

Uncovering Happiness: The Natural Anti-Depressant Effects of Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

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When depression takes hold, it can become an insidious loop from which patients struggle to break free. But what if we could help them create an “anti-depressant brain”? Below, you’ll find out one way to help clients initiate brain change to alleviate depression, courtesy of my friend Elisha Goldstein, PhD. Elisha is a Clinical Psychologist in private practice, Co-founder of The Center for Mindful Living in LA, and author of the new book *Uncovering Happiness: Overcoming Depression with Mindfulness and Self-Compassion*.



Depression is the brain’s ultimate avoidance strategy.

For over 350 million people worldwide, it saps the ability to engage life and creates resistance around doing things that matter. Whether you want to work on a new project, get out and exercise, or sit and meditate - whatever it is that is in the direction of growth - the resistance of depression comes alive. In *Uncovering Happiness: Overcoming Depression with Mindfulness and Self-Compassion*, I explore some of the neuroscience behind what keeps a person stuck in a depressive loop and how to get unstuck. In the process, we discover a host of natural anti-depressants. Not only can we create an anti-depressant brain, but we can also lay the tracks for a more enduring happiness.

Understanding how depression impacts the brain gives us clues about our natural anti-depressants. For example, studies have shown that a depressed brain has significantly more activity in the right prefrontal cortex than the left prefrontal cortex (PFC).

1. The right side is associated with avoidance, negative emotions and stuckness.
2. The left side is associated with approaching, positive emotions and resiliency.

Relapse prevention is about resiliency so . . .

. . . *The natural question is what creates a left prefrontal shift?*

Science has shown two key natural anti-depressants that create this shift: mindfulness and compassion.

The science behind mindfulness has shown that it can cut down on **depressive relapse significantly**. While compassion can be implicit in mindfulness, often people who have been depressed have such a low degree of self-compassion that it’s essential to make the practice of it explicit as a form of scaffolding. Self-compassion is a skill that allows us to intentionally turn the volume down on rumination and activate the self-soothing states of the brain to provide an experience of safety, courage and resiliency. As a bonus, self-compassion has been correlated with a deeper set of well-being traits like hope, gratitude, joy, patience, forgiveness, connection, and wisdom.

Here’s a practical acronym to begin igniting the natural anti-depressant of self-compassion. Play with this, see what you notice and allow your experience to be your teacher.

S.A.F.E. - A Self-Compassion Practice.

SAFE is a simple acronym from *Uncovering Happiness* that just happens to be fitting to what we all ultimately need to feel happy. When we don’t feel safe, our brains fall into a fear mindset and don’t allow for our natural states of joy, calm and happiness to arise. I’ll often have people just play with this in any moment to see what they notice. Or I’ll have them visualize a recent or upcoming difficult moment to get in touch with more uncomfortable feelings of shame, fear, guilt, sadness or anger to bring alive the natural anti-depressant effects of the SAFE practice.

S - Soften into the feeling. This implies a type of gentle recognition of the feeling, maybe even naming it. “Breathing in, opening to the vulnerability that is there, breathing out, softening into it.”

A - Allow it to be as it is, without resisting or clinging to it.

F - Feel into the emotion that is there with a kind attention. In doing this we can still drop in the questions, “What does this feeling believe” and “What do I need right now?” When we discover this we might send that internally. For example, if we sense that we need to feel loved and to feel safe, we might say, “May I feel loved, May I feel safe, etc...”

E - Expand awareness of all people who also experience this vulnerability. The fact is this vulnerability of resistance, depression or any difficult experience is also a human experience. This is a core component of self-compassion. Here is where we understand that we are not alone and that in this very moment there are thousands if not millions of people who are experiencing this very same feeling. The “E” of SAFE is where we inspire connection with the rest of humanity. In this practice we can also take what we learned from the “F” of SAFE and send it outward saying, “May we all feel loved, May we all feel safe, etc...”

Some people find it helpful to do this with a hand on their heart, stomach or both. While mindfulness and self-compassion are fundamental natural anti-depressants, the neuroscience and practice of purpose, play and confidence also reveal key natural anti-depressant effects that are essential for uncovering a more enduring happiness.