

Episode 065 – Hardwiring Happiness An Interview with Dr. Rick Hanson

Aired on October 5, 2017

[Intro Music]

[00:34] Angie: So, today on the Human Current, we have Dr. Rick Hanson back on the show. Rick is a psychologist, Senior Fellow of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, and New York Times bestselling author. Rick joined us on our last episode for the first half of this interview, where we really dove in and explored complex systems and how the brain is a complex system.

Today I'd like to shift things up and talk a little bit about your book Rick, I'm excited to have you back on the show. So, for listeners tell us about your most recent book, *Hardwiring Happiness*. What inspired you to write it and who should be reading it?

[01:12] Dr. Hanson: Thank you Angie, it's a pleasure to be here. Well that book is about a very simple, which is how to help yourself learn and develop and grow as you go through your life and that is fundamentally about steeping your own learning curve, your own growth curve as you go through life. It has struck me for really a long time that the most important thing a person can do, really, is to steepen their growth curve, you can't do anything about the past, you can't do anything about where you are right now, when you let say, wake up in the morning, but you can do a lot about whether you go to bed that night a little wiser, a little happier, a little stronger, and a little more loving than when you started out that day. And that fundamental increment between, let's say where you began and where you end, at the end of the day, let's say, adds up over time to become something really, really big, and so that then takes us into the question of, well how do you actually do that? Thank you Captain Obvious, how do you actually do that, and that goes into how the brain changes for the better, which is fundamentally a two-stage process. I summarize it as essentially just saying have it, enjoy it. In other words there's a saying in neuroscience that goes back to the work of Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb, neurons that fire together wire together, and right there you can see the two stage process of learning. We begin with an experience of whatever it is we want to develop, maybe it's holding an idea in mind or maybe we're using our body in a certain way or maybe we are having an emotional kind of experience or maybe there are body sensations, we want to increasingly help to become our home base. So we begin with an experience such as feeling care about by other people or feeling of worth of ourselves, we start with that experience now we have the neurons firing together and then in the second stage, we need to help those neurons wire their way together so that we then retain the value of the experience as a change for the better in ourselves.

So, what the book's about is how to tap into the extraordinary power of helping your brain change for the better. Researcher Jeffrey Schwartz, I think at UCLA coined the term self-directed neural plasticity and that's what that book is about. It's for general audience, it's not for neuroscientists. But it really is about using what we know about brain science to turbocharge your own growth process, your own healing process, your own developmental process, your own transformation, as you go through your day. There's a lot of detail in the book that gets in the how to do this and how to apply it for particular needs, but again the essence is fundamentally simple, have the experience that you want to grow, and then slow your brain down for a breath or two or longer to really help that beneficial experienced land inside you and stick to your metaphorical rifts.

[04:08] Angie: Thanks for that little background of the book and it is really that simple to have it and enjoy it. Just to also let our listeners know, if you are not a big reader or you have long commutes like I do there is an audible version for that as well and when I was reading it I was half reading it and half listening to it except for the meditation parts where you say not to do while I'm driving, I promise.

[04:32] Dr. Hanson: I'll hear questioning authority but anyway.

[04:36] Angie: Yeah, it's a great read and I appreciate that you mention that it's not for neuroscientists that it's for a general audience.

You and I we're talking a little offline about how I feel this would be a great book, in my past career in child welfare and how I wish that this book could be introduced into that arena. Thank you so much for this gift, *Hardwiring Happiness*.

[04:57] Dr. Hanson: Thank you.

[04:58] Angie: So, Rick is there anything else you'd like to add about *Hardwiring Happiness*?

[05:02] Dr. Hanson: Yeah there are two big implications from this basic idea about how do you help yourself grow and change as much as possible, how do you take in the good, in other words, how do you do that?

A deep implication of that is that we've taken a good to meet our needs and we have three primary needs for safety, satisfaction, and connection. And, as we've taken a good experience again and again and again that we are safe enough or satisfied enough or connected enough, then we start to feel fundamentally at peace in our core, in terms of safety. Fundamentally contented in terms of satisfaction. And fundamentally rested in love, receiving love and giving love in terms of our need for connection. And, this is not pie in the sky, in and of itself, it's not enlightenment, although I think it's a significant step in that direction, but through feeling like that your needs are met, then a fundamental engine of what's called craving, starts to fall away and one of the things that's informed my own work is the think about evolutionary neuropsychology



through the lens of early Buddhist psychology. And the Buddha's drive theory of suffering, in which he essentially said that much, much, much human suffering is at the root of it has to do with craving of one kind or another and we crave in relationship to needs, our needs are safety, satisfaction, and connection, broadly defined, meaning needs are blends of those three. And so, if we internalize again and again and again that embodied felt sense of core needs met and as we again and again develop an underlying sense of peace and contentment love as we meet the next moment of now and we can meet the next moment of now, including the challenges that may be in it, with much less of an underline biological basis for craving. And that is a big deal and has a lot of implications including for people who are interested in using those to move forward in their own personal path of awakening, but really for anyone to enter into the next moment feeling already peaceful, already contented, and already loved is the foundation of resilience, if you think about it. It's how we can deal with the world rested and when I call the green zone, even when the world is flashing red. So, that's a second big implication and then if I could take a swing for the fences, I'd love to mention a third.

There are societal implications. So, if you think back in evolutionary time including as homo-sapiens, at least two hundred thousand or so years ago and recent findings suggest that anatomically modern humans lived even three hundred thousand years ago and that we had hunter-gatherer hominid ancestors long before that, during almost all of human history until the last generation or two it was impossible to reliably provide for everyone's needs. We could not reliably protect people including from pain in terms of safety, we could not reliably feed everyone on the planet, it's one of the minimal aspects of the need for satisfaction for getting rewards of different kinds, and we could not reliably protect people from attacks from other groups. But in the last generation maybe the last two generations, the objective capabilities, the objective needs, technology, the know-how, the wherewithal to be able to meet the needs of everybody on the planet, so that they can engage life in what I've called the green zone, I described it already, that's absolutely unprecedented. That's one of the absolutely unprecedented in my view, it's one of the most biologically unprecedented characteristics of human life today. And how the human species wraps its collective mind around the possibility of truly helping every single seven billion plus person on the planet be safe every day and to have their needs met enough every day terms of satisfaction and connection, how we wrap our minds around that is I think going to be one of the great stories of the twenty first, twenty second, and twenty third centuries. And, one of the big implications of that, is that when individuals have a deeply internalized felt sense of calm strength in terms of safety and internalized sense of contentment already, satisfaction and internalized sense of compassion and empathy and kindness toward them not just toward us, when that's the case, citizens and people in general are much harder to manipulate with the traditional appeals to fear and greed and us against vengeance, grievances, and conflicts. And there too I think that as we go forward you know as a human species in which we all have to live with each other in one little lifeboat, planet Earth being able to enable more people to have a deeply internalized felt sense needs met is one of the things that will really serve us as we go forward and try to address current enormous inequalities of wealth and power.

[10:12] Angie: I think you just answered one of my questions for you, I'm going to throw it at you anyways.

[10:18] Dr. Hanson: All right.

[10:18] Angie: One of my questions was, how can Hardwiring Happiness change the world?

[10:22] Dr. Hanson: I'm a psychologist, I tend to intervene at the level of individuals, but one of the things that's really striking is that with the advent of agriculture, ten thousand years ago fairly minor inequalities of wealth and power found in hunter-gatherer bands were exploded because with agriculture surpluses could be accumulated and with those surpluses there could be an accumulation of wealth, and therefore an accumulation of power through hiring warriors and making offerings to priests to justify elite rule, and that's the beginning of Game of Thrones and the last ten thousand years of human history, and we still see many of those features today even in democracies of various kinds.

So, the question then becomes how can we intervene at all levels, intervening at the level of United Nations and arms control, intervening at the level of bringing fresh water to places that don't have it, but also how can we intervene at the level of individual brains, one brain at a time and my own hopeful vision, I probably won't live long enough to see it I have a hopeful vision of getting a critical mass of human brains rested in the green zone. I think the tipping point will come with roughly a billion brains or so spending most minutes and most days in the green zone with an underlying felt sense of core needs sufficiently met and underlying core sense of peace and contentment and love and when that happens I think we'll see something fundamental shift in the course of human history, because among other things when people have that core inside themselves when they can join with others who are grounded in that same fundamental, resilient wellbeing, hard wired into their own bodies, which is a very powerful basis for courage and public service as well. When that happens, my own hope is that will be able to re-tilt the playing field and reduce the great inequalities of wealth and power that we see around us today.

[12:17] Angie: I hope that we're both around to see that and experience that and be a part of that, yeah beautiful. Coming back to your book, *Hardwiring Happiness* you share a chart and for those who have the book, it's on page fifty-one, it explains the difference between a responsive mindset and a reactive mindset. So, for our listeners can you explain these different mindsets and why the reactive mode has become the normal state for many people?

[12:44] Dr. Hanson: Well, it's right at the heart of the matter, so we have needs so we have safe, satisfy, connected we need those things, how about we go getting those needs, vary by the stage of brain evolution that's quite associated with fulfilling those needs. So, we have the reptilian stage, very associated with safety, chameleon stage, very associated with satisfaction, a primate human stage very associated with connection, all right, so we have those needs that are related to the stages, the question is fundamentally, how do we go about meeting our

needs? I'm a methods guy, I'm in the trenches, I'm practical, I'm trying to figure out how to help myself and how to help other people. So, the question is not can we abandon our needs? You can't get rid of your needs and it's also important to think about the needs of other people. The question is how do we go about meeting those needs? And it's pretty clear like any kind of framework that the dichotomies are not super sharp but there's a fundamental difference between, let's say going about your need for safety based on an underlying sense of calm strength, or do you go about meeting your need for safety, scared out of your mind or enormously angry or feeling immobilized and helpless. There's a difference there and there are similar differences in terms of meeting needs for satisfaction and for connection and so I use a language that other people sometimes use too that we basically have two ways of going about meeting our needs, the response of mindset, as you put it, or the reactive mindset. In the reactive mindset, there's a piercing sounds of needs unmet and what the brain and body does is fires up into its fight or flight or freeze mode to manage the needs in a very intense and reactive way. Mother Nature's plan is for her little critters, her little children, to be able to go into the reactive mode briefly and exit it rapidly because it can be a short-term solution to immediate threats of survival but it's not a long-term solution because there are a lot of costs, a lot of it's called allostatic load, wear and tear on the body, as well as the mind, and relationships from spending time in the reactive setting of the brain.

The other way to go about meeting needs— this going to sound a little tricky but you know it when you feel it —is on the basis of feeling a sufficiency of them being met already. In other words, you addressed challenges to safety while also experience and a calm strength inside and a sense of feeling alright, right now in your core and probably also resourced and protected and allied with other people. So, there's a sense of feeling resourced as you meet a challenge to a particular need, and then what happens when we experience that the needs are met or that we're sufficiently resourced as we as challenges to needs the brain body defaults to a very different place, it defaults to its resting state, which I and others call it responsive mode, or setting, or mindset of the brain and the body and in that mode the body repairs and refuels itself, long-term building projects can proceed, immune system strengthens, digestion occurs, sex hormones are released, and in the mind in terms of these three needs there's a pervading sense of peace, contentment and love in terms of safety satisfaction, connection, rather than in the mind in a reactive mode, a pervading sounds of fear in terms of safety, frustration in terms of satisfaction or we can say hurt or heartache in terms of our needs for connection.

And the takeaway here is to number one, get out of the reactive mode as fast as you can when you find yourself sucked into the red zone, I call it. And then second many times a day internalize green zone experiences and as you internalize green zone experiences, in other words as you have it and enjoy it, simple two-step process, the second step is absolutely critical to help the experience hardware its way into your body as you repeatedly over the course your day internalize green zone experiences, you build up a green zone core inside yourself so that you can meet greater and greater challenges in your life, while staying in the green zone even when the world around you is flashing red to finish. To finish, I think of the metaphor of a sailboat in the keel, having sailed with a boat that had no keel and managing to capsized it, I'm a

big fan of keels and I think of this process I'm describing of repeatedly having and internalizing responsive mode green zone experience of needs met of feeling peaceful, contented and love, fundamentally as you do that repeatedly you deepen the keel of your personal sailboat, and as you deepen the keel of your personal sailboat, you become much more able to dare greatly, as Brene Brown puts it. To go out and sail the deep dark glow, so you become actually more capable of ambition, you start dreaming bigger dreams, you are willing to play more fully in your big life and also as you deepen your keel, when the storms of life inevitably come they don't knock you over and if they do bang you hard, you come back to center much more quickly and I find this to be an incredibly wonderful way to orient to your day based on a very hard headed understanding of the evolution of the brain, it's built in negativity bias and the fact that we are going to be endlessly challenged as we go through life.

So, based on this hard-headed perspective, it's wonderful to me that you can go through your day deliberately looking for enjoyable experiences of feeling safe enough, satisfied enough, and connected enough and as you internalize these enjoyable experiences you build up muscles inside yourself that enable you to deal with bigger and bigger challenges while staying centered in that resilient mode, that's awesome.

[18:52] Angie: That is awesome and I love the examples that you share in the book and doesn't have to be that you have a brand-new car or gone on an expensive elaborate trip, it could be simple as ice cream or the time you spend with somebody.

[19:04] Dr. Hanson: Oh yeah, the happiest people in the world are generally the poorest ones and that's not to justify or countenance, oppression, mistreatment and so forth, to just make the observation that as someone who grew up in L.A. in my case, there are a lot of miserable millionaires in Beverly Hills and up to a point it's about your material circumstances but above a threshold of terrible misery above that threshold is all about what you do in your mind, that doesn't mean that we should not try to improve material circumstances, but it does mean that the most important variable, the most important factor in whether a person does develop a green zone brain is not the life they have but how they relate to it.

[19:48] Angie: I love that, thank you. Here in our office we do a book club and when we were reading the book we thought it was interesting that chart on the summary of responsive and reactive mode it felt very much like the responsive was complexity thinking where is that the reactive was more of a reductive thinking approach and that got us having this great conversation around emergent properties and how that functioning from the place of being a complexity thinker, being responsive, could really be the emergent property of happiness and we thought that that was an interesting parallel to complexity and a big ah-ha for us.

[20:27] Dr. Hanson: I think that's a brilliant way to think about it and to tip my hat to you all, I have been presenting this material for twenty years plus probably thirty and long before I wrote, *Hardwiring Happiness* and you are the first people that have made that distinction between, let's call it simplicity complexity, reductionism or holistic thinking, let's say that I've ever heard and

relate that to the reactive responsive mindset. So, tip of my hat to you all and I think you're right and there's a lot of good signs on that, just shows that when people are in the reactive mode, their perceptual world narrows, they lock onto that one tile in the mosaic of their own internal experience, the one part of the body that's hurting or that one word that was said to them in a complex relationship or that one thing that's happening around them in the world, they lock onto that one bright red tile, as it were, flashing away, and then they fixate on it. But on the other-hand as Barbara Fredrickson and others have shown in the research on positive emotions, when you're in the responsive mode, which by definition means that in your core you're in a state of positive well-being fundamentally, even if your mind is also holding pain or worry or upset of one kind or another when you're feeling positive emotion, particularly in the core of your being, your perceptual feel broadens and widens out and therefore by definition you're much more able to think and perceive and act in complex ways.

[21:56] Angie: Yeah, absolutely we love that that connection to complexity thinking and we get all kinds of conversations around how your book relates to complexity and tying that in and one of them in particular at the front of your book is around feedback loops and we really connected to your description of because something feels positive it could still be negative and we think of a feedback loop and just because it's a positive feedback loop does not intend that it has positive outcomes, it could have negative outcomes in the same is true with a negative feedback loop, it could have positive implications or emergent properties.

[22:31] Dr. Hanson: I think that's really interesting, that's great, thank you.

[22:34] Angie: I'm sure you would have loved to be a fly on the wall when we had all of our conversations and dove into the book, we really, really enjoyed it.

So, speaking of books that you've worked on, we understand you're working on another book, can you tell us a little bit about that book? When it'll be released maybe who should be reading it?

[22:51] Dr. Hanson: Oh, your kind, it's called *Resilient* and it has to do with using positive experiences to become more resilient, which then helps you have even more beneficial, usually enjoyable experiences in a wonderful upward spiral. So, the question is, how to be resilient, right? It's a longstanding topic, most people think about resilience in terms of bouncing back from adversity or recovering from a trauma or a combat tour in the Middle East and you know that's certainly an aspect of resilience, you and I have spoken to a little bit Angie about children including children who had adverse childhood experiences, but there is another aspect of resilience that is much more central to most people's everyday life, which has a do with happy coping, in other words with being able to deal with what's coming at you while retaining a fundamental peacefulness and happiness and lovingness in the center of your own being and so that's what this book's about. It's about twelve key strengths that are central to a lifetime of resilience, I'll just kind of name them here as a bit of a list so people can get a sense of what the book is about, so compassion, mindfulness, learning, grit, gratitude, confidence, calm,

motivation, intimacy and courage, aspiration and generosity. So, those twelve fundamental psychological resources where we could say “inner strengths” are what we need to grow and what we need to draw upon to truly have resilient wellbeing in a changing world, stable lasting well in a changing world and so that's of the book's about, it's about in twelve chapters each one of those twelve strengths I get really into the detail out of how to grow it, coach Rick here, you know I'm going to bring you along the path and tell you how to do it along the way and that's what the book's about.

[24:42] Angie: Exciting, we can't wait to get a copy. When will it be released?

[24:45] Dr. Hanson: Mid-March 2018.

[24:46] Angie: Yeah, all right. We'll be looking for that, we also came across the website the Foundation of Wellbeing and we'll include links to that website and then also your book in our show notes, but the website the Foundations of Wellbeing looks really great and we been talking about enrolling in the program here at the office, can you tell us about the website and the program?

[25:08] Dr. Hanson: It's an online program and is related very much to the book I just described. So, the program itself is online and very experiential, it's chock full of resources, each one of the twelve strengths is broken down into four parts and in each one of those parts, I give a video talk of about twenty minutes and there's also an experiential practice of around fifteen minutes or so.

In addition to that, we have a number of guest expert interviews including with really top line people such as Barbara Fredrickson, a world class researcher on positive emotion that I mentioned a little bit ago and others such as Tara Brach, Jack Kornfield, Paul Gilbert, passion focus therapy is an order of the British Empire another world class scholar, and in addition to all that there are a lot of other experiential things people can do. About twelve thousand people so far have done the program or are in the program and one of the things that is very important for me about it, is that while it's very affordably priced considering the actual amount of content in it and the tremendous depth of stuff in it, it's kind of encyclopedic, people often will take about a year to really go through it in a thorough going way in about an hour or so a week but in addition to the ways in which, it's very affordable priced and we also have CEUs for people who are in the helping professions. If people have financial needs, we love giving scholarships and financial need issues should never be a stop for people. We have many many people doing the program on a scholarship basis and so people can check it out, go to my website rickhanson.net and you'll see about it and see if it interests you.

[26:43] Angie: Just one additional way that you're changing the world with your work, so thank you for that.

[26:49] Dr. Hanson: Thank you. One of the wonderful things about today like Wikipedia. I love Wikipedia, one of the great things and in many ways I've been trying to build something of a Wikipedia of psychological tools, and that's what this foundations program is most fundamentally, and the thought that anyone in the world, who's got a connection to the Internet can participate in this program, even people in developing parts of the world, and the thought that anyone can access it, get access to tools, kind of going back to my roots with the Whole Earth Catalog, I have access to tools of the sort it just makes me really happy.

[27:25] Angie: Yeah, I think we'll be checking that out here at our office. So, Rick I'm curious what has been the most surprising to you in your career as a psychologist?

[27:34] Dr. Hanson: That's a great question, I mean at this point I've been in the human potential business for about forty-five years really reaching all the way back, and I'll tell you a couple of things. One, is I've been surprised by how deeply satisfying and meaningful it's been to me personally to do this, it's been enormously touching. And the thought of having a line of work that in a lot of ways is about accumulating well-being, resilience, and wisdom in a warm and loving heart, wow that's just fantastic. So, that's been surprising to me in a way, just how kind of profound it's all been.

A second thing that surprised me is the rigor and precision of a tremendous amount of psychological science. When you study something as complex as the mind, much more complex than almost any physical system, when you say something as complex and messy and individualized as the mind, you've got to get very precise and rigorous in your analytic and quantitative statistical methods, both conceptual analysis and mathematical analysis you've got to get good at and I'm really proud of being a psychologist and doing what I do resting on amidst the scholarship and contributions of so many brilliant people, so that's been great.

The last thing I'm going to say, has kind of dismayed me because in the course of my own lifetime in America and the Western world, I've seen the tremendous popularization of psychological ideas, I've seen very good approaches entering into schools getting brought into birth clinics, being used in social welfare of human services, attention to trauma, addiction, human relationships and simultaneously sadly in many ways American culture and perhaps arguably other cultures in the world have become coarser, meaner, more aggressive and there is a big question mark as to why that's happened. Some say that we're it not for many many different kinds of positive developments including through popular culture, I think Oprah for example has done more for mental health in America than arguably anybody else in the last twenty years, but notwithstanding all that some people would say, well if it weren't for that things of you much worse, but for myself it is a big question mark, how in the world can we draw upon the rock solid clarity about what helps humans live well and happily and cooperatively and peacefully together, how can we use that knowledge to make America more broadly to make the world a better place? So that's an open question and it remains a puzzle.

[30:15] Angie: Yeah, that is puzzling for sure and what a big question I sprung on you, it sounds like you went into this job as your career path but it's really been a gift for yourself in the learning in that.

[30:27] Dr. Hanson: I always felt a sense of calling I think I would say that and even with a sense of calling the desire to help people. In your own background for example, you've been in a helping profession, in many ways your still helping people, right? And so you go into it with a sense of calling, but that the profundity of the intimate rewards of sitting with another person and talking about something that's important to them, it's just been really surprising. I think a lot of if humans sat around a campfire talking with each other as our ancestors did there would be less need for therapists like me.

[30:58] Angie: So, true. We need to work all the therapists out of jobs just because we are connecting with each other. My now twenty-two-year-old kiddo is actually doing his degree in psychology and I love having conversations with him around what he's learning in his own ah-has with that.

So, Rick we're heading towards or wrap up, curious is there a takeaway you've given us all kinds of takeaways, I'm wondering is there an additional takeaway that you can offer myself and our listeners, maybe something related to complexity and the brain?

[31:29] Dr. Hanson: I have a little saying that I use for myself and it is “think complexly, act simply” and if there's one take away from everything we've been talking about here is that everyone has the power inside themselves everyday to grow a little bit, to heal a little bit, to become a little wiser, a little stronger, a little happier, a little more loving, everybody has that capacity to help their brain and their body all together change for the better every day. And to know that in a larger context in which so many people feel so pushed around by so large, so great forces of various kinds, to know that is itself a positive thing, itself takes people into wellbeing, to know that they actually can change themselves routinely for the better and the process itself of doing that is very simple, experience what you want to grow and then stay with the experience, open to it in your body, feel it, it's a private act in a corporate job or whatever, nobody needs to know you're doing it, inside yourself you take in the good, you keep those neurons firing together, so they wire themselves as well that to me is a simple, essential opportunity that everybody has every day.

We have to take responsibility for what we do with that opportunity but no one can take that opportunity away from us even in an extremely difficult, extremely hard lives and if anything, the more a person's life sucks, the more important is to take in the good every day. I'm reminded of teaching that came down over the millennia really in the Buddhist tradition goes like this, it's short and sweet, “think not lightly of good saying, it will not come to me, drop by drop is the water pot filled, likewise the wise one gathering it little by little, fills oneself with good.”

[33:18] Angie: I love that, that's really beautiful and relatable and I so really appreciate think complexity but act simply and it doesn't cost a dime to do that, excellent takeaway. So, Rick how can our listeners find you?

[33:33] Dr. Hanson: Well, thank you, very simply just google my name or search on it some other way, RickHanson.net there are tons of freely offered resources of various kinds and people can learn about what we've been talking about here, including applications in different settings in business, at home, and with children and also in different kinds of professional environment. So, Rickhanson.net, that's where they can find out about me.

[34:00] Angie: Excellent, well that is the end of our amazing interview it has been such an honor to interview you and have you here on the Human Current.

[34:09] Dr. Hanson: Angie, it has been an honor as well. I think what you all are doing is just remarkable and I wish well everyone who has been listening.

[34:17] Angie: Thank you so much, let's keep in touch.

[Outro Music]

[35:16] End

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