

Mikaela Suders Westacott PHIL 300 4/25/16 “Habits of a Happy Brain” Review

Founder of the Inner Mammal Institute, Dr. Loretta Graziano Breuning holds a PhD in multidisciplinary social science is the author of several books about the connections between humans and our mammal brains. Her book *Habits of a Happy Brain* aims to “retrain your brain” in order to “boost” the levels serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphin in your brain, which Breuning claims is possible in as little as forty-five days.

Breuning begins her book with an brief introduction on what exactly “happy chemical” are and how they operate in the brain. Happy chemicals are released in the brain when a survival opportunity is met, but only exist as a quick spurt of happiness that then returns to our neutral, base happiness. Breuning asserts that no happy-habit (what she calls the certain activities that are known to boost levels of happy chemicals) can make you happy all the time because happy chemicals, like all of the body’s chemicals, are quickly metabolized, forcing you to do more in order to get more. Breuning believes that understanding our mammal brains is the key to understanding how to be happy.

Our inner mammal is the survival focused part of our brain that deals with ensuring the survival of our genes and wiring itself based on early-developmental experiences. Breuning breaks down the four happiness chemicals and how they relate to the interests of our mammal brain: dopamine is the joy of finding something that meets your needs and is the chemical associated with that “eureka!” moment; endorphins cause the feelings of oblivion in the face of pain that make up euphoria; oxytocin helps to build feelings of safety with others and within social bonds and alliances; and finally, serotonin is released from the feeling of being respected and ensuring security within social importance. Animal impulses cause us to seek rewards, ignore physical pain, build social alliances, and get respect from others in order to protect those alliances, and Breuning believes that understanding these basic components of our inner mammal can help us understand how to better seek out situations that will make us happy.

Happy chemicals promote survival by forging new neural pathways, and these neural pathways are then strengthened through repetition, like how a well-used footpath is deepened through repeated use. This relationship is the crux of Breuning’s argument as

understanding and then rerouting these neural pathways are how she argues we can retrain our brain to be happier. It can be difficult to break these habits because they were formed for a reason; all of your old habits are formed and strengthened because you have associated that habit with success in the past. When you feel bad, you scan your surrounding for something that you know made you feel good in the past. Breuning uses an example where you have a bad experience with your boss, like getting reprimanded or scolded, and you seek something that you know makes you feel good, like a donut, and then an emotional response forms a relationship in your brain between your boss and donuts, so that seeing your boss makes you crave a donut. Breuning believes that understanding the incidents that created your behavior is important in breaking those habits, but she admits that it is not always easy to elicit action from understanding, and that the hardest part in creating new happy habits is overcoming inertia and realizing that a habit that will feel good later is hard to start now.

Some suggestions Breuning has for creating new happy habits include celebrating small victories in order to increase your dopamine and to take small steps towards new goals so as not to feel discouraged if you don't feel like you're moving mountains. For new endorphin habits, it's helpful to forgo inhibitions and commit yourself to laughing unabashedly or crying when the need arises. Breuning also suggests finding new and exciting exercises that stimulate endorphins. If you need to boost oxytocin and strengthen feelings of social bonds, Breuning suggests building relationships and opportunities for trust, as well as even getting a massage to simulate physical closeness, like how monkeys boost oxytocin and social bonds with communal grooming. To build up your serotonin, the best methods Breuning offers is to express pride in the things you have accomplished and enjoy your place within the social hierarchy you belong to while taking note of your influence and importance within the group, while also making peace with the things you can't control.

Breuning acknowledges that there will be obstacles on the path to new happiness, some of which are internal, and offers up some helpful tips. She urges you to not let negative thoughts dampen your drive, like whether or not you can succeed in creating new habits or it being selfish to focus on your own happiness, and instead reminds you that you are your brain's master and only you have the power to change.

Finally, she discusses the tools we can use to help our brain's circuit training: looking towards people who have the good habits you want and mirroring their actions; keeping balance and paying attention to building up all four happy chemicals equally; build up off pre-existing happy habits that are already successful; divert as much energy as you can to rewiring your brain; embrace your legacy as the descendant of generations of

mammals who have survived to pass on their genes; make new habits fun; divide difficult challenges into smaller parts; and finally, plan and visualize the neural pathways you want to create so they're easier to achieve.

*Habits of a Happy Brain* is an enlightening read even for those who may not buy into self-help systems. Breuning's writing is clear and easily digestible, and it's free from heavy scientific jargon or dense theoretical analysis. She breaks up the text into concise areas of reference and then further breaks down the chapters into focused sub-sections. Breuning provides plentiful graphs and diagrams, as well as exercises for every topic she covers. At the end of the book, alongside a helpful index, she invited you to keep in touch and provides an email where she can be reached for further discussion. She also includes a list of recommended reading based on area of interest. Overall, *Habits of a Happy Brain* was insightful and helpful in understanding the chemical nature of happiness and how our brains work, and I would suggest it to anyone that wants to learn more about happiness through the lens of tangible, scientific study.