



June 2016

Issue No. 100

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

100th Issue!

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND TAKING IN THE GOOD

Starting with the work of the humanistic psychologists in the 1950s, such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, there has been a growing study of the benefits of positive states of mind. This research has really taken off in the past 10 years or so with the “positive psychology” movement, championed by scholars such as Martin Seligman. The research on positive emotions has found major benefits, both psychological and physical, such as promoting energy, counteracting depression and anxiety, reducing production of stress hormones, increasing resilience, promoting relationships, supporting immune system function, and promoting contemplative practice.

### The Preferential Registration of Negative Experience

To experience more positive emotions, we have to overcome a fundamental challenge: our brains are hard-wired toward negative experiences. Historically, negative experiences signaled the greatest threats to survival. Our ancient ancestors who lived to pass on their genes paid a lot of attention to negative experiences. That ancient circuitry is loaded and fully operational in your brain as you drive through traffic, argue with your mate, hear an odd noise in the night, or see in your mailbox an unexpected letter from the IRS.

By understanding this machinery – alive and well right now inside your head – you start to see how to act upon it to keep it under control and to compensate for it. Yes, we can notice positive experiences and remember them. But unless you’re having a million-dollar moment, the brain

circuitry for the positive is just not turbo-charged in the same way as the circuitry for the negative. The net result is that the brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones.

You can see the effects in your own experience. For example, when you look back at night on a typical day, what do you usually reflect on: the dozens of mildly pleasant moments or the one that was awkward or worrisome? When you look back on your life, what do you muse about: the ten thousand pleasures and accomplishments or the handful of losses and failures?

Your own personal training in the negative – whatever it has been – shapes your view of the world and yourself, as well as your personality, interpersonal style, and approach to life. Negative events that show up on your radar can make you even more inclined to see the negative in the future, even though the vast majority of events and experiences in your life are neutral or positive.

### The Importance of Taking in Positive Experiences

Because of your brain’s built-in negativity bias, it is so important to consciously and deliberately help your brain register positive experiences. You have to compensate for the hard-wired tendency of your brain to overvalue negative experiences.

This compensation is not about wearing rose-colored glasses. It’s about learning from new positive experiences and having them make a difference. Healthy optimism is about using new positive experiences to counterbalance old negative ones.

### OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

503-226-1057  
1-800-321-OAAP  
[www.oaap.org](http://www.oaap.org)

Helping lawyers and judges since 1982

- Alcohol & Chemical Dependency
- Career Change & Transition
- Gambling Addiction
- Mental Health
- Procrastination & Time Management

A free, nonprofit, confidential program for you.

## How To Take in the Good

As you know from school – and corroborated by hundreds of studies – you remember something best when you make it as vivid as possible and then give it heightened attention over an extended period. Follow these three simple steps to register positive experiences in your implicit memory, which will slowly but surely change the interior landscape of your mind.

### 1. Help positive events become positive experiences. You can do this by:

- Paying attention to the good things in your world and inside yourself. So often, good events roll by our eyes without our noticing them. You could set a goal each day to actively look for beauty in your world, or signs of caring for you by others, or good qualities within yourself, and so on.

- Deciding to let yourself feel pleasure and be happy rather than feel guilty about enjoying life. In particular, release any resistance to feeling good about yourself.

- Opening up to your emotional and sensory responses to positive events, since that is the pathway to really experiencing things.

- Deliberately creating positive experiences for yourself. For example, you could take on a challenge; or do something nice for someone; or bring to mind feelings of compassion and caring; or call up the sense or memory of feeling contented, peaceful, and happy.

### 2. Extend the positive experience in time and space:

- Keep your attention on the experience so it lingers; don't just jump into something else right away. Notice any discomfort that arises around staying with feeling good.

- Let the experience fill your body with positive sensations and emotions.

In sum, savor and relish the positive experience.

### 3. Sense that the positive experience is soaking into your brain and body – registering deeply in emotional memory.

Take the time to do this: 5 or 10 or 20 seconds. Keep relaxing your body and absorbing the positive experience.

Every day, you have many opportunities to begin to

remodel your brain. Make it a priority to take in positive experiences so they become a permanent part of you. Yes, there will still be sorrows and disappointments in life. But with a little mindful focus, you can experience more positive feelings each day through a simple change in perspective.

RICK HANSON, PhD

RICK MENDIUS, MD

*This article was originally published at [www.rickhanson.net](http://www.rickhanson.net). Adapted and reprinted with permission.*