

# The Science of Happier with Sonja Lyubomirsky

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**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** How often are you experiencing positive emotions and negative emotions? Right. So how often are you experiencing tranquility or joy or pride or affection, curiosity, um, and negative emotions as well.

Um, so that's being happy in your life and happy people tend to. More positive emotions throughout the day, throughout the week. Um, and then being happy with your life. That's kind of when you review your life and you ask yourself, you know, am I satisfied with my life? Am I progressing towards my life goals and sort of at the rate that that I want to be.

And so you really kind of need both of those component. To be happy..

**Yael Schonbrun:** That was Sonja Lyubomirsky on Psychologists Off the Clock.

**Diana Hill:** We are four clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

**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, [00:01:00] 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 ACT Metaphors.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Diana Hill:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock! I am here with Katy Rothfeld there, who is our dissemination coordinator, and we thought we'd bring her on because we talk a lot about Praxis, how Praxis sponsors this podcast they've, offer online, continuing education for professionals, everything from DBT to act training to compassion focused therapy and Katy's had some personal experience with practice that I think would be helpful for you to all learn.

**Katy Rothfelder:** Yeah Diana. And I started out with Steven Hayes act immersion program, and that was really my first chance to get, you know, really in the act. And then since then I've had these kind of on-demand course opportunities., the one that really sticks out to me is Lou Lasprugato's feedback, enhanced act course, which was this. Beautiful mix of instruction for really difficult act concepts. And then in-depth learning with practice. that grew my muscles as a brand new clinician.

**Diana Hill:** So, so if you are interested in taking a Praxis course, go ahead and go to our website off the clock, psych.com and we have a discount code for you for some of the live courses, check them out. Praxis, continuing education.

This is Diana, and if you're a healthcare worker or a mental health therapist, you may find that some of your clients are caught in a tug of war with food and weight. They battle their body image and eating and are entangled in preoccupation about weight or feeling stuck in cycles of rigid dieting, overeating, shame, or hopelessness. I'm going to be offering a live online webinar. PESI continuing education on using [00:03:00] act for eating and body image concerns.

And then I hope you'll join me on Friday, December 3rd, 2021 from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM central standard time. You can learn more through my events page at Dr. Diana hill.com. Hope to see you there.

**Yael Schonbrun:** This is the Yael here with Diana to introduce an episode with happiness researcher, Sonja Lyubomirsky . She's done research for the. Several decades on happiness has and has been just such a huge contributor. And she's also come out with several books for lay audiences that translate many scientific findings how to cultivate greater happiness in your life.

two books are the how of happiness and the myths of happiness. And. Work is just so wide reaching in terms of the various ways that we can craft more happiness in our lives and day. And I was curious what, what stuck out for you in terms of the ways that you build happiness that fit with her research?

**Diana Hill:** Well, first of all, [00:04:00] I just really appreciate having her on the show. I mean, she's been such an influence on the field of psychology and man, she rattles out a lot of happiness tips in this episode. So get out your pen and paper or your notes on your phone. Cause you'll want to write a few things down.

**Yael Schonbrun:** you can download the transcript.

**Diana Hill:** Or download the transcript.

and, um, you know, things like gratitude and the right dose, you know, and, and breaking up pleasurable bull events, but not negative event net negative, but not negative ones.

But what I was reflecting a lot when I was listening to your interview on is how much happiness has to do with our expectations, our mindsets and our perception. And I was actually thinking about this experience I had yesterday at the DMV, which is a place where a lot of us go with negative expectations.

It's sort of like an unhappy. Place. And so I got there with my computer, like kind of ready to just experience unhappiness. And the reality was that I got so engrossed in a blog that I was writing. It became quite lovely and they kept on calling my number, but I forgot to go to listen. [00:05:00] And finally, someone came and found me and they pulled me up and they were joking around about how they're going to send a search committee out.

And it was just this delightful little banter I had with this guy at the DMV. Meanwhile, I'm watching. 16 year olds take their tests and how enjoyable it was to watch them take their exam and how cute they were. And I bounced out of that DMV happy as a clam. So I think what I'm kind of reflecting on is that a lot of times we try and pursue happiness or force it and in doing so, it makes us less happy, but.

If we shift our expectations a little bit, maybe the contrast, we don't have our expectations so high, but also just be grateful for the experiences that we have. It can really change.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Absolutely. Yeah. that I've been reflecting on that is sort of embodied in what you're saying, Diana, which is. The way that we approach our life, you know, through our thoughts and our actions has such an impact on our happiness. this is something that's really fundamental in her research because she sort [00:06:00] of separates out that there are predictors of happiness and then there's life circumstances.

But then there's these intentional that we can take both with our thoughts and with our body that, um, can really change how happy we feel, moment to moment and sort of throughout the course of our life. for me, I think, I didn't realize how much we influence our own happiness. This is kind of a funny thing.

Cause I went into clinical psychology. So one would imagine that I had some idea that happiness was something that could be built or, you know, that unhappiness was something that could be reduced, but it was really in the first year of my graduate school experience. And I referenced this while I was talking to Sonya Looper Mirsky because I actually come from a family with a lot of mental health issues, a lot of depression and anxiety. And I think I had always just assumed that that was just kind of how I was. I was going to go through life feeling pretty down and I was IX and going to grad school, really exacerbated, whatever mood issues.

I came into the world with [00:07:00] loading for, and I had this very pivotal like aha moment. That was with a conversation that I was having with a dear friend of mine from She was getting really fed up with me, just being very negative about grad school and how I was doing and all of my social anxiety.

And she said this thing to me that has stuck with me for ever since that. Now it's been several decades later. and it was just this one phrase L choose to be happy. And it was just this moment where I was like, I, do that. can make that choice. The work that Sonja Lyubomirsky does has really fed into that aha moment of saying you can make choices, right?

There are some things that are not in our control and therefore it's not our fault if we're struggling with our mood and with our happiness, there are ways that we can learn to relate to our thoughts, to our feelings and. To learn how to act in

the world can really have a positive effect on how we feel as we move through [00:08:00] life.

And for me, that's just been a life-changing realization and one that I really enjoy sort of spreading the word about through therapy and through this podcast and so I just think it's a really powerful thing that I hope that people, um, really take to heart and learn some of the.

Activities and different strategies that Sonja Lyubomirsky teaches that can really help them to build greater happiness regardless of what they come into the world with.

**Diana Hill:** I love that. Yeah. And I think also the connection that you had with a friend there that was radically honest with you, you know, I think sometimes it's hard to be radically honest with people. And at the same time, I think there's a bit of controversy in the field of positive psychology, right. That, that we're supposed to be happy, faces all the time.

And that, um, happiness is something that it should be the goal in life. And that's why I really like sort of this balance of there's there's places. There's happiness. There's joy there, savoring the good and gratitude. And then there's also [00:09:00] the other aspects of wellbeing, like meaning. And that's something that we talked about before on the, um, episode with Paul bloom and really that sometimes we're going to have that we're going to have discomfort.

We're going to have DMV experiences. And how we relate to them is what's important. So.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And she does, she actually refers to Paul bloom. I know she hadn't known that we were having him on the podcast. Um, she refers to him a couple of times and talks about this sweet spot, which is the title of his book. And, and I think that really does. This idea that you're, articulating Diana, which is that, you know, we can't be happy all the time.

And in fact that shouldn't be the goal, but there's this sweet spot of trying to kind of turn towards and actions that work better for us and building more happiness and more meaning while allowing for some of the uncomfortable things that are also a part of life. Also a part of living in, in kind of a necessary part.

Barbara Fredrickson, another really prominent happiness psychologists work. Talks about that. There's this optimal [00:10:00] ratio of having three positive experiences to one negative experience, but that we need the negative cause that helps keeps us on track, motivates us in some ways, keeps us aware of dangers.

Um, People who are flourishing, tend to have more positive, fewer negative experiences and that using some of the strategies that Sonja Lyubomirsky talks about, can, be better equipped to achieve that more optimal ratio that suites.

**Diana Hill:** Yes. And also some of the neuroscience coming out showing that if we are just hyperstimulating our dopamine systems all the time, it's actually gonna counterbalance with the opponent process theory so that we're going to experience more pain. So sometimes moving towards pain is the key to happiness as well.

So yes, the sweet spot of embracing pain and pursuing meaning and hopefully feeling some pleasure along the way.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. So we hope that you all get a lot out of this episode.

I'm beyond excited to have Sonja [00:11:00] Lyubomirsky one of the world's leading experts in happiness science as a guest today, Dr. Lyubomirsky studies, happiness interventions, exploring how individuals grow and sustain greater happiness.

She's a distinguished professor of psychology at the university of California, Riverside and has translated happiness science for non-academic audiences in her two incredible books. The how of happiness, a scientific approach to getting the life. And also the myths of happiness. , what should make you happy?

But doesn't what shouldn't make you happy, but debts and Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky is also mother of four, which just amazes me given how prolific she is. Welcome.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** It's great to be here. Thank you.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I actually want us to start our conversation by diving into a specific area of your research. But one that I think has pretty expansive themes. So as you know, and probably most of our listeners know relationships are a critical factor in happiness, but of course carry enormous complexity in how they make us happier or unhappier and one particular kind of [00:12:00]

relationship widely thought to make people less happy is the parent child relationship.

Now you're a mother. I'm a mother of three, and I think we both know how complicated these relationships are, but there's this sort of prevailing idea in our culture that parents tend to be less happier and there's some science that backs it up. So for example, Nobel prize winner, Danny Kahneman has an extremely well cited study of Texas based working women that shows that parenthood and caring for children in particular generates about as much happiness as cleaning the house or commuting.

So not much happiness, but. Conducted some followup research and have a study that I love titled in defensive parenthood coming to a different conclusion. So I'm wondering what we can take away from these studies, both in terms of how complicated it is to determine what predicts happiness, and also how research can sometimes unwittingly contribute to some of these erroneous beliefs, these myths about what makes us happy or unhappy.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** thanks Dal. I, uh, I've been actually thinking about this very [00:13:00] question very recently because Paul bloom has a new book out I was just reading his piece in the Atlantic about, uh, sort of parenthood and happiness and misery.

And it is indeed a very complicated question. I'm going to start with the study by Danny Kahneman. Where I believe the item that people rated was, I think it was caring for children, maybe it was babysitting. Um, and I've always had an issue with that item because a lot of the time that I spend with my children.

Necessarily categorize as sort of babysitting or caring. So if I'm having dinner with my child, I'm seeing a movie with my child would not be sort of part of that category. When I'm thinking about sort of babysitting, that's usually not as sort of happiness inducing. So that's a, that's a critique of that study.

I mean, not, I mean, They didn't set up. They didn't set out to, uh, determine sort of whether ha parenthood or parenting makes people happy. Um, um, so basically the research is quite nuanced in this, in this area. And, my former student, [00:14:00] Katie Nelson and Costa live, and I have a paper, psych bulletin paper that basically, um, reviews sort of all this literature asked, you know, are parents happier than people who don't have children.

And the answer is. It depends on a lot of things. It depends on whether you're a parent who are, who's a young, whether you're married and a parent, you know, it depends on the child, like the age of the child. Obviously it's very different when you have a newborn versus a teenager versus a, a grown, you know, child was 30 versus a, an eight.

I mean, I have an eight and a 10 year old. It's a lovely age, um, uh, sort of that between, you know, early childhood and, uh, and adolescents. Um, and so it depends on so many factors. And so it's almost like a ridiculous question to ask, like, are parents unhappy? Well, it sort of depends on lots of factors. Um, also it depends what you're measuring.

Are you measuring sort of happiness? Are you measuring. Meaning, you know, which is very much related to happiness, happiness, and meaning tend to go together. Most parents report more meaning [00:15:00] than people who don't have children. Uh, gender is a big factor. So we have a study that's from a couple of years ago that shows that.

There is a, there are gender differences. It turns out that, fathers tend to be quite a bit happier than men without children. It's really the men without children that seem to be sort of the unhappy group. Um, tend not to differ so much whether they have children or not. It could be because mothers tend to start.

Uh, bear the brunt of childcare. Um, and so, yeah, so it's a great question. It's something that I've been interested for a long time. And actually I got interested in it, um, because when stumbling on happiness came out, uh, by Dan Gilbert, there was a lot of press about sort of this issue that parents are unhappy.

And so it always made me think like, gosh, sorry, I just feel like that's just sort of too simplistic an answer. And so, know, my former student, Katie Nelson kind of dove into that.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, and I think it's so important to highlight the, the nuance of happiness, both in terms of what predicts it, but also in how we experience it. [00:16:00] Cause you're pointing out that it can both be the pleasure that we experience moment to moment, but also the deeper meaning that we derive from engaging in specific roles.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** In that, in defense of parenthood paper, we also looked at something else, which is that it's one thing when you ask parents kind of like



overall, you know, how satisfied are you with your life? know, I might be asked this question right now.

I'm at work. um, and I'm thinking, oh yeah, well I have these kids. Yes, sure. I'm happy. And I don't really think about. Moment to moment when I'm actually with the kid and they're having a tantrum or, know, or I have to clean up after them. And so we also, we also had a study where we, as we, we sort of ask people sort of throughout the day, you know, kind of, um, experienced sampling study, you know, are you happier when you're actually with your kids?

And we found that parents are as happy even when they're with their kids. So that was a little bit surprising. So there's all sorts of different methodologies that one can use to get at the question you might get somewhat different. Yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Well, and so let's get to that. So, so I started specific and now I'm going to go a little bit more global, but [00:17:00] sometimes. Research can get pretty granular in defining happiness, either as pleasure, a psychological richness, meaning positive effect. When you think about happiness in your research and in your writing, how, what is it that you're striving to help folks build?

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** It's a great question. Well, yeah, there's lots of definitions of happiness and the definition that I tend to use as one that a lot of researchers in my field used that was developed by ed Diener, is the founder of the science of happiness. And this is the idea that happiness really has two components.

And I like to think about it as being happy in your life. And being happy with your life. So being happy in your life is basically sort of moment to moment, day to day. How often are you experiencing positive emotions and negative emotions? Right. So how often are you experiencing tranquility or joy or pride or affection, curiosity, um, and negative emotions as well.

Um, so that's being happy in your life and happy people tend to. More positive emotions throughout the day, throughout the week. [00:18:00] Um, and then being happy with your life. That's kind of when you review your life and you ask yourself, you know, am I satisfied with my life? Am I progressing towards my life goals and sort of at the rate that that I want to be.

And so you really kind of need both of those component. To be happy. And that's how I define happiness. You know, other, other ways of thinking about

wellbeing well being is more of like an umbrella term that encompasses kind of everything, including physical health and all kinds of, sort of inputs into happiness, um, might include things like engagement or meaning.

And to me, those aren't really happiness. Those are really, um, you know, inputs into happiness or contributors to happiness or correlates of how.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And when one area of your research that I think is really striking and has received a ton of press, is this idea that there's kind of three central predictors of happiness. Uh, genetics life circumstances and intentional activities. And I know you want to stay away from like, quantifying exactly how much each contributes, but why is it important to lay out the different predictors in terms of how this empowers folks [00:19:00] to work on cultivating their own happiness?

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Well, I think it's important for people to sort of understand, um, kind of where happiness comes from, kind of what determines it. And, um, you know, I was writing my book, the how of happiness. I talked to a lot of people about happiness. And I was surprised that some people, in fact, I even have an anecdote in the book about my own brother who said, well, happiness, that's something, you either have it.

Or you don't, you know? And I was like, really my own brother thinks that like thought it was sort of genetic, genetic, you know, either you either you're happy or you're not. And I am like, well, actually that's not really true. And there's, there's a genetic component to happiness. Just like there is still like any human trait.

Um, So, so I think it's important for, to people to understand kind of like, well, you know, how happy you are kind of overall, you know, day to day, you know, this year, this month, um, has to do with yeah. It has something to do with your genetics is some people really are kind of happier than others and they don't have to work very hard at it.

Um, but some of it has [00:20:00] to do with your life circumstances, like. In a really bad relationship or you don't have a lot of money or you live in an area in a place where there's a lot of, you know, instability or uncertainty or crime or a war going on, right. You're going to be less happy. Um, and so your left circumstances matter as well, but also what matters is sort of what, what you

yourself are doing and thinking kind of the sort of intentional activities, sort of intentional things that you can.

You can do, you can make a choice to do in your daily life that also impact your happiness. So, so I think I liked the kind of laying it out this way. Cause for the late person, when they understand it, then they can kind of see, oh, okay, well she like maybe my life circumstances are okay. You know, I sort of have my basic needs met, but I'm still not happy.

You know, maybe, maybe I'm just unlucky, but there's things that I can do. To be happier if I want to be. Cause a lot of this takes effort. And so not everyone wants to put the effort in, if you want to put the effort in their sort of kind of exercises that you can work on to be happy. So I think it's [00:21:00] for people to have that kind of big picture.

Cause it sort of helps them understand why they're happier and happy then, and then decide, make a decision. Like, do I want to do something about it or do I want to sort of leave it to.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, to me, I think it's really powerful in, in sort of helping people be self-compassionate if they're not happy that it's not just because you're making bad choices or doing the wrong things, but there are some factors that are. Largely out of your control. And yet it's also empowering to know, as you're saying that there's a lot that you can do to shift the dial that you might have a set point as you talk about it in a lot of your work, but that you can raise it through through effort.

And I, I kind of have started to think about this as like mindset, right? It's sort of a bit of inducing a growth mindset around happiness.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Absolutely. It's funny for many, many years, we actually have wanted to do a growth mindset study, you know, where we kind of try to induce a growth mindset in people about happiness.

**Yael Schonbrun:** So cool.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Yeah. And, and we never kind of got around to it. And then actually someone did that, or someone did a study. That was very similar to that, that I [00:22:00] remember finding, I thought, well, okay, well good.

Someone else is supposed done. So the idea is that right, if you kind of, um, try to persuade people that happiness is something you can change, that's something that's malleable that they're more likely to kind of. Put the effort into it. Um, and, and even longer ago, um, I was interested in cultural differences in happiness.

I'm I'm was born in the Soviet union and actually one of the reasons that I got interested in happiness is when I was 10 years old and I came to the U S I kind of noticed these huge differences in sort of how happy people looked or acted, from like between Soviet union Russia and the U S um, and so I came back.

To Russia, you know, when they, when it became Russia, um, in the nineties. Um, and I, and one of the questions I asked was about kind of the malleability of happiness. Like, do you think happiness is something that you can control so that you can change? And in Russians were much less likely to say this happiness was something that was malleable.

And so that is something, that that is sort of a stable construct. Also, I guess, in our minds that one can measure.

**Yael Schonbrun:** [00:23:00] Yeah, I think that's really interesting. So I have an Israeli background and I would say it's fairly similar. At least I was raised in a family where, um, the assumption was you're, you're born with a certain happiness level or depression, and there's not much you can do about it. And it was really in graduate school that I had this sort of aha moment of.

Oh, I can make a change. I can make choices. And it was, it was really, um, kind of a pivotal moment in my life. And I think reading books like yours really empowers people to say, you know, I may have come into the world with these circumstances in this genetic loading, but there are certain things that I can do.

And there's real strong science supporting the efficacy of making these kinds of changes and changing sort of how satisfied I am day to day and more globally.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Yeah, I agree with everything you just said. Yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Um, but I do want to sort of take note of, you know, the fact that there's, these there's several sort of blocks to increasing your happiness. And you write a lot about a concept known as hedonic adaptation, which is a huge factor that impacts our [00:24:00] happiness. So I wonder if you can

explain what is hedonic adaptation and how does it fit into the scientific art of cultivating happiness?

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Right. Sure. Um, yeah, you know, there was a, there was a time period that I really thought they had done a capitulation was like the most important construct that we all should should understand. And I still think it's really important. So, so adaptation is the idea. Human beings are remarkably good at getting used to changes in their lives.

You know, both positive and negative, but especially positive changes. Right? So when, you know, when we get a raise at work or we get a new job, we move to a new city. We started a new relationship. We have a baby. Um, we buy something new, we buy a new car, a new bag. Um, at first it gives us, these are all examples of positive changes.

Um, at first it gives us a happiness boost, right? Like we're so happy we have this new job that we've wanted to have. We've we have this new car that we've, we've been looking forward to. Um, but that boosts doesn't S doesn't sort of stay forever. You know, we tend to kind of go back our happiness baseline.

Um, same thing for [00:25:00] Netina for negative changes is a really good thing, right? that

that human are really resilient. And we can, we tend to kind of adapt even to negative changes when we lose our job, or when we lose money, we, our relationship breaks up now, adaptation doesn't have to be complete. And so for certain kinds of events, especially negative.

Like when people who, um, acquired disabilities or actually unemployment tends to be something that people don't tend to, especially men, as opposed to women, don't tend to adapt to completely. So we may never kind of go back to our previous baseline with positive events. We tend to go back to a previous baseline.

Um, marriage is a really excellent example, you know, marriage for many people, sort of the best thing that they've done, you know, in a way, um, in terms of how it brings lots of good things to them. Um, But, but show that if you follow people over, across time, that after about a two year average period, people tend to go back to baseline.

Although the baseline tends to be inflated. Um, but that's not true for everyone there. Individual differences for some people kind of never go back. Go hop [00:26:00] up and stay up. And so adaptation is a really powerful phenomenon and a very important one think about with regard to the pursuit of happiness, because sort of, uh, sort of opposes a kind of a puzzle if we adapt to almost everything positive that ever happens to us, can we ever become happier?

Right. Um, and so that, that, that. question and, and sort of one answer is that we don't adapt completely to everything. So, and, and then we can actually try to slow down or try to prevent adaptation, right? So if we buy a new car, you know, if we could try to use it in ways, we could try to think about it in a way.

We try not to adapt to it. Like, you know, gratitude is actually a great example, expressing gratitude for the things that we have, whether it's our car or our marriage or a house or a new job, um, is the antidote to hedonic adaptation. Because basically you're grateful for something, you're basically not taking it for granted.

So adaptation is basically taking things for granted. And so we try, so we can kind of active steps [00:27:00] to try not to take things from.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, so kind of in infusing variety and then appreciation into the positive experiences that we have helps them to last longer. One other thing that I. So cool that you cited in your books. And I was just reading some studies this morning about it is the power of interruption to have having like our pleasurable experience interrupted.

And so I write a lot about working parenthood and one of the challenges of working parenthood is that we're often sort of cut off. Like we get into flow while writing, and we got to go pick up the kids or with our kids and having good time and we have to get them out the door so that they can be on time to.

School. And it's just kind of fascinating how, um, I think a lot of the research comes from marketing research, but that, for example, if you're watching TV and it is interrupted by commercials, we actually tend to enjoy the show, the show more than if it's not interrupted by commercials. And I wonder how, um, I wonder if you sort of explored that in, in your work.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** It's such a great question. [00:28:00] I haven't explored in my work, but I have not made the connection to toe sort of working parenthood, which is a really interesting connection that you say that you're right. There's,

there's so much interruption or just anyone who has like a really busy life, you know, kind of by definition, there's going to be so many, you're multitasking.

You're doing so many things that there's a lot of interruptions. And so the research suggests that. Interrupting positive experience is actually good because it kind of your kind of, um, set like adaptation point. So like you're, as you said, like you're, you're having fun with your kids and then suddenly you have to stop and put them to bed or, you know, bring them to school or bring them to the dentist.

Um, um, and, and, but, but, but the, what the research suggests is that, um, while when we're having fun with our kids, we kind of adapt to it. Right. That the more we're doing the same kind of activity. The kind of, maybe it's still fun, but it's not as fun, like an hour or two or three hours into it as it was for the beginning of it.

And same thing with watching a movie, um, kind of like, this [00:29:00] is why, you know, Yeah, but exactly like, it's why actually we shouldn't binge binge watch on Netflix. Like my husband and I love is the show succession. So, and now we have to wait a week until every episode. And, um, it's actually good to wait.

Right. Because then you're just, you're interrupting that pleasure. But if you kind of watch it all together, then it's still really pleasurable. Um, but if. Yeah, added up the units of pleasure, whether it's watching a show or, or with your kids, the units of pleasure would actually be higher with interruption sexually.

I'm glad that saying this because it makes me better now, um, about my life and, and like, I guess a lot of people's life that involves a lot of interruptions, but when it comes to negative experiences, you don't. To interrupt them. And so actually I was just thinking about this because to the dentist today for the first time in a long time, since COVID, I sort of had to change dentists.

And, and sometimes when you have like a nine, hopefully I'm not going to have like any kind of painful procedure, but if you have like a painful dental procedure, I used to have a. Who would [00:30:00] keep interrupting it kind of give you a break. And so they had this very faulty assumption like having breaks actually makes it better, but it does not make it better because you just kind of want to get it over with, right.

You want to aggregate negatives and other research that I remember reading about in grad school, you want to aggregate negative Vincent segregate positive and kind of like academics. Understand this. Um, if you're going to get two rejections from different journals, um, it's better to get them all in a single day it kind of ruins one day a lot, but otherwise you, you ruined two different months.

Um, if you want to get two acceptances from two different journals is better to spread them out. And so we have two kinds of positive events. So aggregate negative. So negative put negative things together. If you have a lot of negative things to do, just put them in all in one day, as long as it's not too much and you're overwhelmed and separate, positive things.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Right. So aggregate negative and separate positive. I love that tip. And you have, you have another set of tips that I think is really cool for optimizing happiness, um, that I [00:31:00] wanted to ask you about. So how should we handle positive memories and experiences versus negative memories and experiences? The, the, the advice is different.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Right. So this, again, this sort of asymmetry of how, what to do with sort of positive versus negative memories. and there's a couple of ways of thinking about it. So one way I'm not sure which because there's two different papers that I have that are relevant. One is a in Israeli researcher.

Um, and one is with not so I don't, I don't, um, I don't know which one you're talking about, but okay. But I'll, I'll, I'll start with the first one, which is that when you're thinking about. Uh, positive things. Um, it's better to, to play them out in our minds, kind of like a video camera, like a video tape. And so imagine like the happiest day of your life, maybe it's your wedding day.

so when you remembering your wedding day, you kind of want to like replay it sort of think about. You know what happened, kind of like a videotape that you're playing back to yourself and that's going to make you happy when it comes to things. You don't want to do that. I mean, unless you're sort of in therapy and you're [00:32:00] trying to let her know process something, um, because playing like a really, really bad day back to yourself is going to make you feel terrible.

Right? It's gonna put you right into. Um, well for negative experiences, you really want to like process them and try to analyze them. So basically the advice is you want to analyze negative things, but you want to kind of replay positive.



So you want to ruminate. Rumination is basically replaying. You want to kind of replay positive things and analyze negative things.

Because when you analyze negative experiences, you might come to terms with them. You might sort of try to understand them, get past them, but you don't want to analyze positive experiences. You don't want to ask yourself, gee, why, why was I happy at my wedding and where other people have either too, like you don't want to analyze positive things too much.

that's, that's one piece of advice about positive and negative. The other piece of advice comes from another paper that I have. Really love it has to do with what we call, um, or other researchers called endowment versus contrast effects. that is when something really good happens to you. You kind of want to.

Put it in your bank of experiences, like imagine you have like a really amazing meal and it's one of the best [00:33:00] meals you've ever had for my 40th birthday. My husband took me to this restaurant, this likes to considered one of the best restaurants in the world. And, and so I'm like, that was such an amazing, and also two best friends were there kind of as a surprise, it was a really amazing day.

so I remember that day in that. And I kind of, I T I endow it. So basically I put it in the bank of experience of some way, life is sort of richer. It's better having had that experience. I don't want to do with positive experiences, I don't want to contrast them to other things. Right. So if I have this like amazing meal best I've ever had.

You could, you could argue that every restaurant meal is not going to be as enjoyable, right. Because I'm always going to compare it to that one. It's never going to be as good. So I don't want to contrast that. So, so when it comes to positive experiences, do you want to endow them and not conscious them for negative experiences the other way around?

Right. So. Uh, if someone experiences like, say they're, they're mugged on the street, you know, and their wallet is stolen. It's very, it's traumatic. Um, you, you, you don't want to put [00:34:00] that in the bank of experiences because your life is just going to be worse off because of it. You don't want to indoubt, but you kind of, but you can contrast it and say like, That was horrible.

That happened say 10 years ago, since then, you know, that has not happened. So it's like, it's kinda like, my life is better since then, you know, it has not

happened. And so you sort of want to contrast negative experiences, but you want to endow positive experiences.

**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 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:** What [00:35:00] I love about your work is that there is really a lot of opportunity to kind of tailor the, the way that you optimize your happiness, depending on who you are and how you are and what the circumstances are. Um, I wanted to ask a little bit about the folks who sort of

Have a harder time with happiness either because they have depressive symptoms or they just have this sort of foreboding around happiness. So for example, some people experience a happy moment and then immediately following there's sort of like, uh, what's going to happen now. The other shoe's going to drop in.

I know some of your research explores interventions with dysphoric individuals. So I'm curious what kind of happiness activities you've found to work better and which work less well, for instance, Who have that kind of disposition or sort of temperament.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Well, it's a great question because I think the people who argue that people who are most in need of happiness interventions are those. You're not just sort of little bit unhappy, you kind of who want to be happier, but, um, you [00:36:00] know, who are quite unhappy who might be just for, or depressed. there's now quite a few studies um, you know, clinical researchers are doing with clinical populations.

Some of them partnered with some of them to do some studies. Um, but I'm not a clinical psychologist, but I, you know, I speak to that on that subject. Um, and I guess the first, my first answer is I think. Pretty much the same types of

positive strategies or activities apply to dysphoric or depressed or anxious individuals as they would apply to sort of healthy individuals.

So, so, you know, whether it's, um, you know, the kinds of activities that I study are, you know, expressing gratitude, you know, engaging in kind of social interactions. Pro-social or kind acts. and your other lots of other people study things like savoring the good things in your life, physical exercise, pursuing goals.

So there's lots of things one can do to be happy. And I think they're very similar, no matter whether you're sort of depressed or anxious or worried, whether you're, you're not. Um, I think, but I think what matters is fit. Right? So, so, [00:37:00] so, so some people say. If you're, um, you know, maybe very depressed and you're having trouble kind of just getting out of the house, you know, maybe like going out and, you know, engaging in lots of social interactions outside, you know, may not be a fitting activity for you.

So and so, so you ha you might have to sort of tailor the activities to the person or to the population, but really to the person, because every person is different. Right. So if you're an. Maybe going out and being extroverted is going to be super hard. Although we have a study that shows that even introverts benefit from acting extroverted.

Um, and then, and then there's some kind of more serious caveats that I haven't studied yet, but I would like to study. is sometimes. Some positive activities might actually backfire for certain individuals and for certain populations. So an easy example is, um, you know, we, we do lots of studies showing that doing acts of kindness for others makes people happier.

So not only do you benefit the other person, but you feel good as a person, you, you make this connection with others, you feel good about sort of the world at large humanity. [00:38:00] Um, if you're someone who's like already? So giving, like you're just, as in fact, a lot of women tend to kind of ignore their own self care.

Being really, really giving to others. Like if you're already really giving, then telling them to sort of do even more giving is, is not going to help and may even backfire, right. So maybe they really need to focus on themselves. Um, another example is gratitude. I think gratitude is one of the most important things that we can do to try to sort of, to be happy and sort of, to be satisfied with our lives,

to really appreciate what we have and to, to, to express gratitude to the people in our lives.

gratitude can buck back far as well. When we express gratitude. Make us feel embarrassed. Um, it can make us feel. Like, like we were not sort of so successful or happy after all, because it's not about us. It's about sort of other people's help. Um, but I think one thing that's really, that's really serious as it can make us feel indebted.

And in fact, in some languages that we're grateful is the same as the word indebted, um, kind of by definition, when you're grateful to someone else, you sort of feel a [00:39:00] little bit indebted to them. Now I do research showing that when you feel indebted and grateful, you actually might actually inspire you to pay back, to prove yourself worthy to the person to make themselves processing.

Right. So gratitude can actually make you want to be a better person and eat more healthfully and work harder and be kinder. what if you're very, very depressed? So recent research shows that who are very depressed and especially people who are suicidal, they feel like one of the reasons they feel this way is that they feel like that they're burdened or maybe one of the correlates is that they feel that they're a burden on their family and friends.

And so one reason that they report that they want to end their lives is they feel that they're a burden on their family and friends. So if you, if people. Severely depressed, asking them to, to express gratitude for the family and friends might actually make them feel even more of a burden, right. So that would be totally counterproductive, might really backfire.

so those are the kinds of nuances that I think is important to consider when you try to apply kind of positive activity interventions that I, and other people mostly study with sort of healthy [00:40:00] individuals. we try to apply them to clinical populations.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, absolutely. That that fit is, is so key. The other finding that I thought was really fascinating about gratitude. I think in one of your studies, you examined dosage effects and I, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that, that, you know, some of these happiness activities are good broadly speaking, but.

But it's interesting to think. Just like taking medication, we want to be sort of careful about how and how often we apply them.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Absolutely. In fact, when I talk about my happiness interventions to lay audiences, I often use the word clinical trial. They're not actually technically clinical trials, but they're similar. And that now everyone kind of knows what a clinical trial is because they're following like vaccine trials. And so like retrials trials, of course, are looking at dosage at fit.

You know, some people might not need and might not be able to take this vaccine and, and we need to know what the proper dosage is. For, for different age groups for different, you know, types of individuals. Um, the same thing with gratitude. So we, did a study where we showed [00:41:00] that expressing gratitude once a week or counting blessings one.

Make people happier, but, but expressing kind of blessings three times a week, didn't do anything. It did have a, it didn't backfire either, maybe it was too often. Maybe it became monotonous. so we actually just, uh, or not just, we, we, we did a study where we actually vary how many blessings we ask people to count.

Right. So in one condition we asked people to think of things that you're grateful for. And another, we ask people to do. For things that you're grateful for. So we have 2, 4, 8, 16, and 32 blessings, one condition. We actually asked people to think of 32 things grateful for.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, that's, that's, intense.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** That's a lot.

Exactly, exactly. So, so, um, uh, there's a, there's a heuristic called the effort as information heuristic that, uh, um, uh, judgment decision-making, um, researchers have studied, basically suggests that sometimes if you takes you a lot of effort to do something that that is kind of a. Just sort of what that means to you.

So for [00:42:00] example, with gratitude, if I ask you think of 30 things, 32 things in your life that you, that make you fortunate and you have trouble thinking of 32 things, you might actually, uh, conclude that maybe you don't have a lot of in your life to be fortunate about, right. If you're fortunate about, so it actually might backfire.

And so in that particular study, well, I don't, maybe I could have you guess which do you think 2, 4, 8, 16 or 32 blessings was kind of the optimal dose.

**Yael Schonbrun:** For

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** That's a great guest actually, because that was most of people's guests and it was eight in that particular study,

**Yael Schonbrun:** okay.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** but you have four or five, I feel like.

Um, but we're we're yeah, it's interesting. And we're replicating that right now where we actually randomly assign people. Out of like from between one and a hundred hour, um, many blessings to count? And so, um, or was it one in 50? A hundred is a lot. Um, anyway, so we're trying to replicate that, but, but the key point is that there is going to be an optimal dosage, pretty much to everything, to, to medication, but also to [00:43:00] kindness and to gratitude, exercise, almost anything right.

We, there's kind of, I really am. I'm a real believer in kind of Aristotle's idea of the, kind of the golden mean. That there's sort of moderation everything. And one of my examples actually comes from kids. My oldest kid, who is now 22 when she was little that's what that's when the Harry Potter books were just kind of coming out.

I mean, they're like half of them were written, but like not all of them were written. So it's actually very exciting to wait for the next Harry Potter book. Um, and so I got into reading Harry Potter with her, was like so wonderful and very connecting and we both really enjoyed the book. But we were doing it too much.

And then my husband at one point said, he's like, Sonya, you really need to like, you're like neglecting your other responsibilities. You're spending too much time reading to Gabriela, which, and I, and you think like what, how could, how could even reading to your kid be too much, but there could be too much of a good thing.

Right? So, so there, there there's an optimal dosage to pretty much any activity in life, including kind of happiness activities.

**Yael Schonbrun:** [00:44:00] Yeah. And I think Paul Bloom's new book is actually called the sweet spot, which I think is a really nice way to capture this idea of that Aristotelian mean where we don't want to do too much of a good thing cause we'll habituate or it'll sort of backfire in some way. Um, but, and so I think therefore, You know, discussing some of these myths that we have about, you know, what should make us happy and what shouldn't helps us to locate that sweet spot more effectively.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Exactly know the sweet spot. It's a great title. Um, or sometimes I think of like the Goldie locks, you know, like idea sort of like the, the, the bed that's just right to, you know, the just right dosage. Yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** More broadly speaking, just stuff. You know, if you are living a very demanding life with a lot of roles and not a lot of time, um, and recognizing that there's a fit issue and a dosage issue. I mean, what are your sort of go tos of where people can begin by trying to, you know, throw some things at the wall and see what [00:45:00] sticks to cultivate greater happiness in their lives.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Um, well I think one thing to keep in mind is that the pursuit of happiness doesn't have to take a lot of time, you know, it's, you know, when you think about like fitness, you know, we go to the gym or we like go running or swimming or whatever, and it takes time out of our day. And then when you're working parent, like that's really hard.

And, and of course you could try to like, I dunno, workout with your baby. I mean, there's things like that, but I. Run with a, you know, jogging stroller a lot, like to try to combine it, but, and, but you can do the same kind of thing. Maybe this is maybe not a bad metaphor. You can ha you can like, have like a jogging stroller for happiness.

that is while you're, you know, I don't know, taking a walk with your kids or doing something with your kids, like. You can practice some of these strategies and it could be gratitude, for example, like you could like, think about like how grateful you are for this or that, or look on the positive side of things or saver or something.

Um, or you, you know, you, you know, while. Walking from work, you might an act of kindness, you know, for a stranger [00:46:00] it doesn't have to take a lot of time, right. Or effort. So, so a lot of sort of positive activities don't have

to, again, sort of take time out of your day, they can be kind of incorporated into your day.

It doesn't mean, does it take effort? Like if looking on the bright side of things, doesn't come naturally to you, does it come easily to you? That's really hard, right? Like something happens. Like, I don't know. Your managers gives you some negative feedback. And you're just like, eh, you know, you just feel bad.

Right. And so it's really hard to kind of be like, you know what, maybe, Maybe this is, this is good that I got this feedback because. I learned my lesson. I feel like many of us, like, I think I'm fairly good at it, but it takes me some time. Right. I'm like, mean, I, after a while I'm like, okay, I'm glad.

I'm glad I got that feeling. Like I made that mistake. Like this is a silly example, but I, I had a phone call the other day to Australia and I did, I made the phone call in the wrong way and it cost me \$80. Damn \$80 just went out the window I'm like, but it took me a bit and I'm like, okay, I've learned my lesson.

Okay. I've learned my lesson. I'm [00:47:00] not going to do that anymore. And so, but anyways, so, it doesn't take like a lot of time out of your day. So again, there's lots of strategies to incorporate and kind of fold in, into their work time where their commute time, where their time with their kids cultivate how.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. So it's kind of like stacking some of those activities into things that you're already doing in ways that don't feel so burdensome recognizing that it does take effort, especially if you haven't built the muscles for it. And I really love that example of the phone call to us, Julia, because it's such a nice, I think that that's a nice example of how a happiness mindset.

And knowing that you can sort of turn a difficult experience into something good really opens you up to sort of reframe that experience. And again, I think being open to looking at things in new ways or engaging in behaviors that work better for, uh, you know, fostering greater happiness is, is just such a powerful. So I recognize that we're just about out of time and I just wanted to thank you so much. We'll link to your website in your amazing books. And, um, I just wanted to [00:48:00] thank you again for making time in your busy schedule to meet with me.

**Sonja Lyubomirsky:** Thank you so much, Gail. And I know I really enjoyed, uh, the questions that you were asking and really delving into the details of the



research and the, of the implications. I don't often get, um, such a good question. So thank you.

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