THE SWEET SPOT

What's the key to long-term happiness? How can we override our biological tendency toward negativity? Science has the answer.

By Mary Stone

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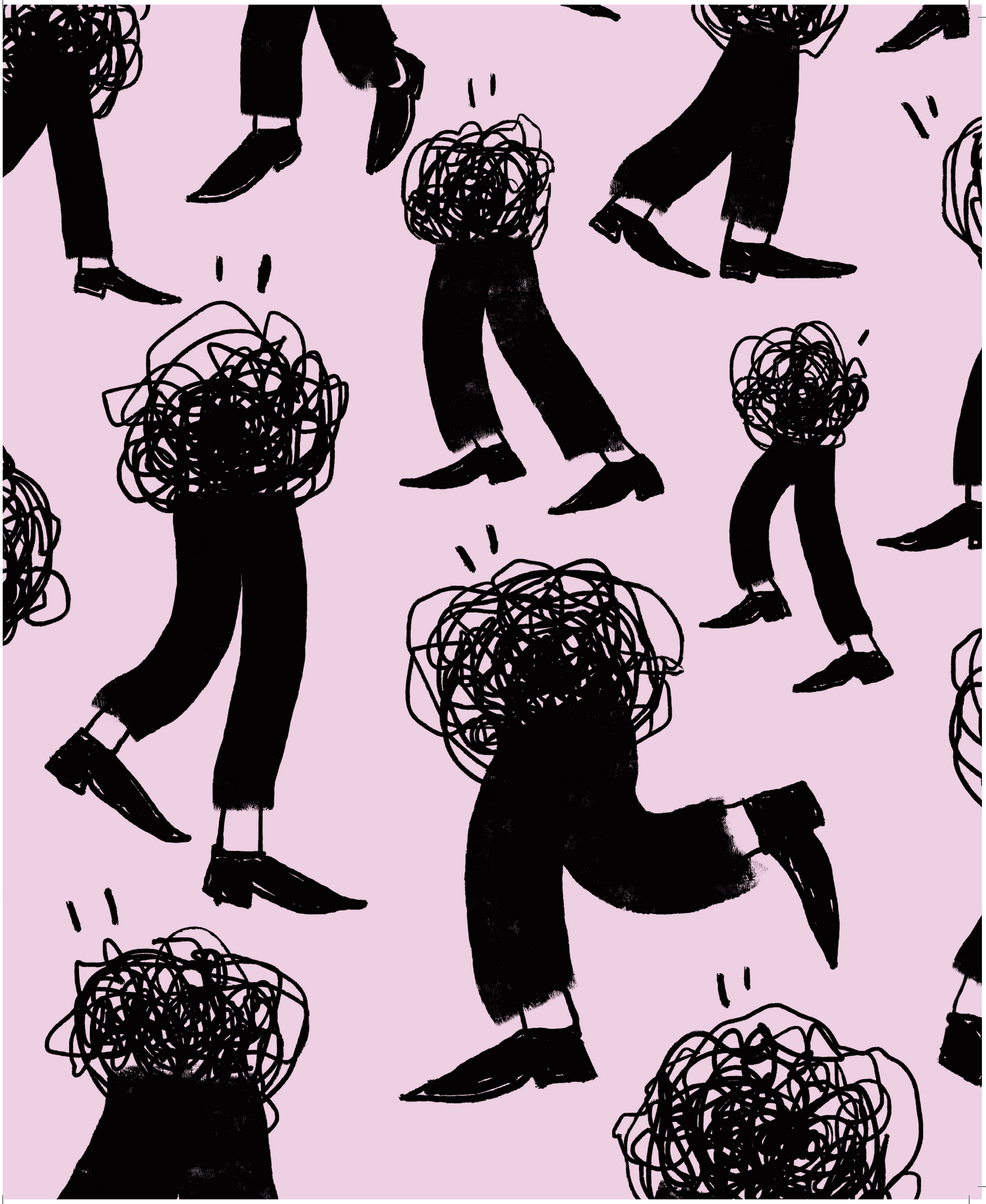

WE ARE HARDWIRED TO THINK NEGATIVELY

We are hardwired to think negatively: to prepare for the worst-case scenario. It is a survival mechanism that doesn't serve modern man as much as it did his ancestors. As a pattern, negative thinking is more than irrelevant to our lives; it can be harmful. Yet even as a collective, we tend to focus on it.

As a medical discipline, psychology—justifiably—has made negativity its focus for most of its history. Anxiety, depression, compulsive disorders, mental illness are common areas of study and treatment for psychologists. But what about patients who aren't suffering? What about people who want to live better, more enriched lives? Experts say psychology has overlooked them more or less out of necessity until the 1990s, when a new branch formed: positive psychology.

Positive psychology shifts the focus to finding and exercising one's strengths instead of trying to strengthen one's weaknesses. It involves re-orienting the brain to create a positive, supportive mental climate. It takes time and practice, but there are practical ways to go about it: Therapy, visualization exercises, hypnosis, mantras, affirmations. Rewiring our responses to events can be done, experts say, and it can result in a more peaceful, fulfilling life.

It starts with making a conscious choice to feed more positive thoughts and emotions, like well-being, says Sabrina Vogler, a former medical social worker who now runs Heart in the Moment Mindfulness Coaching LLC in Rochester. She is a certified professional coach specializing in self-compassion.

"When I say well-being, I mean, like the deep-seated, embodied, lasting, feeling satisfied, feeling of peace, you know. So if there's one thing that all the positive psychology researchers agree on is that we now know how to create the causes and conditions for opening other responsivity bias to well-being."

Responsivity bias, she explains, is our setting: It's how our brain reacts to events. As humans, our responsivity bias naturally is set to negative. The more fearful our ancestors were of their surroundings, the more likely they were to dodge danger and survive. As a result, we have evolved to be afraid and focused on the negative, explains psychologist and author Rick Hanson, Ph.D., in his book, "Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence." These qualities helped us survive then, he writes, but they are limiting our quality of life now.

This bias is responsible for the pervasive yet unexplained unease that underlies our experience of life. Our whole bodies are ready for attack. It's why we have trouble letting go of past events; we are wired to react more intensely to negative experiences than positive ones.

"Negative stimuli produce more neural activity than do equally intense (for example, loud or bright) positive ones," Hanson explains in his writings. "They are also perceived more easily and quickly. For

example, people in studies can identify angry faces faster than happy ones; even if they are shown these images so quickly (just a tenth of a second or so) that they cannot have any conscious recognition of them, the ancient fight-or-flight limbic system of the brain will still get activated by the angry faces."

The amygdala, which Hanson describes as the alarm bell of the brain, consists of two little almond-shaped regions, one on each side of the head. It uses approximately two-thirds of its neurons to look for bad news. "Once it sounds the alarm, negative events and experiences get quickly stored in memory—in contrast to positive events and experiences, which usually need to be held in awareness for a dozen or more seconds to transfer from short-term memory buffers to long-term storage," Hanson explains.

It's why we have a vast mental warehouse of negative experiences "locked and loaded," Hanson writes: They are in our heads ready to be activated by an event at the dinner table, or TV images of a car bombing 10,000 miles away. "The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences but Teflon for positive ones," Hanson writes.

There are ways, however, to override the circuitry, and it starts just by being aware it is happening, Vogler says. We have to remind ourselves of our tendencies to tune out good news and to seize on the negative, and be cognizant of our own responses to those negatives, which can be significantly shaped by personality and traumatic life events. Our reactions to perceived danger vary. For some people, the reaction might be to run and hide.

To change these tendencies, we must remember they exist and then replace them. Over time, we develop new circuitry.

"We build a new habit of the mind, and the habit is to come back to a stance in which we see ourselves; we pick up on any distress, then we respond in kind with what is needed the most. That's the kind of support that we offer ourselves," Vogler says. "That's where the self-compassion really begins in noticing and seeing if distress is showing up in my world and then responding in a supportive way without rushing to cover it over, or without rushing to shove it behind the door with the monsters in the closet."

Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ph.D., explains that unless thoughts or other stimuli are available to distract us, our brain's default setting is worry—hence, all the work it takes to steer our consciousness. Csikszentmihalyi developed the concept of flow, which he describes as a highly focused mental state. A state of flow is one in which we can escape worry, not to mention other unpleasant circumstances such as pain or hunger.

It is in this state that people are happiest, Csikszentmihalyi posits. In a state of flow, people are completely absorbed in an activity. They are in what many people call "the zone." It is a state of being in which a perfect balance exists between the challenge at hand and the skill required to do it.

Eight other components make up flow, including clarity of goals and merging of action and awareness. But the balance of challenge and skill is important because both have to be high—but not too high. And if skill and challenge are both matched but low, for example, one feels apathy instead of flow.

Activities that give us flow produce positive feedback that strengthens at least two important tenets of positive psychology: a sense of purpose and a sense of achievement.

Psychologist Martin Seligman, Ph.D., widely considered the father of positive psychology, says that even though negative emotions have the ability to override positive ones, we can help keep the negative emotions in check by amplifying the positive ones.

Positive experiences are something else we can amplify. Positive psychology calls this savoring: using thoughts and actions to increase the intensity, duration, and appreciation of positive experiences. Of the three main sources of well-being, however, pleasure actually derives the briefest feelings of happiness, Seligman and his colleagues found.

In more than a dozen studies involving thousands of respondents, positive psychology researchers found which types of lives lead to the most fulfillment and well-being. The pleasant life—the kind in which you try to maximize pleasure, and savor positive experiences and emotions with mindfulness—accounts for very little of it, researchers found.

Having flow, Seligman says, is doing something in which you are so absorbed, time stops. It's a feeling of being one with the music that produces more fulfillment long term. Having the third type of life—a meaningful life, one in which you use your strengths for the greater good—leads to longest-lasting happiness. Expressing gratitude, for example, was found to increase people's baseline happiness for one to six months after they

wrote a single-paged, hand-delivered letter expressing their gratitude to someone else.

Maximizing both flow and meaning in one's life, Seligman and his colleagues found, provides the greatest life satisfaction. Having the pleasant life in addition to those, Seligman says, is like the whipped cream and cherry on top: The sum is greater than the parts.

In light of these findings, positive psychologies set about developing interventions, evaluations, and exercises that allowed people to identify their key strengths and craft their lives (their parenting styles, their work, their relationships, and the like) in ways that they could exercise their personal strengths more.

Positive psychology, Seligman wrote in 2002, "takes you through the countryside of pleasure and gratification, up into the high country of strength and virtue, and finally to the peaks of lasting fulfillment: meaning and purpose."

Seligman sought to make this roadmap after reaching an impasse in his career, he recalled in a 2010 lecture at the University of Michigan.

"I am a psychotherapist. Once in a while, I would do pretty good work. I would get rid of almost all of a patient's sadness, her anxiety, and her anger. I thought I would get a happy person. But I never did. What I got was an empty person.

"That is because building the skills of having better relationships, more meaning in life, more engagement, and more positive emotion is almost entirely different from building the skills of fighting depression, anxiety, and anger," Seligman said. "So, positive psychology aims to develop interventions that build the enabling conditions of life, not just interventions that decrease misery."

Associate professor of psychology Jan Gillespie, Ph.D., teaches students about Seligman and positive psychology at SUNY College at Brockport. It was in the 1990s, she says, when Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association, that he made it his mission to turn positive psychology into a scientific field of study. His goal was to find out the factors that help people do more than survive but thrive—or, as he says, flourish.

The introduction of positive psychology, Gillespie says, in many ways was a return to the roots of psychology.

...THE PEAKS OF LASTING FULFILLMENT: MEANING AND PURPOSE.

"Psychology really began as a discipline that studied human well-being and giftedness as well as psychopathology and dysfunction. Studying strengths as well as weaknesses was long a part of psychology and research," she says. Two world wars changed that, she says. Researchers had to go into the field to screen soldiers and treat people's problems.

An ongoing period of peacetime allowed not just psychologists but the public as well to turn their attention to improving well-being and living better, Gillespie explains.

Seligman and other researchers found that with positive emotion, relationships, with meaning and accomplishment, that people indeed could change their baseline for well-being. To this end, Vogler works with clients to help them restructure their lifestyles but also their thinking, to develop a new responsivity bias. Often they are relieved to understand that their minds are operating on an ancient hard-wiring that is telling the mental stories they have allowed to define them.

"Life is a journey, and we can tap into the power to debristle the Velcro and to grow a responsivity bias," Vogler says. "Of course, it's going to take time, it takes practice as we're growing this habit. And yet on the other hand, in my own work, as a mindfulness coach, I am often astonished, as are my clients, by how quickly the world shifts for them, and it's their paradigm shift. Because when we shift how we're looking at a situation, especially when we shift how we're looking at ourselves, suddenly we've grown these new eyes that are both clear-seeing and compassionate."

CLEAR YOUR MIND

Techniques to reset your circuitry

Thoughts and feelings are not vaporous, mystical processes. At the microscopic level, thoughts and feelings require neurons to fire. And when these neurons fire together—for instance, when you combine a new image with an old thought or memory—over time those neurons become wired together. This is how people can change their neural structure and function, by replacing old thought patterns or habits with new ones.

Mantras, affirmations, and visualizations all can help supplant those old habits with healthier ones.

Sabrina Vogler, at Heart in the Moment Mindfulness Coaching LLC in Rochester, is a certified professional coach. She shows clients how their minds are predisposed to think negatively, and how to change the response with words we choose deliberately.

"We make a little bit of room for objections, but we also—and this is where the skillfulness comes in—want to craft and tailor our phrases that we're going to speak to match (our) unmet need," Vogler explains. "So if I have been engaged in the mindfulness practice, just asking, 'What are my thoughts and what are my emotions in this moment, and what do I need?'

"It's almost like we ask ourselves, 'What do I wish someone would say to me right now?' And then that's what we begin to say to ourselves," Vogler says. By then saying that to ourselves at that moment and others like it, strings of neurons register the message, Vogler says. The more that those strings of neurons hear the message, the more neural networks grow to support receiving the message.

"It's kind of like this: If you were standing inside the kitchen, and I walked in and my arms were full of groceries and I said, 'Here's a bag; here's another bag of groceries. Oh, I had this other third bag of groceries.' Well, you only have two arms, so how are you going to hold the third bag, right? If you were a neuron in that moment, you would grow a third arm.

"That is what is so thrilling about this kind of work: The more 'supportive ally statements' that we introduce into the brain, even if in the beginning we don't have the capacity to take them in, if we keep offering the statement, and the statements are carefully tailored to match the unmet need, then before you know it we've grown a third arm and then we've grown a fourth arm, and then we've grown a fifth arm," Vogler says. "Now the brain has tipped from negativity to responsivity."

Jeffrey Schumacher is a licensed social worker and mental health counselor in Rochester. He helps clients, especially athletes, musicians and performers, to develop mental skills that enhance performance and manage performance anxiety.

He uses counseling, visualization, and hypnosis to help clients improve their concentration, eliminate sleep disorders and anxiety, and help them draw new associations to old thoughts, emotions, or memories.

Visualization, Schumacher says, has been shown to help healing in ways science still does not understand. With the athletes Schumacher treats, the imagery is usually focused on performance, or motivation, or a certain task.

"Anything that you consistently give attention to teaches the brain to produce more of it. Using mental imagery or mental rehearsal strengthens whatever neural pathways that are associated with that physical task," Schumacher says. Neurophysiology studies show that simply visualizing exercise actually builds strength.

One study focused on people with wrist injuries in casts, he says. One group was told to imagine pushing their hands and exercising the wrist, while the control group did no visualization. "When the cast came off, the strength of the people who used imagery was measured against the strength of the people who did not use imagery, and the people who used imagery were 50 percent stronger than those who did not," Schumacher says.

He says that science cannot yet explain why this occurs, but it is known that the brain cannot distinguish between a real event and an imagined one. "When you imagine something, those parts of the brain that are activated are the same parts of the brain that would be activated if it were real. Those parts of the brain get engaged; that's how imagery and mental rehearsal help," Schumacher says.

The trick for athletes is to be honest about what truly motivates them and to be consistent with their visualizations. "The big challenge with imagery and rehearsal is that it takes practice. That's one of the biggest things people have trouble with, that it has to be practiced every day, multiple times a day. But even a few seconds or minutes a few times a day makes a world of difference," Schumacher says.

Visualization also helps people with trauma, Schumacher says. There are several techniques such as containment, which Schumacher combines with clinical hypnosis to help clients limit thoughts and emotions that pollute their well-being. "Once someone is in a very absorbed state of mind, the suggestion is given for them to play certain imagery that serves as some sort of container that is kept there. So it doesn't intrude on them until they return to it and work on it some more. So, it helps manage the intrusiveness of those certain memories," Schumacher says.

Another visualization tool improves problem-solving by replaying events on a projector. A client imagines herself in a cinema, for example, where she has complete control over what appears on the screen. She can fast forward, pause, zoom in and out, or change the image completely if it becomes too intense or upsetting. These techniques, Schumacher says, can help people see their lives and the events they have lived more clearly without the lens of negative bias.

"With this method, people can look at an experience in different ways that can help them forgive themselves, not that there is necessarily anything they have done to feel guilty about it. But it allows them to feel some compassion for themselves for what they have gone through, by zooming in and zooming out," Schumacher says.

Kim Williams, co-owner of Rochester Light and Learning Wellness Center in Penfield, helps her clients change their mindset through guided meditation and affirmations, among other methods.

She starts by trying to uncover what it is they are saying to themselves and adjusts the messaging from there to reflect not just what they want but how it would feel to have it.

"It's about taking that energy and stance of I desire and I deserve, and believing it wholeheartedly as if you already have it, as if it's in front of you," Williams says.

"You can say affirmations, but it takes a while for our brains to adjust and reprogram to positive thought. Because if we are used to our negative thought patterns, our brains are programmed that way," Williams says. "It's like we have to unplug those programs that we've put in, like a computer system, and reprogram them into a positive, affirming thought.

"I tell people when they have an affirmation to write it down and put it everywhere, in their car, in the office, in their bedroom. It's about being excited about it, being happy about it," Williams says.

But how effective all of this is, Vogler says, relies on intention. It's tempting, as social psychologist Barb Frederickson, Ph.D., points out, to want to wallpaper over the messiness with smiley faces. Vogler says mantras and affirmations are not about cutting ourselves off from the hard things in life.

"They're not meant to be distractions," she says. "It's almost like you go back to Stuart Smalley on Saturday Night Live: 'Because I'm smart enough, and I'm good enough, and, gosh darn it, people like me.' These types of affirmations are forced or shallow and ineffective. Instead, they must meet a need and be honest.

"The affirmation 'I love my life' automatically brings up an argument within me, and so the trick about affirmations/mantra/phrases is they need to resonate within us without creating an argument," Vogler adds. What does work is finding a response, an image, a series of words that evoke comfort that we can call up when we need it.

"We cultivate a habit of being able to summon at will—summon on demand—images of either people or memories for relationships and moments in our lives in which we feel deeply seen, deeply cared for as maybe a beloved dog," Vogler says. "We summon the image of this being in our mind, and we make it as real as we can, and when we do, the brain alerts the body that something soothing is now here. And, in turn, the body triggers oxytocin; the body triggers endorphins, which cause it to feel capable and serene and connected, at ease and at peace."