

Eudemonology with Dr. Laurie Santos

Ologies Podcast

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Oh heeey, it's that guy who saw you see him bump his head and then you smiled at each other like "Hm, that's okay," Alie Ward, back with an episode of *Ologies* that's going to fix your whole life. Just kidding. Actually, maybe not. It very well might fix your life.

I love the life-fixer episodes and this ologist is someone I've had in my sights for a few years. We mentioned her work in the Awesomeology episode with Neil Pasricha, and instead of just citing her, we're essentially interrogating her now to shake her for brain science.

She got her Bachelor's in Psychology and her Master's and PhD in Cognition and Brain Behavior from Harvard University and is now a cognitive scientist and a psychology professor at Yale, where she has taught the course Psychology and the Good Life. Oh, she's been a TED speaker, she was named one of *Time* magazine's Leading Campus Celebrities, and she hosts a podcast called *The Happiness Lab*.

So, it's been a wonky few years, we all know, and as one person who wrote a review this week of *Ologies* said:

It always brings a smile to my face when I hear people talk about their passions. I'm grateful every day for Ologies and giving me my life back.

AJBuxton, who left that review, I'm very glad you're here. Thank you for leaving that fresh one. Thank you to all the Patrons who left questions for this ologist. You too can join that club. It costs 25 cents an episode at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://patreon.com/Ologies).

So let's get into it. Eudemonology. Will I say it right even one time this episode? Stick around to find out. This is the science of happiness and it's been on the -ology books a long time. It comes from *eudemon*, which is Greek for 'a benevolent demon' or 'a good spirit', and it was a term used by 19th-century humanistic philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. He called Eudemonology "the art of ordering our lives so as to obtain the greatest possible amount of pleasure and success."

But we're talking about the science of this art; how to shed the very comfortable, crusty shell of dissatisfaction and anxiety with some good steps that have been proven by research people to make your brain less of a miserable bummer. So press pause on your sad, inner-goblins and open your ears to hear about wanting versus craving, being happy in your life, being happy with your life, how happiness is even measured, lottery winner statistics, the wealth of free time, the power of a walk, wheelbarrows of distractions, when does positivity become toxic, how to get around the ickiness of the word 'gratitude', and some practical tips to enjoy life on planet Earth before you're a pile of forgotten bones, with cognitive scientist, psychology professor, *Happiness Lab* host, Yale researcher, and Eudemonologist, Dr. Laurie Santos.

Alie Ward: Hello, Dr. Santos! How are you?

Dr. Laurie Santos: I'm great, thanks.

Alie: I'm sure the happiness doctor... as a professor of happiness, you probably are inclined to say, "I feel great," more often than the rest of us.

Dr. Santos: You'd think. I'm inclined to be honest because one thing the happiness science shows is that being honest about our negative emotions is important too. So, when things are tough, I'm like, "You know, it's tough." But today's been a good day.

Alie: Augh! That's great. I'm already learning so much. Can I have you say really quick your first and last name and your pronouns?

Dr. Santos: Sure. I'm Laurie Santos and my pronouns are she/her.

Alie: You have been on my radar for years, actually. So, I'm really stoked to talk to you because this is an ology that I've wanted to do for... I think since before I even started the podcast. Are you familiar with that word? [*struggling to pronounce*] Weedem... Oh-eh-demon... Hmm. Wedimology? Wedimenology?

Dr. Santos: No, maybe...

Alie: It's U-E-D...

Dr. Santos: Oh, sorry. Yes, Eudemology. *Eudaimonia* is the word.

Alie: Yes! So, I guess this is the study of that feeling or that state. And you're the perfect person to talk to because, obviously, you have your podcast, and you teach courses at Yale about this. So can you tell me a little bit about your background? How did you start studying cognition and feelings? Where did it start?

Dr. Santos: Yeah, well I've been a psychologist forever. I think I've always been interested in the human mind and how it works and things. But you know, before I got into the study of happiness specifically, I was really interested in the origins of cognition, the origins of how we think. I studied that by looking at non-human animals. I studied how monkeys and dogs think about the world. That was kind of my day job until I took on a new role on Yale's campus where I became what's called Head of College.

So, Yale's one of these weird schools like in *Harry Potter* where there are colleges within a college, like a Gryffindor-Slytherin sort of thing. I'm head of Silliman College, and that means I live on campus with students. And when I started the role I was expecting it to be, you know, rainbows, and parties, and just happy students all the time. But when I got there, you know, I was really seeing the college student mental health crisis up close and personal.

With so many students reporting feeling depressed and anxious, even if they weren't at clinical levels of mental health dysfunction, they were just kind of feeling stressed and flash-forwarding their life; just feeling overwhelmed and really busy. So, I kind of wanted to do something about it. I didn't like being in this culture where so many students were stressed, and depressed, and just not enjoying their time in college.

So I thought, "Let me figure out what my field of psychology says about this." Psychology gives us so many tips that we can use to feel better. So I thought, "All right, great. I'll do what professors do. I'll make a whole class on this." So I prepped this class that I christened Psychology and the Good Life. And you know, slapped it together thinking 30 or so students would take it. And you can imagine my surprise when a quarter of the entire campus enrolled the first time I taught it.

Alie: [*gasps and giggles in amazement*]

Dr. Santos: Yeah, we couldn't fit the class anywhere. We had to teach it in a concert hall on campus because that was the only place it would fit. But you know, that showed me students

are voting with their feet. They don't like this culture of feeling so overwhelmed and stressed, and I think they really wanted science-based strategies they could use to feel better.

Alie: Yeah. Much different, I think, than just Instagram quotes on a page. Here, you've got someone who studies the brain, who studies psychology. Probably people go into it with a little bit of faith that you'll have some evidence-based information, right?

Dr. Santos: Exactly. And you know, one of the things that's interesting is we learn... As you look into the science, you learn that some of those ancient pieces of wisdom were quite accurate. Some of the platitudes we see are quite accurate, but some not so much. I think that's why we need an empirical approach, right? We can just ask scientifically, "Okay, if we find happy people, what are they doing differently?" What are their strategies? How are they spending their time? And then we can let the not-so-happy people copy that and really test, "Are they feeling happier? Are they feeling less depressed?"

These days, we have almost two decades' worth of scientific work that's done in this field of positive psychology, and we've learned a lot. There's lots of evidence-based tips out there for what you can do to feel better.

Aside: So the term 'positive psychology' was popularized by Dr. Martin Seligman, who felt that the contemporary psychology was too deeply focused on what's fucked up about us, not "How can we live better?" So it focuses on things like self-discovery, and a sense of purpose, and expressing yourself through creativity authentically. So we're going to get to more of that in a bit.

But first, from small, hairy primates to larger, slightly-less-hairy primates like us.

Alie: Where did you make that jump from non-human primates and dogs into humans? Did you find that a lot of the research just correlates based on what our brain structures are, how our neurons work?

Dr. Santos: Well, it's interesting. The work I was doing with dogs and monkeys was more, kind of, figuring out how they decide, what they know about the world. But there was a rich similarity, which is that when you start looking into the happiness science work, you quickly realize a big way that we get things wrong, which is that we have some really bad theories about the kinds of things that make us happy.

When I talk to my students and on my podcast, I often say, you know, "Our minds are lying to us about the sorts of things that will make us happy." We think it's money, and changing our circumstances, and getting the perfect accolade or the perfect grade. But those things seem not to work. And that tied really nicely to some of the work we were doing in animals where we showed that some of the deepest irrationalities we have in our species might be evolutionarily old. They're kind of built in. And I think the same thing about some of the things we get wrong about happiness.

Like, even knowing these studies, it's hard for me to change my intuitions. You know, I still think, "If I hit Powerball today, man, I'd be so much happier." Or you know, "If it just wasn't raining today, I'd be so much happier," or, "If I could change my circumstances drastically, that would really improve my wellbeing." But I know the scientific work that suggests that's probably not the case.

Aside: Okay, so I looked into some data on if Powerball winners are happier, and... It's a mixed bag - of money. So, one thing for sure: People do take more vacations when

they win the lottery. And by contrast, 60% of Americans take zero vacations a year. And apparently, one thing that pleases us so much about vacations is just having something – anything – to look forward to. So, just start peppering your calendar with any excursion you can, even if it's just, like, a nice bowl of soup next Wednesday, or a hike next weekend. Pack a picnic. Leisure time on any scale is apparently worth a million bucks. And tax free, so... hey!

Alie: Is happiness more about being happy with ourselves and accepting ourselves, or external circumstances? Or is it mission-based, like you're on the right path to doing something you believe in?

Dr. Santos: Yeah, it's a few of all of those things. I mean, I think one thing in terms of our circumstances, it's worth noting that if you're in really dire, traumatic circumstances, yes, getting different circumstances will really, you know, improve your wellbeing. If you're living below the poverty line or if you're in an abusive relationship, you do want to change those circumstances. But for many of the people privileged enough to listen to this podcast, who can put food on the table, have a roof over their head, and so on, changing your circumstances might not affect your happiness as much as you think. For many of us, changing our circumstances isn't the fastest path to feeling a little bit happier.

Aside: So is it mind over matter? This is where you ask smart persons doofy questions.

Dr. Santos: Often, it's more about changing our mindset, which incorporates a lot of the things you mentioned. It's about changing the way we see the world, changing the way we see our circumstances, changing the extent to which we're present with our circumstances and our emotions. And it's also, you know, tapping into things that give us meaning in life, giving us a sense of purpose. So, all of those things seem to matter a lot more than what our salary level is. Or for my students, the last grade they got on their midterm and things like that.

Alie: Backing up a little bit, what is happiness? How do you even define it?!

Dr. Santos: Yeah, tricky. I mean, we could take up many, many podcast episodes fighting over a definition of happiness. You know, social scientists tend to try to be simpler than philosophers, so they go for a definition of happiness that's pretty easy to measure. Most social scientists think about happiness as, sort of, being happy in your life and with your life. So, being happy *in* your life is just having lots of positive emotions, right? Like, you have experienced joy, and laughter, and fun; and less often, things like sadness and anger. Not that those aren't there at all, right? Because a full and complete life includes some negative emotions. But you know, the ratio's pretty good. That's being happy in your life.

Being happy *with* your life is that meaning, that sense of purpose. It's the answer to the questions: All things considered, how satisfied am I with my life? And those two constructs are ones that scientists measure separately. And it's worth noting that they do sometimes dissociate. I think, you know, if you go on Instagram there are a lot of people who are happy in their life. They're eating these hedonistic meals on some plane somewhere. But if you look at how they're feeling with their life, I bet they're feeling pretty empty.

And you can also have cases of the opposite. My dean who I live with here in the college, she and her wife recently just had a baby. And a newborn baby, you know, you're really happy *with* your life, "Oh my god, this rich sense of meaning, being a mom." But *in* your life... dirty diapers and not sleeping. So, they can dissociate. But the best-case scenario is that you're feeling pretty high on both of those.

Aside: I'm going to pause us for a second just to ponder. How do you feel *in* your life? How are you days-to-days? Maybe some nice tea in the morning, some supporting co-workers, maybe some evening knitting or a walk with a friend. Or do you hate your coffeemaker and you don't know why you started rewatching *The Big Bang Theory* from episode one. You're tired! Go to bed!

Now, what about with your life? Do you feel a sense of purpose? Are you proud of your life? Do you feel authentic? Just think about it for a second. It's totally okay if you're like, "Some of it's good. Some of it sucks eggs." Or "I'm very fortunate. Why am I such a grumpy walrus?"

Dr. Santos: And there are lots of different hacks that we can do to improve both of those constructs.

Alie: In terms of emotions themselves, is happiness an umbrella for things like joy, and relief, and satisfaction, and contentment? Or are those all individual, separate emotions?

Dr. Santos: It kind of depends. We, and sometimes scientists, philosophers, all of us... We can get really tied up on the specifics, right? Is joy a subcomponent of happiness, or is it bigger than happiness? What about contentment and things like that? I'm more of the opinion that you kind of know 'em when you see 'em. I want a construct that's easy enough that if I give people some sort of self-report measure, that they can tell me about it. But beyond that, I don't want to get into a big fight about, "Is it joy? Is it contentment? Is it 45% or is it 50%?" I think you kind of know it when you see it.

But we could probably dig in. There's nuance there. The kind of calm contentment feels different than a, kind of, manic, excited happiness than, you know, a deep sense of joy. These are different constructs, and maybe importantly so, but overall what we're going for is as many of those as possible.

Alie: And what about you in particular? I know that you said you can read the studies, and understand, and know, but sometimes it's hard to do. How has your life changed since you switched a little bit of your career focus on this?

Dr. Santos: Well, it's definitely, like, statistically speaking, made me much happier. You know, I'm a nerd, so I take these surveys myself about, like, "How satisfied are you with your life on a scale of one to ten?" and stuff like that. And you know, on most ten-point scales of both happiness in my life and happiness with my life, I've gone up at least a point since focusing on this stuff. But it's not, like, magic, right? It's in part just because I'm doing the things that I keep telling my students to do. I'm practicing gratitude. I'm improving my social connection. I'm meditating more. I'm exercising. Like, I'm doing all the stuff in a big list of, "Hey, if you do all these things, scientifically it seems like you'll feel better." And now I'm doing those and I'm feeling better. So, it kind of makes sense.

There's also something wonderful about being the happiness professor because, you know, I have a whole host of students and podcast listeners who, you know, if I'm not doing the right thing, will probably call me out. So, my students see me, "Oh, how's it

going?" If I'm like, "Ah, I'm so frustrated. Such a..." And they're like, "Uh-oh!" My students call me Head of College Santos, so HocSantos is what it's abbreviated to. They'll be like, "HocSantos, aren't you supposed to be practicing gratitude?" It's like, "Ergh! Okay, yes. You're right." So, I will get called out if I'm not practicing this stuff.

Alie: Do you feel like your friends come to you for more pep talks or fewer because they just look at your published work instead?

Dr. Santos: You know, I think my friends are my friends. They don't necessarily see me as a happiness expert. If anything, I think the happiness expert thing can become a little bit, you know, annoying at times. Like, "Well, you know, I have a podcast on that." It's like, no, they just want me to be their friend. So, I try to separate the two a little bit.

Aside: Oh shit. Am I not supposed to talk about podcast episodes with my friends? Because I've told a lot of people about wildfires and how lizards have two donges. Let's change the subject.

Alie: Let's get into some of those factors, because I know you rattled them off and it's a lot of things that we feel like we know but we don't necessarily know why or the mechanisms of how that works. You know, exercise, practicing gratitude... Can you run me down those things and, in a nutshell, tell me why they work?

Dr. Santos: Yeah. There's different kinds of categories of them. One whole set of categories are... There's a whole host of things that make us happier that are about connecting with other people. Literally being around other people is considered a necessary condition for high happiness in a lot of studies. And that's true even for introverts. Just literally connecting with and being around other people: super useful for happiness.

But another way that you connect with other people is to focus on what makes them happy. Lots of evidence that doing random acts of kindness, spending money and time on other people, that makes us feel happier. And in some cases, especially with spending money, you're happier spending money on others than you even are spending it on yourself. So, this attitude of social connection and doing for others is a powerful set of practices to make us feel happier.

Another set of practices really has to do with our mindset. Do we have a mindset of, kind of, griping and complaining? Or are we focused on things we're grateful for? Are we paying attention to the negative things in life, or are we focused on delights? Are we present enough to savor some of the good things and just, you know, present in general to notice our emotions and notice things? There's evidence suggesting that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. So, just the act of a mindset of being present can be really powerful for happiness.

Aside: For more on a daily practice of looking for things that aren't the fucking worst, I linked the Awesomeology episode in the show notes. Also, learning this next term killed me. I'm dead. I'm a fungus now.

Dr. Santos: And then there's just a whole host of things that I think we kind of know are good for our physical health, but we forget can be so important for our mental health. Things like taking time to exercise, taking time to sleep, which is a huge one. And just having, like, some time off. There's lots of evidence that something called 'time affluence', the subjective sense that you have some free time is much more critical for happiness than we realize.

So, all of those things, as I say them... We can go through the scientific studies and so on, and your listeners might be thinking, "Well, I kind of know that," and what I like to say is, you know, it's common wisdom but it's not common practice. How many of those things that I just rattled off aren't things that you're doing right now? And that's why I think it's really critical to know the science because, as you hear the science of, say, nutrition, you think, "Oh, maybe I should eat healthier." I think as you hear the science of how things like social connection and exercise work, you start thinking, "Oh, maybe those are things I really do need to get in more of. I kind of knew it, but now that I see the evidence, this does seem really important."

Aside: So, connecting with people, talking face to face, is better for us than just text. The phone works too. Facetime is even better than the phone. Also, helping others when you can, looking for lovely, shiny things amid the compost pile that can feel like life. Also, sleep and exercise. It can be immediate, or like exercise, it can be a few weeks before these habits really take root and you start to feel better. So don't give up. Give it a few weeks. Especially since it's free.

Are you feeling lazy and annoyed? Don't worry, a lot of us feel that way when we start doing something that will keep us alive and happy. So, I asked Dr. Santos for us: Why am I like this?

Alie: Why do you think, from some sort of evolutionary standpoint, when we're bummed out, it's harder to do the things that would make us less bummed out?

Dr. Santos: Yeah, super frustrating. The mind is designed in, like, a really stupid way. We knew this from other evolutionary studies, but definitely when it comes to happiness, that's the case. In one of my upcoming episodes of *The Happiness Lab*, I talk about this really stupid design feature of the brain where there's just a different... like, a whole different brain system that codes for what we like, the things we really enjoy; versus the things we want, the things that we're motivated to go after, or that we crave.

The simplest example is, like, sometimes when I'm having a bad day at work, I just crave, like, plopping down and watching Netflix, or eating a cupcake, or having a huge glass of wine. But like, if you actually look at how much I would like that, the Netflix is going to make me apathetic, and the cupcake's going to give me the jitters, and the wine, I'm not going to sleep very well. Ultimately, the liking has this disconnect from the wanting. And you get it in the reverse direction, too. Like, I don't, after a long day at work, crave a really hard Peloton ride, or a really hard yoga class, or taking a long walk with a friend. I don't have the same motivation I have for that as I do for, like, the cupcake, or the relaxing thing, or a hit of social media. But even though I don't have the wanting, if I actually engage in that practice, I'll feel so much better.

So, this is a dumb way to design a brain. You'd think that wanting would, kind of, go with liking, but it just sort of doesn't. And that means we spend a lot of time craving and easily going after things we won't really like, and it means we don't have mechanisms... except for a rational, push-ourselves, we don't have these low-grade craving mechanisms to go after things that really will benefit our happiness but we don't realize we want them.

Alie: How do we hijack that? How do we trick ourselves into doing the thing that we don't *think* we want to do but we like doing and is good for us?

Dr. Santos: You know, there's two ways to do it. One is this very rational force-yourself way, which I harness a lot, which is like, "Okay, even though I don't really feel like calling anyone right now, I know the science and if I talk to someone, I'll feel better," right? So, the force-yourself approach. But the force-yourself approach works best if it's paired with the second practice, which is forcing yourself to notice what you like. Because the wanting system can update, it just doesn't do it naturally. But after a really hard yoga class, or after calling that friend when you didn't feel like it, take time to notice, like, "Does this feel good?" And you're like, "Yeah, this actually feels nice."

I had this – pre-covid, when I was going to a yoga studio – this wonderful yoga instructor who would, right at the end of a hard class, have you take this moment where we were like, "Okay, take a moment to notice. Notice how you feel after this class. Notice how this made you feel." And afterward, you're like, "Damn, that was great. I want more of this feeling," you know?

Aside: So when you pick the salad and stop pretending that Diet Coke is water, and you go for the slowest, sweatiest shuffle around the block but you do it, take a minute and absolutely relish how wonderful, and brave, and heroic your efforts were and how you feel. We deserve this.

Dr. Santos: But we tend not to be present. We tend not to mindfully notice. And that's true for the stuff you really crave but you might not like. After you, like, open the fridge four times and grab that thing to eat that you didn't really feel like, take a moment to be like, "Am I satisfied now? Not really. I want to grab something else." And once you notice that, your wanting system can be like, "Okay, duly noted. [*"You got it?" "Got it."*] Let's take note of that for next time."

So, forcing yourself to ignore your wanting system and just act through this very rational path, but then also mindfully noticing what you really like, those things can start to update your craving system at least a little bit. But the systems are always going to be disconnected, unfortunately. It's just that our minds are not really designed that well for wanting all the things that we like.

Alie: What about, like, our self-image? How much does that play into our happiness and how much does monitoring our likes on our social media and looking at pictures of our face through a distorted camera lens... How much is that affecting our happiness and how we see our lives?

Dr. Santos: Yeah, another dumb feature of the way our minds work when it comes to happiness is the fact that we don't necessarily think of the good things in our life in objective terms. We think of them in relative terms. And that means that seeing ourselves on social media, seeing what's going on with other people on social media, that can really affect our happiness in some dumb ways.

Take your body image, for example. You might objectively think you have a certain body that's good, or not-so-good, or whatever, but we don't necessarily think in terms of our objective sense. We think relative. So, as soon as you go on Instagram and you look at, you know, the bikini pictures of someone else, or take your objective sense of how good your vacation was, or how rich you are, or how nice your house is, then you watch the celebrity TikTok feeds and you're like, "Eeh... my house isn't that good. My vacation sucked," and things like that. We're really susceptible to social comparison when it comes to evaluating anything in our life; our abilities, our amount of money,

our salary, our house, whatever. And that means that we can easily start feeling bad even when we're objectively in a good situation.

My favorite extreme example of this was a study that looked at the emotions of different Olympic medalists. So, gold medalists, probably feeling pretty happy. Makes sense. They just won a gold medal. But what about silver medalists? Maybe slightly less happy. But what researchers find is that if you look at the emotional expressions that silver medalists show on the stand... [clip from 1994 Olympics, announcer: "Oksana Baiul has won the gold. Backstage, Nancy Kerrigan and Chen Lu exchange congratulations and consolations for silver and bronze."] They're not just slightly less happy. They're actively feeling awful. They're showing signs of extreme sadness, contempt, anger. It's not just "slightly less happy," it's actively negative.

Alie: Wow.

Dr. Santos: If you think about what I just said, it sort of makes sense, right? Because the silver medalist isn't thinking, "I'm objectively the second-best in the world. I objectively beat the other 7 billion people." They're just thinking about one reference point that makes them feel awful. The gold. They were *almost* there and they didn't get it, so they feel like a loser. But what's striking is, if you look at the bronze medalist, you see something completely different. Because their reference point isn't the gold. They were, I don't know, like 30 seconds off, or they lost two matches or something.

Their reference point is, like, "If I had just messed up a little bit more, I would go home completely empty-handed. I wouldn't even be on this stand at all." So, they're showing signs of true ecstasy. In some cases, they're showing expressions that are even happier than the gold medalist because their reference point is, like, "Phew! Look how lucky I am! I almost totally screwed up!"

Aside: So, Nancy Kerrigan displayed a famously sour face receiving the silver in 1994. And then in 1995, a study was published in the *Journal of Personal and Social Psychology* titled "When less is more: Counterfactual thinking and satisfaction among Olympic medalists."

Counterfactual thinking? Huh? What the fu...? That is the sinking, gnawing feeling of what could've been, or "Wow, I fudged it up." One researcher, Andrea Luangrath, a University of Iowa Marketing Assistant Professor did follow-up studies on medalists to confirm that first study and recently said in an interview that, "You don't have to be the second-best out of 8 billion. There are always going to be people who we can compare ourselves to that are better, faster, smarter, or whatever, and that can make us feel relatively bad."

So what is the lesson here? Eeh... Think twice before you get a "No Regrets" tattoo, and maybe consider a "Counter Your Counterfactuals" tattoo instead. And once the sting wears off, celebrate your silvers! You did it.

Dr. Santos: And I love this metaphor because, you know, it shows us that it doesn't matter what's going on objectively. It matters who we're comparing ourselves against. And that means we can be in, objectively, a really good spot but feel kind of awful about it.

Alie: And what about chemicals? Where are, just, the chemical hands that we were dealt... When do those have the reins on the amount of happiness we feel?

Dr. Santos: You know, we can think about the chemicals we're dealt in a couple of ways. Often, we think about it in terms of, you know, our genetic lottery, right? Are you naturally a happy person or are you naturally a kind of down-in-the-dumps person? And just like circumstances, what we find is that there is a genetic component to happiness. If you're born from a long line of overly optimistic people, you're more likely to be overly optimistic. But the amount of that heritability is tiny. [*"What?"*] It's probably tinier than something like height or weight in the US. And especially weight, we know that's something that obviously your environment can shape a lot.

So, while there is some heritable component to happiness, it's much tinier than we think, and this is really good news, right? You know, it would suck if we were like, "Hey, you're just born to be happy or born to be not-so-happy, and that's it." What the science is really telling us is that there is some inheritable component, but there's a lot of action that we can take, through our mindsets, through our behaviors, to change things around.

And that's great because, you know, putting this all together, it means our genetics don't predict our happiness that much and our circumstances don't predict our happiness that much. We don't necessarily get to control whether we're born into complete luxury or we're born into poverty. We don't necessarily get to control what our genetic heritage is. But we all can completely control our mindsets and our behavior. So, it's good news. The bad news is that changing those mindsets and behavior, as you probably guessed, takes a lot of work.

Alie: Yeah. Do you ever have students who either come to you or you hear about who aren't quite sure if it's time for medical intervention or is it time for just... trying to hack their habits? How do we, as individuals, make that call?

Dr. Santos: Yeah, I'm glad you brought this up because I think this is really important. You know, so many of the hacks we're talking about today are ones that really can improve your wellbeing. But there's some points when you need a hack and there's some points when you need something that's much deeper. The analogy I like to use is, you know, imagine you go into your doctor and you say, "Hey, Doctor, I have high blood pressure. What should I do?" Your doctor might say, "Get on the treadmill and exercise a little bit more. Eat these fruits and vegetables every day," or something. But if you walked into your doctor's office and you're saying, "Doctor, I'm having chest pains. I'm having acute cardiac arrest right now," your doctor wouldn't be like, "Get on the treadmill for a half-hour a day." Your doctor would... an emergency intervention would take place.

And I think it's worth recognizing that our mental health works the same way. The kinds of things I'm talking about are, in some sense, preventative medicine. They're there so that you don't wind up in a state of acutely feeling clinically depressed, or suicidal, or something worse, right? They're there so that you can protect your mental health so that you don't get to that point. But if you're experiencing true depression, hard for you to do your daily activities, or anxiety so powerful that you're experiencing panic attacks, that's a sign that you might need professional help.

All the hacks I mentioned are good... you know, once you get out of that acute state, just like the heart attack person, as soon as you get out of experiencing cardiac arrest, the next step is going to be to go back to some of those preventative measures once you get out of the hospital. I think the same thing is true for clinical parts of these diseases. You

might also want to go back to experiencing gratitude, and mediating, and these things. But it is important to get acute care if the mental health situation you're in is acute.

Alie: Okay. That's great to know for people.

Aside: You may know when you hit this level because your friends will say, "I think you should see a doctor, dude," which is what happened to me when I was going through the hardest parts of my life and also had a couple medical conditions that turned my brain into bees. The doctor was like, "Well, shucks. You need more than a carwash. Let's check under the hood there, buddy."

But yes, what is the technique for sloughing off persistent, crusty, muddy feelings?

Alie: When it comes to things like gratitude and meditation, how much is effective? Like, how much can we get away with if we're feeling real down in the dumps but we're low on motivation? How much gratitude is enough? How much meditation's enough? How much exercise is enough? *[laughs]*

Dr. Santos: You know, one of the nice things about all of this stuff being evidence based is that it allows you to kind of do your own experimentation, right? The answer of how much meditation you, particular podcast listener, need might depend on all kinds of things, right? So, the key is to try it out.

One thing we know, though, is that sometimes it takes less than you really expect. Take something like gratitude. There's evidence that just scribbling three things that you're grateful for every day, that can be enough to significantly boost your wellbeing in as little as two weeks. It doesn't take that much time.

There's evidence, for example, from Hedy Kober's lab at Yale that even as little as 10 minutes of meditation a day can really start to improve your mental wellbeing and some mental health symptoms, right?

Aside: For more on this, feel free to peruse papers such as "Brief Mindfulness Meditation Improves Attention in Novices" and "Let it be: mindful acceptance down-regulates pain and negative emotion," both published by Dr. Hedy Kober.

So, scientists in lab coats have dedicated the research and their grant money budgets to proving that, yes, meditation does help. It's free, it takes less time than making a sandwich. We can do this. Let's do this.

Dr. Santos: So, it doesn't take long. What it takes is some consistency. So my instinct is like... because sometimes we hear these tips and we're like, "All right, I'm going to drop everything and do 70 hours of meditation every week." It's like, "No, no..." just start really small. Allow yourself to do these baby steps. And test it out; how are you feeling? Are you feeling better? Is it making things better or is it making things worse? Allowing ourselves the self-compassion to engage in these baby steps, I think, is really important.

Alie: I think that's so true. Whenever I get out of the habit of running – which is now – I'll go do a lap at the reservoir but I'll have to just tell myself the first couple times I do it, the first month, even, "As long as I just get around the reservoir, even crawling is fine," you know? Like, expecting yourself to get back into running at a certain pace or doing things whole hog can be so intimidating you just want to give up right away.

Dr. Santos: Yeah, and I think we're not good at understanding the amount of self-compassion we need to motivate ourselves. I think, again, this is a spot where I think our minds get it wrong. We think the right way to motivate ourselves is to become these horrid drill instructors and, like, yell at ourselves in our head in a way that we'd never speak to a friend, or a child, or someone we cared about, hopefully, right? But that kind of just doesn't work. That convinces us that it's not good to try. We end up setting our standards lower, we end up procrastinating more.

Self-compassion, it turns out, can actually allow you to engage in new habits better, and more effectively, and with less procrastination. That's not our theory. We go for the drill sergeant approach, but we'd be better off, kind of, mindfully paying attention to what's going on, and recognizing that we're just human, and giving ourselves a little bit more of a benefit of a doubt.

Alie: Yeah, I never want to obey a dick who's yelling at me, so why do I do that to myself, you know? *[laughs]*

Dr. Santos: Yeah, and we're, like... The dickiest of dicks is often the person in our head, right? *[laughs]* It's like, "Wait, I would never say... That thing I just said to myself in my head, I would never say that to another human." Why am I talking to myself that way?

Alie: Yeah, I would want to slap my own self for saying that to me. I'm the hardest on myself, more than I would ever tolerate in somebody else, which is so funny that we do that.

But you know, you mentioned the term positive psychology before and I'm so curious about that, because I feel like I can't tell if it's flimflam or not that positive psychology is totally, like, a legit practice, or is it something along the lines of, like, toxic positivity at all costs. What is positive psychology? What do scientists think of it?

Dr. Santos: Yeah, I mean, the term positive psychology began when scientist Martin Seligman, who kind of invented the field or is the founder of the field, really had this intuition that so much of psychology is about what he called, kind of, 'below baseline'. Like, "I'm trying to cure depression. I'm trying to cure anxiety," or something like that. But he realized that we didn't have, as he called it, a good science of going above baseline. So, there's baseline and then there's feeling like you're flourishing, and then there's getting social connection, feeling really present, experiencing joy.

So, he really christened this name of this field, positive psychology, in order to focus on those things. But I think positive psychology gets the wrong rap. I think there's this idea that you have to only be positive. But you know, if you look at what the research is really showing, there's a lot of evidence that a real, true, happy life, a successful life, a healthy life, involves experiencing negative emotions; allowing those and not running away from them. There's lots of evidence suggesting that there are different techniques you can use to navigate those emotions and, sort of, feel them without getting destroyed by them.

So, I think when you hear these terms, 'positive psychology', 'positivity', they can kind of feel a little cheesy and get a bad rap. But it's like, "Positive! Positive! Positive! All the time." But that's not really, when you dig into the field, what it's showing. My sense is that, you know, the whole goal is to get to this idea of *eudemonia*, this rich, meaningful life, and you do that not through, you know, putting blinders on and being a Pollyanna and, like, trying only to experience happy, happy, happy no matter what. You do that by having a full life which is rich with lots of emotions and experiences.

Alie: Yeah, that's such a good point about letting yourself feel those negative emotions but necessarily, like, succumbing to them, you know? Not letting them win all the time.

Dr. Santos: Yeah, and I think we get that wrong. I think our instinct, again, is this idea that, "Well, there's some negative emotion, I should run away from that," or that the right move would be to suppress it, stiff upper lip. But there's evidence from James Gross at Stanford that the act of suppressing our emotions can lead to things like increased cardiac stress, or even can cause us to have some problems with memory and decision making. You do worse on a memory test when you're trying to suppress some negative emotion. So, it has negative costs. We're much better off if we can find ways to regulate and allow those emotions, right? To experience them, give them some time, and then be self-compassionate and nurture ourselves through them.

Alie: Mm-hmm. Are there any myths about happiness that you find yourself constantly having to bust?

Dr. Santos: All the time. I mean, as we've been talking about, like, our minds lie to us all the time about this stuff. The biggest one that my students fall prey to so much is that happiness is about circumstances; that happiness is about money in particular. My Yale students were all thinking about what job they want to get when they get out of this Ivy League university, and what salary they're going to get, and things. You know, you tell them that after a certain, reasonable, middle-class income, money doesn't matter for happiness anymore, and they want to fight you on it. They're like, "Well, what if I spent it differently? What if I went on vacation to these places over and over again?" And it's like, "Nope. Doesn't count."

Or, at the very least, it's not so much that money doesn't matter for happiness, it's just that there are so many other things you could focus on that matter much, much more. Maybe, yeah, if you go up like that minuscule amount, if you put all this work in and all this time in to earn more, maybe you get a teeny bump, maybe. Maybe not. But like, if you just wrote down three things you're grateful for, that would work way more effectively. We know that empirically.

Alie: Is there a test where people can go figure out "How Happy Am I?"

Dr. Santos: Yeah, there's lots of different spots online where you can do that. In fact, Marty Seligman, who we mentioned, this founder of positive psychology, has a website called Authentic Happiness. If you google the Authentic Happiness Test...

Aside: Yes, I checked this out, and if you google 'Authentic Happiness' you can help fellow eudemonologists by taking scored questionnaires. They have Authentic Happiness Inventory, the General Happiness Scale, Positive and Negative Effect Questionnaire, the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire.

I myself opted for the classic: the Authentic Happiness Inventory. And on a scale of 1 to 5... Jarrett, what do you think I got?

Jarrett: F- f-... Three?

Alie: You know me too well.

Jarrett: Did I?

Alie: Yeah, 3.08. So, maybe I'll mediate a bunch and then I'll take it in a few months.

Also, I have no idea what all those different tests do, but I'm sure that the scientists know, and that's all that matters.

Dr. Santos: You know, you don't need a fancy test. It's really, kind of, all things considered, how happy are you with your life? And this is the beauty, for better or for worse, there's not a thermometer that we can use for happiness, as scientists, where we put it in and we're like, "Boop. You're 98.6 Happy." You just have to answer it for yourself. And that kind of feels a little bit not-as-legit scientifically, but in practice that's what we're really trying to get at. We're trying to get at your own perception of how things are going, and if things are going well, then they're going well.

Alie: Can I ask you some listener questions?

Dr. Santos: Sure!

Aside: But before that, let's aim a money cannon at a worthy cause. This week, Dr. Santos chose DonorsChoose.org, which lets teachers list their classroom needs, and then regular jabronis like you and me can make their dreams come true. So, Donors Choose has fulfilled 1.7 million classroom projects, from butterfly cocoons to robotics kits, to pencils and paper, and books with diverse characters. So, in Dr. Santos's name, we funded Mrs. Weter of MacArthur Middle School's project to make birthday-party-in-a-bag gifts for impoverished students; Carbondale Middle School's Ms. McCormick's STEM lab kits, and LA's Ms. B's kindergarten class with printer cartridges for craft projects and handouts!

So that is DonorsChoose.org. I had never heard of them before this. They seem awesome. Our donations were made possible by the following sponsors, who you may hear about now.

[Ad Break]

Okay, happy to ask your questions for Dr. Santos.

Alie: Okay, Arielle Regan wants to know: Do animals experience happiness? Are they happier than people?

Dr. Santos: Yeah, it's really hard to ask animals about their happiness because, you know, I can do the self-report measure with you. It's harder to do that with a banana slug, or a bonobo, or something. Physiologically, we know they go through a lot of the same states as humans, but it's hard to know for sure if those physiological states correlate with this subjective state. I only know that you have the subjective state because you tell me, so even though everything we can objectively look at suggests that, you know, we're feeling the same thing, subjectively it's really hard to know for sure.

Aside: So, one thing some scientists try to observe is play behavior, like hopping around, and running, and chewing on stuff. My tiny poodle angel, she rubs her butt against stuff, like a tire, or my shoe. That's her version of typing #Blessed.

Alie: Courtney Graziano wants to know: Can anxious people be happy?

Dr. Santos: I think anxious people can definitely be happy. I think there are a lot of strategies we can use to regulate and allow our anxiety. I think part of the problem with anxiety is that we try to run away from it, that we try to avoid it at all costs. But that's yet another emotion that I think we can kind of sit with, like, "I'm feeling really anxious right now. It's an 8 out of 10." You can surf that anxiety urge and get to the other side, and then do

some work to, sort of, nurture yourself. So, I think you can be anxious and happy just like you can be sad and happy, and you can be angry and happy. To have a truly happy life requires experiencing all those emotions but finding ways to navigate them so that they don't take over.

Alie: That's really well said. Aidan Patko and Meg G want to know: Is it flimflam that smiling actually makes you happier, or is that a true fact? Meg says: And laughing! And a lot of other folks...

Aside: Looking at you, patrons Sey, Cdemos101, Alexis Wallick, and Ashley Herbel.

Alie: ... want to know: Can you fake it 'til you make it?

Dr. Santos: There's a lot of feedback that we get from other people's emotions, our own feedback from our own actions. So, pretending you're happy, acting like you're happy, can often put you in a happy state, in part because it puts the people around you in a happy state. And we know that there's a lot of evidence for what's called 'emotional contagion'. Like, "If I'm around happy people, I'm just going to catch the emotions of that happy person." And the reverse, right? "If I'm around those negative nellies, I'm going to catch that too." So, there is a kind of "fake it 'til you make it." There's "associate with the people who have the emotions that you want to experience." It's a powerful way to use your situation, your social environment, to build in wellbeing.

Alie: Is there anything you can do for a friend who is feeling really unhappy to help them out as well?

Dr. Santos: Yeah, I think... The way to do it, I think, really is to try to bring some of these practices in naturally, right? First of all, give that friend some social connection. Just the very act of you talking to them, being around them, spending time with them, is going to improve their wellbeing. I think you can also bring your attitudes that are positive, right? If you're expressing things that you're grateful for, you know, if you're savoring things and feeling a little bit present, that kind of thing is naturally going to rub off on them because of emotional contagion, because of behavioral contagion. But the biggest thing you can do is, I think, check-in. Check-in and allow yourself to be present and be there for someone who needs you. A really powerful way to use your happiness to positively affect others.

Aside: So if you ever think, "Why would I check up on someone? I don't know how to fix things," don't worry. Just be alive, and in their orbit, and listen. Or tell them about how lizards have two dicks. That's what I do.

Alie: Patrick Javarone, first-time question-asker, wants to know: Happiness and the microbiome connection? What can we do to improve our microbiome? Is there a connection? What's the deal?

Dr. Santos: Great, great question. It's something that we don't have that much good data on yet. Everything we know suggests that microbiome affects all kinds of stuff. It would be surprising, I think, in some ways, if it didn't affect our wellbeing and our happiness. But you know, this is a new area of work where we're learning new things all the time and we don't really have a great verdict yet. But you know, if you want to throw research money onto something that I think will be really telling in the next ten years of happiness science, I think microbiome might be a spot to do that.

Alie: Nice. You can just get in on poop on the ground floor. Let's ride this thing to the top!

Dr. Santos: Poop samples from very happy people. I'm in!

Alie: I think that you literally can buy poop, like, on the black market for your own at-home fecal transplants.

Aside: PS – Of course I looked this up. And getting an enema with someone else's poop, it's called Fecal Microbiota Transplantation, and in the Microbiology Gut Biome episode from November 2018, we go into detail about how our microbiomes are suffering from processed foods, and artificial ingredients, and overuse of antibiotics for things like viral infections that don't need antibiotics. So, given that up to 90% of our serotonin is synthesized in our simmering, poo-filled guts, DIY FMTs (do-it-yourself fecal microbiota transplantations, as they're called) they're getting more and more common as doctors are still reluctant to shove poo up our butts, even when we ask nicely.

According to an *American Journal of Gastroenterology* article called "Understanding the scope of do-it-yourself fecal microbiota transplant," 82% of folks who tried it felt better afterwards, and 92% of those knew their stool donor, who, I don't know, I guess you find by asking your friend who seems chill and has good poops. So, you can ask a doctor to screen a donor sample and see if they'll do it. Otherwise, there's plenty of instructions on the internet. Apparently, you buy a blender at Goodwill or something, and then you maybe burn it later. None of this is my beeswax. Ask your doctors. Don't sue me or make me a smoothie later. I'm good.

Alie: Rahala wants to know, first-time question-asker: Is there any truth to the notion that people who are generally happy tend to live longer? And I want to say, my dad has cancer and his oncologists were saying just positivity is really helpful for patients in general. Do we find that statistically sound?

Dr. Santos: Yeah. There's actually some strong evidence that happiness seems to affect our longevity in super interesting ways. One of the most famous studies on this looked at a group of individuals that had really similar lifestyles... because if you think about it, this is a hard study to do, right? We want to ask, like, "Are happier people living longer?" But of course, there's lots of things that affect whether you live longer. So, the researchers tried to find a population that had, like, reasonably low risk factors and a really similar lifestyle. And they hit upon studying nuns.

The way they did this was they went back to nuns' journals that they had in their 20s... I guess nuns, at least in one of these convents, kind of did some journaling when they first joined the nunnery. So, you go back to when the nuns are in their 20s, and you look at their journals, and you do, like, a text analysis. You run the text of their journals through something that pulls out all the happy words and pulls out all the negative words, or like any emotion words whatsoever.

And then you use those textual analyses to predict how many of the nuns live into their 80s and 90s. And what you find is that the happier nuns are just living surprisingly longer; in some cases like decades longer than the nuns, on average, who were just sadder, which is really quite striking. It suggests that happiness might really be affecting how long we live. So yeah, important to focus on, not just because happiness feels good, but it might make you live longer too.

Aside: Patron Annika Callen asked: Why are feelings of happiness stronger when you're younger? And Aurel Chaoul Pelleg, Paige, and RJ Doidge wanted to know if

happier people tend to be of a certain gender or age? RJ wants to make sure they don't become a grumpy crank who hates everyone.

Alie: Yeah, I wondered, do we find that people get happier as they age or crankier as they age?

Dr. Santos: On average, the data really suggests happier. There's some interesting, like, lifespan work on happiness. You're kind of happy when you're young, and then as you become an adult and middle-aged, especially after you have children, in fact, happiness tends to dip. But then as soon as you, kind of, go back to empty nesting and the kids go off to college, then the slope of happiness kind of goes back up. So, something to look forward to as you age. On average, older people tend to be happier.

Alie: You know, I wasn't sure about that and kids. And I hadn't thought to ask that. I have friends who have kids; I have friends who don't have kids. I myself have a daughter; she's a dog. And that's... she's probably the only kid I'm going to have and she's an animal. [laughs] But I don't know, like, in general, is that the case? The stress of having kids, but then the satisfaction that you did it later? Like, it balances?

Dr. Santos: I think this is one of those spots where those two constructs of happiness can be so powerful: the happiness in your life and happiness *with* your life. Lots of evidence that kids boost the happiness with your life. You get this sense of meaning and so on. But if you look at people's time budgets in terms of what they spend their time on, the thing that often feels the most miserable is spending time with your kids. Like, in your life, when you're picking up the toys and dealing with the dirty diapers and things, that is the thing that people seem to, on average, enjoy the least. [*"No offense!"*] It ranks up there with, like, commuting and shopping for groceries. Not a heavy endorsement. But that's, kind of, complicated and it's one of these reasons that these constructs are helpful. There are certain things that you do for meaning that, in the moment, don't feel great but they wind up giving you meaning. I think the tips are powerful too because they're hacks you can do to enjoy your time more with your kids, right? If you have strategies for managing stress and negative emotions, that can probably make your time with your kids even happier.

Alie: Yeah, I'm so in awe of people who do have kids, just because it seems so challenging. And I know, myself, I'm so scatterbrained that I feel like I just don't necessarily feel like that would be my strong suit. But there are some people who love kiteboarding and others who are like, "No thank you. I would rather be on the beach reading a book." So, it really depends on what you like, you know?

Dr. Santos: And I think you're doing it right because there's a lot of evidence that the furry babies, especially dogs – there's more research on dogs – really do have a significant effect on happiness. But again, that research is interesting because it's not the dogs, per se, it's kind of the benefits that we get from dogs. So, dogs get us out exercising. Dogs allow us to make more social connections. They are a social connection, but then they also let us connect with people. They make us more present. When you're with your dog and you're, you know, playing fetch with your dog, it's hard to be distracted or checking your email, right? So, it seems like dogs don't necessarily inherently make us happier, but they make us do a lot of practices I've mentioned that lead to higher happiness.

Aside: First-time question-asker Alanna Richman asks: Has the rapid development in technology in the last few years had an overall increase or decrease in people's

happiness? And patrons Diana, Ash Gelhaus, Jenna Mendola, Lucas O'Neil, and Nicole Kleinman, all echoed that.

Alie: Yeah, I wondered too, in terms of being in the moment, is being on our phone... does that take us out of the moment? Does that take us into another, like, universe or galaxy of what's happening in this digital realm versus what's happening around us?

Dr. Santos: I mean, when you think about technology, it's worth remembering that we can use technology for all kinds of things, right? We could use technology to scribble in a gratitude journal, or I could pick up a phone and call my mom and have a social connection. Often, we're not using our technology in ways that boost happiness. We could, but often we're checking social media, getting the NutraSweet social connection but not real stuff. "I'm distracted and not paying attention to the real things in life." I could be present looking at the trees, or talking to the people around me, but you know, I'm scrolling through, you know, some dumb thing on the internet.

So, it's not that technology in and of itself is bad, it's just that the way we use it, often, is bad. And it's kind of built to make it harder for us to use it well. Every app, in some way, is competing for your attention, right? They want to notify you of stuff and have the dings that give you a little burst of rewards every time you get some new piece of information. And that means that our apps and our technology is, kind of, constantly competing with real life for our attention. Sadly, I think there's domains in which the technology is winning, which makes sense.

On my podcast, I talk to the University of British Columbia researcher Liz Dunn, and she had this lovely quote where she's like, "Imagine if, with your next dinner date with your husband, you took a big wheelbarrow. And in the wheelbarrow was DVDs of every movie you've ever seen. A big pile of CDs of every song in the universe. Printouts of every family reunion ever. Printouts of all your emails. Big piles of porn, right?" If there was a wheelbarrow with all that stuff next to you, you'd want to be going through it the whole dinner. Like, "Oh, let me go back to my family reunion..."

What she says is, like, your brain isn't stupid; your brain knows that on the other side of your iPhone is all that stuff. So, there's something constantly in your brain that has to be like, "No, no. Pay attention to this conversation," because... you know, "Don't check your email. Don't check your email!" And that, kind of, is constantly a little bit depleting. It's definitely distracting, but it's a little bit depleting as well.

Alie: *[laughs]* Just this wheelbarrow... *[laughs]*

Dr. Santos: I mean, when you think about what's on the other... Like, printouts of weather predictions, every TikTok video in the history of the internet, right? I mean, it's a huge, huge slot machine. And sadly, I mean, I love my husband, we have some great conversations, but is every conversation with my husband more interesting than literally everything on the internet? Not necessarily. And what that means is we're so tempted by that stuff over in real-life social connection, even though we know the in-real-life stuff is going to make us so much happier.

Alie: That's such a good way to look at it, to understand just what our brain is grappling with there, why it's difficult. It's not a personal failing that we sometimes look to that. But yeah, I definitely find that when I'm looking for something to, sort of, boost my dopamine or happiness, I'll go to my phone and after an hour I'll go, "I don't think that

really did the trick.” If I had practiced some things I knew might be longer-lasting... But at least I can’t blame myself for why I was looking.

Anthony had a great question. Asked: What if certain aspects of your happiness or the pursuit of your happiness cause others you care about to be unhappy, thereby making you unhappy? What about those circumstances where you’re worried that your happiness might make other people dislike you?

Dr. Santos: Well, I think, again, if we’re really going for true happiness, my guess is that those cases are occurring, probably, less often than you think. By that I mean, you know, the real happiness seems to come from doing acts of kindness for other people; real happiness seems to come from focusing on the happiness of others, right? So, already we’re in a bind of, like, if other people aren’t happy then that’s orb going to mean we’re not happy, right? As we’ve talked about, happiness doesn’t seem to come from our circumstances, so it’s not like we’re trying to beat other people or go after these accolades, right? Happiness comes from being grateful and present for what you have.

So, my guess is that more often than not, if you’re pursuing happiness correctly, based on what the science suggests, you’re just not going to run into situations where you’re, sort of, competing or hurting other people’s happiness because other people’s happiness is part and parcel of getting true happiness.

Aside: And if you’re worried someone in your life will be upset at your happiness, just know it’s your life and it’s okay to feel good. If anyone has a problem with it, that is their own baggage to address. I highly suggest some of Melody Beattie’s writings about codependency. I’m just going to leave that suggestion right there for you.

Alie: Ben Dewhurst says: I’m just finishing up my MBA, and in one of my classes they talked about how optimization is actually an attribute of emotional intelligence and can be learned. As an optimist myself, I’d always considered it more like a part of my personality like extroverted or introverted and unteachable. So how would someone go about learning and training to be an optimist? And what’s the relationship there? Also, is there a relationship between happiness and emotional or just, like, IQ intelligence? I feel like there’s some badge of, like, “If you’re unhappy it must mean that you know more and therefore you’re smarter.” *[laughs]*

Dr. Santos: That’s interesting. I don’t know of any data that looks specifically at IQ and happiness. My guess is there’s probably not the relationship that you’re looking at, but there is definitely a relationship between happiness and optimism, obviously. I think optimism is, sort of, part of our general happy life. And the good news, based on this question, you can in fact learn these kinds of things. The fastest thing to do is really try to just train your brain to pay attention to good things out there. Our minds are naturally tuned to negative things, the yucky stuff out there, the griping; but we can tune our minds towards positive things. You can focus on what you’re grateful for.

Another practice that I’ve been into lately, which I talk about on the podcast, is focusing on delights. Sometimes gratitude can feel, sort of, cheesy, but you can just focus on things that are delightful out there. The sunshine, that’s delightful. The fact that coffee exists, that’s delightful. Some funny video on the internet, that’s delightful. Training your brain towards things that you really enjoy that cause delight.

Aside: Okay, so if the term ‘gratitude journaling’ conjured up visions of sickly-sweetened chamomile tea, just opt for the term ‘delights’, which is a straightforward,

good cup of coffee. Actually, for years, my husband Jarrett has cited a short tally of favorite things. His are lavender soap, coffee, and sandwiches. And he says just thinking of those three things and letting his mind wander to more helped him during a really deep depression. So, gratitude journaling, delights, whatever you want to call it. Jarrett calls his “Do Not Kill Yourself List,” which is kind of like the Miami Cola Bang energy drink of a gratitude practice branding. [to Jarrett:] Would you agree?

Jarrett: That’s my favorite Bang flavor.

Alie: Is it really?

Jarrett: Miami Cola?

Alie: [laughs]

Jarrett: That’s on the list.

Dr. Santos: And again, your brain is going to focus on whatever you give it data for. So, if you give it data about things that you’re feeling really grateful about or are really delightful, that’s what your brain is going to start noticing.

Alie: I love that you just are constantly filling evidence folders for, like, “Things Are Shitty” and “Things Are Good.” It’s like, what are you putting in your evidence folder?

Dr. Santos: And it’s not just, like, what you’re picking. You’re training your brain to look for that stuff. In my podcast, I interview this fantastic guest, Ross Gay, who’s a poet and an essayist, who has this book called *The Book of Delights*. And he decided that every day for a year after his birthday, he would write an essay about something that delighted him. And he talks about how, at first, he was really worried, like, “Am I really going to find things that really delight me?” And he said that, you know, even just a week in, like, he’d tuned his mind to find these things.

Walking down the street, he’d be like, “Oh, that dude’s t-shirt is delightful. That cat on the street is delightful.” Like, he just shifted his perception and tuned his mind more towards the good things than the bad things. Our brains, evolutionarily, are naturally tuned towards the bad things. Makes sense; you want to see the tiger that’s going to jump out at you. But we can control that tuning just by, like, taking some explicit work to pay attention to the things we’re grateful for, to the things that delight us, to the good stuff out there.

Aside: So yes, Ross Gay, *The Book of Delights*. And again, check out Neil Pasricha’s work and his Awesomeology episode. Another fun project? Start a private Twitter, just for yourself, and chronicle delights of your own, or a private Instagram account, or something.

Also, I should note that, in recording this episode, the internet dropped out a few times, so I had to email Dr. Santos a new link during it, and she has an autoreply message explaining that she may not write back. It explains that she gets more than 100 emails a day, and it reads in part:

Keeping up with that many questions/requests meant that I was hurting my own time affluence and having less time for the important projects that I really should be prioritizing. So I am currently trying my own personal wellbeing experiment. I’m going to try to practice what I preach and reduce the amount of time I usually

spend on email. Thanks for your understanding as I try not to overcommit and protect myself from burning out.

Ah!! I love her. Totally solid. Major props for walking her talk. She's the best. And in respecting her time, we wrapped it up.

Alie: Last listener question. I saved it because it was juicy! Oh, it's so juicy! Bailey Ricketts wants to know: How do we find a balance between being happy and living in the moment while acknowledging all the hurt and suffering going on in the world? Essentially, guilt over being happy when you know that there's a lot of bad shit out there. How do we do it??

Dr. Santos: Yeah. Tough. This is, like, a really real one because there's a lot of bad stuff out there right now. Structural racism, horrible global pandemic, the list goes on.

So, I think one thing that helps me is recognizing that if I want to be the kind of person who's an ally for all that stuff, all the yucky stuff in the world, who wants to have the resilience to fix it, I'm not going to be able to do that if I'm incredibly anxious, and overwhelmed, and burnt out. I'm going to be able to do that best if I'm really in a happy state, if I'm really feeling good, if I have put my own oxygen mask on first, right?

And in fact, there's evidence that so many of the things we were talking about that are parts of a happy life help for doing hard things. My favorite one is that people who are grateful are better at what's called self-regulation. They're better at doing the hard thing today to help their future self, whether that's saving for retirement, or eating healthier, or putting work into hard, scary problems that just require a lot of hard, scary work.

So, for me, it's made me feel like if I want the world to be a better place, I can't afford to be down in the dumps freaking out about it. I really need to put energy into doing these practices for myself so that I'll be, hopefully, one of the people that has the bandwidth to help with some of this stuff. So, far from feeling guilty, I feel like we might want to feel guilty for the opposite thing, right? Doing what we can to fix things, it really does require not just working on these structures, but working on our emotions so that we have the bandwidth to fix those structures that might be messed up.

Alie: Ah. That just, I'm sure, gave so many people permission to pursue happiness who feel, maybe, guilty about it. And by so many people, I mean me specifically. *[laughs]* But no, that's really helpful.

Last two questions I ask before we go. Worst thing about your job, worst thing about being a eudemon... ologist, *[laughs]* and the best thing.

Dr. Santos: There's lots and lots of good things, but if I have to shift towards negativity, I would say the hardest thing is that, you know... one of the things I really try to pay attention to is this phenomenon of time affluence, this subjective sense that I have a lot of free time. And being a happiness guru, especially in an age where there's a lot of bad stuff going on and a global pandemic, it keeps me pretty busy because, you know, a lot of people want advice, a lot of people want help. And that means I have to put a lot of work in to protect my time. So, the hardest thing is protecting my time in the midst of everything else going on.

Alie: I can totally understand that. I just got your autoreply that was like, "Yo, I get like a hundred emails a day. Thank you so much, but I gotta stick to my principles."

Dr. Santos: And that's hard, right? Because I get to my inbox and I'm like, "Oh, that listener has this really cool thing to say," or "this student has a really cool question." But I also know that if I answer all those, that means I'm not spending time with the people I care about and I'm not having time to meditate and exercise. So, it's hard prioritizing the right stuff. But time affluence is definitely something I need to work on prioritizing.

Alie: I'd never heard those words before but I love them. Best thing about your job? Best thing about your career?

Dr. Santos: Oh man. There's so many best things. Honestly, I think the best things are my students. I love them so much; I love interacting with them. They teach me so much and I'm so privileged to get to work with them.

Alie: That's great. I am so happy to talk to you. I have been a fangirl for years!

So ask smart people happy questions, or bumper questions. They are wonderful and they're great at sharing their knowledge. Obviously, get more of Dr. Laurie Santos with her podcast [The Happiness Lab](#). Her [socials](#) are [linked](#) in the show notes. She is great. If you can take her course, take it. It's also available on Coursera for free, so look for that. I will link all of those on my website too, which is [AlieWard.com/Ologies](#).

We are @AlieWard on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). We're also @Ologies on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). Find us there, be our friends. Thank you to Erin Talbert, who moderates and admin the Ologies Podcast [Facebook group](#) and is excellent at that. Thank you, Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch, who are of the podcast *You Are That*, comedy podcast. They manage our merch at [OlogiesMerch.com](#). Thank you, Emily White of The Wordary. She is a professional transcriptionist who makes transcriptions available. She's great. Hire her. She's wonderful. Caleb Patton bleeps our episodes; those are available on our website for free. The link is in the show notes.

We also have *Smologies*, which are episodes we put out once every two weeks. They are cut-down versions of classic ones that have already run. They are cleaned up and kid friendly. They're ready for the classroom. So, look for *Smologies* too if you have smologies.

Thank you to Noel Dilworth and Susan Hale for helping me take care of all the *Ologies* business behind the scenes. Thank you to Steven Ray Morris and Zeke Rodrigues Thomas, who are also working on *Smologies* and wonderful. Thank you to editor Jarrett Sleeper. And also, thank you to Gremmie. We are actually recording this in the car as I'm on my way up to see my pop for his birthday. And I recorded this at five in the morning this morning before I hit the road and then I realized that my mic gain was all the way down, so I had to re-record it on the side of the road, which is what we're doing. *[laughs]* Hoo-hoo! That's one secret of the episode.

The other secret is, you know how sometimes it'll be like, "If you need to clean a screen, just use a microfiber cloth"? And you're like, "Yeah, well, what do I use to clean it with though? Windex? What are we talking here? Water? What do I use with the microfiber cloth?" So, I just tried just the microfiber cloth like you're supposed to use and it cleaned the shit out of my laptop. Like, my monitor's never been so clean. All I did was use one of those microfiber, too-soft-on-your-hands cloths and, apparently, they're good at what they're supposed to be used for. So, go figure.

Okay, berbye.

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