

HOW KINDNESS CAN CHANGE YOUR BRAIN

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We all know that the more you practice something, the more likely it will stick. But when it comes to things that are hard, like a new fitness or nutrition habit, it's all too easy to let things slide. And if we consider something like cultivating more self-love, well, the brain sounds off the alarms. It's a paradox: We resist the very things that will feed the body and soul. Usually, it's because there's some inner voice that says, "I don't deserve this." "I'm not good enough." "Why bother?"

Harsh.

There is another way if you listen quietly. Deep inside you, there's a wise, loving self who knows what is good for you. And the kindest thing could be the hardest to do. Instead of resisting doing the things that are good for you, ask yourself instead, "What's the kindest thing I can do for myself right now?"

Doing kind things for yourself makes a real difference. The new science of "positive neuroplasticity training" allows you to take in the good and silences the inner critic. It's a great workaround for the negativity bias — that's

the persnickety tendency to see everything that's wrong rather than what's right. But you can offset this bias. Psychologist Rich Hanson teaches that new connections in your brain are being formed in every moment and through every interaction you have. The more you expose yourself to negative or harmful habits, the more they stick. Similarly, the more you expose yourself to positive habits, the more they stick. This means you can influence your own brain on a very deep, cellular level on purpose. Here's how:

- **Notice or create a beneficial experience.** Beneficial isn't synonymous with pleasant. For example, eating kale or bitter greens isn't exactly tasty for everyone. Other beneficial experiences include going to bed on time, reading a good book, or listening to relaxing playlists during a commute.
- **Be present.** Stay with the experience by noticing the sensations and imagery. Don't let the good moments pass you by.
- **Let the experience stick in your mind.** Savor it. Intentionally recall it and, when you do, experience the positive feelings all over again.

My Self-Kindness Plan

Here's a kick-start for how you might express your desire to be kind to yourself and how you want to go about doing it. Like an old Mad Libs exercise, see if you can fill in the blanks.

To be the person I want to be, I'd like to feel _____

One positive step I will take today is _____

I promise to do this step: _____

I may even let _____ know that I'm taking this step so s/he can support my efforts and encourage me on days when I may fall short.

I know that any time I choose to take this positive step of _____, I am building up fresh neural pathways in my brain and growing new inner strengths.

I promise to be kind and caring toward myself every step of the way because _____

Write this out. Then tape the intention to your bathroom mirror, refrigerator, or create a screen saver so you can read it regularly, as repetition is important. Consider this a daily invitation for self-kindness and see what happens.



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Tara Cousineau, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, meditation teacher, well-being researcher, and social entrepreneur. She has received numerous grants from the National Institutes of Health Small Business Innovative Research program and is affiliated with the Center for Mindfulness and Compassion at Cambridge Health Alliance in Somerville, MA. Learn more about her new book *THE KINDNESS CURE*.

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