

# Episode 224 Transcript

**Paul Bloom:** [00:00:00] I think sometimes we choose pain in and of itself. Sometimes we choose a meaningful pursuit and we don't really want the pain, but we understand that the pain and suffering is part and parcel of what makes it meaningful.

**Diana Hill:** You're listening to Paul Bloom on psychologists authentic.

**Yael Schonbrun:** 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 Sorenson:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorenson, 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, am doctor 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

**Yael Schonbrun:** we hope you take what you learned here to build a rich and meaningful life

**Diana Hill:** Thank you for listening to psychologists off the clock.[00:01:00]

**Diana Hill:** 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 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](http://Dr.DianaHill.com). Hope to see you there.

**Diana Hill:** I am here with Katie Rothfelder 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 [00:02:00] therapy and Katie'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.

Um, 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. 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.

**Diana Hill:** So this is Diana and there are so [00:03:00] many paradoxes in psychology. Things like the harder you try to fall asleep, the less likely you will, the more you try and not think negative thoughts, the more likely they're going to pop into your head. And according to Paul Bloom, struggle and pain may just be the source of pleasure and meaning in our lives.

So I'm going to be talking to Paul Bloom today, all about the pursuit of pain and how it's related to. Sure how it's related to meaning and some surprising aspects of human nature as well. Like why empathy? Isn't always a good thing. I have been reflecting about my own relationship with pursuing pain.

And I want to talk with Yael about it because we were in grad school together. We were fellow writing partners. So we both have experienced pain. And I think in some ways I am a bit of a benign masochist. It really helped me reading his book to understand why I like to do things that are hard. And I'm curious for you Yael, what are some of the things that you do that are maybe painful that bring you a little bit of pleasure?[00:04:00]

**Yael Schonbrun:** Well, so many things, because I think that ambition it's like, so I am admittedly an ambitious person. Like I want big things and pursuing big goals is hard

because it means that you're confronting areas that. Um, you know, other people are going to be in that space trying to pursue and compete. And so you're not always going to be the best.

And if I, if you have big goals, it means that you have to try hard and take

**Diana Hill:** Okay.

**Yael Schonbrun:** But I can actually think back to a conversation. I mean, when you say grad school, I'm just thinking back to that conversation that I had with my now husband, he was then my boyfriend. And I remember saying, you know, feels like it kind of comes more easily to me, but research is really hard, but I just find it much more gratifying.

And said, I think it's because it's hard that you find it gratifying. But wouldn't it be better to just do the thing that's easier? And I said, no, I think I like doing the things that are harder because rewards are just much sweeter. And I think that's a lot of what Paul Bloom talks.

**Diana Hill:** Absolutely. I think he talks [00:05:00] about , just sort of also the contrast of doing something really hard, how it actually allows us to experience pleasure because there's that relief that comes when you're done, you know, something like working really hard in a project and then being able to relax after, but also this aspect of, you know, for me, I'd always, whenever I go into massage, I'm always like, Give me the painful massage, like in some way, the Swedish massage doesn't quite do it for me.

I need it to be somewhat painful, to feel like it's doing its job. And there is something about that in our human nature where experiencing pain has some degree of achievement associated with it. There's also an element of just being curious about our capacities. I know that for you, y'all, in terms of research, there's always been this sort of edge that you can write.

Keep on pursuing and growing in, and that is satisfying for us. So it's really interesting to talk to Dr. Bloom about some of the experimental research behind pain, how it's related to pleasure. And I hope you find this episode as interesting [00:06:00] as I did.

So here we are with Paul Bloom. He is a professor of psychology at university of Toronto and the Brooks and Suzanne Reagan, professor emeritus of psychology at Yale university, and his research explores the psychology of morality, identity and pleasure.

Bloom is the recipient of multiple awards and honors, including most recently the million dollar club. L Jacobs research prize, and he's written for scientific journals, such as nature and science for the New York times, the new Yorker or the Atlantic monthly. And he's the author and editor of eight books, including just babies, how pleasure works, Decartes baby, Against empathy, and most recently the sweet spot. So today I hope that we can talk about the sweet spot because it is, really relevant for folks that, uh, in particular follow this podcast and have been interested in accepts the commitment therapy, because you're talking about, uh, sort of the value of choosing pain.

And it feels a little bit, um, sort of unusual for someone [00:07:00] to research this, the value of choosing pain, but I'm curious why you named it the sweet spot and what you're talking about in terms of choosing pain

**Paul Bloom:** yeah. Well, thanks for having me here. This is a, this is a great experience for me. I'm a psychologist, but I'm not a clinical psychologist. I'm psychologist. So I'm really grateful to get the chance to get a different perspective on this work. Um, is about chosen suffering, why we sometimes choose to, uh, pain or anxiety or stress.

And I argue that we do it in part because it gives us. But in part, because it has a sort of a separate value all to itself. Um, it's part of a search for meaning, for purpose in life. activities that are worthwhile will involve some degree of suffering and the title, the sweet spot is basically an acknowledgement that we're looking at many different things.

If we want to live a full life. And one of them is pleasure. I don't deny. We seek out pleasure and times, but another is meaning and purpose. And I think it's up to each one of us [00:08:00] is going to figure out what the right space between these is how to balance them properly. So hence the sweet spot.

**Diana Hill:** You kind of break it down into two components in the book, the first part, really being about just sort of the enjoyment of benign masochism. And you say things like, you know, why is it that we want to do hot yoga or do things that are just sort of painful, but they kind of feel good because they're painful.

And then the second part is about meaning. So I'd like to actually start with the first part, which is why is it that we enjoy pain? And one of the questions that you asked early on in the book is for readers to think about something that they do, that's painful, that's enjoyable. And I wanted to pose that to you.

What, what is it that you do? That's painful, but that also kind of feels good. And then maybe the second part of that question is why does it feel good?

**Paul Bloom:** Such a good question. Um, I have an easy answer to this, which is, um, I joined a gym a few months ago. Um, a couple of blocks from my house and, and what we do there is for about [00:09:00] 50 minutes, we lift weights uh, you know, we're doing, you know, and, and, and, you know, kettlebell swings and all of this stuff.

not in the best shape. And it kills me. It kills me. And, I'm a constant clock watcher when I'm there 38 minutes to go 11 minutes to go as awful. It's physically painful. It's difficult, it's stressful. And I love it. It's also to high point in my day, and I think what's going on here is a few things.

Um, one thing is the contrast, is, it feels so good when I stop. but I think more substantive leaders, a feeling of mastery of satisfaction, myself, and doing something good. making some progress. And, um, if it was easy, if I went in there and I dunno, they hooked up electrodes to my muscles, naked cat bars and watched YouTube videos.

I don't think it would carry the same satisfaction. I think the difficulty is part and parcel of the reason why I feel so fondly towards this activity in session important part of my life.[00:10:00]

**Diana Hill:** so exercise is a good example, but I also want it more of like an example of something that's just. So, for example, my child, I was having him floss his teeth the other night, and he came out and he had wrapped the floss completely around his finger. We've all tried this as a kid, like wrapped it to the point that your finger starts to turn blue and then kind of white.

And then he showed it to me. And as a parent, I'm like, why'd you do that? And, and you actually asked that question, in the book, like why, why would you do that? Why would you wrap a piece of floss around your finger to the point that it turns blue? And there's some maybe potentially social signaling or evolutionary reasons that don't have to do with the, you know, sort of the, the greater virtue of exercise, but just have to do with the pure pleasure of pain.

**Paul Bloom:** No, fair enough. I think we often like pain almost. It seems like for its own sake. the, the, the, the dental philosophy I'm thinking is a perfect example. Another example is you have a sore tooth and you poke it with your tongue. have a sprained ankle, [00:11:00] you press on it.

Um, you, um, you know, people put their hands over flames and, and I think everybody does it. It could be taken to pathological extremes when you damage your body, everybody does it. And there's a few stories as to why one account is it social signaling, it's designed to tell people around you. So, and for instance, when, uh, when adolescents cut themselves, this is part of what it is, is a cry for help.

Um, in other instances, it could be a signal of look how tough I am. You know, you, you do sometimes use things in public. I, you know, I'd get into wasabi eating competitions with my teenage son and, you know, so, so you mean, this is like, we're just trying to show off to each other, but I think something else and maybe something which connects, um, a lots of sort of clinical issues and also issues of just everyday life is pink could serve as an escape from the.

And that sounds like a really weird way of putting it and kind of mystical. And, [00:12:00] self-consciousness could be a burden you're, you know, just like he gets sick of somebody else gets sick of yourself. He gets sick of, ruminations that have passed that old voice in your head, thinking about the future and pain could jolt you out of it.

It captures your attention. There's a certain clarity to it. And I think we could find it refreshing and invigorating in the right context, under the right sort of control.

**Diana Hill:** It makes me think about, I worked in the field of eating disorders for a long time. And if you think about something like, um, anorexia that folks that starved themselves, I mean, I would have clients that would, you know, run miles on 300 calories a day. And certainly this is the pathological aspect of pain, but often times what they would report is this sense of numbing, like the, that, that pain actually numbs you from other stuff.

And then also, like you're saying, it, it, it kind of turns down the volume of self. If you have a really loud self-critic and then you can purposely choose to go run for two and a half hours, there's a self punishment aspect of [00:13:00] it. But there's also an escape and an act, we call that like, sort of experiential avoidance.

Right? So you're like avoiding the, discomfort with the, with this other type of discomfort. So that seems like that plays a role.

**Paul Bloom:** I think so. I, I quoted dominatrix saying that when someone holds up a whip, that's all you could think about. It takes up your whole mind and, and the pain itself really does. Um, if people are upset, they'll, they'll, you know, hit a wall or something and a jolt of pain that they experience in some way, clears the mind.

And you're, you're certainly right. Uh, this could be taken to extremes to really unhealthy extremes, but, but I think in a normal range I even am including even in this media, Which doesn't seem to be linked with any psychological disorder in a normal range. It could be fine and healthy.

**Diana Hill:** so BDSM is an interesting topic, right? Because it actually gives you a sense of control because there's something about BDSM that has to do with choice and there's consent, [00:14:00] there's control there's choice.

And that seems like it's a real foundation of some of what we're talking about in terms of chosen pain is different than unchosen pain. Can you talk a bit about.

**Paul Bloom:** I think that's an absolute, really important insight, which cuts across everything want to talk about, is I'm in favor of chosen suffering of the right source. I think it's part of a healthy mind. I think it improves people's lives and chosen suffering is typically just sucks. It's it's just, it's just bad for you and you should try to avoid it, which no surprise to anybody.

but there's a world of difference between choosing to cause yourself some pain or even some indignity or humiliation or something like that. And having an under your control, um, Versus it being imposed from somebody else. The first could be pleasurable and healthy and interesting. second is just, it's just horrible.

Um, CS Lewis, you know, the great writer and theologian makes a point regarding deprivation of food. So he says, you know, sometimes fasting in the context of [00:15:00] religion, in the context of an exercise a rate amount could be like, look at, look at, look at my autonomy. Look what I'm doing. Look at my control.

But to have someone else deprive you of food just terrible. You're just a victim of a crime or to run out of food cause you're you can't afford it. So yeah, control is totally important. And I think in some cases, control is where the suffering derives. That satisfaction gives you pleasure.

**Diana Hill:** and I don't know if you're actually controlling the pain itself. It's, you're, you're controlling the choice. I mean, that's kind of an important distinction there like that you, that you are willingly entering into pain. And that is really some of the foundation of, of clinical work. So when you're working with someone around exposure to anxiety, we, and actually having folks come into my office and approach the, the thing that they fear

most, and they're choosing it as opposed to it being chosen for them, which is a real, it just is such an important distinction.

One of the areas where people choose pain is, [00:16:00] pursuing goals, mastery, achievement, you talk a bit about the difference between happiness, that sort of the you denomic happiness versus the hedonic happiness?

I'm curious if you can speak to that in terms of choosing pain and, and the role that that has to do, and actually making things potentially more meaningful.

**Paul Bloom:** Yeah. Um, I think we choose pain in different ways and it kind of, uh, the division that you're making. So sometimes for pleasure, will just directly choose, choose pain. Um, gave a talk based on my book as I was writing it and, um, some graduate student in Mexico. Emailing. He said, you know, we have these things and clubs and restaurants, which are electric shock machines and you put it on and you'd see how high a shock you could take and to do, if your friends, you lose your family and it's a riot, it's a lot of fun.

And, I think that is what you're just choosing pain. But then other thing is we often choose meaningful life pursuits and here it gets a bit complicated because [00:17:00] when I decide to have a child or take on a new job or open up a business or whatever, I don't want to fail. want pain and suffering.

I want it to succeed, after it, wasn't the possibility of failure and there wasn't pain and suffering and difficulty, would be meaningless. I think sometimes we choose pain in and of itself. Sometimes we choose a meaningful pursuit and we don't really want the pain, but we understand that the pain and suffering is part and parcel of what makes it meaningful.

**Diana Hill:** If there's pain associated with something like your graduate degree, you know, you get a degree from somewhere that's a little bit more prestigious or it has a little bit more, um, effort associated with it. Is it, do you actually value it more because of the pain

**Paul Bloom:** it kind of it's people use the term pleasure in different ways. The way I think of pleasure is in a more sort of visceral way. And I think, um, spicy foods and BDSM give you pleasure. I don't think graduate school gives you pleasure.

I think I, you know, I remember [00:18:00] my graduate school and it wasn't fun in any simple way. I think pleasure wouldn't be the right term, but it was satisfying. I felt a



feeling of accomplishment. I'm glad I did it. And so I think some sort of suffering we choose for pleasure and it real basic sense. It's just fun.

But other sorts we choose for other reasons that don't give us pleasure, but give us something.

**Diana Hill:** In terms of, again, this distinction between like what, what is happiness and what is a wall of life? And your thesis is this idea around that we can have many different reasons that contribute to a happy life. Part of that is the hedonism and pleasure.

And part of that is meaning when we look at things like the world happiness report that recently came out, they're starting to introduce some ideas of that. It's not just about money and social connection, but it's also about things like trust and benevolence.

**Paul Bloom:** I mean, you're raising a lot of interesting things here. If you ask people, how happy are you and how meaningful your life is, treat this as two different questions and the world happiness report is a wonderful example of this.

So [00:19:00] one of the core findings is, you know, you have these the happy to richer, a country to happier more social trust, the happier, the more, um, and, in some ways the countries which are happier, you know, New Zealand, Norway, there, countries that are sort of people live comfortable and fairly prosperous lives.

Um, And then you ask there's, but there is other studies. We asked people how meaningful your life is. there was fascinated results. Flip the Richard, a country to less meaning countries which people say to have the most meaningful life are poor to live with the difficult to live in, have a lot of struggles.

And there's all sorts of questions as to why, but it seems to capture, these are two different things.

Um, of the social utility of pain I think pain can bring people together. Uh, there's some experimental work by Brock Bastian, which is he gets people in the lab has them have them experience, mild pain together, sort of pain.

Psychologists give people and I'll add. And then if like each other more, they're more [00:20:00] connected. And, um, of people, scholars of religion have argued that painful religious rituals a bonding function among members of that room.

**Diana Hill:** Yeah, sort of that social signaling, again, of, of we're kind of in this together, we're sacrificing together for something, but circling back to the countries that have lower income tend to also be related to a greater meaning. It also seems like that could potentially map on to work as well, that some of the most meaningful work that people do is also the least paid, you know, things like social work, or as you mentioned, you know, the clergy scores pretty highly on sense of meaning.

**Paul Bloom:** yeah, I think, I think there, there was a study, I think 2 million people asking about what jobs they have and how meaningful they find them. And the punchline is exactly what you're saying, which is, um, most meaningful jobs are things like, uh, clergy, educators, um, social workers [00:21:00] and military. And these are not hugely well paying jobs naming.

I be the highest status jobs and they're difficult jobs. They involve dealing with people in trouble and, and, and stress struggle. And people say, this is what gives them meaning. Um, you can get a high paying job, which does give you meaning a surgeon is high up on the lesson that pays well as high prestige a lot of meaning, but, also involves dealing with people and dealing with people's problems, the job of, to least meaning of any job that was on a scale is a parking lot attendant. So

**Diana Hill:** Which are

**Paul Bloom:** to yeah.

**Diana Hill:** yeah. Being outsourced anyways, as you. So we be automate everything, but it also makes me think about just, you know, during COVID and the, and the pandemic and the chain, people changing their jobs and quitting their jobs like this mass Exodus of, of jobs. And it seems like some of the ones that folks are quitting tend to be the ones that have lower meaning.

And there also may be some [00:22:00] degree of, you're not getting the, the happy, pleasurable aspects of your job anymore. Like being able to meet your friends and hang out at lunch and do those types of things that may be made. Something like being a grocery clerk, more enjoyable. Uh, so there is there some kind of like race, like perfect ratio that we're trying to achieve there, you know, cause we want some joy in our work.

It just can't all be meaningful.

**Paul Bloom:** No, that's right. Yeah, I think this brings us back to the title of which is, I think, think we can get both. And if you ask people, how meaningful their life is and how happy they are, the answers actually correlate.

So it's not like you certainly there's a lot of people who have one and not the other, but you can have both, there are people walking around whose lives are both meaningful and happy. And, uh, I think employment is a good case where you could live it out. There's, there's kind of a Zen idea that, um, job could give you meaning and purpose and satisfaction if you're sort of situated.

Right. But the reality of it is that some jobs lend themselves to that. I mean, your job [00:23:00] itself to that. Treating people as this sort of thing is it's easy to find it meaningful. You see a purpose, you see consequences and goals. You're making a difference. And if you have that kind of job, you're gonna be better.

You know, unless you could find something else, but a lot of people have awful jobs that provide them with no meaning and, uh, and very little pleasure. And you could really see that those people might be better off if they could retire or do something else doing exactly that. And the pandemic has, as I think reminded a lot of people of that

**Diana Hill:** Yeah. You know, I'm thinking about, um, substitute teachers. So that's one area where there's just been a mass Exodus. And I know this because my partner, he. He teaches teachers. He has it he's, he's a credentialed teacher, but he went on to get his PhD and teaches teachers. And they called him. He hasn't taught in 20 years, but they started calling him into the classroom just a few weeks ago.

He taught first grade, third grade and high school math. And, uh, because there's no substitute teachers to be had. And if you think about, okay, [00:24:00] that would be traditionally a very meaningful job. You're getting paid really low. But if you really care about kids or you enjoy this work, but during these times, things are more stressful. And maybe either the, , the lack of pleasure associated with them, or even just the questioning, is it worth it? Which I think a lot of are doing

**Paul Bloom:** for the last year and a half, I'd been teaching classes over zoom. And for the first time, this semester, I'm teaching a seminar in person at university of Toronto. And at the beginning I said of these 20 people, I said, look, we're going to see how this goes, but we all had masks on dumb-ass might be uncomfortable.

if we don't like this, we could just go to zoom. And by the end of the class, I'm saying we're never going to go to zoom. It is so nice to be in people's actual physical presence.

would have never known it made such a difference. And you're right. I think a lot of the circumstances that pandemic. Both changing the nature of your job.

And also, like you said, changing the social connections you normally get from. It has made people miserable as taken good jobs and, you know, meaningful, happy [00:25:00] and taken away a lot of their value. And I hopefully when this ends, you know, we'll get people who have the good jobs can get some of those benefits back

**Diana Hill:** so how can you, if you're in the situation that you're in, maybe you're not in a job that you're finding a lot of meaning, but you need to be there financially, or, uh, you know, you don't have a lot of control over that. How can you bring some of these ideas from, um, the sweet spot to maybe shift your perspective or shift your experience of, of your, you know, maybe meaningless, um, job or situation.

**Paul Bloom:** yeah. That's, that's a toughie. I don't, I, I have general avenues I'd suggest, but I don't have any concrete advice. One avenue is this is more difficult, but you could try to find meaning in your. There's a story as probably not true, but there's a story a John F. Kennedy visiting NASA, he talks to a janitor and he asked the janitor.

So what do you do [00:26:00] here? the janitor says, put men on the moon. And you know, you see your job that way. You see, you know, even a job, which is which may others might view as menial. could find a find purpose established goals. Um, and then alternative is sometimes your job. Isn't going to be meaningful and you should try to find meaning.

And other avenues of life. I have of mine who works in a bank and he it fairly dull and not bringing any point. He has friends there. he does, you know, competitive athletics for every other moment of his life when he's not at work. And he finds that very meaningful.

**Diana Hill:** Thing that I thought about in your work is sort of this progression of, um, books that you've written. So you started out writing about pleasure and then you, and then you wrote a bit about empathy. And now, now we're at meaning. And I want to pause on the empathy one because, uh, your book is titled against empathy.

And I think it's that title is a little bit of a, you know, in, in marketing when they say like, when everyone else is zigging, you should zag. So it has a little bit [00:27:00] of that. Like, it'll capture people's attention. You're not a hundred percent against empathy and you're an empathic guy, but I'd love to talk about empathy and how it kind of relates to pleasure and relates to pain.

**Paul Bloom:** sure. I mean, my friends have made fun of me that I've wrote my last two books could be called against empathy and in favor of suffering. And I, um, I think, uh, I'm not, I'm not against empathy in two senses. First thing, some people use their empathy very broadly to mean kindness and compassion and 11. I'm not against that.

That's horrible. And in fact, the subtitle of my book, just to make it very clear people just read the cover is the case for rational. And I'm also not against empathy in a sense of that. I'm interested putting yourself in another person's shoes, feeling what they feel, , in general it's actually, for instance, is a great source of pleasure.

You know, one of the joys of having a kid for instance, to be able to take things you've experienced a thousand times before, like are a hot [00:28:00] fudge sundae or a Hitchcock movie, experience them a new each time. One of the joys of fiction movies, TV is, is, is, empathic connection to fictional characters.

So empathy could be a great source of pleasure. the argument I make in my book is that it's an unreliable moral guide that leave your empathy, guide you to do the right thing, guide you to help people who look like you, who are close to you or friends with you or non-threatening. and.

Our empathic, uh, preferences are very tied to sort of racial preferences and sexist And to be really good people, we have to say, well, empathy is pulling me this way, but I should step back and, you know, use my rationality in my caring to act

**Diana Hill:** There's been a couple of times where empathy has come up on guests that I've interviewed, and one of them being Stephen Porges, who talks about he really warned against empathy as well in terms of his concern was if you are [00:29:00] overly empathic, you start to activate areas in your brain that are associated with pain.

And it would sort of be like, if you're empathic with someone that's grieving, all of a sudden you start grieving so much, the other person has to take care of you, right. That there's a, there's a little bit of distance or perspective that's needed in order to be compassionate. Uh, and then the other part of it, when you, when you use the word compassion, I think there, you need to have some degree of empathy to be compassionate. You need to be able to understand someone and empathize emotionally and maybe cognitively with their pain, but not be consumed by it. And certainly as a therapist, that's, you're kind of always walking that

**Paul Bloom:** I

**Diana Hill:** line.

**Paul Bloom:** And my empathy book is a long chapter on therapy and, and, and looking at exactly these issues and you're right, need as a therapist, what we call cognitive empathy, you have to understand what's going on and you may have had to experience it at some point. You know, if I'm, if I'm seeing something, cause I'm very lonely, it would be odd for me to get help.

Somebody who had never experienced loneliness, they [00:30:00] just couldn't understand. But I really agree with the first point that, that, that you made, which is that, if I am seeing my therapist and I'm very anxious and upset and I'm crying, I'm overwhelmed. don't want her to start crying and get anxious and upset.

You know, I have, you know, Denilson, you know, we have two problems and not one I want, you know, I want her to give me a name, but therapists look and say, so how does that make you feel? I mean, I wanted to take, you know, I want her to understand what's going on with me to care about me or want to make me better.

And, and, but, but if I am anxious, the response I want is calmness. If I'm miserable, I don't want misery jumping back at me and putting aside what the client wants, there's a therapist, him or herself, which is, you know, lot of therapists will burn out very quickly if, um, if they feel to them. And same with other professions, like, uh, like, you know, or, you know, pediatric doctors.

And w you know, if you [00:31:00] feel the pain of other people too intensely, your job becomes a misery.

**Diana Hill:** yeah, instead of compassion, fatigue. It really should be termed empathy, fatigue. Uh,

**Paul Bloom:** right.

**Diana Hill:** the, you know, it's interesting. Cause I think sometimes as a therapist, it's more like a dial that you need to be able to turn. So sometimes I need to turn up my empathy because I'm not relating with the client enough.

Uh, I had a client that had a phobia of fruits and vegetables. It's fascinating. Something happened in preschool with a banana, and it was downhill from that. This is many, many years ago, and I personally am a lover of the fruit and vegetable category. And so I had to get into the space of how much this is impacting her life.

I mean, it's, it's really hard when you have to have a separate refrigerator forever, for all fruits and vegetables, you can't go out to lunch. With other people really made college challenging and all these certain things that we can empathize with. And I would think that sometimes empathy we only empathize with people that are similar than us, but sometimes we need to dial up our empathy with [00:32:00] people that are different than us. And that sort of, you know, I think some of the work around morality and, um, compassion that you talk about as.

**Paul Bloom:** I think that's right. And I think it's, it's a real challenge. Um, and as a challenge, somebody who does what you do faces, which is how do you deal with people who are really have concerns and problems that are just going to alien to you? I imagine part of the way you do it as you're certainly not afraid of fruits and vegetables, but you are afraid of other things.

Everybody's afraid of something. he could say, well, if, if the way I feel towards rats or tight spaces or whatever, imagine I felt. And now it could help you make that sort of empathic connection.

**Diana Hill:** Yeah, absolutely. And sometimes, you know, the opposite can happen as you're a therapist, you don't go into the uncomfortable spaces because you have too much empathy, you know, maybe you've had your own history of a family member with suicide. So you don't ask questions about suicide or you have your own anxiety about, uh, you know, whatever the pandemic.

So you don't talk about anxiety [00:33:00] around the pentatonic. So it can kind of go both ways of how to navigate that.

**Paul Bloom:** that's right. And I think so much of your profession is the training of your profession is adopting the proper sort of but, but empathic and a cognitive empathy sense your clients. And also I think the field weeds out, people who feel too much, um, um, they either burn out are to just not have that effective at what they do.

You know, if you can't, if you can't talk to a client about depression, because it just makes you too sad, you're not going to be able to work with depressed people.

**Diana Hill:** and it comes back to. 'cause I think with a, with a therapist you're choosing to move into uncomfortable places for a reason that you have to have, especially if you're an evidence-based therapist that you're, you're thinking about the functionality of that choice. Like I'm, I'm choosing to talk about, um, you know, like with kids, I'm

choosing to talk about racism with my kids, which is uncomfortable as a white person , this is uncomfortable conversation, but there's a meaning or purpose behind it.

[00:34:00] And I think that that is really at the crux of some of, choice around pain is if it's connected to our values are connected to something bigger than, than we may be more willing to do.

**Paul Bloom:** I think that's right. And I think a lot of what we talked about, we talked about meaningful jobs and how meaningful jobs requires suffering. And if you look at the most meaningful jobs, probably the majority are people in some sort of a or medical perspective where they deal with people who are in trouble, who are in physical trouble or psychological trouble.

And if you're a normal person with normal empathy that just difficult, a difficulty can become meaningful and not pleasurable really in a simple sense, but meaningful because you know, you're doing it to help people and you believe you can help people.

**Diana Hill:** so there's a third dimension of well-being that's being talked about in the literature. And I wanted to ask you about this, what your thoughts are on this. So there's the sort of happiness pleasure. [00:35:00] Meaning purpose. And this third dimension is being described as psychological richness, which has to do with curiosity perspective, change, um, sort of the, uh, having dramatic life experiences, that kind of shift how you see the world.

And although it's related statistically to the other two, it does seem to be sort of a third separate factor that's different than the other two. And I'm, I'm, I'm just curious what your thoughts are about that, because it also seems that things that are uncomfortable would also be some of the things that are, or that are painful, would be some of the things that are also, um, interesting to us.

**Paul Bloom:** I think that's right. Um, this, I think you're referencing a Seminole paper, which came out like a couple of months ago, that explored this psychological richness dimension. And I wish it came out in time for me to discuss it because it really connects in an interesting way. So in my book, I talk about seeking pleasure.

I talk about meaning I talk a bit about morality, how we want to be [00:36:00] good. Um, but you're right. We also want variety and there's a sense in which, uh, another component of human motivation, wanting variety, wanting interesting lives. And I think again, suffering and difficulty in anxiety is. If, if, you know, if when I travel, I never feel self doubt.



I'm never worried about embarrassing myself. I'm never worried about some sort of physical or social danger. I'm probably not traveling to very interesting places. And now, again, there's this balance, um, this sweet spot thing, which is you go, if you want to titrate your risk appropriately, not everybody is going to go the jungle for six months naked, uh, you know, see how that works out.

but, but you should get some, some anxiety and stress, and that's a clue. Not only you're at home, you're having a life purpose, but also when somebody's having a life and it's interesting. Full of variety.[00:37:00]

**Diana Hill:** and it seems that in that paper, I, it OCI in west Westgate, I think is the paper that we're referring referring to. And one of the examples that they give is escape rooms.

**Paul Bloom:** Yes.

**Diana Hill:** folks that, um, are successful at leaving their escape room, feel a sense of greater meaning and grading hat, greater happiness, but folks that when they dial up the challenge of the escape room, the folks that aren't successful, but still continue at it report a greater increase in the psychological richness.

So to that, that challenge of an unsolved puzzle and persisting, you know, Angela Duckworth's grit aspect to life. Uh, so, so the sweet spot is. Finding a balance between all of those and, and, and, and maybe dialing up some of your meaning. If you don't have enough meaning or dialing up some of your pleasure, if you don't have enough pleasure or dialing up some interest, curiosity, variety.

**Paul Bloom:** Right. And I think a similar moral applies in, in other ways as well. Um, uh, uh, sadly passed away a few days ago and he, uh, was the founder. [00:38:00] He wrote the book flow, this crazy best seller. And I read it when I was a teenager and I had this enormous influence on me. And, and he argues that these flow states where you get immersed into a puzzle Sunday, an athletic, uh, performance or a musical performance, or some sort of great conversation sits between in another book he calls between boredom and anxiety.

So if it's too easy, you're just bored. If it's too difficult, you're kind of freaking out. And at a certain point it becomes Versive and we have to find a sort of space in between for, for projects, for travel for relationships. , I think our temptation for a lot of us is to just stick with the boredom.

So, you know, rather than engage in something difficult and challenging, it's a lot easier for me to sit and watch. And, uh, you know, take, take, just live vicariously.

**Diana Hill:** or the loss a sort of least effort that it's the, in some ways we just choose the boredom because it's less our effort. But, , yeah, I was wondering how his death [00:39:00] impacted you because you talk about him a lot in terms of his personal influence on you, you know, in your work.

**Paul Bloom:** Um, you had a great influence, just on my work, um, but on my life in a way. Cause I read his book flow, which I highly recommend. that book along with another book, I talk about a Viktor Frankl's book. Man's search for meaning made me rethink what a good life is.

So one of the things that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi talks about is his work. he says, know, people tend to think a work is bad. Going to your work is bad, unpleasant, difficult, and vacations. Nobody never negotiates for less vacation time. You want to have vacations, he does these studies and it turns out that if your work is rewarding enough, you're actually happier at work or more engaged than on vacation, which could be kind of boring.

And, and I had always, in my own life sometimes got involved in sort of flow activities, like training for a marathon or writing a [00:40:00] book. And I always thought, oh, this is kind of what weird thing I do. And I, and this isn't a real where the real stuff is, this is just stuff I have to do. then I read flow and it was like a, a flip of perspective where I said, maybe this is where life is and, you know, to hot fudge sundaes and Netflix, that's all great, but, but that's, but that's not the most valuable part of things.

So I think the field lost just a great mind. And since he wrote the book flow, he did a lot of other work, expanding on looking at it across countries and teenagers and so on and you know, great scholar.

**Diana Hill:** Yeah. You know, I think that, um, our relationship with work has gotten really confused, right? If you go back to hunter gathering, there was no separation between work and life. It's just. You're engaging in, in chop wood carry water of, of living. And, uh, and we've released in the same way that I think as soon as we put kids into PE class, they start hating movement.

You know, it's like [00:41:00] they they'll hang from trees. They'll go across the bars, they'll hang from your shower curtain. But as soon as you start making them do it in a

certain way and telling them that this is work, it, it sort of almost takes away that intrinsic motivation. And so flow gives us back, you know, that, that sense of wait a minute, this is actually an it's.

It's enjoyable to have that, to have something that's effortful and a little bit interesting. And in that zone of, of growth and, uh, engaging.

**Paul Bloom:** I think that's right. And, and the PE class is a good example. Cause with the PE class with Jim takes away from you, is the. You know, everybody line up, do this, do that. Um, and sometimes for, for physical activities, it's actually fun learn something new and to do drills and to practice and everything.

But you it's different, you, when you choose to do it versus it's what you do from 50 minutes between, you know, chemistry and English. And, um, and, there is a compartmentalization of it. religion is another activity. That's compartmentalized over [00:42:00] history, which is, many cultures, uh, and ours long ago had no separate notion of religion because it wasn't a separate thing.

It was just what you practiced day to day. And now we now, because there are many religions, cause some people like me don't have a religion. it's viewed as a separate category and we compartmentalize. Um, and you would think, I, so here's where it's this personal opinion that some of the hash was personal thing, but here's a personal opinion, which is the way I like to do it.

I just blur my work in my life. I mean, an experimental psychologist. I'm constantly talking about this stuff and talking with friends and thinking of examples and everything. And liked that way of doing things. I noticed other people who prefer to compartmentalization. I know some very productive scholars who work from nine to five, Monday to Friday, really intensely interested in just other things.

But I like the blurring. I like, I like, I like the letting it slip from one end of one party life to another[00:43:00]

**Diana Hill:** yeah. What am I co-host Yael Schonbrun talks about the enrichment of how your work can enrich your life and your life can enrich your work in particular, in the arena of parenting. Right? So, uh, I think that being a psychologist has deeply enriched my parenting practices and vice versa, and then, you know, doing a podcast, enriches my clinical work and vice versa.

So when we start to, you know, we do like to kind of separate things out and there is, I think that. Some degree of importance to do that. Like when you, I don't want to be on my phone when I'm with my child doing work-related stuff, it's good for me to be with my child and with my child. But that doesn't mean my work isn't going to influence how I engage or the choices that I make in that encounter.

**Paul Bloom:** I

**Diana Hill:** So

**Paul Bloom:** And, and again, I think we're speaking from a of view of lucky people whose work is rewarding enough. your work was in some way, degrading or unpleasant or boring or meaningless, you wouldn't want to [00:44:00] do that. You'd want to be done with your work, and then you're just done with it.

And you need to go to parts of life that matter. But if your work is rewarding, that sort of thing that you're talking about, where it, where it connects to your parenting and connects to your relationship, then that's actually just as a terrific thing that makes you late.

**Diana Hill:** how would you like to see this? I mean, obviously we're talking about it at the individual level, but how would you like to see this, uh, sort of a grander scale applied, um, to society as a whole? Like how, how can we use what we're learning from the sweet spot and the pleasures of suffering to actually maybe make some bigger picture adjustments?

**Paul Bloom:** I don't know. I don't, I don't, I have no policy suggestions revolving

around us. Um, I guess what I'd like to do is to some extent changed the culture. Um, people think often think that we're eating us, that people are eating us. I think that's that's if you ask people psychologists and [00:45:00] sometimes lay people, what do people want?

I say people, I root just want to have. And, you know, we do difficult things, but that's because we want to have, you have to, you know, you have to get a job in order to pay for your good time and you have to do that. And, um, I think, um, people are wrong about themselves. I've never met a hedonist. I never met somebody who just cares about pleasure.

Didn't care about doing the right thing. Didn't care about making a difference. So I think I like on a broader scale to persuade people, to have a sort of more sophisticated and I think, um, more generous view of human nature.

**Diana Hill:** so altruism, in terms of like saying, saying that people are generally concerned about others, do you believe that there's sort of some evolutionary benefit to that?

**Paul Bloom:** so my, my day job, my research, most of my research is in moral psychology, like in the development of moral psychology, looking at empathy and compassion and moral judges. And I think the [00:46:00] answer to your question is complicated. I think we've evolved some degree of what, um, what I used to call fellow feeling, compassion, concern for others.

We've evolved a sense of fairness and justice. We've evolved, um, punitive appetite towards people who do bad things. Um, and, is sort of part of an innate morality. And so I think to some extent, yeah, we start off as moral creatures, but I also think that our built in morality is very limited. And one thing, and this connects to what we talked about before regarding empathy is it's very local.

So we're wired up to care for people around us. But I think the idea that people far away lands have lives that value have value just as much as our children and our friends is a very difficult and very modern idea, a modern, moral. So we have a built in morality, but it's, it's limited. And, um, of the great things about culture and progress, human progresses, [00:47:00] we've gotten better at morality.

We now have more impartial, moral systems. We now care more about people who are different from us, but, um, but yeah, I do think we have an innate evolved core and some of the research had been involved with babies and young children. at, look at how that works.

**Diana Hill:** You said you don't feel like you have much, of policy recommendations, but it seems that if we, as a culture and I mean, in particular, the us can get more comfortable with pain and see that we have a choice to enter into pain. There's actually benefits to choosing pain. It would facilitate us to maybe enter into difficult conversations in spaces, in, um, in a way that we can have more compassion.

So for example, if you can, uh, I think like a vegetarian vegan movements, a lot of their movement is like to watch. You know, videos of like slaughtering of animals and then it kind of motivates you to, you know, that they could change in [00:48:00] terms of that.

But if we can do that in the, you know, arena of racism, where we can do that in the arena of, um, hunger, then we may be more willing, not in, not in like overcome by empathy, but maybe more willing to, uh, act towards, towards compassion.

There's someone named Paul Gilbert, who's the founder of compassionate mind foundation. And he started this type of therapy called compassion focused therapy. And one of the things that you do in this approach with compassion COVID therapy is you start with an assessment of fears around compassion and fears of receiving compassion, but also fears of giving compassion. And it's been really interesting to see like, what are people afraid of? And they're often afraid of, if I am compassionate towards another person, it may, um, sort of let them off the hook in some way, or, they won't be responsible for themselves. They won't pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but it does seem that if we are entering into a little bit more of a compassionate space where we can.[00:49:00]

Choose pain. It may shift some of our policy around, um, helping others.

**Paul Bloom:** I think that's fascinating. I never thought of it that way, but I think that that's, that that's right. A lot of moral progress at both the society level and individual level, it involves voluntarily exposing yourself to uncomfortable things. It involves, um, you know, a vegetarian would say, and I'm not a vegetarian, vegetarian would say I'd be a better person.

If I forced myself to consider what happens as a result of factory farming and treatment of animals, um, people of every political perspective I think would benefit from a critic close and careful look at, you know, at the other side and what people on the other side. Uh, and often we choose the very comfortable route of sort of being very pleased with our own prejudices and our own moral perspective and, you know, [00:50:00] following our friends on Twitter and, and making fun of the people we disagree with.

But, um, I think we're better people and live better lives if we force ourselves to do some uncomfortable things.

**Diana Hill:** I think one of the best gifts for me during, uh, the pandemic was having some clients that had a completely different political view

**Paul Bloom:** Yeah.

**Diana Hill:** than me. And it really, really helped my understanding of where they were coming from and that at the. There was really sort of the same core things. Like I care about my family.

I want people to be safe. I, you know, and, and when I was able to see that common humanity, it helped me be able to take their perspective and then be able to work with them more effectively. I'd have conversations with them that if it were a friend, I would just probably shut down and argue against, but because it's my client, I'm deeply listening for what's underneath it.

**Paul Bloom:** Yeah, I think, I think that that's right. I mean, I'm a university professor at Yale university transfer, so I'm in exactly. I have exactly the politics you'd expect [00:51:00] I would have. And, and everybody I know just about, except for some family members has exactly the politics that you'd expect us to have, but there's a danger to this where we can be very quick to demonize and belittle people who are different from us.

So it's not just that. Well, you know, voting for Trump, I would think would be a mistake. I think it's, it's, it's, it's, you know, it's, uh, not taking vaccines is a mistake. One shouldn't jump so quickly to say that to people or monsters or idiots. And I think that is, it is reflex is very easy reflex to say, well, my group is so much in a right without taking the steps to figure out why did people vote for Trump?

Why don't want people want to take vaccines? Um, I think there's an, as it is uncomfortable to say that, you know, if you're, if you're a committed anti-racist, you might say, you know, so, so what's going on. People who are really worried about diversity programs and think they're unfair Newark, maybe we feel we will [00:52:00] be contaminated if we, if we dwell too much on opposite perspectives.

**Diana Hill:** I think maybe there's contamination. Maybe there's just exposing that you don't know.

**Paul Bloom:** yes.

**Diana Hill:** You know, if I stay in there, I kind of have that feeling with you, Paul Bloom. I'm like, oh, I don't know a whole lot that, you know, a lot about. And it's uncomfortable to stay in spaces with people that know a lot about things.

And so I almost feel like the more politically opinionated you become, the more, you know, it's almost the, you know, sort of the research around people that the more, the

more they watch the news, the more polar they become. Right. And so staying in places where you don't know, um, maybe that were maybe a little bit more ambivalent about around some stuff than we, than we think we may agree around some things that's uncomfortable.

Like how do you agree with someone that you're opponent to?

**Paul Bloom:** but I think

**Diana Hill:** Yeah.

**Paul Bloom:** an important, discomfort. I, I made a case for chosen suffering, uh, as a way to sort of improve your life and everything, but you're, raising another dimension, which I don't talk about enough in my book, which has [00:53:00] suffering as a moral position as a way to become a better person as a way to, you know, make the world a better place.

And I think that's.

**Diana Hill:** absolutely. I think that's important.

I think in honor of, um, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, that we should say his name and you can maybe even pronounce his name.

For, we read it a, but we should pronounce his name, but also thinking about, you know, ways in which we can engage in flow in our life. And I'd love for you to just, maybe give some suggestions around how we could engage in more flow.

**Paul Bloom:** So if you read, uh, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, book flow, and his other books it's full of stories of people have flow in their lives. These athletes who spend hours and hours, and these musicians and performers and scholar, scientists, you know, one quick sign is if, if several hours have gone by and you forgot to eat and like lost track of time, then you probably in a flow state.

And when I read this first, I felt envy. [00:54:00] You know, of a man what lives and I don't have that sort of life. I, I don't maintain flow as much. Um, it was another book now, Cal Newport talks about deep work, which kind of captures the same theme. I don't have any, you know, if I knew the trick of it, I would do it myself.



But, um, but but what what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says, um, is that entering state of flow is the difficult part entering is, is taking the steps to push yourself through the effort required to get into something, you know, going to the gym, um, you know, trying to learn a second language or so on. Those are that's the difficult part.

And once you're there, you can kind of get a habit of doing it and. You know, it's, it's, a very separate concern and focus on my book, but I'm kind of really into habits. And, uh, and I'm working on, um, I do writing, working on another book and every, every morning I try to work an hour on it and I try to get into a state of flow.

And I just [00:55:00] purposely started to kind of get really into it until I lose myself. And often I don't because I have email and Twitter and, and, you know, so they distract me and I let them distract me. But when I don't, my life is the best. When I, you know, I'm, I'm the most pleased with myself and most satisfied when I, when I put the extra energy to block out other distractions and enter a flow state. So, um, I should, you know, I, I shouldn't have been telling people to buy my book, but, but if you had to just buy one book by flow,

**Diana Hill:** Certainly I think in terms of work habits, one way to, to start to identify that for yourself is just be sort of a highlighter to that, that feeling state. And what is it that brings you that? And part of that, I also think going back to children and what I work on a lot with my children is not rescuing them from boredom states, letting them stay in boredom long enough, so that then they become creative and, and not putting parameters around.[00:56:00]

Our creativity or our children's creativity, letting it just sort of go and, and see where it takes you. So that's certainly a lot of your work is, is, you know, sort of this creative pursuit of looking at things in different ways.

**Paul Bloom:** I think that's right. I'm far from the first to say this, but we have the terrible curse of now living in a world where it's kind of hard to be bored because, you know, I have my, I have my phone right next to me. Um, my computer and kids can immediately find endless distractions in games and videos and social contact.

Um, and you miss the benefit. And in fact, one of the authors of paper you spoke a bit is Erin Westgate. Who's written very eloquently about boredom and ideas. Boredom's a wonderful motivator. You get bored, you go somewhere. And that's such an important, important skill to have.

**Diana Hill:** The interesting thing that you need sort of an, um, the, the dopamine nation and Lembke's work. I don't know if you've read that or heard her speak. She's great. But what she also talks about is that if we're constantly in this pursuit, we're going to pursuit a pleasure. Our dopamine [00:57:00] is going to drop off and we're just going to feel more dissatisfied.

So if we can stay in this place of dissatisfaction a little bit longer, then maybe we could have the dopamine hit of pleasure. I mean, that, that sort of moment, when you break through the boredom and you get into the state of flow is incredibly satisfying.

So

**Paul Bloom:** true. I think that's true at, at a, at an intellectual level, even at the most basic level. Um, if you eat whenever you're decide to split it. BA, you know, you'll always be kind of satisfied, but, but maybe going for a while without eating and then having a nice meal, there was a pleasure to them.

There's a pleasure to, to, um, to the enacting of willpower and holding off on things. And as a pleasure, that's harder and harder to find in our modern world. We have to sort of establish it ourselves because often things come easy to us.

**Diana Hill:** Well, thank you, Dr. Bloom. I appreciate having you on the show and, um, folks that want to check out your books. You have many of them, the sweet spot is one of molding to everything in our show notes. And I, I guess the last thing I want to say is you're a [00:58:00] fan of podcasts. Do you have any recommendations for our listeners?

**Paul Bloom:** oh, um, oh my God. Um, my friends are gonna be so angry at me cause I'm going to exclude some of them, but, uh, I won't mention F some famous friends to do this, but, uh, but very bad wizards is a wonderful podcast, um, of a psychologist and a philosopher. It's incredibly profane. Very. Um, and then I would also talk for psychology and two psychologists four beers, um, which is, uh, where they talk about issues in the field and, and social issues and so on.

And those are two I'd recommend right from the get-go.

**Diana Hill:** That's great. Thank you. Always looking for anyone to listen to. Okay. Take care.

**Paul Bloom:** That was great. thank you for listening to psychologists off the clock. If you enjoy our podcast, you can help us out by leaving a review or contributing on Patreon.

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