

Your Brain at Work

Using Neuroscience to Improve Daily Life
by [David Rock](#)



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Recipe for maintaining inspiration: conversations, random people & big ideas

Recipe for a burst of positive dopamine

I was inspired by the positive response to last week's post on [using a rested mind for the right things](#). (I write weekly, posting by Sunday evening US ET). So I thought I'd stay on the theme of ideas to help people coming back to work.

Many people are suffering from an overload of difficult news, uncertainty and financial challenges. Some people probably would like to know what they can do to improve their mood, as it's not much fun being glum (it's also a recipe for being ineffective at work.) The fact is, you don't have to be glum when the whole world seems to be. However that's also not so easy - we tend to be heavily [influenced by the prevailing emotions of others](#) in our group, so it's hard to be up when others are down.

Spirals in the brain

Certainly there are [drugs](#), both legal and otherwise, that can impact your mood, but I'm not a supporter of either, so my recipe is more about what you can do easily yourself. One aspect of the brain works in a spiral-like manner. You always tend to be spiralling up, to better and better moods, or more often, spiralling down. To change our mood we need to alter the spiral from down to up. One of the keys to this spiral effect is [dopamine levels](#), which are linked to many things but in particular positive expectations, novelty and positive rewards. Dopamine is created by these activities, but it's also [needed for clear thinking](#), affecting prefrontal function and working [memory](#). If you want to do well at anything with a mental component, good dopamine levels are important.

While working on my recent book I noticed the long hours making me feel low, and sensed this might be impacting dopamine levels. I could see that a poor mood made it harder to think and write. I started to think about how I could keep an upbeat mood, and all the ways of increasing dopamine, even when I was mentally struggling. Here's a summary of some of the big drivers of dopamine, and an idea that I find helpful for changing the internal spiral that puts all these drivers together.

Seeking novelty

[Novelty](#) is a great dopamine producer. You can see this in young children who delight in the smallest newness, simply a new colour or sound can be all it takes to delight a two year old. With adults it's harder to find novelty as we've all experienced so much. I propose that the kind of novelty that appears to be engaging for complex adults is having novel complex conversations - talking about things we don't often talk about. The philosopher Theodore Zeldin writes about this in his book ['Conversation'](#). In August this year Zeldin ran what he called a ['feast of strangers'](#) in a park in London, to inspire different conversations.



The brain is a social animal

Another big driver of dopamine is social connections. Work by [Cacioppo](#) and others shows that a lack of social connections is experienced as a threat response. We experience this as [loneliness](#). Several studies are showing that social isolation can be as [dangerous to health as smoking](#) or being overweight. The opposite is true too. Social connections are generally rewarding. One paper in [Scientific American Mind this month](#) explored how health can be linked to how many social groups you are involved with. A sense of being related with others seems to be rewarding. I write more about 'relatedness' as one of the five big drivers of primary rewards in the brain, in a new paper in strategy+business magazine called ['Managing with the brain in mind'](#) (Also in my new book, [Your Brain at Work](#).) So as well as novelty and good conversations, connecting with other people, especially new people, can be a great way of creating an upward spiral.

Positive expectations create positive rewards

Another big driver of reward in the brain is expecting something good to happen. Positive expectations can activate greater reward responses than a reward themselves. This may be the way [goals](#) affect us. Another way of creating an upward spiral is having something positive to look forward to - such as a social event, where you have positive, complex conversations with new people.

With this in mind I decided to put together some social events for small groups of people. The idea was to host a 'Salon' with a theme, which should be positive in itself. I chose the topic of 'how positive change happens.' I ran the first in New York City where I live about half the year, the second in San Francisco where I often visit, and the third just last week in Sydney where I also live. (I do indeed like the novelty of of travel. I saw a study last week that I [twittered about](#), on people who travel [being more creative too](#).)

Create your own dopamine-rich salons

The insights that came out of the salons were in themselves really helpful, and I will write about these another time. However it was the events themselves which impacted me the most. Having the opportunity to connect socially, having complex, rich positive conversations with a mix of people I knew and some I didn't, was highly rewarding. Not just at the event but leading up to it, and for some time afterwards too. It was hitting several reward functions all at once, and it felt great!

I will share the basic format as I think these are something lots of people might like to try. The idea is to get no less than 8 and no more than 12 people together for an evening of conversation. It should be at a private home, so it's quiet enough to focus on the conversation, and with food ordered in (and costs split). I personally like to make it great food, but that's optional...though the extra reward of unexpectedly fabulous food is nice too.

The focus of the evening is the conversation. Too often I meet great minds at dinner parties and find the conversation focuses, almost by accident, on real estate or the financial crisis. I often left these events thinking what a [shame](#) this was.

The idea is to invite people who don't know each other, and to encourage some people to bring along a guest. The topic I have been using is 'how does positive change happen' which in itself is a positive discussion. You may notice if you run these how easy it is for the discussion to go in the direction of the negative: how and why change is hard, instead of what makes change work. There are other topics I will try in future, like 'what makes for a sense of fulfillment', and 'what's one thing you want to change in the world'. The idea is to think big thoughts, the kind of thoughts we don't often get time to think. Thinking this type of thought, conceptual, big ideas, in itself is stimulating, it's activating higher order circuits that often don't get used. I haven't seen studies on this yet but it certainly feels good.

I encourage you to try something like this. It does take a bit of courage, and sometimes the conversation can diverge into politics or what's wrong in the world. Even in that instance I find that events highly refreshing and stimulating, enough that I want to keep doing them. Unexpected, novel social connections are wonderful things. Taken regularly, these may be a useful recipe to maintain inspiration in a world that otherwise appears determined to reduce your [dopamine](#) levels. And the big bonus: boosting your dopamine levels this way is legal, costs nothing, and has no side effects.

PS - If you do run a salon along these lines, put a note on this post, I'd love to hear how it goes.