

H.E.A.L.

Rewiring Your Brain for Goodness Early Edition

Rick Hanson's Method — The Neuroscience Behind It

"Your brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones. The H.E.A.L. method changes that." — Rick Hanson

Out here, we know that a horse doesn't unlearn a spook in a single calm moment. It takes repetition. Intentional exposure, and time in the "good feeling." That's not just good horsemanship — that's neuroscience. And it turns out, the same is true for us.

Rick Hanson, neuropsychologist and author of *Hardwiring Happiness*, developed the H.E.A.L. method as a practical brain-based tool for doing exactly what your horse trainer has been telling you all along: you have to practice the good stuff, not just avoid the bad.

Let's break down what's happening in your nervous system — and why this practice matters for women like us, who've often learned that staying alert to danger is what keeps us safe.

First, Let's Talk About the Problem: Negativity Bias

Your brain was built to help you **survive**, not to make you happy all the time. Because of this, it pays much more attention to things that feel scary, painful, or stressful. This is not a weakness. It is how the brain is designed.

Inside your brain is a small part called the **amygdala**. It works like an alarm system. Its job is to quickly look for danger. When something feels threatening, the amygdala sends a signal to another part of the brain called the **hippocampus**, which helps store memories. Your body also releases stress hormones like **cortisol** and **adrenaline**. These chemicals help your brain remember hard or scary experiences so you can avoid danger in the future. Because of this system, difficult experiences often stay in our memory very strongly.

Positive moments work a little differently. Kind words, peaceful moments, or feelings of safety can pass through our minds very quickly. If we don't slow down and notice them, they can disappear from memory fast. That's why it helps to **pause and really take in good moments**. When you slow down and feel them for a little longer, your brain begins to store those experiences too.

Over time, this helps your nervous system learn something important: **You are safe.**

The Horse Connection

A horse that has been scared by a plastic bag may remember that bag for years. One calm moment with it may not make much difference. It often takes many slow, safe experiences for the horse to learn that the bag is not a threat. People are very similar. Many of the women who come to this community have had years — sometimes even decades — of experiences that taught their nervous systems to stay on high alert. So one good day does not erase all of that. But something powerful happens with **practice**. When safe experiences are repeated, the brain and nervous system can begin to change. Over time, new and healthier patterns start to form.

Little by little, the nervous system learns a new message: **It is okay to feel safe.**

What Is the H.E.A.L. Method?

H.E.A.L. is a four-step practice that helps your brain change and grow. Your brain has something called **neuroplasticity**. This means your brain can change based on your experiences. Every thought you think, every feeling you have, and every sensation you notice leaves a small mark in your brain. Over time, these marks become patterns that shape how you respond to life.

The H.E.A.L. practice helps you **use positive experiences on purpose** so your brain can build new and healthier pathways. This practice is not about ignoring pain or pretending things are fine. It is about slowly building real inner strength — feelings of safety, calm, and confidence — so your whole nervous system can begin to work in a healthier way.

Over time, these new experiences help your brain and body learn something important: **Safety and strength can grow inside you.**

Have a Positive Experience

H

This step is simple, but very powerful. First, **notice or create a positive moment right now**. It does not have to be something big. It could be the smell of your morning coffee. Your horse is taking a deep breath and licking his lips. The feeling of your boots standing on solid ground. A small moment of pride. A breath that finally settles your body. Small moments like these matter.

The Brain Science:

When you notice something good, a learning system in your brain turns on. Part of this system uses a chemical called **dopamine**. People often call dopamine the “pleasure chemical,” but it actually helps your brain **learn and**

pay attention. When something feels good, and you notice it, your brain releases dopamine. This helps your brain mark the moment as important and begin storing it.

It is like telling your nervous system: **“This is good. Remember this.”**

For people who have been through trauma, even this first step can feel difficult. Your brain may quickly scan the moment and find what is wrong instead of what is good. That does not mean something is wrong with you. It simply means your nervous system has learned to watch for danger. When you gently bring your attention back to something that feels even a little bit okay, you are doing something brave. You are helping your nervous system learn a new way to respond to the world.

Enrich It

Now, **staywiththegoodexperienceforamoment.** Let it grow a little. Notice it with more of your senses. Feel it in your body—not just in your thoughts. Ask yourself where you feel it. Maybe in your chest, your shoulders, or your breathing. Let it be more than just a quick thought. Give them a moment a little time.

The Brain Science:

Research shows that a positive moment needs about **20 to 30 seconds** of your attention for your brain to begin storing it as a lasting memory. This is the difference between a moment that quickly passes and a moment that actually **changes your brain**. Most people notice only the good things for about 2 or 3 seconds before their minds move on. When you stay with a good feeling a little longer, something else happens in your body. Your **parasympathetic nervous system** begins to turn on. This part of your nervous system helps you feel calm and safe. Researcher **Stephen Porges** calls this the **ventral vagal state**—the state where your body feels connected, relaxed, and safe. As this happens, your body releases helpful chemicals like **oxytocin**, which supports trust and connection, and **serotonin**, which helps you feel calm and steady. Your body becomes part of the learning — not just your brain.

This is one reason your **horse can be such a powerful partner in this practice**. When you feel that relaxed connection with your horse and you slow down enough to really feel it—when you breathe, stay present, and let the calm sink in—you are actually changing your nervous system.

Your horse’s calm nervous system can help settle yours. And when you stay with that feeling, your brain begins to **wire in the experience of safety.** 🐾

E

A

Absorb It

Now **let the good experience sink in**. Imagine it soaking into you like sunlight warming your skin, or water soaking into dry ground. You might place a hand on your chest or your belly. You might quietly say to yourself: **“I’m taking this in.” “This moment belongs to me.”** Give your body time to feel it.

The Brain Science:

Your brain learns through a simple rule: **neurons that fire together, wire together**. This means that when the same brain cells activate again and again, they begin to form stronger connections. When you **intentionally take in a good experience**, you help these connections grow stronger. Over time, your brain begins to build new pathways connected to safety, calm, and good feelings. Part of your brain, called the **hippocampus**, helps store the memories you are aware of. But other parts of your brain store memories in your body and emotions. These body memories help shape what feels safe, what feels good, and what feels true for you. That is why the **body part of this practice is important**. When you place a hand on your heart, take a slow breath, or notice the feeling in your chest or belly, you are helping your whole system learn — not just your thinking mind. Your brain also has a system that helps you notice what is happening inside your body. This is called **interoception**. The more you practice feeling good and safe experiences in your body, the better your brain becomes at noticing those feelings. Little by little, your nervous system learns to recognize **safety and calm — not just danger**.

L

Link (Optional — Use with Care)

This step is optional. While you hold the good experience in your mind and body, you can gently allow a difficult feeling or belief to be there as well. Think of it like **holding two things at once**. The good experience stays in the front of your attention. The difficult feeling stays in the background. It is sitting near the warmth, safety, and calm you have been building.

The Brain Science:

Your brain can **update old memories**. When a memory or feeling returns to your awareness, it becomes flexible for a short time. During that time, your brain can add new information before the memory is stored again. When a hard feeling is held alongside a strong experience of safety, your brain has a chance to rewrite part of that **old pattern**.

For example, a feeling like *“I’m not enough”* might slowly begin to shift when held alongside a strong sense of connection, care, or safety. This idea is also used in many

forms of trauma therapy. These approaches help people feel **safe in the present** while gently touching difficult memories from the past. One very important thing to remember: If the difficult feeling becomes too strong or starts to take over the good feeling, simply let it go and return to the first three steps. This step should **never be forced**.

You are always in charge of the pace.

Why This Matters Especially for Trauma Healing

Trauma doesn't just leave memories — it changes your body and nervous system. Your body can learn, without you thinking about it, that the world is not safe, that connecting with people can hurt, or that your goodness isn't guaranteed. These aren't things you can just "think" your way out of. They live in your body, in how your brain notices danger, and in automatic reactions that happen before your thinking mind can act.

H.E.A.L. works because it talks straight to your nervous system, not your thoughts. It doesn't try to argue with you about being safe. Instead, it gives your body real experiences of safety over and over, long enough that your brain starts to believe a new truth: good things are real. They last. I can hold onto them.

The Worthy Cowgirl Lens

Women in Western and equestrian culture are often shaped by values of toughness, stoicism, and self-reliance. Many of us learned early that needing things — softness, comfort, rest, connection — was weakness. That wiring runs deep. H.E.A.L. isn't about being soft. It's about being strategic. You are using the science of your own brain to build the kind of inner foundation that doesn't just survive hard things, but genuinely thrives.

Your horses have always known this. Watch a horse settle after a hard moment — the sigh, the lick and chew, the drop of the head. That is their nervous system doing exactly what H.E.A.L. asks you to do: completing the stress cycle, returning to the body, absorbing the safety of right now.

A Simple Practice Guide

You don't need a meditation cushion or an hour of quiet. You can do H.E.A.L. in 60 seconds, standing at the fence line with your horse, sitting in your truck, or pausing in the middle of a busy day.

H.E.A.L. — Step by Step

H — Have it. Find something goodright now. Even something small. Let yourself notice it.

E — Enrich it. Stay with it for at least20–30 seconds. Let it expand in your body. Open your senses to it. Breathe.

A — Absorb it. Intend to take it in. Place a hand somewhere on your body. Say internally: I'm letting this be mine. Feel it sinking in like sun-warmed ground.

L — Link (optional). If something difficult wants to be held alongside this goodness, let it be present in the background — gently, briefly, with the positive experience staying in the foreground. If it floods you, release it and return to A.

A Final Word

This practice is not about toxic positivity or bypassing your pain. It's about balance. Your nervous system already knows how to hold onto hard things — that skill came at great cost and kept you safe. H.E.A.L. is about building the other side: an equally strong, equally practiced capacity to take in what is good, to let it land, to let it change you.

That, sweet cowgirl, is how you hardwire healing.

"The good news is that since neurons fire together when we take in positive experiences, we can use brief moments many times a day to gradually build up positive neural structures." — Rick Hanson