

## Happier with Tal Ben-Shahar

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** [00:00:00]initially when, when I came to college, I was a computer science major. I switched to philosophy and psychology. Just so that I could understand why am I not happy? And more importantly, how can I become happier? And, um, you know, I studied that also went back to graduate school, and continue to explore what to me was the most important question, you know, the question of happiness.

**Yael Schonbrun:** That was Tal Ben. Shakara on psychologist off the clock.

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.

I'm Dr. Debbie Sorenson, practicing in mile high Denver, Colorado, and coauthor of act daily journal.

I'm Dr. Diana Hill coauthor with Debbie on act daily journal and practicing in seaside, Santa Barbara, California.

[00:01:00] From coast to coast, am doctor Yael Schonbrun, a Boston based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown university.

And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill STalard author of be mighty and the big book of act metaphors

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**Diana Hill:** We're so happy to be partnered with Praxis, continuing education here at psychologists off the clock, they offer continuing education for promoting lasting change with evidence-based training.

And they're the premier provider in continuing education for clinical professionals. Some of their ongoing on demand. Anytime classes include act immersion with Steve Hayes act in practice, and also the DNA VI model, which is with Louis Hayes who works with adolescents and is fantastic.

**Debbie Sorensen:** yes, and we have big news. We Diana and Debbie here are offering a Praxis training. It's a two hour workshop on Wednesday, April 28th. And you can sign up [00:02:00] best of all, it's free and anyone can join. It's not limited to therapists. And what we're going to do is talk about some of the concepts from our book that we have coming out in may and offer you some practices that you can use from acceptance and commitment therapy to thrive in your own life.

So we're really excited to be offering that. You should check it out and we hope you can join us.

**Diana Hill:** So go to our website off the clock. psych.com to get a promotion code on live events through practice.

**Yael Schonbrun:** This is Yael here with Debbie to introduce an episode with happiness guru Tal Ben Shahar. And I got connected to talk through Debbie who, who knew him from a past life.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, it was really fun for me to listen to this because we were we're old friends. I went to graduate school with tall and we were in the same cohort in grad school, in the psychology department at Harvard. So listening to this really brought back a lot of fond memories. So it was, it was really great to have him on.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, Debbie, I think you told me that you sort of had maybe lost track of him and then saw him go on [00:03:00] the daily show with Jon Stewart. Oh, Oh,

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yes, my jaw dropped. I was like, I knew he had a book out, but when I saw him on the daily show, just randomly, I was like, Oh my gosh, he's made it big. He's on the daily show. You know, which to me is like, as big as it comes.

**Yael Schonbrun:** as it gets.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Well, happiness is one of these topics that I think we're always kind of talking about, but we often don't talk directly about, so it felt very important to me to have an episode where we really explored what happiness means, how psychology researchers think about happiness.

So we can think about happiness in terms of pleasure. So things that feel good, emotions that feel good, you know, the experiences that we have of like eating something delicious or buying something new, those sort of feelings of pleasure and gratification.

But another way that positive psychology research researchers define happiness is. Meaning of doing something that's meaningful to you. So parenting is very meaningful, but it doesn't necessarily feel pleasurable all the time, but it is another [00:04:00] form of happiness, you know, the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

And when we think about both the pleasure and the meaning and happy lives, It's really the balance between the two. And the wonderful thing about Tolle's work is that he offers a whole host of practices that people can use to build both meaning and pleasure, and really to be thinking about the balance between the two.

So I thought Debbie and I could share some of our happiness hacks and practices that we use, to build happiness in our busy lives.

**Debbie Sorensen:** you know, when you asked me this question, I think what I realized is that I really have a high level of the meaningful kind of happiness in my life right now. You know, I think my work is feeling really meaningful lately and. You know, relationships including being a parent and that kind of thing. And honestly, with the pandemic and I've been very busy.

I have, I feel like I'm a little bit lower on the pleasure kind of happiness. And actually this episode in this [00:05:00] conversation is making me realize that I'm not carving that out enough. I actually save it up. Like, you know, we went to a cabin up in the mountains. Several weeks ago, just to have a, you know, a rare pandemic change of scene.

And that felt really great. But in terms of day to day, I don't think I'm really carving out very much of that right now. So I'm going to work on that, but, but meaning wise, I do feel like my daily life has a lot of meaning. How about you? Do you have, maybe you can help me. What are you doing?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Oh, I've been very intentional about this because the pandemic has been so hard and I can feel myself get really depleted. And in order to counteract that depletion I've been very intentional because I, I. Become not the kind of parent that I want to be, not the partner that I want to be and not the therapist that I want to be when I feel that depleted.

So the kinds of things that I do are, um, I work out regularly. I wake up early to go for runs. And when I'm on my run, I either listen to music that I really like or an audio book that I really [00:06:00] enjoy. And then to really savor meaningful experiences. one of the practices that I've been pretty diligent about is when I'm reading stories with my youngest, my four-year-old at night, we do, um, breaths of love and he gets to pick how many, so it varies between three and 10.

And we do breaths of love where we just sit quietly and breathe together and feel the connection between the two of us. And it's one of the moments that I'm most looking forward to in my day. So those are the kinds of things that I do.

**Debbie Sorensen:** now that you mentioned that I'm reading Harry Potter with my youngest kiddo and we've been. On this massive star [00:07:00] Wars kick, which I love. And so there are, maybe I'm selling myself short here because those moments really are fun and special. And it's nice. Cause you're actually focused on, on something.

You're not trying to multitask, trying to sneak in a little work. Thank you for reminding me of that.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And actually that's one of the things that I've realized. Um, as I've gotten really deep into the happiness literature is that sometimes it's really about just paying attention to what we're already doing, slowing down enough to savor the moments of pleasure and of meaning because they're, they tend to be all around us.

We're just preoccupied and our minds are wandering everywhere. So it's sometimes really just about recognizing where we are and being more present within it.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I think that's so true. We talk about making room for the full range of human emotions. And sometimes when we say that, I think we're talking about the less pleasant emotions, but that can also mean savoring the positive pleasant ones when they come [00:08:00] along. Sometimes they're few and far between, but if we can savor them and enjoy them and make more room for them, that's great.

And before we get right into towels wisdom, we just want to let you all know that psychologist off the clock is doing another book giveaway. This one for Tal's book called choose the life you want the mindful way to happiness. So head over to our Instagram account for details on how to enter a drawing for a free copy of this book

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm here with Tal Ben-Shahar, I teacher and writer whose work bridges Eastern and Western traditions, ancient wisdom and modern technology science and art talk created the most popular course at Harvard on the topic of positive psychology. And he's written several best-selling books, including happier.

Tal founded potential life, a company providing leadership program steeped in the science of behavioral change. And the happiness studies Academy is a certified yoga instructor. And most importantly of all his very many accolades, he's a former classmate of our co-host Debbie Sorenson.

So welcome, Tal. I'm so [00:09:00] honored to have you on the show.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Great to be here. Yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** you have done. An amazing job of bringing what has been done in positive psychology out into the non-academic world. I wanted to take advantage of your ability to translate a lot of those academic findings.

Here. So to start off with, we mostly think of psychology as a field that attempts to reduce the negative impact of mental health problems, like depression, anxiety, psychosis, , and damaging life experiences like painful relationships, but there's this newer discipline in psychology that you've been instrumental in sharing.

So I'm hoping that you can start us off by explaining how do psychologists define what happiness is.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Yeah. So, you know, there, there are many definitions, uh, to happiness and, uh, in many ways people have given up on trying to define it and they say, well, it's a little bit like beauty, you know, when you see it. Um, but, um, I think it is important to define happiness because, uh, when we [00:10:00] define it, we know what we're pursuing, which of course increases the likelihood of, uh, of attaining it.

So my definition of happiness comprises five elements. The five elements are spiritual wellbeing, physical wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing, relational, and finally emotional wellbeing. These five elements also, uh, put together. They spell the acronym, Spire, spiritual, physical, intellectual, relational, and emotional.

Now each one of them is important and the, um, The, the more important thing is that they are tied together as a system, meaning we don't need to do it all. We can enter the system through any or all of these five elements. In other words, I can work on my spiritual wellbeing and that will have an impact on my happiness.

In general, I can work on my intellectual or relational [00:11:00] wellbeing and that will have a holistic impact.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, so there's lots of different ways to create more happiness. . One thing that I think people often get caught on though, is that happiness. We often define it in Western societies as like feelings of pleasure.

And as you're sort of saying this, this, you know, spiritual, physical, emotional, Relational, um, that isn't necessarily like the feel good, like the feel-good that you get when you buy something new or eat something delicious. And so I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the difference between the kinds of wellbeing that you're referring to and experiences of pleasure.

Are they the same? Are they different? And why does that difference? Matter if there is a difference?

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** so pleasure certainly is an important part of a, of a happy life, but it's only a part, um, specifically. No. When, when I talk about the five spar elements, emotional wellbeing is, is a part of it. [00:12:00] But even within emotional wellbeing, when we're talking about pleasurable emotions, like joy and fun and excitement, they are only part of it because, uh, under emotional wellbeing, it's also important to learn, to deal with painful emotions. You know, we're, we're, we all. Uh, experience, uh, emotions of anxiety or sadness or anger or, or, um, or envy or, um, or a frustration. These are natural human emotions and, um, discarding them is, um, is always to our detriment because what happens when I reject painful emotions, paradoxically, they intensify. And when I embrace them as part of life, as part of a happy life, when I embraced these painful emotions, they don't overstay their welcome, you know, yell.

There's a beautiful, uh, poem written, uh, 800 years ago or so by Rumi called the guest house. [00:13:00] And in the guest house, Rumi talks about. Our need to embrace, accept that invite in any and all emotions, again, the pleasurable as well as the painful ones and when we do so, that's when we learn peaceful coexistence, uh, rather than, um, um, going into a conflict with these emotions and then they ultimately, uh, intensifying growth stronger.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Right. I mean, and there's something so paradoxical about human, emotional life. And I think that you just captured it well in that Rumi poem captures it so beautifully that when we make room for all the experiences, we can actually have more of the good ones, even though it feels kind of counter-intuitive on the face of it that, you know, we think if we just reduce negative mood, we'll feel happier.

But what you're saying is actually the opposite is true.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Yeah. The reason for that is that there are, um, th there's one, uh, [00:14:00] emotional pipeline, all our emotions flow through that one pipeline. If I reject painful emotions. In other words, you find blank. Um, painful emotions from flowing freely through that pipeline. I'm inadvertently also blocking the pleasurable emotions.

So if I'm blocking envy, I'm also preventing myself from experiencing love. If I, if I stop anxiety, then, uh, excitement is going to be shortchanged. If, uh, I don't allow myself to experience sorrow than joy. Um, isn't going to enter that pipeline either in the words of a

golden Mayer who was Israeli prime minister back in the 1970s, those who cannot weep with their whole heart cannot laugh either two sides of the same coin.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And what I have loved about your writing is that you share a lot of your personal experiences in a very authentic way, in terms [00:15:00] of how it brought you to some of these realizations. Like your, you talk about yourself as a young man who was incredibly ambitious. And.

That this kind of pursuit of excellence and sort of really being out there and, always perfecting your skillset was this, you know, in a way, a pursuit of happiness and yet you couldn't quite access it. So I wonder if you can talk a little bit about what you learned from your life experiences and how that really got you into this.

, deep dive into what it means to be happy. And some of the counterintuitive findings that really we, we really experience as human beings.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Yeah. You know, like most people are raised in the West. Um, B mental schema. The belief that I internalized was that the path to happiness, um, has to go through success. Uh, so if you, uh, if you succeed, whether it's in school initially, uh, college in, uh, at work, [00:16:00] um, uh, professionally, then, then you'll be, be happy.

And, um, in many ways I checked the right boxes, you know, I did what was, what was required of me now. I did well in school. I was, uh, it was, uh, I was, uh, I was an athlete. Um, I got a good job, you know, I made a nice income night. I checked all the boxes and yet I was, uh, extremely unhappy. And, um, I must say it didn't, it didn't make sense to me at the time.

And, um, you know, I first thought about it when I won my first, uh, Uh, is writing national championship. I was, uh, you know, 16. Um, I was the youngest that effort to win it. And I thought, okay, now I'm all set. I'm going to be happy for the rest of my life. And I was happy for about four hours. And, you know, when I got into Harvard, I thought, okay, now I'll be happy.

And yeah, I was happy for longer than four hours, but not much [00:17:00] longer than that. Um, and then I got a great summer internship and I was doing well academically. And again, these were all short lived spikes in my wellbeing. And at some point I decided that I have to find out, you know, what, what's going on here.

And then initially when, when I came to college, I was a computer science major. I switched to philosophy and psychology. Uh, just so that I could understand why am I not happy? And more importantly, how can I become happier? And, um, you know, I studied that also went back to graduate school, um, and, um, and continue to explore what, what, what to me was the most important question, you know, the question of happiness.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Yeah. Was there like a moment of insight or was it more that you had small lessons along the way?

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** So both.

Yeah. So, so yes. Um, And more, in other words, there were pivotal [00:18:00] moments, but, but more importantly, it was a gradual change. One of the pivotal moments were when I realized the real relationship between success and happiness, that while success doesn't lead to happiness, more happiness does lead to more success.

In other words, we increase levels of well-being. We become more creative, more productive, more engaged, our relationships improve. We become physically healthier. So I realized that I and millions, if not billions of people around the world that have the, uh, success, happiness, uh, causative relationship upside down.

Success doesn't lead to happiness, happiness leads to success. So that, that, that was an aha moment. Another aha moment was around painful emotions because, um, for a long time I thought that, okay, once I become a real expert in the science of happiness, then I will be exempt from these painful emotions.

And, and I realized that, um, [00:19:00] There are only two kinds of people who do not experience painful emotions. They are the psychopaths and the dead. So, um, so, you know,

**Yael Schonbrun:** You didn't want to be either of those.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** I don't want to be exactly and, you know, and I, and I, and I make that very clear to my students when, when, when they communicate explicitly or implicitly, that they hope to, uh, to, to get past all these, uh, um, Painful emotions, unpleasant emotions. Um, so these were some of the aha moments, but generally the, um, the trajectory of becoming happier is, uh, is, is gradual. Yeah. There are ups and downs throughout life. That's inevitable, but the question is always, how can I raise my base level, my average level of wellbeing and how can I do it by 1%, 3%. Um, and, and do it consistently over time.

You know, how that [00:20:00] relates to, uh, a question that many people ask me and they said, okay, now 30 years, hence, you know, since you started on this journey, are you finally happy? Because they know that I started it, you know, because, because of my unhappiness and my answer to that is, I don't know, Why? Because I don't think there is a point before which one is unhappy after which one is happy.

It's not a binary zero one rather. It's a continuum. Yes. I'm a lot happier than I was 30 years ago. Uh, I certainly hope that five years from now, I'll be happier than I am today. It's a lifelong journey and a journey that ends when life ends.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Yeah, it reminds me too. And when I was reading your books, it made me think of a conversation that I had with kg Del Antonio, who wrote a book, how to be a happier parent. And she says, when people ask me, how do I be a happy parent? She says, it's not happy. It's happy year. And your book is very aptly titled happy year.

Right? It's not happy because we don't get to be happy all the time. [00:21:00] Because as you started off saying, The emotions we have to experience the gamut of them right. In a life. We feel all of them. And if we allow ourselves to feel all of them, we'll actually have more access to the happiness too. And I think that's such an important message.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Yes, it's a very important message. And it's an important message for, uh, for everyone, including positive psychologists or including psychologists in general, you know, it, it reminds me, um, Um, you know, so I teach a certificate program, which is a year long and, uh, in one of the programs, uh, towards the end of the year, we had a retreat and during the retreat, the, uh, one of the participants, you know, put her a hand up, you know, we had a, a Q and a session.

And, um, and, uh, you know, there were a, of to 200 plus people in the room and she was sitting right in front. And, and, and I said to her, yes. And she said, uh, you know, [00:22:00] Tal, sometimes I feel like, uh, um, I'm a fraud now, just a bit of background about her. She's a very, very successful clinical psychologist. Um, you know, numerous patients, you know, she's studied the field, she's written about it.

Um, Um, and she, she, she tells me that she tells that the audience, you know, 200 plus of us, you know, sometimes I feel like I'm a fraud and you know, the imposter syndrome. And I say to her why, and she said, because, you know, I talked to them about happiness, you know, I'm, uh, I have a PhD in psychology. I'm becoming more and more of an expert in positive psychology, the science of happiness, and yet, and yet sometimes I go into these dark places. And what she means is that, you know, she, she, she, she becomes, um, you know, frustrated or depressed or anxious. And if she goes into these dark places and you know, how can I talk to them about, you know, happiness and, and the better life. [00:23:00] When I go into these dark places she asks and she's crying. And I asked her at that point, I said to her, do you mind if I ask a question to the rest of the group? And she said, sure, And I asked them the following. I said to them, put your hand up. If over the last three months you have been to one of those dark places. And then I ask her to turn around and she turns around and she, you know, she begins to smile because every hand was up and she looks back at me and I say, we all go through it.

I do too. And you know, my hand is up as well.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** And then now you're looking into her eyes and suddenly I noticed something, I noticed something. Um, and I say to her, you don't believe me, do you meaning you don't believe me that I to go these dark places?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** And she says, no, I don't. And the thing, this was a real aha moment [00:24:00] for me, because I realized then that, you know, Pete, I talk about the permission to be human all the time.

I talk about it, you know, in my first class of a year long. course because it's so important and so fundamental. And yet she, and I'm sure many others don't believe me. Why? Because they think, okay, I'm experiencing now. It's difficult. It's unpleasant. But when I become a real expert, you know, like my teacher or like others,

**Yael Schonbrun:** the guy who wrote the best-selling book, then I won't feel that way. Yeah.



**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Yeah, well, that's not true. And I told her, look, I promise you I'm not a psychopath and I'm alive. Look, I'm moving here. Um, and yet, and yet it's very difficult for people and myself to, to truly accept, truly embrace painful emotions as, as natural, just as we do accept and embrace the law of gravity, both are part of nature indispensable.

Real and they're here to stay, [00:25:00]

**Diana Hill:** we've had a number of guests on the show that we've been inspired by and that are offering you our listeners discounts on their programs if you go to our website [offtheclockpsych.com](http://offtheclockpsych.com) you'll be able to find coupon codes for the programs of dr Judson brewer dr Rick Hanson and Jen Lumenlun So go check it out at [offtheclockpsych.com](http://offtheclockpsych.com) and start learning today

**Yael Schonbrun:** . So let me ask you a question as a father. I know that you have three kids. How do you teach your kids? As, as an expert, but also as a parent to embrace and make room for those uncomfortable emotions. Because as much as we're wired to have them, we're also wired to kind of not want to keep them.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** right. Well, first and foremost by example. And let me give you an example. So, um, you know, we're going through this, um, very difficult period in, I I'd say in human history and, you know, we're, [00:26:00] we're living it when, you know, with a lockdown and, and, and, and stress and anxiety probably at an all time high depression levels on the rise.

Um, you know, w we're at home and we, you know, the kids are not going to school. So we're together all the time. And, uh, just a few days ago we had, um, we decided to, you know, have a dinner together and after dinner to watch a movie, , the Hobbit together, and, you know, everyone was looking forward to it and comes 7:00 PM. And I'm, I'm really just feeling down, uh, not, not, not feeling well. I'm feeling frustration and, and anxious and, and, and, and sad. So I tell my kids, look, that is not doing well. And I'm just really feeling down and I need some alone time. I need some time to recover. Um, and I went up to my room and, you know, wrote in my journal shed.

A few tears went into bed with, um, with a [00:27:00] book, fell asleep earlier than I usually do and woke up the next morning, not feeling great, but, but feeling better. And, um, there were two important things for me in that experience. One is I gave myself the permission to be human, uh, you know, express my emotions, whether to them weathering writing.

Um, whether it's through tears and second, no less important. I also told them that it's, that I'm giving myself the permission to be human and giving them the permission to be human, because, you know, they know what I do, you know, they know that, you know, that I do happiness. Uh, and yet I'm also feeling down at times and that it's as a Demi Lovato said in one of her songs that it's okay not to be okay.

**Yael Schonbrun:** There's actually a great book on grief called it's. Okay. Not to be okay. That I, I also really love, so I love that idea that it is okay. Not to be okay in the more we [00:28:00] can again, make room for it. The more it kind of comes, but it also is allowed to pass more easily. It doesn't quite get as sticky. When one thing that you write a lot about that, I also want to.

Dive into is this idea of choice that we have a choice in how we respond to the uncomfortable things. And I think you gave a really nice example of like, you know, part of the choice is to make room for it, to treat it as normal and human and not to vilify ourselves or pathologize ourselves. But I'm curious what you would say to the many people that.

Say, you know, there are so many things I don't have a choice over that are just beyond difficult and that I, you know, I don't really have that much flexibility in how I respond to things like health issues. I mean, things like the pandemic are, is a good example, but also challenges that we have with our kids, our work hours, how our boss treats us.

So how do you explain to folks that, um, really sort of push against this idea that there is choice in how we respond? [00:29:00] Because they're manifest experiences that there really isn't a lot of option in what to do with the difficult things we are confronted with in life.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Yeah. You know, um, here we are. I have to go to the, uh, um, to the AA, a creed to the serenity prayer, which is a, you know, God grant me the serenity to accept the things. I cannot change courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference. Well, there are things in our life that we have a choice over, and there are things that are not up to us.

And, uh, we need to, to, to learn to discern between these two and, um, and then make the choices that we do have where we do have them. Now, the thing about choices is that quite literally, at every moment in our life, we have a choice. But here is the thing about choices that we mostly failed to exercise them.

Why? Because most of the choices that we have in life are what I've come to call rhetorical. Choices, you know, what are rhetorical choices? It's like a rhetorical [00:31:00] question. You know, if, uh, when, when we ask our kids, you know, do you want to, you know, daddy to be upset? It's a rhetorical question of, of course, you know, no child would say yes, please.

Um, and in the same way, we have rhetorical choices in life. For instance, if I ask you your L um, do you want to take the. Good things in your life for granted, or do you want to appreciate the good things in your life? I mean, you and everyone in the world would, of course, of course I want to preach. I don't want to take for granted the people in my life and the people I love or the things that I have you, I want to appreciate them.

And yet, and yet most people, most of the time take the good in their life for granted. So we have a rhetorical choice and yet we failed to choose appropriately. We failed to choose in the way that would [00:32:00] best serve us and others. Similar, you know, here is another, uh, uh, rhetorical choice, you know, do you want to, um, you know, sit down or stand with your shoulder?

Stooped or do you want to stand up straight? Well, you know, everyone will say, yeah, of course I'm going to stand up straight because we know what that communicates. And yet, so many people, so much of the time, our stoop over. So we have rhetorical choices throughout our life. And the question is, how do we make them, how do we choose appropriately?

And the answer is, and this, this is where, um, um, this is where the whole. Science of choice becomes really important and relevant. We have to create reminders in our lives to help us choose more wisely. The reminders can come in the form of rituals. For example, I have a ritual every night before going to bed, I think about, and imagine the things for which I'm [00:33:00] grateful.

I wake up every morning. It's a ritual. And I think about what are the things that I'm looking forward to during the day? You know, I have rituals around exercise, cause we all know that exercise is important and yet not enough people are exercising consistently. So we need reminders around, around that.

Um, we need, um, so other forms of reminders can be using our smartphone. You know, even remind you of such as, you know, be kind, be nice. Of course, we all want to be nice and kind, um, rather than harsh and impatient, we sometimes need to be reminded of it, especially when we're under a time pressure. So why not create a reminder that we read every morning about kindness or that, you know, flashes on our screen every once in a while, or have, you know, uh, a picture on our wall.

We, you know, which I do have with people who remind us. To be kind or generous or, or [00:34:00] playful or whatever it is, whatever rhetorical choice it is that we want to make more often.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, I loved your example in the book too, that you sometimes put a bracelet around your wrist as a reminder. And I was just curious, are you wearing a bracelet to remind you of anything? Are you, are you sort of focusing on building a habit at this point?

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Yeah, no, at this point I'm not wearing a bracelet, even though I did wear it until, uh, two and a half, three, three weeks ago. And it's always, well, it's not always something different, but, but it's, it's um, around things that I'm working on. At a particular time. So for instance, the, you know, it could be about being, you know, more patient or, or, or kind it could be around being more present.

If I feel like I'm a distracted, uh, it could be about, uh, uh, providing positive feedback, you know, in, in, in the workplace. Um, whatever it is, but wearing a bracelet is, um, is one of the, uh, key reminders

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. So like embedding these sort of cues into your [00:35:00] environment helps you to. Really sustained some of those practices that are happiness building. All right. So on that front, I actually have another question that's related to some of the work that I do on working Parenthood. So I'm working on a book that is sort of a guide for building more happiness in working parent life.

And one of the challenges is of course, and I think this is not just working parents, but people that have a number of demanding roles, whatever they may be is finding the time and the energy. And so these rhetorical questions are really. Easy to sort of default to then non-action because we're already feeling so overwhelmed with all of the demands of life.

So what do you tell people who truly feel they don't have a spare minute or a spare ounce of energy to build greater practices by. But using these kinds of cues to remind them to do something more. In other words, , there's always a great irony when you counsel a patient or a client to create a few minutes to just pause.

And they say, I just don't have those minutes to meditate or to even take a breath. There's too [00:36:00] many things. And really, if you tell me to do one more thing, it's just one more thing. I'm going to feel guilty that I'm not doing. And so. You sort of get to this stuck point in building happiness with a lot of people who are feeling that level of overwhelm, which is in all honesty, many of us.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Yeah, look, um, unfortunately, you know, we have, uh, 24 hours in a day, seven days a week and that's, uh, that's immutable. Um, and the question is how, how do we fit in more? And I think a more important question is, uh, um, how do we do less? You know, in our modern world, we have the, uh, the luxury of choice and, uh, you know, Barry Schwartz talks about it in his book and Amy's know lectures on the tyranny of choice, where we have so many choices and it's a wonderful thing on the one hand.

But on the other hand, it also, um, it also hurts us, um, because, [00:37:00] because it means that we have to say no more often, um, So, you know, I faced the, the, the very challenge that you're describing, first of all, I, I still do, but I remember it became real, pronounced for me when our first child was born David and, , until, until the time he was born, I was.

Pretty good. Pretty. Okay. In terms of, uh, time management, meaning, you know, I was working, uh, many hours a day, you know, it was also, uh, you know, spending a lot of time with my initially girlfriend. Then, uh, my wife, Talmy, I, we were seeing friends, you know, we were, we were living the life and then Sunday comes this little one who, um, I want to dedicate so much time, uh, time to, I want to, you know, spend time with, but then there is, you know, when I'm at work, I'm feeling.

Guilt over not being with him. And when I'm with him, you know, I know that I'm not getting enough work done or spending enough time with my partner or we're not seeing friends. And it became a whole mess, [00:38:00] um, of, um, you know, maybe the dominant emotion being a, you know, guilt and frustration. Um, and, um, and I decided to sit down and.

And, and write about it. You know, I often when, when, when I face issues, like, you know, I write in my journal and I wrote about it and I said, okay, so what do I want to do in my life? And I made a list of, you know, you know, the time I want to spend with my friends in the time I want to spend with my wife at the time I want to spend with David.

And then the time I want to spend working and exercising. And when I edit it all up, it, um, it added to, you know, over 48 hours in a day, you know, sleep is important too, you know, it just, it just didn't work out. It just didn't, it didn't, it didn't make

**Yael Schonbrun:** the math did not work.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** it did not work and, you know, and, and I studied computer science, you know, I can do math,

**Yael Schonbrun:** can do simple arithmetic.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** I couldn't make that equation work, whatever.

I try, no matter the code that I wrote. And, um, so, [00:39:00] so what I did then is I created a, you know, a second. List next to the list. The first list I called it, my, you know, my perfect list. Um, the second list I called my optimal list now optimal means best given the, um, constraints of reality. That's the definition of optimal best given the constraints of reality.

so the one was, you know, perfectly the other was optimal or the one was ideal. The other was good enough. And in the good enough, uh, list, I wrote all the things that I want to do, but what would be good enough? Yeah. So, you know, in a perfect world, I would do yoga two hours a day, plus exercise, you know, two minutes, that's in a perfect world in a good enough world.

You know, I'd work out three times a week, you know, 40 minutes it's each time and then do yoga three times a week. Good enough. Seeing my friends, you know, my, my wife and I, we love hanging out with, with, with friends, with family, [00:40:00] we would do just about every day, perfect world in a good enough optimal world.

You know, we would see our friends, you know, religiously once a week. And if we have more time, you know, that's that, that's great. And on and on with work, ideally I would work 14 hours a day. I love my work. But, you know, then I wouldn't get to see friends, family, or, or, you know, anyone. So, you know, what's good enough.

Well, good enough is between six to eight hours a day and on and on for each, uh, you know, Tal with my kid time with my wife. Um, and once I wrote them down, once it was, you know, you know, black on white, it became clear to me what kind of life I could live. It became very clear that I couldn't live the perfect life.

But it also became clear that I could live the optimal life or a good enough life in good enough really is good enough. And this is something again, you know, you speaking earlier about the aha moments, [00:41:00] you know, it sounds trivial, you know, a totology, but embracing and accepting the fact that good enough is good enough, um, is, um, is important, but to create this good enough list.

We have to prioritize means, meaning we have to say no

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yes.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** many things, which is easier said than done.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. The saying no is hard. And I also, as I was reading, so in your book, being happy to talk a lot about this perfectionist versus optimist, separation and that. Really does harken back to Barry Schwartz, his work on the paradox of choice with people who want to be maximizers in their choice versus satisfies.

But this is more building a happier life. So you're sort of taking this idea of. Figuring out, like what for you is a good enough life, given your constraints and focusing on that versus some fantasy idea [00:42:00] because you know, real life is lived when we can fantasize all we want, but if it's impossible to bring it into reality, then we're going to feel constantly frustrated.

So I love some of those exercises of actually putting pen to paper and really thinking through what is most important to you. And very Schwartz is, you know, research really mimics what you're talking about, which is that even though, so maximizers who try to get the perfect outcome versus satisfies, who are aiming for the good enough.

And that satisfies theirs are much happier and do better over time, even in their performance. And that's the irony. And you talk about that too, and I sort of am curious what your thoughts are on sort of the performance side of things.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Right. So, you know, the, the, the misconception that many people have about giving up perfectionism is that it means giving up ambition or hard work and so forth. But, you know, when we talk about perfectionism, it's important to break down this concept into its different elements and the different elements of perfectionism are that there is a what [00:43:00] psychologists call maladaptive perfectionism as well as adaptive.

Perfectionism. So maladaptive perfectionism is an obsession with, um, um, with perfect success or with failure. , it's the rejection of any painful emotions because that's a deviation from the straight and narrow. It's an inability to appreciate because when you appreciate, you know, you're in danger of, uh, of stagnation. So this is the unhealthy, the maladaptive part of a perfectionism. The healthy parts of perfectionism is, are things like, uh, you know, being ambitious, working hard. Um, um, it's, uh, it's about, uh, being responsible. These are the, you know, the, the, this is the upside of perfectionism and you can. Once you break down perfectionism, you can give up on the maladaptive and, uh, and embrace the adaptive.

We can still be hard workers. We can still be ambitious. We can still [00:44:00] be very responsible without being perfectionist, without being obsessed with a fear of failure, without rejecting any and all painful emotions while appreciating, um, what we have embracing the good. So, and when we do that, then. Our hard work is much more sustainable when we do that, we don't just enjoy the journey more.

We also enjoy a better outcome. Why? Because when we eat, when we increase levels of wellbeing, as I mentioned earlier, we're more creative, more productive, more engaged, um, and therefore in the longterm perform better.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And it sort of hearkens back to the kind of therapy that I, and all of my cohort colleagues do, which is acceptance and commitment therapy. And it really is always about coming back to your values because even if you're tired or you're angry or you're even depressed. If you can connect into what matters to you, what you want to stand for, [00:45:00] it helps you sort of push through the discomfort or sort of, you know, the dark periods as you were saying.

Um, and you know, when you think about grit in that persistence, it's the, the equation for grit is passion plus persistence. And if you care very deeply, you're more likely to persist. And that is what leads to a better outcome. So I think that there's, just so much science supporting that.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** yes. And, and, you know, going back to acceptance and commitment therapy, you know, I'm, I'm not a therapist, uh, as you know, but if I were a therapist, this is what I would be practicing. And the reason is that, uh, as I always, you know, Tell my students, you know, what we do matters more than what we feel because, uh, you know, I can feel, you know, sadness, frustration, hatred, uh, envy, um, disappointment, anxiety, you know, these are emotions that we all feel at times.

However, that doesn't mean [00:46:00] that I need to act malevolently or that I need to give up. Um, for instance, you know, courage, what is courage? Courage is not about not having fear. Courage is about having fear and going ahead anyway, and paradoxically it's when we reject the fear that the fear is more likely to control us.

It's when we embrace the fear that we're more likely to have the choice of acting courageously or however we choose to act. So it's the action that matters more when it comes to emotions, we simply accept them. Um, you know, I, I compare emotions to the law of gravity because the law of gravity simply is we don't judge it.

We accept and embrace it. And if we can, um, perceive emotions in the same as stoic, accepting, embracing way that we perceive the law of gravity, that's a first and very important step towards fulfilling our [00:47:00] potential. You know, it's when we first allow in unhappiness that we open ourselves up to happiness.

**Yael Schonbrun:** absolutely. And just as you're talking, I'm just sort of thinking about the research that comes out of Sonja Lyubomirsky, his lab. She talks about this sort of chart of like what contributes to happiness and it's 10% life circumstances. It's actually 50% genetics, . But the remainder that 40% is the intentional activity. What's so terrific about your work is that you offer really on the ground practices that people can do on a daily basis.

And those sort of fall within that intentional activities that can build happiness and 40% is quite a lot.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** 40% is a lot and it can even be more, um, because when a Sonja Lyubomirsky and Ken Sheldon and others talk about the pie, they're talking about averages. Meaning on average, if you aggregate all people about 50% is determined by, by genes and early experiences. And that's all, uh, [00:48:00] 10% external circumstances and 40% choices.

Now, when it comes to the 10%. Just like the 40 and the 50, these are averages because if you now go to a person who's living in a war zone, you know, you can be sure that their happiness is impacted by more than

**Yael Schonbrun:** That's a very good point,

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** in dire poverty.

Their external circumstances affect their lives much more than by just 10%.

So it's average. And the question is how can you increase or decrease the 40% of choices? And that's when we go back to, The idea of mindful choices and my mindful of the choice that I have to appreciate rather than take for granted. Um, am I mindful of the choice that I have in terms of how I sit?

Well, the kind of work that I choose to do or how I'm intentional, I choose to be. When I spend time with, um, with friends and [00:49:00] family. So these are all choices that we have. The question is, am I mindful of them? And the more mindful I am of the rhetorical choices that I have throughout my life, the larger that 40% part of the pie becomes.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean, every time you've said now twice, you know, the comment about posture and then I remind myself, Oh yeah, I should stand up straighter. And it also reminds me of a study by Daniel Conaman that I've heard you referenced in some of you or in some of your talks and in your writing as well, which is, you know, when parents are asked how they're feeling, they're often not that happy because they're so distracted in a hundred different directions.

And I, as a parent, know that experience very well, but. When I'm really deliberate about being with my kids, I'm far more likely at, right. It's not a guarantee, but I'm far more likely to have a really enjoyable time when I am really present in one minded about my time with them. But it's really easy to drift away.

[00:50:00] **Tal Ben-Shahar:** Yes. So, you know, when Coleman, um, received the results of that study, what surprised him most was that parents don't particularly enjoy spending time with their children. And it's not that their children are not a meaningful part of their life, that, you know, for most of them that are the most important part of their life, but it was rather than, than when, when they were with their children, they weren't really.

With their children, meaning as you pointed out, they were distracted, whether it's that phone call, whether it's that work that they're doing, whether it's thinking about what they had to, what they should have done or me to do. Um, and it's very similar, you know, the, the, the analogy would be one of, you know, listening to music.

If I listen to my favorite piece of music, um, with my eyes closed and focused, um, that's wonderful, but if I listened to it and three other pieces, single tenuously, It will be noise cacophony.



And if we can think about spending time with our children or partner or friends in the same way that we [00:51:00] think about listening to a piece of music and we do it discreetly on its own, then we can learn too much more. Enjoy these precious moments.

**Yael Schonbrun:** So before I let you go, I wanted to ask you something because you're clearly an avid reader choose the life you want. Has these short chapters about big topics ne in each you refer readers to more in-depth works. And it's clear that you're just very well versed in philosophy. So I'm curious for you, what has been the most influential book that you've read in this really tumultuous past year?

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** so in the tumultuous past year, I've actually gone back to many books that I've, uh, that I've read before. This has been my focus, because I think we don't spend enough time rereading, you know, it's, um, Um, just hearing an idea once or twice may not be enough. Um, that's why for example, religions are structured around ritual and repetition and [00:52:00] reminders.

You know what I call the three RS of change. So I've gone back to, um, to, to some of the books, um, and, um, Right now what I'm, uh, rereading is a re startles Nicomachean ethics, which I also see as the founding document of the field of happiness studies. Um, before that I re-read Nathaniel, Branden's the six pillars of self-esteem, which I think, which is a book that, um, w w that started me off in many ways in, in.

In my field. Um, and, um, the book that I'm going to read next, I was just thinking about it this morning. Reread next is the, the power of now.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Awesome. Well, thank you. Thank you for those recommendations. Cause I, I hope that people take them as such. And I just want to say that I recommend any book by title because they are really life-changing and they will leave you not just with a new way to look at things, but a [00:53:00] set of practices that really can help you to build a happier life.

So really thank you from the botTal of my heart, for joining me and using your very valuable time to share your wisdom on our platform. I really appreciate it.

**Tal Ben-Shahar:** Thank you very much yell.

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