

Growing Positive Emotions

Neuroplasticity

Understanding Neuroplasticity

Neuroplasticity is our brain's ability to change its internal structure based on our life experiences, emotions, and thoughts. Our brains can evolve specifically based on what we encounter or do! Every activity we engage in, each thought we entertain, or the emotion we experience has the power to mold our brains. The more we do activities, have thoughts, or experience emotions the easier they are to have or do.

This is how neuroplasticity works. You can think of it like carving new trails in a forest - the more we revisit this trail (or practice an activity), the more defined and easier to navigate it becomes.

The discovery of Neuroplasticity gave hope to medical professionals helping patients recover from physical brain challenges and therapists aiming to facilitate emotional and psychological healing. This is why we know you **can** replace **old habits** with **new ones** or **old coping skills** with **new ones**. The malleable nature of our brains means that we can continually learn, enhance our skills, and embrace healing **at any age or stage in life**.



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The Negativity Bias

The Negativity Bias

We've talked about how ADHD brains cling to negative experiences, like velcro, while letting positive ones slide away as if coated in teflon. In fact, all brains have this tendency; it's just a little more pronounced in ADHD brains. This is a survival mechanism from our ancestors' times. **Remembering threats was crucial for survival.** This is known as the "**negativity bias.**"

This is where **Neuroplasticity** comes into play. Just as we can shape our brains to learn new skills, we can also train them to hold onto positive experiences more strongly - transforming our brains from teflon to velcro for positivity. Neuroscience shows this is possible. Techniques like **savoring** positive experiences, **mindfulness** practices, and **gratitude** can build up positive neural pathways. When we intentionally take time to enjoy and reflect on good moments, our brains start to register and remember these experiences more readily.

In this module, we'll dive into these strategies and help our brains welcome positivity more naturally.

Growing Positive Emotions

Gratitude

Let's start with our first strategy, **gratitude**

Gratitude helps with Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria

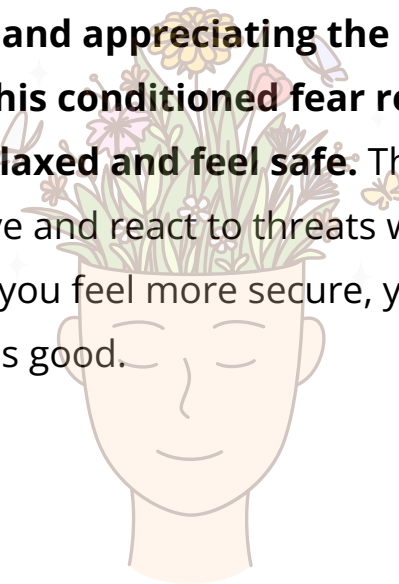
Many women with ADHD suffer from rejection sensitivity dysphoria or RSD; being sensitive to rejection has its basis in **registering and reacting to threats from other people or your own thoughts about your ability or worth.**

This is a coping skill valuable for survival as a child in an environment where lots of criticism exists!

It may be less beneficial as you get older. RSD might lead to unnecessary emotional, physical, and psychological distress.

Promotes Safety

Gratitude, **recognizing and appreciating the good in our lives**, offers a powerful **antidote to this conditioned fear response**. Practicing gratitude can **help your brain relaxed and feel safe**. The safer you feel, the less likely you are to perceive and react to threats when you don't need to. When your brain helps you feel more secure, you can consciously choose your responses, which is good.



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Gratitude

Helps with Depression and Anxiety

Gratitude can also significantly influence mental health. It helps manage anxiety by shifting focus away from worries towards appreciating the good. This reduces the intensity of anxious thoughts.

In cases of depression, gratitude acts like a natural mood enhancer, stimulating **dopamine** and **serotonin** production. These neurotransmitters are crucial in mood regulation.

✦ ✦ *Gratitude* ✦



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Gratitude

Gratitude also promotes happiness by fostering **contentment**, leading to increased positivity and resilience. It serves as a **buffer against negativity**, contributing to a more optimistic mindset.

Medical Benefits

Scientific studies have provided evidence to support the healing powers of gratitude that are uniquely suited to balance out some of the stress of being an ADHD woman in this world. A 2016 pilot study revealed that **keeping a gratitude journal for two months reduced patients' inflammation markers and increased heart rate variability (HRV)**. This is particularly significant for ADHD women, as adhd is often associated with **increased inflammation, high blood pressure, and decreased HRV**.



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Gratitude

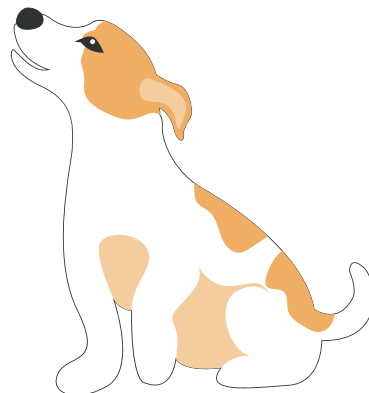
Who and what should you express gratitude for?

1. **Recognize Benefits:** Gratitude involves recognizing the benefits you receive, whether they are small or large. This can be anything from appreciating a kind gesture from a stranger to being thankful for your health or job.

2. **Recognize when you have enough.** Gratitude is about acknowledging and appreciating what you have right now, rather than constantly striving for more. It's about feeling content with your current circumstances.

3. **Express Gratitude for Everything Including You:** Gratitude can be expressed for anything in the world, both human and nonhuman. This includes people, animals, nature.

4. **Gratitude in Adversity:** An essential aspect of mature gratitude is the ability to be grateful for adversity. This means finding things to be thankful for even in difficult situations, which can help to foster resilience and emotional well-being.



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6. Gratitude towards God or Higher Power: Some cultures and religions practice gratitude by expressing thanks to a higher power or deity. This can be a personal practice depending on one's spiritual or religious beliefs. Many religions express gratitude for nature.

7. Gratitude for Social Relationships: Expressing gratitude for the relationships in your life, such as family, friends, and community, can strengthen these bonds and contribute to social well-being.



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Ways to Practice

1. Three Good Things

Write down three things that went well or were good for you today and provide an explanation for why they went well. It is important to create a physical record of your items by writing them down; this can be more helpful than simply doing this exercise in your head. The items can be small, everyday events or more important milestones (e.g., “my partner made the coffee today,” “My grandparents were happy when I brought them groceries,” or even “my coffee tasted good”).

If you want to level up this exercise, follow these instructions:

Give the event a title (e.g., “I received a compliment on something I’ve been working hard on”).

Write down exactly what happened in as much detail as possible, including where you were, what you did or said, and, if others were involved, what they did or said.

Include how this event made you feel at the time and how this event made you feel later (including now, as you remember it).

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Ways to Practice

1. Three good Things

Explain what you think caused this event—why it happened. If you contributed in any way to this happening- bonus points.

Use whatever writing style you please, and don't worry about grammar or spelling. Use as much detail as you'd like.

If you find yourself focusing on negative feelings, try to refocus your mind on the good event and the positive feelings that came with it. This can take effort but gets easier with practice and can make a real difference in how you feel.

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Exercise 2: Gratitude Jar

Create a gratitude jar. You can do this with your family or alone. Each day, write a note about something you're grateful for and place it in the jar. Over time, this becomes a collection of positivity you can revisit when you need a boost.

Exercise 3: Dinner Time Gratitude Sharing

During dinner time, make it a habit for everyone to share something they appreciate about their day. This promotes a culture of gratitude within your family.

Exercise 4: Expressing Gratitude through Texts

Choose a partner and agree to send one daily gratitude text to them. Gratitude for something simple like a delicious meal, and extra hour of sleep, a kind person, something you did well, a kindness a person did.

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Exercise 5: Writing Gratitude Letters

Once a week, pen a letter to someone expressing your thanks to them. Whether it's a close friend, a family member, or a mentor, the act of writing a letter helps consolidate feelings of gratitude.

Exercise 6: Social Media Gratitude Posts

Post a daily gratitude update on your social media platform of choice. Sharing your gratitude publicly can inspire others to do the same and helps to foster a positive online environment.

Exercise 7: Gratitude Partner

Find a gratitude partner. Each day, share with each other one thing you're grateful for. This can strengthen your relationship with your partner and motivate you to keep finding things to be grateful for.

Exercise 8 Thanks before a Meal

Giving thanks for food to the people who brought the food to the table or prepared the food is a great and simple way to express gratitude and generate benefits every day three times a day.

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Savoring

Savoring

Savoring is stepping out of your normal flow of time to intentionally engage in thoughts and behaviors that heighten the impact of positive events and emotions. In other words, it's about fully immersing yourself in the present moment to enjoy positive experiences to their fullest.

Research shows that savoring has several benefits:

- It enhances our positive emotions, leading to increased levels of happiness and satisfaction.
- It helps reduce stress and anxiety by shifting our focus from the past or future to the present.
- It can strengthen our relationships, as shared positive experiences often lead to stronger bonds.



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Savoring

There are several strategies for savoring:

1. Mindful Presence: This involves being fully present in the moment and focusing all your senses on the experience. For example, if you're **eating** a delicious meal, **focus on the taste, texture, aroma, and appearance** of the food rather than **letting your mind wander to other things**.

2. Visualizing the Future: Anticipate the joy of positive future events. For instance, if you're planning a vacation, **spend time imagining the enjoyable experiences you'll have**.

3. Reminiscing: Reflect on past happy experiences. Looking at old photos or talking about past positive experiences with friends and family can help you relive these moments and enhance your current mood.

4. Sharing the Experience: **Share your positive experiences with others.** Talking about positive events can make them feel more real and help prolong the positive emotions associated with them.



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Taking in the Good

Savoring Exercise by Rick Hanson

Find the Good: Throughout your day, **actively look for good facts.** These could be positive events like enjoying a delicious meal, receiving a compliment, or simply appreciating a beautiful sunset. They could also be positive aspects about yourself or the world around you. **When you notice something good, allow yourself to feel good about it.** Aim to do this at least six times a day. Each instance should take about 30 seconds.

Savor the Good: Once you've noticed a good fact, don't just acknowledge it - savor it. **Stay with the positive experience for 20 to 30 seconds.** Let it fill your body and mind. Try to visualize it as a warm, enriching experience. Remember, the longer you hold something positive in your awareness, the stronger its imprint in your memory.



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Absorb the Good: Now, imagine the good experience sinking into you. You might visualize it as a warm glow spreading through your body, or as a golden syrup soothing old hurts and filling in gaps of yearning. If you prefer, you could simply understand that as you hold this good experience in your awareness, its neurons are firing and wiring together.

Note: Be aware of any reluctance to feel good. If you think that you don't deserve to feel good, or that it's selfish or vain, acknowledge these thoughts and gently turn your attention back to the good experience.

Reflection: At the end of each day, you may choose to write about your experiences in a journal. Reflect on the good facts you noticed and how you felt when you savored and absorbed them. Over time, you should find that your happiness becomes more unconditional and less dependent on external circumstances.



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Metta

Metta Practice

"Metta," also known as loving-kindness meditation (LKM), is a form of meditation that involves directing warm, compassionate feelings towards oneself and others. Research has shown that regular practice of metta meditation can have multiple beneficial effects on the brain and overall well-being. Metta practice could also help release **oxytocin**, a hormone that is involved in warm feelings of safety and contentment – and is released in women when they are nursing to give you a sense of its qualities.

Research using brain-imaging techniques has revealed fascinating insights into the effects of practicing metta, or loving-kindness meditation. When individuals engage in metta, there's an **uptick in activity within specific brain regions, notably the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and the insula**. These areas are closely associated with empathy, emotional processing, and the experience of **positive emotions**.

The ACC, key in regulating brain regions and controlling impulsivity, and the insula, vital for processing sensory information and internal sensations, show differences in ADHDers. Metta practice could improve the function of these areas, potentially easing ADHD symptoms.

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Gratitude

Some studies have reported an increase in gray matter density within the prefrontal cortex following metta practice.

This brain region is vital for decision-making, attention, and emotion regulation. Could metta help with Executive functioning?

The beneficial effects of metta can be observed within a few weeks of regular practice.

Physical Benefits and Emotional Benefits

A study published in "Psychoneuroendocrinology" found that just seven weeks of loving-kindness meditation reduced **multiple inflammatory and stress markers**.

Another study published in "Psychological Science" found that practicing just a few minutes a day for several weeks produced **increases in positive emotions**, which, over time, produced a range of personal resources (such as increased mindfulness, purpose in life, and social support) and decreased symptoms of illness.



It's important to note that everyone is unique, and the timeframe and intensity of the benefits can vary significantly from person to person. Like any other form of exercise or practice, regular and consistent practice likely yields more significant results.

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Metta

Here's how to practice Metta meditation:

 **1. Find a Comfortable Position:** Choose to sit, lie down, or walk. Ensure you're comfortable for several minutes.

 **2. Choose Your Mantra:** Start with these phrases "May I be safe. May I be healthy. May I be happy. May I live with ease."

 **4. Expand Your Focus:** Gradually extend your goodwill to others, beginning with a person you love, a person you don't know very well (neutral), a person you've had a conflict with, and finally, the entire world.

 **5. Practice Regularly:** Consistency is crucial. Practice regularly, even for a few minutes each session. Over time, this will become more natural, and the feelings of loving-kindness will intensify.

 **Note:** If difficult, start by directing kindness towards others and then towards yourself.

Note: If this feels difficult, reverse the order, beginning with others and later moving towards directing kind thoughts towards yourself.

