

Hi everyone. For those who don't know me, my name is Zac and I use he and him pronouns. I'm a white 37 year old male with long medium brown hair. I'm wearing a gray shirt and gray glasses. And although it's not visible on my camera, I'm seated on a gray and black manual wheelchair. I live with both genetic and acquired disabilities. I've been disabled my whole life, but I only started identifying as disabled a few years ago.

In 2022, I became certified as an Awakening Joy teacher, which is a 10 week course developed by James Barris. I'm going to be teaching my version of Awakening Joy that I've adapted for a disabled audience starting in late January.

This will be done independently of East Bay Meditation Center, but everyone here is invited to join. This class will be offered on a dana basis and no payment is expected. If you'd like more details, you can email me. I'm putting my email address in the chat. And you can also visit my website to read more about the class.

Tonight's talk is a little intro into the main concept behind Awakening Joy. This past week has been very stressful for many of us. Sometimes in dark times, these practices can sound a little hollow. But I find when I take a deep breath and step backwards, they have as much truth as they ever have, if not more.

Self care is an essential part of activism. Stress makes most, if not all, our health conditions worse. In order to support ourselves and our communities, we have to put our oxygen masks on first. This is why it's so important to understand the negativity bias and how to navigate it. There's a lot of negativity in the world right now and it's so easy to get lost in it.

I discuss the negativity bias in the context of my own chronic illness, but the negativity bias touches all aspects of our lives, and the techniques I describe can be applied to any aspect of your life.

The negativity bias is a proven phenomenon that shows that our brains are more receptive to negative experiences than positive ones. Neuroscientist Rick Hansen describes this by saying, our brains are like Teflon for good experiences and Velcro for bad ones. We overlearn from our bad experiences and underlearn from our good ones. An example that's given frequently is of a job review. Many of us are unable to work, but I'm sure that you'll still be able to understand the metaphor.

Your boss gives you nine pieces of positive feedback and one area you can improve on. After the review, it's common to lose sight of the nine positive attributes and hyper focus on the one area for growth. This is the negativity bias at work. This means that negative things hold more weight in our lives than positive ones.

Scientists have determined that the weight of negative to positive things is 3:1 this means for every negative experience, we need three positive experiences to balance things out. Personally, I don't think that this is something that we can assign numbers to. It will differ for everyone, and we can't magically make more good things happen in our lives.

Especially when we have a heavier burden of difficult things due to chronic illness, mental health, or other things that we deal with. What we can do is give more attention to the good that already exists in our lives, which increases its staying power.

Evolutionarily, the negativity bias was quite helpful. We needed to quickly learn what was dangerous in order to survive as a species. Today, however, it does more harm than good, making us overly aware of the difficult aspects of life while glossing over the good ones. The

good news is that it's not so hard to override this. But the difficult part is just remembering to do so.

A few months ago, I decided to retry a medication I had taken a few years prior. I had stopped this medication the first time due to its numerous side effects. Recently, it was suggested that I try again. I wondered if a very slow titration could help avoid the issues that I had had before. And unfortunately, it did not.

And a few weeks later, I decided to discontinue it. While most people can discontinue at the dose I was taking without weaning themselves off, my sensitive body did not like this. So I experienced a new flavor of discomfort. Once withdrawal wore off, it was replaced by more familiar, but still unpleasant symptoms.

I started to despair that no matter what I did, my reality was just that I felt awful all the time. Thanks to my practice, this thought set off alarm bells, reminding me that this was likely the negativity bias speaking, and to investigate the thought deeper. The next day, I started to pay close attention to how I was feeling throughout the day, not just when I was at my worst.

I noticed that there were lots of times that I felt okay. To be clear, my baseline is never great, and I'm sure many of you know what this is like. And at the same time, my baseline is considerably less than terrible. Terrible moments, or even hours, exist on most days, but not all the time. It's not relentless.

I want to make a note here and say that I experience my illness only, not yours. It's possible that you feel poorly all the time. And I don't want to suggest that I know your experience and illness better than you do.

This sort of inquiry is not only useful for my own relationship to my illness, but also for my doctor's information. Feeling awful all the time would be a new level of illness for me, and an important thing to discuss with my doctors. Even if there's no real solution, keeping them in the loop is crucial. I think this is a common thought trap for those of us who have chronic illness.

When we're feeling badly, our body is sending signals to us that something is wrong. For example, pain can be a very helpful signal to tell us to remove our hands from the hot stove. Unfortunately, when we live with chronic illness, resolving feeling poorly isn't as easy as pulling your hand away. Sometimes it is what it is. Thanks to the negativity bias, this can lead us to believe that we feel awful all the time.

There are two major ways of managing this phenomenon. The first is savoring moments when things feel good or even just okay. You may find the word savor to be too strong or inaccessible to you.

Instead, simply noticing or appreciating may fit better. When we allow a little extra time to take in the experience of feeling better, we absorb it more deeply, overriding the negativity bias. Suddenly, "I feel bad all the time" becomes, "although I feel bad often, there are times when my illness feels more manageable". Both/And.

The expert level of this is noticing how brief blips of joy can exist in moments of suffering. A funny meme. A good song, a text from a friend, can all put a momentary smile on my face, even when I'm really feeling unwell. The point here is not that life isn't so bad, but rather that there are waves.

Everything is changing all the time. Even when there's an overall undercurrent of feeling poorly. There can also be tiny ripples of pleasure. Thanks to the negativity bias, those ripples are easily lost when we are not paying attention.

As a personal example, sometimes I'm unable to do much but lay in my bed. If I can notice how soft my sheets are despite my general discomfort, it can make that experience much less undesirable. Sometimes when I'm feeling poorly, a cool drink of water can feel really nice for a brief moment. And of course, I'm not suggesting that refreshing water or cozy sheets outweigh the difficulties of chronic illness.

But when we appreciate how small, pleasant things can coexist with suffering. Life feels less one dimensional. Although these fluctuations may seem tiny, they're worth paying attention to. "This moment, I feel better than a moment ago". "That moment, I felt worse". "I'm still feeling badly, but a little more clear headed than I was 10 minutes ago".

The goal is to practice non clinging. We want to be able to be aware of the changing moments without grasping at the good or pushing away the bad. We're observing from a distance. You might find a deep dive into your body to be undesirable, but that's not necessarily what I'm suggesting. Just make a mental note when things are more easeful, and take it in for a moment.

If you're up for going deeper, that's great, but it's also not necessary. This is just a guess based on my own personal experience, but I wager that the more difficulty we have in our lives, the harder it is to let go of the small stuff and let it roll off our back. In addition to amplifying the good in our lives, we can also hold the less difficult with a lighter grip.

I'm not suggesting if something is really upsetting that you just ignore it. But personally, I know that I can get really caught in things that aren't a big deal or things I don't have much control over. I have a lot of legitimate things I struggle in my life. So sometimes minor inconveniences on top of everything else carry much more weight than they would otherwise.

One last time, I want to emphasize this is not about putting rose colored glasses on and ignoring the bad. Rather, we're turning up the volume of the good because it's already being overpowered by the difficult. When I can't find any moments of refuge to appreciate, I turn to self compassion.

One thing that's great about self compassion is that no one gets your struggle like you do. You're the only one who lives it, which makes you the best suited person to apply it. There are three elements to self compassion. The first is mindfulness, which you essentially just tried. The second two are common humanity and self kindness. With common humanity, we're reminding ourselves that we're not alone in our struggles.

We often struggle in isolation, in our rooms, or in our own heads. But just because we can't readily see others struggling doesn't mean that there aren't any who are. That's what makes community like the one we're in tonight so great. We all know that everyone here is having similar difficulties and it becomes less conceptual that others struggle when we're in community with others who deal with the same things we do.

I usually overlap common humanity with the third aspect, self kindness. Self kindness can take on a few different forms. One is supportive touch. Our bodies and our minds don't differentiate between supportive touch from another person and from ourselves. So putting our hand on our heart, giving ourselves a hug, or stroking our face can cause some of the same reactions that we have when another person does this.

One I personally really like is rubbing the middle of my forehead right above the bridge of my nose, where the proverbial third eye is. I like this both because it's a place where I have a lot of sensation, but also because I can place my elbow on a table, and my arms get tired much less easily.

Secondly, self kindness is speaking kindly to yourself. You can remind yourself that although you feel lonely at times, there are others who are struggling with the same things you are, including the loneliness. Remind yourself that it's okay to have hard feelings about this. In fact, it's a totally natural response. You don't have to be strong. And it's totally justified to feel despair. We don't want to stoke these feelings, but if we vilify them, it compounds our suffering. Feeling poorly sucks and there's no sugarcoating it sometimes.

Kristen Neff, who's a leader in the self compassion movement, talks to herself using words like "sweetheart", and "my dear". This feels a little unnatural at first, but I think it's really worth trying it and seeing how it goes. It's supported me a lot.

If it's too unnatural for you, you could also try using your own name. In his book, Chatter, Ethan Kross calls this distanced self talk. He discusses how it's been shown to have real benefits. To paraphrase Ethan, 'research has previously indicated that using first person singular pronouns is a reliable marker of negative emotion. Using your own name creates emotional distance because it makes you feel like you're talking to another person when you're just talking to yourself'. I think everyone can relate to how we talk to others we love with more kindness than we talk to ourselves.

So try extending that kindness to yourself too. You absolutely deserve it.