

HAPPY -go-lucky

Discoveries in mindfulness and neuroplasticity are proving that attitude really is everything.

WORDS CHELSEA ROFFEY

We hate to burst your bubble, but you're biologically hardwired to notice about seven times as many unpleasant things as you are pleasant things. While early humans needed this trait – a radar alerting them to danger was crucial to their survival – in the modern world, a persistent glass-half-empty attitude isn't merely unhelpful, it can be downright depressing.

"Forty thousand years ago, we'd do much better if we were looking out for sabre tooth tigers than admiring the rainbows. We've got this hardware running that keeps finding problems," explains Dr Richard Chambers, a mindfulness expert and co-creator of Smiling Mind, a program designed to build more mentally resilient communities. "[But] neuroscience and positive psychology literature is finding that by consciously paying attention to things that are pleasant and beneficial, we can actually change our negativity bias."

By demystifying the concept of mindfulness (in essence, paying attention to the present moment), Dr Chambers is helping organisations as diverse as the Victorian

Police Force, Australian cricket team, elite footy clubs, and schools, to adopt better ways of thinking.

Dr Chambers says applying mindfulness techniques as "circuit breakers" for everyday patterns of busyness or judgement can help us appreciate more of the "good" stuff, as his work with Australia's best cricketers illustrates.

"If someone went out for a duck, the next time they go to the crease, they potentially get caught up in that worry. What's going to serve them better is to be fully in the moment, watching the ball," says Dr Chambers.

Not unlike our top athletes training for peak performance, approaching the crease of life with a positive attitude each time you go out to bat takes practice. Dr Chambers says changing your outlook is possible, if you are willing to change your relationship with how you view your emotions.

Tuning into the senses more often – pausing for five minutes, one minute, or even a breath – can help us to observe, without judgement, those moments of more intense emotion that can otherwise snowball into a more permanent sense of unpleasantness.

"It's normal to feel sad and angry, these are normal human emotions. Just let them be there. They're not such a problem. It's when we react to them, try to stop and resist or get rid of them, judgement of the worrying – that's where we get into anxiety," says Dr Chambers. "There's a different relationship that mindfulness can help us bring to our emotions where we can name it, stay present in the body, not get carried away with stories and judgements ... all of that is what causes problems."

Once you get into a pattern of judging less, a beautiful thing happens. It's called self-compassion, and Dr Chambers believes it'll be the next big thing amid the building evidence in support of mindfulness.

"Often when we're suffering or going through some difficulty, or we've failed at something, we tend to get really tough on ourselves," he explains. "[But] students who are self-compassionate in the face of failing a test are much more able to go back and look at reasons for failing and their performance improves. Whereas students who say 'I'm bad' and get caught up in that layer of judgement never go back and look at what happened there."

GO WITH YOUR GUT

After the brain, there are more neurons in your gastrointestinal tract than any other part of your body. Our increasing understanding of this connection is revealing that the gastrointestinal tract essentially functions as a second brain.

"Although medical science has always recognised this important connection, it's only recently that we are starting to realise the communication actually goes both ways," says Leslie Embersits, founder of the Mindd Foundation (mindd.org).

"Given how closely the two interact, it's easy to understand why you may feel nauseated before a big game or feel intestinal pain during times of stress." Heartburn, abdominal cramps or loose stools can indicate stress, but problems beginning in the gut can also manifest as a range of physical symptoms including:

- Stiff or tense muscles
- Headaches
- Sleep problems
- Weight loss or gain
- Restlessness
- Changes in your behaviour including procrastination, grinding teeth, increased alcohol consumption, or difficulty concentrating.



If you think food is affecting your mood, remove sugar from your diet and keep a journal documenting reactions after eating to identify whether certain foods are problematic for your gut. Adopting strategies for handling stress – such as a regular mindfulness practise – can help to ease digestive discomforts, but it may be necessary to repair and rebalance your gut in order to re-establish a healthy gut-mind connection.

Digestive enzymes and bile acids assist digestion, and probiotics and high-fibre foods can help to re-establish optimal gut flora. But be patient.

"Strengthening your gut flora will require similar care to growing flowers in your garden," says Embersits. "Time, patience and plenty of TLC are critical to re-establish good bacteria. Fertilise your gut flora with essential nutrients to assist in ongoing repair and maintenance; zinc, omega-3 fish oils, vitamin A, C and E are essential for gut healing."

A POWERFUL PRESENCE

It doesn't take much for the mind to wander. Moments of stress or boredom offer perfect settings for distraction from the present. Having awareness during these times can establish a regular mindful practice.

"If people just recognise those moments when they're aware and engaged in the moment, they can just do more of that. You might be brushing your teeth or taking the dog for a walk. If you're exercising, use breath and posture as a way to get into your body," says Dr Chambers.



CHILD'S PLAY

You're never too young to develop a mindful attitude. In fact, taking the time to pass on mindful habits to the little people in your life can help some of your own unhelpful, more entrenched habits to unravel. It also influences how they see and interact with the world.

"Most kids are naturally in the moment," says Dr Chambers. "But as we get older, life gets busier, we start to relate to the world through concepts and ideas, and we start to take things for granted. We start to get out of our bodies, worrying and dwelling on things... that's when problems like anxiety start to emerge."

"Give kids your full attention, take them outside into the park and point things out to them... encourage them to sit down with Mum and close their eyes for a minute – it's all about being present and in the moment."



FURTHER READING

For further reading, visit smilingmind.com.au or download the Smiling Mind app to start your mindfulness journey.

