



CONNECTION is about widening the circle of healthy, connected relationships. Positive connections help us to have healthy relationships, to see the best in ourselves and others, and to reduce bias.



APPRECIATION

- The skill of appreciation is to notice the positive
- Evolution has set us up to be hyper-focused on the negative
- In **neuroscience** research, Hebb's Law says that "**neurons** that fire together wire together." The more you practice gratitude, the more you strengthen the brain's **neural** circuits for gratitude, making it easier to focus on feelings of gratitude.
- Expressing appreciation and gratitude has multiple winning effects on the brain
 - increases dopamine (*increase duration and experience of positive emotions, and promotes prosocial behavior*)
 - increased serotonin production (*the happiness chemical that contributes to feelings of well-being stabilizes moods and elevates a sense of relaxation*)
 - increased activity in the medial prefrontal cortex (*area linked to learning and making decisions*)
 - activation of the brain's ALTRUISM and Reward System Regions (*the brain craves the experience of giving*)
- We tend to think we see other people "as they are," but research shows that how we perceive other people is shaped by our memories, expectations, and a range of other factors.
- These factors drive what we notice about other people in the first few moments of an interaction, and what we notice can lead to bias or negative reactions in some cases, or warmth and connection in others.
- If we train our minds to notice positive qualities about the people we interact with, we activate brain networks associated with feelings of connection, appreciation, and care.

Appreciative Inquiry

"What's the best thing that has happened to you today?"

Asking this playful question can serve as a bridge to connect the shared spectrum of emotions that shape the experience of others, leading to increased understanding, greater tolerance and heart-felt connections.

- Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based, positive approach to leadership development and organizational change.
- The three concepts of Appreciative Inquiry are:
 1. *Appreciation*: Recognize the best in people, or the world around us. Recognize that strengths are the foundation on which the future can be built.
 2. *Inquiry*: Ask questions and evoke curiosity
 3. *Wholeness*: Encourage participation from everyone. "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much." – Helen Keller

Feeling Connected

- Social relationships have a significant impact on our mental and physical health.
- Science indicates the need for connection with others to be healthy, especially caring relationships.
- Being distracted is toxic for our mind and many people feel less content.
- Research supports that we can learn to control our focus and pay more attention at any age.
- We are all born with the abilities to form and maintain healthy relationships. We come into this world with the capacity for kindness and appreciation, but they must be nurtured.
- Practice the skill of focusing on the positive to nurture healthy relationships; notice the positive in daily interactions with people.

**When you experience stress or conflict in a relationship (family member, co-worker or student), how did this effect your wellbeing? When you experience harmony in a relationship, how did you feel?
How do we bring balance to our social connections?**

Notice the Positive

- One of our deepest needs is to feel valued
- Appreciation creates a burst of positive emotions in both the giver and receiver
- Appreciation is infectious; when we see the best in others, they see the best in us
- Positive interactions releases oxytocin in the brain having a dual effect: caring and appreciation increase which destructive emotions (fear and anxiety) decrease
- We first have to start with ourselves
- When we feel good about ourselves, we see others in a more positive light

What are your positive strengths, qualities, and skills?

What kinds of positive things can you notice throughout your day that you normally do not pay attention to?

Negativity Bias

- We are wired to focus on the negative; it is a natural impulse, but we can rewire through practice
- The brain pays attention to one thing at a time which makes us less aware of the full picture
- When we focus on something negative, we tend to get stuck in a loop of negativity and stop noticing the positive
- The human brain evolved to keep us alive and sensitive to threats in our environment
- Negativity bias creates inner tension and stress in the mind that eventually becomes toxic
- Toxic stress impairs are ability to regulate emotions and engage in healthy nurturing relationships.
- Toxic stress at work impairs the ability to get things done

When have you shifted your perspective from a negative to positive experience?

What did you do or say to shift the experience to a more positive direction?