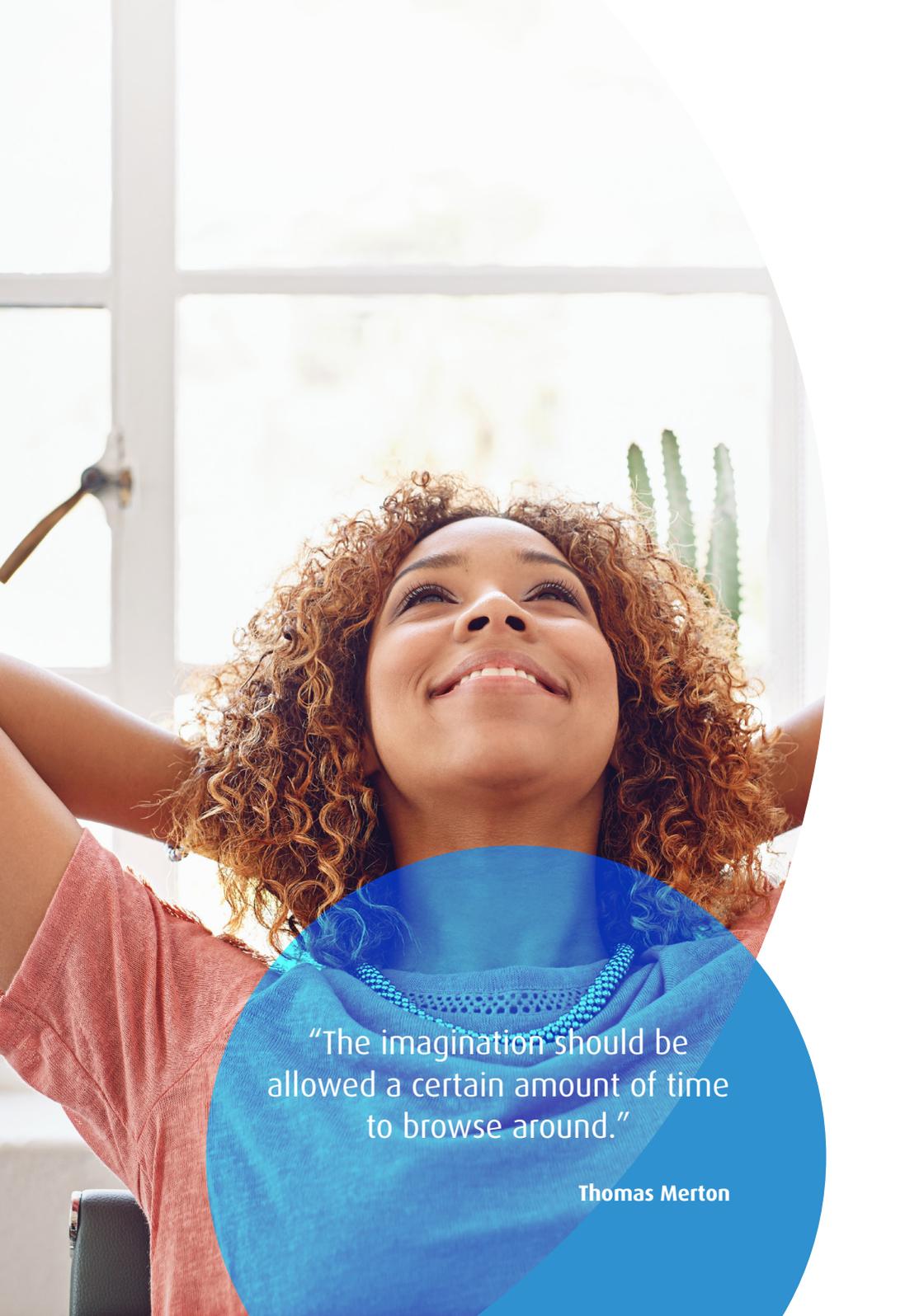
**Get up and move.** It is important to move our lymph nodes to get toxins out of our body. Our lymphatic system doesn't have muscles to get it moving; it works when we move other parts of our body and allow gravity to massage it. Bouncing is the best way. Raising our arms releases 'happy' hormones under our armpits.

This tells our brain we are happy and make us feel better. Get up from your desk regularly, change your environment or get out into nature.

**Check in with your body.** Do a body scan. Take note of where you are holding tension and your overall physiology. Relate these tensions and changes to the emotion you are feeling to begin to understand where and how different emotions affect you.

**Physically remove the tension.** If you feel tense in the arms, shake your arms; if you feel tight in your chest, stretch and expand or breathe deeply.

**Breathe.** Take 6 deep diaphragmatic breaths. Our body cannot sustain anger through deep breathing. Let the lower lungs have that oxygen to pass around your body and brain. This will calm you and flood you with oxygen. Do it for at least 60 seconds.



"The imagination should be allowed a certain amount of time to browse around."

Thomas Merton

## FIND TIME TO IMAGINE

In work and life we need to find creative ways to solve problems and think outside the box, yet we sometimes lack mental space.

Innovation is inspired by imagination, the ability to recognise patterns, form new concepts and ideas. Moments of insight—the Aha! or Eureka effect—tend to occur when our brain is in a resting state.

Breakthrough shifts in perspective happen when our mind is wandering freely rather than focusing on a task or concentrating on how to solve a problem. Our conscious mind may take the credit for our big ideas, yet our best solutions can come to us when we are in the shower or daydreaming aimlessly.

You can trigger moments of creative insight by generating the right state of mind. This can mean easing your concentration a bit, shifting your body to break the space, or going for a walk.

Try journaling, doodling or another creative pursuit that encourages you to process thoughts non-logically.

Even if we don't think of ourselves as 'creative', positive emotions help get us in a creative frame of mind. When we feel good, our brains perform better and come up with more creative and novel ideas. We are more able to see the bigger picture, learn new ways of doing things and solve problems creatively.

We are also more open to input from others, as a positive mood primes us to reach out and collaborate with people.

Negative emotions, on the other hand, tend to narrow them. We are more prone to look for problems than solutions when we are stressed, anxious or unhappy.

If you want to create a vision for the future and think outside the box, start your team planning meetings on an upbeat, positive note. Choose a room that's light, bright and airy. Both the emotional and the physical environment play a part in facilitating creative thinking.



“We put off engaging with  
the new for a future day. But  
what are we waiting for?”

**Todd Kashdan**

## GET CURIOUS

You can't always be happy—yet you can nearly always be curious and aware.

Curiosity is a way of learning and stimulating your brain every day. Brains like novelty and staying open and curious keeps our brain active and engaged.

According to Todd Kashdan, author of *Curious? Discovering the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life*, curiosity makes us more flexible. We gain vitality and a greater capacity to tolerate anxiety while staying curious and connected, leading us to feel more satisfied with “a life well-lived”.

With curiosity you can approach new experiences, people and events with mindful awareness—the positive and beautiful as well as the challenging and upsetting. In anxious situations it is easy to get overwhelmed by your own internal emotions. If you dial up your curiosity, it allows you to dial down anxiety.

By getting curious about others, your own emotions and biases fade into the background. A curious mindset helps you put aside your convictions and even your need for certainty to make room for other people and their perspectives.

The more curious you become about people day to day, the less you may feel concerned about yourself, and the more compassion you may feel toward others.

Savouring is an activity that stimulates curiosity. Take a positive moment, like eating a Lindt ball chocolate or an exotic meal, and mentally stretch it out so it lasts a little bit longer. Tune in to the experience by noticing what each of your senses tell you. Take a mental snapshot so you can recall it in vivid detail.

Make curiosity part of your daily routine by noticing new things each time you are out walking or in a natural environment.



“Let us be grateful to the people  
who make us happy; they are the  
charming gardeners who make our  
souls blossom.”

**Marcel Proust**

## PRACTICE GRATITUDE

Gratitude makes us aware of the good things that happen and connects us to a sense of life's wonder.

There is no diminishing return for gratitude. Thanking others makes us more tolerant of differences, creating a sense of camaraderie and belonging.

Practicing gratitude day to day makes us aware of the good things that happen. Studies show that when people write regularly about the things they are grateful for, their mood, coping behaviour and even physical health improves. Continuing to appreciate positive changes in life – such as a new job, friendship or goal achieved – counteracts the tendency to revert back to previous levels of happiness after the situation has passed.

Rather than taking happy events and success for granted, continuing to remind ourselves why they made us feel good in the first place makes us happier for longer. It is no wonder gratitude is one of the most powerful habits for boosting positive emotions and wellbeing.

Start with a gratitude journal. You can also keep a checklist in your mind—as long as you do it mindfully and attach meaning to the activity. This practice trains your brain to notice and savour positive experiences that happen over time, increasing your positivity.

Try this practice for a week. Every night write down the three best things that have happened to you in the day, or three things I am grateful for. Research supports doing this activity once a week ongoing, though some people find this too little. What is important is finding out what works for you. It won't work if gratitude feels like a duty!

Share your gratitude with others. What positive feedback have you received? What feedback can you give them? Share your gratitude list with your friends and find out what they are grateful for too.



"A smile is the light in your window that tells others that there is a caring, sharing person inside."

**Denis Waitely**

## SMILE OFTEN

Smiling is one of the most immediate and natural ways to shift yourself—and other people—into a positive mood.

Our faces express our inner thoughts and feelings, even fleetingly. A genuine smile signals to other people that you are friendly and open, inviting them to connect. It triggers mirror neurons in both your brains, which allow you to feel empathy and sense what the other person is thinking or feeling.

Start the day on a positive note with a smile. You can do this by practicing smiling at yourself in the mirror for 30 seconds. Make it fun. If it doesn't feel right to start with, you will soon be laughing at yourself and feel better naturally. The muscles you use to smile will tell your brain you are happy. Smiling, like positive emotions, is contagious.

Try this practice for a week and you'll start to see a big difference. Each morning as soon as you wake up practice hold your smile there long enough for the positive emotions to kick in. You may end up laughing at yourself for grinning in the mirror (and that helps too!)

A physical ritual or visual reminder can help you learn a positive habit like smiling. Keep a note on your bathroom mirror or buy a bracelet or something that when you see it will remind you of your commitment to your positive behaviour.

Laughter is another way you can activate the healing effect of positive emotion. Just a few minutes of laughter a day can reduce stress and improve your heart rate, muscle activity, digestion and immune system.

Laughter can relieve tense situations and bring people closer together to address difficulties. According to laughter researcher Robert Provine, laughter is part of our social DNA. People are 30 percent more likely to laugh in a social setting than when alone.

Smiling and laughing are two ways to spread positive emotions to the people around you and throughout your social network.



“Our bodies change our minds,  
and our minds can change our  
behaviour, and our behaviour can  
change our outcomes.”

**Amy Cuddy**

## STRIKE A POWER POSE

Our brain and body are interlinked. When we experience an emotion our body has a physiological reaction. The reverse is also true - changing your physiology can change how you feel.

That is why posture is important—it impacts your emotional state, changes the chemicals in your brain and thus the outcomes you can create.

Amy Cuddy studied how body language affects how others see us and even how we see ourselves. She showed how “power posing” can make us feel confident even if we don’t.

Just sitting in a hunched position (akin anxiety) for two minutes starts to increase cortisol. Whereas standing in what is now commonly called the ‘Wonder Woman Pose’ for two minutes decreases cortisol and increases testosterone.

When people adopted a ‘Wonder Woman Pose’ just before a job interview, they considerably raised their chances for success. Great when you are preparing for a presentation or simply as a daily ritual.

Try practicing the Wonder Woman Pose every day. For the guys, you can do Superman. Stand hands on hips, chest out, head up, ready to save the world.

You can do it anytime when you need a boost. Try the same pose without the hands on hips. No-one has to know you are doing it – just lift yourself up, stand tall and imagine your energy and emotions positively expanding.

This change in your physiology sends a message to your brain that creates a sense of confidence and strength. Positive emotions flood your brain, which will help you perform better that day. It can allow you to think more clearly, make good decisions and regulate yourself.

Consider your physiology - how can you use it more effectively to recognise and manage how you feel? If only two minutes can change how you feel, what can you do differently every day?



“Other people matter.”

Chris Peterson

## CULTIVATE KINDNESS

Small gestures and acts of kindness send powerful messages that connect us with others and give meaning to our daily lives.

Kindness makes both giver and receiver happier. Studies show that simply by counting one's own acts of kindness for one week our subjective happiness is increased. People who already feel happy become more kind and grateful through counting kindnesses interventions. Happy people accrue more and better quality positive memories in their daily lives.

Acts of kindness give us stories to tell to help us and others savour happy times. They also improve our self-image.

While random acts of kindness are great there are a few rules to making kind acts really count. Here are three practices.

### **Do something kind for a loved one.**

Kindness can be a day-to-day investment that bonds relationships. Make sure you give freely and autonomously. Helping behaviour that feels burdensome or inhibits your own goals won't increase happiness, even though it might remain the right thing to do.

Something as simple as washing the dishes when your partner has had a hard day at work honours your connection and shows you value their wellbeing.

### **Do something kind that is unexpected.**

Capitalise on the urge to do good in the moment. Going out of your way to help a stranger who has lost their keys may only take a few moments; to the other person it could make the difference between feeling alone and on the verge of tears to feeling supported and energised.

### **Do five different kind things in a day.**

Researchers have found the frequency of kind acts does not impact happiness; variety does. People who don't vary kind acts actually show a decrease in happiness over time. They eventually receive less thanks and it may even become a duty or box-ticking exercise. A creative approach to kindness is far more sustaining and interesting. Dedicate a day to come up with five novel actions to surprise yourself and others.



“Mental activities like meditation  
can actually change the brain.”

**His Holiness the Dalai Lama**

## BE MINDFUL

Mindfulness involves single pointedly resting our awareness in one place for an extended period without being distracted. It can also mean staying present in the moment.

Ellen Langer, a mindfulness expert and pioneer in positive psychology, defines mindfulness as “the process of actively noticing new things.” She believes it’s the opposite of mindlessness, drawing us into in the present.

When we approach the world with mindful awareness we can more accurately assess and respond to situations and people. By noticing and separating ourselves from old beliefs and anxieties we become more accepting of ourselves and others.

It is possible to train the mind to become more still and focused. While there are many mindfulness practices we can learn and master, such as meditation and yoga, its not that hard to include mindfulness in our own day-to-day, routine-filled lifestyles. We just need to notice what’s going on and savour our experiences with attention and awareness.

Try to practice five minutes of mindfulness every day for the coming week. Ideally you would align this mindfulness practice with an activity you do every day, such as eating a meal or walking to work.

Start by sitting with your spine aligned in a comfortable, yet alert, posture, with your legs and arms uncrossed and feet on the floor.

Take a couple of deep breaths and bring attention to your body. Gently let your eyes rest on a single point and notice your breathing. Whenever your mind wanders, observe where it has gone and then without criticism or judgment, gently guide it back to your breath. After practicing for the allotted time, gently expand your awareness from your breath to your whole body.

Take a minute before moving onto your next activity for the day.

We all have a To Do List full of day to day tasks. What about a “Ta Da List”?!

Barbara Fredrickson came up with the concept of a Ta Da List made up of daily actions you love and want to practice to make ongoing positive changes in your life.

Your regular To Do List may already be full of things you know you should do. Some of these may feel motivating, some may not. Too often our lists get clogged with things we never seem to get done and we wonder why.

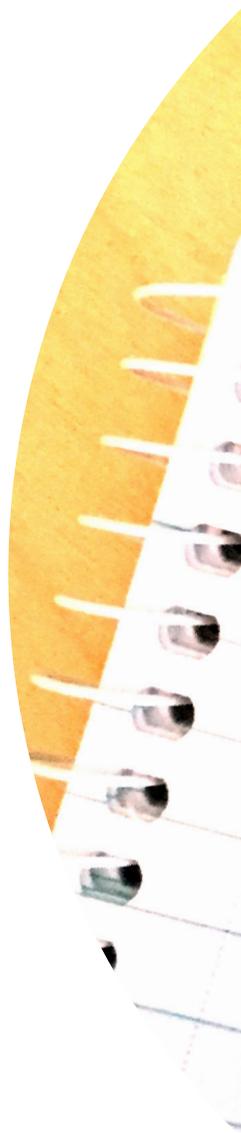
Try incorporating activities you feel positive and enthused by and want to integrate in your everyday life. Plan to kickstart your physical wellbeing? What simple daily action can you add to you list that will keep you feeling energised and motivated to take on more challenge? Want to bring more positive connections into your life? Add smiling or a kindness practice to your list.

Focus on things that will boost positive emotions and enhance wellbeing, such as the practices in this ebook, along side your regular list of tasks. Any can become habits if you practice them consistently over time.

Aim to tick off one or more each day.

## Hint

Observe and challenge your habits afresh. Do you really want them? What new positive habits can you create?



# Prioritising Positivity

"Ta Da"

~~To Do~~ LIST



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