

Subtract with Leidy Klotz

Leidy Klotz: [00:00:00] it's actually harder. To think of subtraction because our first instinct is to think, what, what can we add? And to, to think of subtraction, we have to get beyond that and also consider what we might subtract.

Yael Schonbrun: That was Leidy Klotz on psychologists off the clock.

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Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen practicing in mile high Denver, Colorado, and coauthor of ACT Daily Journal

Diana Hill: I'm Dr. Diana Hill coauthor with Debbie on ACT Daily Journal, and practicing in seaside Santa Barbara, California.

Yael Schonbrun: From coast to coast, I'm Dr Yael Schonbrun a Boston- based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

Jill Stoddard: And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of Be Mighty and The Big Book of [00:01:00] ACT Metaphors.

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Diana Hill: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock!

Jill Stoddard: Lately. I have been enjoying some mindful centering moments with my new favorite teas from the art of tea. Art of tea is an award-winning organic tea company based in Los Angeles. And they are on a mission to impact lives through healthy, delicious, and sustainable brews and blends. Each and every art of T product is designed to help bring you grounding moments of peace, serenity, and joy.

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Yael Schonbrun: This is Yael here with Diana to introduce a new episode. I got to interview author and professor, Leidy Klotz, who has come out with. Truly transformational book called subtract the untapped science of less. And I just want to start with a little bit of a backstory ,

, this book got sent to me and I thought the title is super provocative, but when I started to read it, it actually. Seemed to be more about different approaches to change, but more in the physical space because Leidy is an engineer and has a design background.

but there's this story threaded throughout the book about how his son gave him inspiration to sort of think about a different approach to decision-making to, to transforming things into their best possible outcome. And so I asked him if I could interview him for a book that I'm working on about working [00:03:00] parenthood.

And when we spoke, he just brought these ideas to life in this way that I was kind of like, I didn't see it, how transformational these ideas are not just in the physical space, but also in the psychological space that we tend to neglect this idea of subtracting to make things better, not just when we're designing buildings or roads, but when we're designing our lives.

And Diana, I think you had a similar feeling as you were listening to this episode.

Diana Hill: Yeah. I mean, I think that first, I just absolutely loved this episode and I love stepping out of psychology to get perspective on psychology. I do that a lot in my life actually learn sometimes more from folks that aren't in the field. And I do see us as sort of designers of people's lives. Like helping people design their lives in ways that, um, Aligned with how they want to live in the world.

And the idea of subtraction for me in the way that he talks about it is really one of having that as a choice and I loved how he used evolutionary psychology [00:04:00] to kind of address this. Our default is to just add or to stay stuck. And we don't think about subtracting, but oftentimes it's in the subtraction.

It's in the removing that creates the space for us to be able to pursue.

Yael Schonbrun: Okay.

Diana Hill: Really is sort of like how we want to be in the world. And it, it brought up for me two things, one which is values and the other is discomfort, which often come hand in hand. Right. And with oftentimes we stay stuck in things.

We, and we have difficulty letting go of things because. Of the discomfort of doing that. Like maybe we're going to be facing anxiety around not being productive, or maybe, maybe we're fearing the loss of like maybe ego, like doing this thing is going to sound really good when I go to my high school reunion someday.

Right. As opposed to doing this thing is actually really lined up with how I want to be. And for me in my life, this is something that I've just struggled so much with across my whole. [00:05:00] Just really ever since I was a teenager right. Of, um, the, the, the courage to let go of things that aren't working for.

You. And to subtract and, and that's been something that I've been thinking a lot about, especially during the pandemic, when my kids needed me a lot more, and my professional life also kind of took off. And for me, I'm kind of going through like with tweezers now, like

pulling out small stuff and big stuff that is not aligned with, with what's important to me and where I need to be.

Currently in my life, which is really with my kids and in my practice supporting people that need support. ,

Yael Schonbrun: Thank you for sharing that, you know, more vulnerable, personal side. And I think it's one that many people, including myself can. Too. And I think what's so powerful about what Leidy shares is that subtraction is hard for us. Not even, just because we're not thinking about it, although that's a part of it.

We systematically neglect thinking about it. But even when [00:06:00] we do think about it, we're just so wired to acquire for all these evolutionary reasons, the social reasons. And so it's, it's tremendously uncomfortable. And so . For me, the really transformative thing that comes through in his writing and in our conversation is if we can really push ourselves to think about it as a potential pathway to a better outcome, there often is tremendous power in that option of subtracting that we sometimes don't give ourselves enough time to deliberate. Okay.

Okay.

Diana Hill: Yeah. You know, I, it brought up for whatever reason, it brought up this memory for me of, um, I think I shared about how I studied with Techna Han in my twenties. And I went to plum village and I remember him doing a Dharma talk where we had this bouquet of flowers next to him. And the, and the talk was on actually flat Japanese flower arranging.

And he was talking about how, when you arrange the flowers too, Less is more and two, because you want to create space [00:07:00] around each flower. And when you create space around each flower, you can see it and you can enjoy it more. And I think that a lot of times in our life, we sort of take the approach of sort of this Western flower ranging.

I was like, pack them all in and squeeze it all in. And we, we over-pack our lives. And without that space, sometimes we do. Enjoy our lives. And we also don't see our lives clearly because we keep on adding on. So I really appreciated this all. I think that this interview made me think a lot about my own life.

It made me also take perspective with my clients' lives, how to maybe take the angle of what could we subtract here and that that can be quite liberating and that you are the designer of your life. So you get to choose and that's empowering.

Yael Schonbrun: And I really hope that people reach out and share with us about what kinds of things they're now considering subtracting as a result of being inspired by, by this kind of work, so reach out to us and share.

Leidy Klotz studies, how we transform things from how they [00:08:00] are to how we want them to be in his recent books, subtract the untapped science of less. He proves that we are far more likely to pile on the two dues, then execute, stop doings. And he shows us why and what we can do about it. He is a professor at the university of Virginia and his research on

the science of design has appeared in premiere academic journals. And he's written for popular press outlets like the Washington post fast company and the globe.

Your expertise is in many different areas. You have, uh, appointments in three different schools at the university of Virginia. You have this soccer career you've written popular, press books, you write academic articles, and yet you write that your obsession has long been with less.

Leidy Klotz: It's great to be here. And, um, yeah, and I mean, I, when I was playing soccer, my focus was on, on soccer and that was like how I made meaning in my life. And so, but after I was done playing soccer, I had this thing that most people probably started thinking about sooner than when they're 21 years old.

And it's like, how am I going to make a difference in the world? How am I gonna, [00:09:00] leave this place better than I found it. Um, and, and make a positive contribution for other people. And, uh, I'd always been interested in sustainable ability, you know, environmental sustainability and environmental issues.

That was how I thought, okay, how can I apply what I know to these issues while I was playing soccer in college, I had majored in engineering because everybody told you that if you have any interest in engineering, you should, you have to start out in it. Um, and you can't switch in. So I started out in it as a first year college student and I just never switched out.

Um, and it's been great. I, I mean, you wouldn't want me to, to build your bridge, but I learned a lot of like math and science, and also more importantly, just this idea of creatively applying science to, to make things better. And so applying engineering to some of these sustainability challenges,

yeah, there's some really cool technology out there. You know, you can have a home that uses no energy, you know, to, to heat and cool. It heats and cools [00:10:00] itself just by like passive solar heating, for example. And, um, and this would drastically reduce. You know, uh, climate change emissions, because so much of our, our fossil fuel burning comes from heating and cooling buildings.

It's like 40%. So it's more than automobiles and planes combined. And so I was interested in, okay, how do we create this built environment? Whether it's the individual buildings that we have, or the bigger cities, and it seemed like a lot of these technologies were there.

Um, are there kind of underlying things that we could do better, like mental shortcuts that we're using in our design processes that are leading to these possibly detrimental, outcomes and. You know, so I'm, I'm close to wrapping up here on how I got there, but so I started out focusing on this psychology of how do you help people make better decisions? And the unique angle that I was taking with that was okay, what about designers? Because we always apply nudging to the users, right? It's like these people are the [00:11:00] problem. Why didn't so-and-so turn the light switch off when they left the room, it's like, well, why didn't the designer designed the room so that you didn't need it?

The light switch just use natural light. Um, and so we tried to apply some of the nudging too, to design decisions. And in that work, as you would predict, I mean, nudges work on regular people. They also work on engineers and other designers. , and what I love about it is this fundamental. Choice in design. It's like when we're presented with something, um, that we want to change from how it is to how we want it to be. Do we, you know, do we think about adding to it? Do we think about subtracting from it?

And that mindset, you know, and what we ultimately found is that people default to, to adding is that it could be at the root of some of these environmental problems. If we're systematically overlooking subtraction, we're systematically overlooking a whole category of solutions and we're systematically overlooking perhaps the more sustainable solutions.

Yael Schonbrun: it's, It's, really a transformative finding many people can get [00:12:00] behind the idea that less is a desirable outcome, right?

There's sort of like all the rage over the KonMari method and essentialism and this idea that we want uncluttered spaces and less clutter in our lives, but you make this really critical distinction that honestly stopped me in my tracks when I was reading your book, because I never really realized that less is the outcome, but subtraction is the act of getting there. And so I want, I want to give you a chance to talk about why that distinction is so very important. And then we'll talk about how you discovered the systematic neglect of

Leidy Klotz: Yeah. And they

both kind of the story that gets used a lot, um, and is really the origin story of our research and because it really well illustrates the thought process and it's a cute story.

So I was playing Legos with my son, Ezra, who was three at the time and we're, and we're building a bridge. And, uh, the problem that we had was the bridge level. And so like one of the columns was shorter than the other column. So I did what all good dads do. I turned [00:13:00] around behind me and grabbed the block to add to the shorter column.

But by the time I had turned back around as he had removed a block from the longer column. And so that, you know, I mentioned this idea, this core idea of design is taking things from how they are to how we want them to be. And right there in front of me was this really tangible example of two different approaches to taking things from how it, how it is to how we wanted it to be in one was adding, which I thought of immediately and would have followed through with never even considering this attractive option had Ezra not shown me the, that subtracting was an option.

And to be clear as it was getting a big head, because I'm telling the story a lot, and now he's a six year old going around telling his classmates he's like, oh, I taught psychology off the clock, how to subtract. And as there's a horrible, subtractor, he's worse than me. I think I, I don't have experimental evidence of this, but just, this was the one-time playing Legos that he stumbled across subtraction because he plays a lot of Legos and he was bound to [00:14:00] subtract one time.

Um, and that led into our research studies. I was able to take that Lego, uh, model to give Adams who's a co-author on this study and, um, just brilliant, uh, psychology research. And I showed it to her and she's, and I've been talking to her about these concepts of less than how it mattered for sustainability and so on and so forth.

And she said, oh, well, so what you're interested in is why aren't we, why don't we subtract to make things better in that to make things better piece. Is a really key distinction too. Um, and, and, and it was exactly what I was asking. And then we pulled in a couple more people for our research team, Ben Converse, and Andy Hales, who Ben's also a professor at university of Virginia.

Andy's a professor at university of Mississippi. Now he was at Virginia at the time. And then we did all these studies. I mean, I counted up the hours. It's tens of thousands of hours of study time. And, uh, and also [00:15:00] studied this in different paradigms, like travel itineraries and showing that people indeed defaulted to this additive, um, additive phenomenon that is the unique new contribution in the book.

It's like, oh, it's actually harder. To think of subtraction because our first instinct is to think, what, what can we add? And to, to think of subtraction, we have to get beyond that and also consider what we might subtract. And speaking of books, I mean, when you, let me preview the chapter in your book that talks about this as one of those moments where people doing this stuff after writing the book and you're like, oh man, I wish I had put it that way, but your distinction about how this is really, this is hard.

That's the thing that makes it different than kind of all the other stuff that's out there about minimalism is that this is the problem. That's why we still need these reminders is because, you know, left to our own devices. Our brain doesn't think about it. And I think part of the [00:16:00] problem is that we're sitting there thinking that it should be easier, right?

I mean, MCU owns second book is, uh, is effortless. I don't know. Have you read that yet? Um, I, and I love essentialism and I'm sure I would love effortless. But subtracting is not effortless. Um, and so, and certainly there are effortless things that we should be doing, but when we think that this is easy, we're even less likely to put in the extra effort that's required to, to do it.

Yael Schonbrun: In this series of studies that you had, that was published in nature. What's so cool is that you show across physical design concepts and, itinerary planning and idea formation that across all of those different arenas, we systematically neglect subtraction.

And that, that I think is really cool because you, you have an engineering background, I'm a clinical psychologist, and yet the challenge applies in all domains where we are more likely to think about adding and subtracting. And I want to talk about [00:17:00] what you're finding is in the realm of like, what happens when we're under more pressure, have a higher cognitive burden are feeling overwhelmed or distracted. What happens with our tendency to neglect subtraction?

Leidy Klotz: I'm so glad you brought up that this extends across, you know, we thought of it as objects. So the, the bridge, the Lego bridge or city planning, um, ideas, the thoughts that

are in your head, these mental models that we have, it's harder to take away than to add to what's there. In fact, that's one of the hardest places to take away, um, and the situation.

So you talk about like the social structures or your calendars, um, itineraries it's, it's hard to take away from those two. So I'm so glad you pointed that out because I think that's probably the, one of the coolest things about the finding is that it extends across all of those domains and maybe the best way to illustrate the, you know, the finding about cognitive load and also reinforce exactly what's happening is described one of the studies.

So, you know, we had the Legos, we had [00:18:00] travel itineraries, we had recipes, we have. People looking at writing, we have the university strategic plan. And in all these cases, people are add, add, add, add, add. And of course, one of the criticisms that you can level against any one of those individual studies as well, that's just strategic plans.

That's just what people do when they're revising strategic plans, as they suggest 90% additions and only 10% subtractions. And it's a fair criticism of any specific study. So. We, we wanted to find a way to test this, that wasn't, um, that people didn't have any practice with. Uh, so we developed these grids that you could display on a computer screen.

And it basically was a pattern, a grid pattern that was broken into four quadrants. And the quadrants were symmetrical except for extraneous marks in one of the quadrants. And we'd tell people make this symmetrical left to right top to bottom. And basically we had a, a variety of the patterns, but the solution in all of them was to either take away the [00:19:00] redundant grids from one quadrant or add marks to three quadrants.

And we told people, Hey, look, you've got to do this in as few clicks as possible. So in this case, it wasn't like Lego as it was bridge where this is just as good one way or the other, it was you're gonna not get the right answer if you don't think to subtract. And, you know, people. Of course, some people got that.

Right. But still a huge percentage of people were overlooking subtraction on those grids. And then once we had those grids, we're able to do other things to see, okay, well, what makes this worse? What makes this better? And that the cognitive load, um, tasks that you're talking about, it's like, okay. The, the basic finding on, like more cognitive load that they're under was by having a scroll of numbers, come across the bottom of the screen while they're solving this grid task.

And so in that case, you, these numbers would be coming across. People have to press F on the [00:20:00] keyboard, every time a five came across. So it's the equivalent of texting when driving, right? Or like trying to multitask you. You've got two things going on. And the theory being that if the. Default to adding is kind of our, our, the factory default in our brains of what we go to.

We'd be even more likely to go to that when we're under this cognitive load and sure enough, that's what we found. Um, and so, okay. That's, that's a lot of fun with grids and numbers scrolling across the computer screen and fancy words like cognitive load, but what does that mean for, for life? Like, well, this, this tool that we need most when we're overloaded is hardest to excess, when we're overloaded this really dangerous kind of

reinforcing loop that could be happening where it's like, okay, I'm stressed out and that's the, or I've got a lot of stuff going on.

I've got a lot on my mind. That's the time that you're least likely to think about, okay. How can I subtract? Which is precisely the thing that you need to [00:21:00] do to, to relieve this problem that you've got. So, yeah, it's, uh, it's problem.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And that's why I think the science is so important because as you, as you just pointed out, like if we think that subtracting should be effortless, then we don't make a more deliberate move to consider it when we're overwhelmed, which is exactly when it's hardest to access. And so for people whose lives are super busy, you know, it can be that much more important to say, okay, here's where I know that I'm going to be less likely to consider taking things off my plate, but it's actually the most important time. And then I want to sort of ask How do you understand why we're so inclined to add when sometimes subtracting really is the better option?

Leidy Klotz: Yeah. And I mean, as you and your listeners know, there's no kind of one why answer to this and we certainly don't have any experiments to back it up. That would be impossible. But when you think about we've got this wiring that we have in our brains is, is, has served us well in the [00:22:00] past for some reason, that's why it's like this.

And, so if you just think of it from an evolutionary standpoint, well, what has helped us, you know, survive passed on our genes to the next generation. One obvious thing is, you know, our desire to acquire food, um, which other psychology researchers like Stephanie precedent, Michigan. And so that, that also extends.

Physical things, even useless physical things. She's got this really great task where she has people fill up a virtual shopping cart and people overfill the shopping cart, and then they're challenged to get it down and they can't subtract to get down the shopping cart. And you know, this, this desire to acquire things is, you know, consistent with hoarding disorder even, um, but also consistent with, you know, just our desire to eat, , on the other hand.

And so that's something that we have to override again, it's not impossible to override any of these things. We don't go around eating everything just because we're, we're wired to eat, but, um, it's, there could

Yael Schonbrun: Well, sometimes when we're stressed that we do.

Leidy Klotz: That's true. Yeah. Yeah. Speak for yourself. [00:23:00] Um, I'm starving. Uh, yeah. And, uh, did another more surprising to me evolutionary one that I came across was this desire to display competence.

And so basically we want to show that we can interact with the world. Otherwise we feel helpless, uh, feeling like we can interact with the world is really important thing we can capably make change.

And adding it seems to me is it's easier to display competence through adding when, as we're builds a Lego structure, it's like, oh, good job. You made a Lego structure. Everybody

can see what he did that day. And he can see what he did that day. Um, when you take something away, uh, if he cleans up his room or just maybe cleans up one thing from his room, I might not notice that he's he's subtracted.

Um, or if you take away a block from the Legos, um, people will notice the bridge, but they might not notice that he's attracted to get there. And it's the same in the, in the real world. When you take away, you know, the 10 minutes of this podcast that don't see the light of day, nobody's gonna. [00:24:00] Got to know that we did that.

That's not going to be a reminder of our competence. And, um, but I was surprised about competence, how biological that is. Um, and the example that really struck home for me was bowerbirds. And so these are the birds where the males build ceremonial nesses, and then the females go around and look for the nest that they liked best.

And that's how they decide which male to meet with. And you're like, oh, well, that's fine. That's there for shelter. And so it would make sense that you would want to meet with somebody who can build a good shelter, but then the females don't even use the nest for shelter.

They then go off and build a shelter and raise the kids the little bowerbirds in that shelter. And so the whole point of these ceremonial nesses in the first place is just showing that the males can interact effectively with the world, , and you know, displaying competence. And so that's also another evolutionary thing that could be kind of contributing to this.

Mental shortcut that we now have, where we automatically think about what we can add.[00:25:00]

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, And I think too, that there's so, like for survival purposes that we want to add calories or connections to peers, then there's showing competence. And then I think there's this sort of like and I think that your DC itinerary piece of your nature study really reveals that tendency, that we're so afraid we're going to miss out that we pack it in and we don't. And we end up, at least for me when I pack it in, I just don't enjoy anything. And I certainly don't do a great job, but there's this tension of like, well, if I say no and I don't show up, then I'm going to miss out on a meaningful piece of life. And I think that certainly happens in roles like parents.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah, that's true. The itinerary study is one of my favorites because we were, we were doing all these examples studies with like Legos and ingredients and words. And we're like, let's make one that people should just subtract from that. It's obvious. And so we created this itinerary study that you're in Washington DC, and I think there were 12 or 14 different things.

You did like big things. Like each one of these things was visit the [00:26:00] Smithsonian and go to the Washington monument and then like have dinner at this five-star restaurant. So like each of these things. It could be a full day activity. And, so they had 12 of these things and there's this drag and drop interface where you could add more stuff on, or you could just take it out and give yourself more time at certain events and people by and large added to that itinerary.

And, you know, so I do like the idea that it could be just this fear of fear of missing out in that case, as much as you know, I don't know how much competence it shows to, to show that you're going to all of these things. Although I don't know, maybe a little bit with like the that's like 14 Instagram photos that you can take.

Right. If you, uh, if you go to all these places and that's a little bit of displaying competence, but, um, but yeah, the, the fear of, um, the fear of missing out certainly plays a role there too, but that was a, that's a classic example for me anyway, of how this applies to how we behave in, [00:27:00] in social situations and how we kind of default to adding, to make those better too.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And I mean, I think it's really notable that by, by the time you had designed that experiment, you were actually trying to get people to subtract, but people were still highly unlikely to subtract.

And I think this comes through in your book that you're not necessarily advocating that everybody only subtract quite the opposite, but what you're really encouraging people to do is to be more deliberate about considering it as an option to a better outcome.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah. And recognizing the, you know, after we think of it, there are some Thinking traps that we can fall into that might make us not choose it, even if it might be the better outcome, you know? So, um, but yeah, I'm, I'm agnostic on adding versus subtracting. That's not the thing here. These should be complimentary approaches to change.

In fact, like the binary thinking there, which is like, oh, if you add, then you can't subtract is, is a huge part of the problem. If you subtract, then you can't add. Um, and I think if we could shift the perspective on these two, two things, they're [00:28:00] not opposites. I mean, some things are opposites and it helps to recognize them, but these are not opposites and they're in fact complimentary approaches to change.

So then if you could think, oh, well, I added to, I added this task to make my parenting life better. I wonder if I could subtract something to make my parenting life better, then we, then we wouldn't have this problem.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. I like that. It's very yin and yang. Considering both and finding balance. And I think that there's something so lovely about that is, is like recognizing that we tend to default more to adding leaves this really heavy on one side. So if we can be more deliberate about taking away, then we can be more successful in balancing over time.

Diana Hill: If you listen to this podcast, you probably know by now that we are partnered with Praxis continuing education, and there's a reason why it's because Praxis really can help you transform your client's lives by learning how to effectively promote lasting change with evidence-based approaches act, [00:29:00] DBT, compassion, focused therapy.

And we love Praxis so much, especially because. Our very own Debbie Sorensen is going to be doing a workshop through Praxis. Tell us about it, Debbie.

Debbie Sorensen: Yes. I'm doing a webinar on acceptance commitment therapy for burnout. This is for therapists who are working with clients who are burnt out. And of course, as therapists, we are also occasionally may experience our own burnout. So hopefully it will be helpful for that too.

It starts August 25th and it's on Wednesday afternoons just for a few Wednesdays in a row. So you can check it out on the Praxis website and learn more. I hope you can join me if you're a therapist, be great to have you there. And for all of the live online courses that Praxis offers, you can go to our website OFFTHECLOCKPSYCH.COM and get a discount code.

Yael Schonbrun: We all have thoughts about ourselves and other people. Sometimes those thoughts are useful, but often the ways that we interpret things, assume limitations, [00:30:00] doubt our self-worth and follow familiar scripts with others can keep us stuck.

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Jill Stoddard: We've had a number of guests who want to offer you our listeners discounted access to some of their fantastic programs. So if you want to learn powerful practices for happiness, calm, and wellbeing, we have several offerings from Rick Hanson. If you want app based behavior change, you can check out Judd brewers apps for anxiety eating well and smoking cessation.

Or you can learn how to be a [00:31:00] calmer parent with mindful mama mentor hunter Clark fields. So go to our website off the clock, psych.com and visit our offers page where you will find access to free courses and discount promo codes.

Yael Schonbrun: One thing I wanted to ask you is that, you make this really great point in the book that saying no is not the same as subtracting. So I wanted to give you a chance to, to talk about that. Cause I'm always proud of him, but it's not the same.

Leidy Klotz: Well saying no is good. Yeah. Just don't don't think that you've subtracted Yael. Um, so. And you're in good company because one of the other coauthors Ben Converse, we were two years into this research and, uh, he comes up to me and he's like, Hey, this is working the research. I'm taking the research to heart.

I'm getting some personal benefits out of it. My department chair asked me to be on this committee and I said, no, I was like, congratulations, Ben. But, uh, I, it doesn't strike me as you subtracting something because

that wasn't something that you were already doing. You [00:32:00] just did an ad and you know, this is, we see this everywhere though.

People will be like, oh yeah, subtracting CO2 emissions. So like, let's make our buildings. More efficient or let's spew less CO2 into the atmosphere. It's like, yes, but that's not actually like subtracting CO2 from the atmosphere, which is another part of what we need to be doing. So anyway, Ben, uh, you know, Ben had me there to explain that to him and I think he was kind of annoyed, but he's always really helpfully skeptical with my ideas.

So I felt like I'd returned the favor there, but his, , his partner also a psychology professor has this really cool tool to get past this. So she will actually like, look at her calendar and say, oh, you know, I've been going to this meeting every week for a year and it's provided marginal benefit at best.

So I'm going to subtract it. And then when she subtracted. She also leaves the thing on our calendar. It's like, okay, this window of time brought to you by your subtraction. And so in doing that, she likes shows her competence at subtracting [00:33:00] and it's like a reminder. disadvantage that subtracting faces is that, you know, we walk around the world surrounded by these reminders of adding that has made things better.

And this attracting that has made things better as invisible, like a, you know, a tidy closet, unless you saw it before it was tidy. You're just like, oh, that's a tiny closet. You don't recognize all the cleaning that went into making it that way. So, so, uh, Ben's partner leaves this as a reminder. And I think it probably makes her more likely to think of subtracting going forward.

But yeah, uh, I think the key distinction there and it's, uh, you know, saying no has to be part of our repertoire of options, but so does so does taking away, even if you, the best you can possibly hope for, even if you say no to everything else going forward is to maintain your current state. And if the problem is that you're overloaded, that's not gonna, it's not gonna help.

Yael Schonbrun: exactly. So you collaborate with a lot of people in, in psychology, and I'm just curious, sort of had [00:34:00] those collaborations came about and how you sort of, because your background is in engineering, but you also do a lot of behavioral science in your writing and in your thinking. And so how did you sort of land on that interdisciplinary approach specifically in the field of behavioral science?

Leidy Klotz: One thing that got edited out of the book is just like a personal, like, I ha I got a ton of help from a clinical psychologist. Like I have, well, I guess I, I don't know. I guess I had obsessive compulsive disorder and it was like one of these things where I didn't really notice.

And it wasn't, um, wasn't like keeping everything clean or anything like that. It was more just the mental part and you know, which, which worked fine until you get to these problems where they're like, there's no answer, right? It's like, do I, can I be 100% sure that I don't have aids?

And you're like, okay, well I can get a test, but that's only whatever percent. This happened, when I was like 25 and I went to a clinical psychologist and, you know, just ultra success story in terms of like helping with the cognitive behavioral therapy plus medication.

And like, [00:35:00] I haven't had to deal with it. Since, I mean, it was really bad when I had to deal with it just mentally.

I didn't write it into the book, I think, um, but you know, there's an argument to be made that that's what got me interested in behavioral science in the first place.

Um, because it's like, oh, look, our brains are doing funny things that we don't understand, or that seem irrational. And, um, there's this whole science of dealing with them and understanding why that happens. So anyway, um, if you think that story is useful,

I'd be open to sharing it

it's not one that I've ever told on a podcast, but, I think it's really important for, I mean, I share it with my graduate students and stuff like that, because I want them to know that, you know, mental health issues are just as serious as physical health issues.

And especially since that time of life, it's

really, um, you know, at least from what I understand that it seems like some of these things kind of show up around that early adulthood, like 20 to 25 span. And so I think that grad students are often dealing [00:36:00] with this, um, for the first time. So anyway, yeah. So it's not like I haven't ever shared it before, but I've just never told the story in a succinct way.

And, uh, you know, so I did a ton of reading about psychology, starting with the popular press books that seem to be. Start in, you know, in earnest with like, I mean, Dan Ariely's work was really influential for me, of course, like Freakonomics and then failers and Sunstein nudge and, and those kinds of books.

And, you know, as a scholar, I'd read those books and then I'd be like, oh, I'm going to go look at the paper.

And so then I'm less bound by the,

The boundaries of a discipline. So that's always been helpful and I've, I try to do a good job of like, okay, yes, this is what civil engineering says about this, but like, what are other fields saying about it?

And we've always applied physics and chemistry. And now that psychology is being used to try to. The world a better place and, uh, you know, with nudging, but also with just all these applied behavioral science organizations, [00:37:00] engineering should be contributing to that. And I don't think the engineering should take that over, but as with our track record in history of applying science creatively, why aren't we, you know, more intentionally creatively applying science and contributing to that effort.

And so I think that's when, when the behavioral scientists work with me, that's one thing that I can kind of offer them. And also, you know, and this is something that Ben engage in. Andy would say, my coauthors on this attraction research is that, you know, there's no way I could have done this research.

That's in chapter one without. But at the same time, they would not have gotten the question without me. Um, and it's this really basic psychological question, but it's not something that, you know, was kind of grounded in judgment and decision making. It was more grounded in my understanding of design. Um, so yeah, that's a long-winded way of saying I kind of how that has merged together.

And, um, but it's been, I mean, it's been the most rewarding part of my [00:38:00] academic thinking, uh, over the last 10 years and I expect it to be so going forward and I'm just so grateful for all the people who have, uh, yourself included. Y'all have who've entertained the behavioral science ideas of somebody who is not trained in behavioral science.

Yael Schonbrun: think it's, so I think it's really cool that this sort of interdisciplinary approach for a variety of reasons, but one of the things that comes to mind is, is just, I think, in, in design and building design, for example,

it's a little bit easier to concretely see, like what happens when you add or subtract, whereas in these more abstract social rule scenarios or day-to-day decisions that people make to try to make a happier, more functional life, it's, it's harder to put your finger on it.

And so some of the ways that you understand decision-making into more physical space can be really informative in this arena that I'm in, which is a lot more abstract. So the kinds of things that you're able to learn and then see, you know, experiment with whether they apply in social roles is is so [00:39:00] it's so powerful. Um, and I think that's exactly what, what you've been able to do.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah. Well, thank you. And one of the things, you know, we've talked about all these disadvantages of tracking faces, but you can add something without understanding what's already there. Right? Um, so you can Add medications to somebody's, portfolio of medications that they're already taking, just by understanding how they're currently behaving.

And you're like, okay, well, this medication should steer you in a certain direction, but to subtract, you need to like understand what's there. And maybe, maybe, I mean, medications is, is one example, but you could think about this with systemic racism, which is the example I use in the book, which is like to remove this thing.

You need to, you need to see it as there. And when you're talking about these complex systems, it's hard to understand them. And it's hard to, you know, I think this is what people always ask me. Like, well, what's something that you've learned in the past year. And I think, you know, understanding more about systemic racism has helped me find it in more places and you [00:40:00] can't subtract it without, without first seeing it.

And that challenge is, is hard enough in cities where the stuff's there right in front of you, but it's even harder in these social situations where you kind of have to, I don't know, have some expertise or training or, you know, just real intentional, thought into what's going on here? What's the system.

And to be able to subtract things from it, you need to see that. I mean, you can, you can add diversity without, uh, without subtracting systemic racism. That's like, uh, you can just bolt that on to the system that already exists, but to get rid of the systemic racism, you actually have to understand the system itself.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, I think that's so critical. And, and I love that you're making that point. And so there's sort of like the system-wide way of looking at, you know, what's what exists and how can we make it better? And can we consider subtraction is one option that might not be as obvious a default

setting in our brains, but then also, you know, [00:41:00] if you look at your own life to be able to kind of be more deliberate and say, you know, how were things going?

You know, when, in my day to day I often think about adding, but could I also think about subtracting what isn't working? What, in what ways could I make my life better by, by taking things away? And I wonder if maybe we could just spend a little bit of time, about tips that people could use for subtraction,

Leidy Klotz: So tying it into the experiments, we found that cues help in the experiments. So , the straightforward tip is to put cues, you know, reminders to subtract as close as possible to the decision that you're actually going to make. And, um, you know, so these cues were something that we found in our research to be effective. You know, what we found in when we were doing the grid studies, for example, is that when we remind people that they can add and subtract that this increased rates of subtracting, but not rates of adding.

So for our research studies, the purpose was showing, Hey, people, aren't thinking of subtracting. But as a practical tool, it's like, okay, if you can think when you're [00:42:00] doing your to-do list. Okay. What are the things that I can stop doing? You're not going to overlook subtraction in that instance. , I, I hope that people who read my book just get better at subtracting across all domains.

And I think, you know, some of the feedback I've gotten is that that's the case, but if, um, And we didn't necessarily find that a reminder to subtract on the grids, for example, made people more likely to subtract on Legos. And so you need to put, you know, maybe after the podcast, a good exercise would be okay.

Think about ways that you could subtract in your life and how can you give yourself reminders to actually consider it. And so if it's, you know, your parenting and your, you know, you have a, a daily meeting with your partner, well, bless you for figuring out how. Schedule that maybe it's like more like me and my wife when we have a, a weekly meeting.

And, but in those meetings it's like, Okay.

in addition to thinking of, oh, we need to do swim lessons. We need to do, uh, buying school supplies. Um, [00:43:00] what can we stop doing that we've been doing? And so. Put those cues in place when you're thinking about subtracting, you're more likely to follow through with them at the time of the choice.

So that's the number one takeaway in that works across parenting across your personal productivity, across your, your work life. Um, and that's, that's my number one recommendation.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. So like a stop doing list.

Leidy Klotz: Uh, stop doing lists, but, uh, and then, and then at the moment of choice, um, and so, yeah, so maybe the stop doing list.

is, you know, as part of your, to do's, but also if you're applying this to ideas. Cause we, you know, the stop doing, I guess, works for social situations. But if you're talking about the ideas in your head, it's like you've got this time for in-taking information.

Right. You're listening to podcasts, you're reading books, you're talking to interesting colleagues, but also do you have time to kind of synthesize what you've, [00:44:00] um, what you've come across or have you set aside time to kind of rethink. What's in your brain and be like, okay, you know, this thing that I once thought was like, foundational knowledge is proving not to be true.

And so I'm going to subtract that. So putting in place these opportunities to do that and to remind yourself to do it, um, can, can be really effective as a reminder or.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And I think embedding those kinds of cues in different places in your life, whether it's your meeting with your spouse once a week, or, um, you know, w reminder in your calendar, To sit down and really think about it, knowing that it's so easy to neglect, subtracting as an option really can make daily life a little bit better, less overwhelming, and more deliberate about what you do include in your days.

And before you go, I loved in the chapter on sustainability that you talk about one of my favorite books, I'm sure many people's favorite books, the Lorax, and you walk readers through your thinking in, in sort of being more deliberate about subtractive changes at a global level.

So I [00:45:00] wonder if you can offer us some wisdom on how we can have a positive impact by doing less.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah.

Yeah.

I love, I'm glad you liked the Lorex. Uh, and there's this like really high brow environmental argument that, you know, brilliant science writers, Charles Mann talks about it in the wizard and the prophet and, uh, John McPhee, a great non-fiction writer. About it and encounters with the arch Druid.

And it's this tension between people who think the way to make the world better is by like kind of rolling back human progress and, you know, not overshooting limits and people like the techno. Optimist. It's like, okay, just keep innovating in the world will become better. And, uh, these are both well-meaning groups.

Uh, there, there are people who, you know, they think legitimately this is the best way to make the world better. This isn't like climate change deniers because they're, you know, making profits from oil or something like that. So, and the, the point that all these writers make Dr. Seuss included is that there's, um, [00:46:00] Oftentimes, there's not a lot of overlap between these groups, which both basically want the same thing, which is like a flourishing environment for humans.

And, but subtracting, I think is one way to kind of maybe both of those groups happy, right? Because the techno optimist you're doing something, right. This is an effortless, this isn't sitting back and just kind of, um, letting things be, or even like rolling things back to how they were 50 years ago.

Intentionally going around trying to make the world better, but you're doing so by taking away and for the, the other group, the group, that's always warning about like, look we're overshooting, planetary boundaries. I mean, climate change is one of them, but there's a great science paper that talks about the planetary boundaries and how many of them we've already overshot.

And when you've already overshot these planets here, tipping points.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah.

Leidy Klotz: The only option is to take things away. And so both groups can kind of get behind this. Now that's the real like highbrow argument. And [00:47:00] I, you know, that's why I wanted to use the Lorax for it because it's actually a relatively simple argument.

And, um, and because Dr. Seuss is brilliant, but the.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah.

Leidy Klotz: How does this manifest into other climate issues or environmental issues? And so one is just like, over-consumption right. It's like, anytime we have more stuff than we need, there's an environmental impact to that. And it's, you know, part of contributing to this problem, but, you know, specific to climate change.

W w literally the problem now is that there's more parts per million of CO₂ in the atmosphere than scientists think is safe to be there. And it's, you know, like we're probably four 20 parts per million, and we're supposed to be at three 50 parts per million. And so we do need to stop adding, right. We do need to create more efficient buildings and we should um, try to have electric vehicles.

But at some point, we've got to subtract CO₂ out of the atmosphere too. And you know, we're thinking about that more [00:48:00] and more, um, you know, planting trees is one of

the least controversial ways to do it, and that can certainly help pull CO2 out of the atmosphere. But for a long time, we just kind of thought about this with the not adding mindset and that that delay has.

Hurt. And so I think, you know, as we try to address climate change, kind of coming to it with the same mindset that created the problem, which is like, add, add, add, add, uh, who we're not going to have a great chance of, of resolving it. But if we can, like, with all of these other issues that we've talked about, See subtraction is an option and like give it a fair evaluation.

Then we will have more of our arsenal to, to work with as we try to take on this incredible, um, planetary challenge.

Yael Schonbrun: And then do you have recommendations for subtractive changes that people individually can make?

Leidy Klotz: don't overlook subtraction. Um, and that's really what I hope for people. I mean, I think if you talk about it in [00:49:00] terms of climate change, one way that I think we're overlooking it is just our investments. Um, and so one of the example, I used this story in the book of apartheid, South Africa, and how, uh, Divestment, which in this case, like, Okay.

Stop investing in companies that are doing business in South Africa and the university of California system, like divested, I think \$11 billion.

Um, or maybe it was the state of Califia. And then companies all over the world started divesting in South Africa. And that, of course there had long been organized resistance to apartheid, but that divestment really was like kind of the final blow to bringing down that, that oppressive system. Um, You know, Desmond Tutu who was very involved in that obviously is now taking up this idea of divesting from, in climate change.

Right? So it's like, okay, yes, put the solar panels on your roof and, uh, you know, make your home energy efficient, but also like look at your portfolio. And if you really care about climate change, just [00:50:00] consider what you're investing in. And if your investments are propping up this thing that you're trying to deal with in your.

Your other actions, then maybe you could take that money away from climate change, which is something that's something that I got, I thought of while writing the book, I had always known of divestment, but I was like, oh, this is something that I'm not doing yet. And so I, so I did it and I mean, one of the great things about subtractive.

We talked, and this is probably a good one to end on actually. Um, we've talked so much about the disadvantages of subtracting and how it's, it's systematically harder to think of. We don't notice it. There's no reminders. Uh it's you know, you've got to see the whole system to be able to subtract, but once you do subtract something, then you're left with the improved situation.

Plus whatever you've taken away. So when Ezra subtracted the block, he had two extra bucks then I would have had with my bridge solution. And when you divest from, you know, divest something, you've still got that money and you just invest it in something else. So you've

made [00:51:00] the subtraction to make the situation better and you've got the better situation.

Plus you've got the thing that you've subtracted. So that's, um, w we'll end on a positive note for subtraction.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And you know, if you take something out of your calendar, you have that time to do something that you do value or to do nothing at all, which can be valuable as well. Yeah. So I just want to end with a quote from your book, because I think it really just captured this, this theme that you're getting at, which is less, maybe the key to more good for more people for more time.

And I think what you're advocating consistently throughout this interview and throughout your writing. Consider subtraction as an option and be deliberate about considering it because it may not come as naturally. Um, but it is a very powerful decision-making tool.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah, that's

Yael Schonbrun: thank you for chatting with me today. I know that on August 27th, folks can check out a one day event on the science of habits and behavior change, where you and I will both be presenting and for deeper insights into the artists of tracking folks should definitely pick up your [00:52:00] book. It's, it's really transformative of the way that you look at the world and decision making in general. So it's a great read. Thank you Leidy for joining.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah, Yeah, thank you. And that's one of the downsides of virtual commuting is that we won't get to meet in person on the August 27th, event, but, yeah, I'm looking forward to it and I'm looking forward to hearing your talk and thank you so much for this interview. It was, I, I really loved the questions that you got to.

I've been doing a lot of these and it's fun to have somebody who can balance the understanding of the science with the links to the practical applications. So thanks so much.

Yael Schonbrun: Thank you.

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