

# Learning to Learn from Positive Experiences Webinar

## *Introduction: Transcript*

**[00:00]**

So, I want to tell you at a personal level where I started with all this myself. And I look back to being a teenager and I grew up in a normal range, American, middle class, Southern California kind of background. Decent parents, no trauma, no abuse. And for complicated reasons, having to do both with, I would say, with my parents, with me, and with the fact that I was very young in school and therefore the other kids, by the time I was 15 or so, I was very unhappy. And I was twisted in my own mind. I was very quiet, very reserved, very numb. I pushed all my feelings away. I was intensely self-conscious. I was very preoccupied with myself. I was neurotic. I was a mess. I was genuinely a mess. And I was OK. I was a kid in school. I still did my classes. But inside, boy, when I look back, I have a lot of compassion for that 15-year-old kid who was miserable and did not know what to do. I did not know what to do, and I began to despair. It seemed hopeless. It seemed like, whoa, I would be this way forever. And the future looked really bad.

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Then, I'm not sure exactly why, I began to realize that no matter how bad it had been and no matter how bad it was in the present, it was always possible for me to learn a little, grow a little, and heal a little, every day. The past was—I was stuck with it. It was what it was. And even in the moment I was feeling what I was feeling. But in the next minute, the next hour, and the next day, I could help myself become a little better. And that idea—that I can help myself learn, in the broadest sense—was a wonderful revelation. It was so hopeful, so full of possibility. It brought the responsibility to me to grow a little and help myself a little every day. But if I just could do that every day, right, one little step each day, step by step by step by step, moving over time, truly, to a much better place.

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And it then seemed to me that if learning, again, broadly, emotional learning, body learning, somatic learning, motivational learning, social learning, I could become a little more skillful with the other kids. I could learn how to not be so bothered by my parents. I could learn how to not carry the stones inside from my past. I could learn how to be more confident with other people. You know, these are things I could learn. When I realized that that was possible, it became clear that the most important thing to learn is how to learn, how to help yourself grow a little, and heal a little, and awaken a little every day. In effect, learning is the strength of strengths. It's the superpower of superpowers because learning is what we use to grow everything else. Research shows that about one-third of who adults become over the lifespan is built into their DNA in terms of heritable factors, what we can inherit from our parents and grandparents, and so forth. OK. That third, we're stuck with. It is what it is. But the other two-thirds of the range of who we become over the lifespan is up for grabs based on what is happening around us in society and the environment and other people and their influences, and also, in particular, based on what we do inside our own minds, how we relate to the experiences we're having and disengage from the

ones that are harmful and learn from the ones that are beneficial by gradually hardwiring them into ourselves. That's full of opportunity.

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So that's where I started. And it also is really clear to me that as also as the years went by, that life is hard. Life is challenging, often. Right? Many, many difficult things, many, many challenging things can happen. So how do we deal with life, right? How do we face the challenges in the world, in our physical body, and even challenges still in our mind? How do we deal with them? Well, we deal with our challenges by having resources. Resources of different kinds out in the world, in the body, and in the mind. The resources we have in our mind, like resilience, self-worth, skills with ourselves, skills with other people, mindfulness, compassion, self-compassion, love, insight, these strengths, these psychological muscles are what we draw upon to deal with our challenges. So it becomes extremely important to find ways to grow important strengths inside us, inside ourselves.

#### [06:03]

Now to grow these strengths in our mind, starting in the 1980s, really, when brain science really began to develop, it became obvious to me and probably other people as well that if we are to grow strengths like resilience, or secure attachment, or executive functions, or just feeling good about yourself, right, if we are to grow this in our minds and heart, we must change our brains. All right? Any lasting change of mind must involve a lasting change of brain. So the practical question then becomes how to get those good things into your brain? In other words, how to foster what's called neuroplastic, neuroplastic change? How do we actually do that?

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So to do that, I developed a course about 10 years ago. We originally called it the Taking in the Good Course. And this six-class, 18-hour program, which now has been renamed the Positive Neuroplasticity Training, is really about positive neuroplasticity. It was really about teaching people evidence-based methods that plausibly could foster lasting, beneficial change in their brain. I want to mention here that I used the term positive neuroplasticity for a while and then found research from Professor David Vance, now at the University of Alabama, who actually used that term before I did. So I give him credit. You know, he came out with it first. I've communicated with him. We've had some back and forth, and Professor Vance has been very gracious about my use of the term positive neuroplasticity.

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So that said, I created this course. And one of the things that led me to create the Taking in the Good Course was this observation that, for me, as a long time therapist, someone who started leading personal growth workshops when I was 22 or 21, I think, you know, I've been doing this a long time. And when I stepped back from the field of formal mental health training—mental health like psychotherapy and workshops, and also the spiritual, contemplative trainings that I've experienced, you know, like mindfulness training and things like that—it just seemed so strange to me that people in the growth business, including me, were not really thinking about and talking about how growth actually happened, how lasting change actually happened, and in

particular, how people themselves could be active agents of that growth. Most therapists, most teachers, most trainers have good hearts. They want to help the best. But the basic attitude a lot is that our clients or students or patients are like empty vessels that we fill up with different positive qualities over time or somehow the magic just happens. But we do not tend to treat our clients, our students, our patients as active agents in their own learning. We don't give them that respect, which I think is a big problem. I'm generalizing, of course, I'm sure there are significant exceptions. But in general, it would be like being physicians or health care providers deeply interested in health without much focus on how the body heals itself. You see? It's like a huge missing piece, right under our noses the whole time. So to address that missing piece was another major motive for me in creating the Taking in the Good Course, now called the Positive Neuroplasticity Training.

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In that course—which you may be familiar with yourself since now, I think over 6000 people have taken it—in that course, the first half of it is to teach the basic methods of self-directed brain change. I use the framework summarized as the HEAL process, H-E-A-L. It stands for the two—it summarizes essentially the two-step process of lasting positive change that must begin with first having an experience of what we want to grow, and then second, installing that experience as a lasting change in the brain. Both steps are necessary. Experiencing alone is not learning. Just because we're having a beneficial experience doesn't mean that it is leaving any lasting value. We must have that second necessary step. So, you know, the HEAL framework says first, we must Have, H, to have a beneficial experience. And then we install it by Enriching it in a variety of ways. And so E for Enriching. And Absorb it, A for Absorbing, into ourselves. That gives us the first three letters of the HEAL acronym, HEA, Have, Enrich, Absorb. And then optionally, we might choose to Link positive material to negative material in order to soothe, contextualize, ease, and eventually even replace the negative material with the positive. So that is the first half of the Positive Neuroplasticity Training, a focus on those fundamental methods. And then we apply those methods to give people practice with them to three major needs that we all have. In other words, we apply those methods in the HEAL framework to growing inner strengths to be and to feel safe, satisfied, and connected. So that's the overarching structure of the course.

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Now to do the study, which was new territory for me, I connected with University of California at Berkeley and got approval through their institutional review board and worked with a research assistant there, now named Janelle Painter, who was just marvelously helpful. So we did a very official study. We had 46 people, I think, subjects. We randomly assigned them to doing the program or being in a waitlist. And then after the people did the program, the people on the waitlist also did the program so we could combine their information. And we, you know, we did it in a very legitimate way, as you can see in the paper. We had to write up a paper and my coauthors in this were absolutely crucial, so I want to give full credit to Shauna Shapiro, Emma Hutton-Thamm, Michael Hagerty, and Kevin Sullivan.