

Awesomeology with Neil Pasricha

Ologies Podcast

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Oh heey, it's that person sitting on the bus who has the same phone case as you, so you spend the whole ride wondering if you should say something and then you never do, Alie Ward, back with an episode of *Ologies* that I hope lifts some spirits. Or at the very least, has you sprawled out on a blanket staring into the canopy of a tree, because is happiness even possible in this, our shared, global porta-potty of circumstance? Does being grateful do jack? Can we train our brains to look for the good?

Okay, one good thing, real quick, Patrons at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://patreon.com/Ologies) who make this show possible. You can join if you want. It's 25 cents an episode. It's a dollar a month. It's cheaper than a parking meter by the minute, my friends. Thank you also to everyone finding other ologites in the wild by wearing *Ologies* merch, including masks. Thank you particularly for that. And for keeping this show up in the charts by rating and subscribing. Genuine thanks to everyone who leaves reviews. You know that I read all of them and then I pick a new one each week to read like a comment card at a local diner, such as this one from Lyssagogo1234 who says:

I love how Alie is immediately best friends with everyone she interviews.

Oh, Lyssagogo1234, you have no idea how timely this is. Get ready for some real friend magic in this one.

So, *Awesomeology*, first off, it is a word. It does exist on the internet already. It is defined as the study of awesome, naturally. 'Awesome' comes from a root meaning 'profoundly reverential' way back in the 1500s. But before that, 'awe' referred to a feeling of terror or fright. And in the 1200s 'awe' even connoted depression. So, 'awe' came from fright until it meant thunderstruck, and then it meant cool, like in the early 1960s. So, depression, to reverence, to cool, and this episode is centered around the science of gratitude. Is there any? There is. And why having awe for everyday life can give your brain a helping hand out of the muck that we all get stuck in. So, I myself struggle with this a ton. I found this episode to be full of really good strategies, some intriguing science, and also, most importantly, permission to treat my brain with some kindness and stop the hamster wheel to take stock of what's good.

Now, this guest is someone I have known about for years, but we were just introduced by Ludology guest and videogame expert, Dr. Jane McGonigal. And I was so excited, because I remember his blog, *1000 Awesome Things*, and it got me through some a really stressful time when I was working at a newspaper and I was just utterly frazzled. I've always wanted to look at the science of gratitude ever since I made the *Gratefulology is Not a Real Word* minisode, I think back in 2017. And because he's a person who has authored several books looking into it, I sent a too-eager email asking him to be a guest.

He's a long time humor writer, he's a graduate of Harvard Business School, he's an author, a TED speaker, he's the founder of the Institute for Global Happiness, which offers a bunch of free resources to help improve happiness in the workplace. He wrote *The Book of Awesome*, *The Happiness Equation*, and *You Are Awesome*, and he also hosts a podcast. It's great, it's called *3 Books*, and in each episode he reads three formative books of a guest. But first and foremost, listen to this one in its entirety because despite his many accomplishments and dissection of what makes our

thinky parts happy, he's also just a normal, cool guy who understands that no one is happy all the time and that the goal is not to be happy but just a little happier.

So get comfy, kick back, and hear first about a few tough things and then about your new morning ritual, why you should sniff a tree, diary entries, honeymoon drama, the illusion of history, the simplicity of appreciation, the gambles you take while scrolling, regrets, meditation tricks, and how to wrestle with your wiring that means well. Plus, a few of my poodle tick-tacking in and out of the room with my new buddy, Awesomeologist, Neil Pasricha.

Alie Ward: If you could say your first and last name and your pronouns.

Neil Pasricha: My name is Neil Pasricha, and my pronouns are he and him.

Alie: Cool, thank you! First off, I have known about you for over a decade, and I was a really big fan of your blog! So, I've just known about you forever. I feel like you've been in my life for like a decade.

Neil: Oh my gosh, that's so kind of you. I mean, I wrote *1000 Awesome Things* from 2008 to 2012. It was a four-year stretch, like, nine-ish years ago or whatever, so whenever anyone says that to me, which is pretty, pretty rare, I think of them as an old friend.

Alie: Oh yeah.

Neil: Yeah, it's so cool. Thank you for knowing me when I wasn't the version of myself that I am now.

Alie: Early adopter over here, dude!

Aside: It's true. I've seen his TED Talk, and I knew of his work way back, when in order to get updates on people's lives you had to mosey to their individual BlogSpots or WordPressers. Tweets, in that day – I don't know if you know this – arrived as group texts on flip phones. So, for an approximate eon, this guy's been on my radar.

Alie: I know your back story, so I'm going to have to ask it anyway, but I don't even know where to begin because I'm just so excited to talk to you. So you've been through some shit, dude, as have a lot of people, but you went through a pretty shitty time and you decided to try to get through the other side of it. Can you tell me a little bit about that first decision to just start your blog?

Neil: Yeah, sure. So, I just did a callback to 2008, 2009 time period and what I didn't mention was that I came home from work one night and my wife told me that she did not want to be married to me anymore. We had been together two years, marriage-wise, but I think something like four or five years as a couple. We had just bought a house, we were talking about having kids, and I just didn't see it coming. It was just shock. It wasn't anger. It wasn't relief. It was just, "What?" It was just complete shock; I didn't see that coming.

At the same time, my closest friend Chris was going through some severe mental health challenges, and that culminated in an attempted suicide and, sadly, eventually, an actual suicide where he took his own life. Of course as this was all happening I'm like, "Okay, well I've got sell the house, I've got to process this divorce, I need to find a place to live, and I have to give a eulogy," and I'm a complete mess. You mentioned that Twitter had just started, but really, I had newspaper, and TV, and radio; these were the distraction vehicles of the time. But when you turn on any of those things it's all 100% bad news. It's still a way to learn about all the world's ills and problems.

So, I was like, "I need a way to distract myself and put myself in a positive mood," and so I go to Google and I type in 'How to start a blog' and WordPress just narrowly edged out BlogSpot as the top hit and so that's where I went. So, I started a blog called 1000AwesomeThings.com just as a way to put a smile on my face before I went to bed.

Now listen, Alie, I didn't know anything about these gratitude research studies or journaling practice studies. I didn't know shit about that. All I knew was I needed a way to distract myself before bed. And my posts sucked! My very first post on the blog was "Broccoflower," the ugly hybrid child of nature's ugliest vegetables. I put a picture of green cauliflower and I was like, "How crazy is this thing?? Awesome!" That was my whole entry. The birth of the blog was just, "This is awesome today," and I went to bed. Then I wrote the next day about, "Yeah, the smell of walking by a bakery and they're baking croissants," right? Then the next day, "I found five bucks in my old coat pocket, yay." I wrote about that.

Over time what happened was... A couple months later I wrote a post called "Old Dangerous Playground Equipment." I talked about, how bad is it that we don't have slides that burn the bottom of our legs anymore? You can't crash land in a bed full of cigarettes and milk thistles. Kids are wimps! You know, it was just like, "Kids today, they stink!" The post hit the front page of Fark.com, which was... you probably know, the sixth biggest social media site in the world; that's what they called themselves. And it got like 50,000 hits in one day, and then from there I had an audience. I didn't know what to do with an audience other than to keep going. So, as you've already kind of hinted or we have in the title, I wrote an awesome thing every single weekday for 1,000 straight weekdays from 2008 to 2012, to cheer myself up.

Aside: Neil started at the bottom and his first post was titled "#1000 Broccoflower" but some other random gems:

- Watching Cream Go into Coffee
- When You Should Have Gotten A Parking Ticket but Didn't
- When Someone Pronounces Your Name Right on The First Try
- When You Think You're Out of Clean Underwear, But Then You Find One More Pair
- The First Ten Seconds After You Turn Out the Lights and Wiggle Yourself into A Good Sleeping Position
- Finding Hidden Compartments in Things You Already Own (maybe my personal favorite thing in the universe)
- Remembering How Lucky We Are to Be Here Right Now
- #1 Anything You Want It to Be

Now, his book *The Book of Awesome* became a *New York Times* bestseller and the #1 International Bestseller for 142 weeks. This resonated with people. He went on to write several other books and built a small empire focused on intentional living and generally trying to make life suck less.

Alie: Before it went viral, before you started getting an audience, did you find your perspective, or your mood, or your optimism start to shift before that?

Neil: I mean, the thing is, I could not see anything good anywhere, right? That's the problem. I think it's even more pervasive today with how we monetize news media and social media, which is with our attentions and our mindshare going towards things that are controversial, or negative, or obscene, or absurd. So, I just couldn't see anything positive, and therefore when I

posted about the other side of the pillow, and how turning it over to the cold side makes me happy, and 17 comments show up the next morning that are like, “Oh my gosh that so true!” and “How about when you’re lying on a couch and someone throws a blanket on you,” and someone else is like “Ooooh! I love that!”

And people just started... The little horrible solar system that was my brain at the time started forming a new planet that weighted down things towards positivity, and so the gravitational force of this blog in my own mind created people throwing and sticking comments, and ideas, and all that. So, it just rolled and rolled and got bigger and bigger until it was a giant thing where, yeah, I started carrying around a cue card every day, writing down a list of things I found awesome every day. That practice alone will do this for you. If anyone listening is like, “What should I do?” Just put a cue card in your pocket and write down good stuff you see. There you go! There you go, that’s the answer because that’s what totally helped change my thinking.

Alie: And did you ever then try to figure out if a bunch of people were studying this scientifically? Did something click and did you say, “Wait, this isn’t just me, right?”

Neil: Well, it was a long time before I started leaning into the science. Really it came from the fact that people kept asking me these questions and I had no answer. I got invited on the *Today Show* and Meredith Vieira, the host, looks me in the eye... And they don’t tell you the questions before you go on the biggest morning show in the world. They don’t think it’s nice to tell you the questions! I’m sitting there, and frickin’ J-Lo is walking off the set, and Meredith looks me in the eye and says, “So, how do you teach all of America to be happy like you?”

In my head I’m thinking, “I’ve lost 40 pounds due to stress, I’ve got black bags under my eyes, they just repainted my entire face for this show, all my friends think I’m depressed because I’m living in a bachelor apartment by myself, I’m not dating, I’m not going out, I’m not doing anything other than working on my blog outside of my day job,” which is working at Wal-Mart. And I just fumbled through an answer, but after getting asked that question enough times, I’m like, “I’m going to keep getting asked...” you know? I start looking into the research, I start picking up books like *Stumbling on Happiness* by Daniel Gilbert.

Aside: Neil rolled up his sleeves and started studying up on gratitude and how it affects happiness. He was like, “How does this really work?”

Neil: What is so-and-so saying about this, and what is this other person saying? And then it all came hitting me in the head, really, Alie, when a few years later I fell in love with Leslie, who, spoiler alert, is my wife today. She and I went on a honeymoon to Southeast Asia, which was awesome, and great, and wonderful, until the flight home. On the flight home she was not feeling well, she was sick. We had a six-hour layover in Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur. She’s like, “I need to find a pharmacy, I need to find a place to lay down, I need to find a place to rest,” and I’m like “Are you sure you’re going to make this 13-hour flight home from here to Toronto?” And she’s like, “Yeah, I’m definitely up for that.”

So we find a pharmacy, we find a place to lie down, we get on the airplane, and we take off to 30,000 feet above sea level, she goes to the tiny airplane bathroom at the front of the airplane, she comes back to our seats and she says, “I’m pregnant.” [*Alie squeals*]

She bought the pregnancy test in the Kuala Lumpur airport pharmacy! [*Alie laughs*] She did the pregnancy test in the tiny airplane bathroom at the front of the airplane! That’s when it hit home for me. I’m like, “All this stuff that’s been spinning around in my mind for the last few years, I need to put it into something concrete.” So I came up to Toronto and I wrote a

300-page letter to my unborn child on how to live a happy life. In that book, or in that letter which turned into a book called *The Happiness Equation*, that book really is just a giant letter of everything I learned on how to be happy or, I guess you'd call it, Awesomeology.

Alie: [*laughing*] Yes, you would!

Aside: And, great news, you do not have to be Neil's firstborn child to benefit from his research and writing. The happiness equation is, essentially:

Want Nothing + Do Anything = Have Everything

He covers things like how to make decisions faster, why success doesn't lead to happiness, and some myths about multitasking, because when you find out on an airplane that you're sitting next to your fetus, you want to give it the benefits of a lot of scientific research. Like, a lot of it.

Alie: Oh my gosh. I know we do not have the 12 hours I would like to sit here and ask you literally everything, but in that happiness equation, can you tell me a little bit about the Three A's of Awesome and how that factors into the happiness equation?

Neil: Yeah, sure. So basically, as the blog went viral and took off, I won an award at the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences called "Best Blog," or whatever. A Webby Award. [*"You're the best."*] So, I won that and then a bunch of literary agents came and asked if I wanted to have a book deal, I said yes, and then it turned into a book called *The Book of Awesome*.

Why do I tell you that? Because now when the book came out, I was invited to do a Ted Talk, and when you do a Ted Talk, you can't say, "Uh, I have no idea why you guys invited me here. Here's a bunch of jokes I put on my blog." [*Alie laughs*] You're supposed to have a PowerPoint slide with a framework of some kind. That's what I thought.

So I was like, "Oh, what the hell am I going to say? I know! The Three A's of Awesome!" And so, my Ted Talk is called "The Three A's of Awesome," and in it, I talk about Attitude, Awareness, and Authenticity. I tried looking back at my own blog and asked myself, "Hey, what was it about that blog that helped it go viral and what did I learn inside myself?" To me, it came down to those three things.

In the speech I did not put any brass tacks around them, I didn't throw up reams of data and show all these numbers of correlations and dates. I just said, "Look, you gotta have a good attitude, you gotta be as aware as a three-year-old is of seeing everything like you're seeing it for the first time, and you need to be authentic to yourself."

You're doing this so well with *Ologies*. It's like, your purest, truest self is right here. I can feel your heart, I listen to your show and it's like you're right beside me, and I think when you get those compliments it's because you're so authentic.

So, I threw those things into a little PowerPoint slide and I was like, "That's the Three A's of Awesome." Then, flash forward to *The Happiness Equation* a few years later, and the root model underpinning the entire book, my entire view on happiness is this: [*drumroll...*] basically, I think everybody is lied to as children. [*Joe Dirt: "For real??"*]

I think that everyone is told that great work leads to a big success, leads to being happy, and those six words are really important. Great work, leads to big success, leads to being happy. But as I started going into the research myself, I'm like, "Oh my gosh, how's everybody missing this?" The research says it's the exact opposite! [*"What?!"*]

If you look at Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky's work, she's published an amazing report that shows that if you show up to work or show up in your day with a positive attitude you actually end up with 31% higher productivity, 37% higher sales, three times more creativity, all these giant positive things come out of it. And then what happens? Well, it turns out that you end up getting promoted. You're 40% more likely to get promoted in the next year. And you're going to live longer and your longevity goes up. It's like, wait a minute! The model's backwards. It's *not* great work, big success, be happy; it's being happy leads to great work, leads to the big success.

Alie: Oh my goodddd! Whaaatttt??? [laughs] Holy shit, okay.

Neil: And what I mean is, when you're a kid, what do your parents say to you? If you're me, if you're a tiny brown kid in Canada, it's, "If you study really hard then you'll get good grades and you'll become a doctor." That was the Indian parents' dream, right? [Alie laughs] You become a doctor, and then presumably, the end of that is that you're happy. Or, if you're in any other career today, it's like, "If you work really hard, *then* you get the promotion, *then* you're happy."

Aside: Anyone else here raised Catholic? Thinking that this life is for suffering, and then once you die, Saint Peter lifts the heavenly velvet rope to the eternal VIP party where there's a shrimp buffet that never gives you diarrhea? I grew up with the Italian Catholic philosophy, "I'm not happy until I'm miserable."

Neil: The entire philosophy is about, "I'm working now to experience a pleasure later and happiness later." But it's the opposite!

Again, I quoted the work from Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky. It's basically, "No, no, if you can cultivate a positive mindset first, if when you wake up in the morning you can prime your brain for positivity somehow, if you can do that... I'm not it's easy, but if you can do that, then the great work follows." You're more productive, you're more creative, we like having happy bosses, we promote happy people underneath us, blah, blah, blah. And then, the big success. What kind of success? Well, both the career success and the health success, but also the longevity. Life success.

We only live for thirty thousand days! That's it. That's the total lifespan. And so if you're happy you get an extra bump. You get an extra few thousand. It's worth it.

Alie: [sighing] Ah! I need a fainting couch right now. [laughing] I'm about to collapse. That's bananas. They do not teach us that.

And [deep voice] okay... Obviously, and you know more than anyone... You were not handed circumstances that would necessarily lead to a bunch of cheerfulness, what with a marriage that fell apart without any notice, and losing someone so close to you to such tragic circumstances, so how do people who are experiencing terrible circumstances or who are predisposed chemically to not feel positive, what can we do that actually physically changes our brains?

Neil: Because anyone listening who just heard me say that it's not 'great work, big success, be happy', it's 'being happy leads to great work to big success', might be sitting right now, whether they're driving their truck, or in a hotel gym in Mongolia, or wherever they are, and say, "I call shenanigans on that. How do you *start* with being happy?" That's your question. How do you do that? That might lead to all the good stuff, but how do I do that first?

Since I referenced Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky's work once already, let me do it again. She's written a wonderful book called *The How of Happiness*. She posits a model which says 50% of your happiness is based on your genetics, 10% of your happiness is based on your circumstances, and 40% of your happiness is based on your intentional activities.

Aside: If right now you're the meme with the lady haunted by math equations, let me repeat that:

In the book *The How of Happiness* by research psychologist Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, she postulates that 50% of your happiness is based on your genetics, straight-up chemistry, genetics. 10% of your happiness is based on your circumstances, and 40% of your happiness is based on your intentional activities.

But remember though, the bulk of it, 50%, is genetic and chemical. And gratitude is not a fix for mental health issues. Nor is it anyone's failing to not feel happier. As someone with a medicated anxiety disorder, I would never trade my prescription for journaling, but I can learn to upgrade my thinking patterns to serve my brain and my body better. It's nice to think of my brain as kind of a jiggly little buddy up there and I'm trying to feed it fewer moldy leftovers and more of the healthy options it wants.

Neil: She's very careful to say it's a model, it's a framework, she's positing it. It's not like, "This is *the way* it is." My whole caveat on this entire conversation is: Let's remember that we're talking about the 40%. Okay?

If you happen to listen to this and you have two kids, one of them is probably a little happier than the other. There's a genetic set point that we all kind of start with. But the 40% is a lot. It means that it's four times as much as your circumstances. That's a huge thing! What you do in the world is four times more important than what's happening *to* you in the world.

So, in that 40%, now the question is, "Well, what do we throw in there, man? What's the ingredients of this recipe you're telling us to cook?" And in that sense, there are so many things! There are so many things, and I'll just give you, like, three to start with.

Alie: Okay.

Neil: When I say them to you, you're going to be like, "Oh of course!" because they're such good, obvious things, and each of these things is supported by just a huge stack of scientific paperwork that says this is really good for you.

Number one I'll start with is journaling. [*Dear diary...*] A really famous study from the University of Texas is called "How Do I Love Thee, Let Me Count the Words." They looked at couples in a relationship who journaled and those who did not. They weren't journaling about each other; they were just doing the exercise and practice of journaling. Those who did the exercise and practice were 50% more likely to stay together after the three-month mark.

Of course, we're talking University of Texas. Three months is a very long relationship, right? [*Alie laughs*] If it's any college campus. So, what I'm saying is journaling, first things first, do you visit yourself? Do you hang out with you? Do you process your thoughts? Do you put those fiery little tendons in your mind somewhere or do they just sit there setting your brain on fire all day? [*It's very hot in here, isn't it?*] Journaling is a prescription. Journaling helps you be happy, I can't be more clear. That's one.

Alie: I love this.

Neil: Another one I'm going to go on a rant about is forest therapy. Getting out into the woods. "I need to get out into nature." Yeah, you do need to get into nature! In fact, there's research that shows that trees release a chemical called phytoncide... I'm probably pronouncing it wrong. [*automated voice: "FYE-taun-side"*] It's a chemical that trees release that, guess what Alie, when you breathe in this chemical, guess what? Your cortisol goes down. Your adrenaline goes down. These are the stress hormones.

I'm saying, 20 minutes in the bushes is good for you! [*Alie laughs*] And if you're walking on a treadmill showing you a picture of some fancy trail, that doesn't count. A walk through a forest is better than the mall. You actually need to go outside. Those boots, you need to put them on your feet. You actually need to go into the woods. I'm telling you, 20 minutes a day and there's tons of research that supports this. The idea of physical exercise, these are also supporting. I just like the focus on the trees because I think that chemical stuff is really interesting.

Aside: Now, for more inspiration to lace up those boots and go bird watching, or bug hunting, or leaf caressing, listen to the recent Forest Ecology episode with KayDubs the Hiking Scientist. You can march forward, breathe deep, let nature help you. Then, you know, check your crevices in private.

Alie: But trees! So, go huff some bark, dude. [*Neil laughs uproariously*] I'm so into that!

Neil: [*still chuckling*] Oh my gosh, that is a great, great, great way to say it.

Okay, here's another one. Singing. Singing is really good for your happiness. Especially if you do it with a choir or with a group of people. Now, I know what you're thinking, "Hey wait a minute, didn't I just read a story about how a bunch of people singing in an indoor thing all gave each other COVID?"

Alie: Yep.

Neil: Yeah, okay, well the research was done before, but guess what? When you sing in a choir or you sing with a group of people, or when you're part of a social togetherness where you guys are doing something joyful, like singing, it's really, really good for you. I know that it's difficult now, but if you're living at home with a family, can you turn on some music and crank it and get into a family dance party? You can still do stuff like that.

Those are just some of the little, quick examples, I could go on and on about things like meditation, which is really hard for people to do but is really good for you. [*Alie laughs*] Massachusetts General Hospital shows that if you close your eyes and do even two minutes of deep breathing you increase the activity in your prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain responsible for focus and attention. You go from living in a washing machine to *looking* at a washing machine. Right?

Alie: Wow.

Neil: It's really hard for people to do this, but closing your eyes and doing a couple minutes of deep breathing improves your happiness.

Aside: My wonderful therapist recently recommended the 4-4-5 method, which is breathe in for four seconds, hold for four, breathe out for five. I do this all the time and it really helps my brain say to my body, "Okay, okay, everyone settle down. Let's just cool the jets. Four, four, five. Let's do this a couple times. We good? We Good? Okay."

Neil: So, just as a reminder, these things I'm starting to list now here around things like journaling, huffing some bark, singing with a choir, or meditating are just little things... ingredients you can toss into your recipe to build up that 40%, right?

Alie: Yeah. And then, how about... In terms of happiness, I'm sure that you get asked this a lot and you've had to do a lot of research, but what exactly is happiness? How do we even quantify that?

Neil: Not everything can be simplified into words or numbers, so what the researchers do in all these studies that I'm talking about is they use the phrase 'subjective wellbeing'. There is no part of our DNA or anything that shows up on a blood test that tells us how happy we are. What they do in all these research studies is ask people, "On a scale of 1 to 10 how happy are you with your life today?" They ask people who do some of these studies, journaling, exercise, meditation, etc., and then you compare yourself with both of your past and a test group to see, "Hey, where were there increases?"

Now if you're like, "Okay, that's nice. That's the research definition, but what is happiness? What *is* happiness? Tell me what happiness is, Neil!?" Well, there's an ancient Greek definition that I love that a lot of people quote, which is a wonderful definition, which is: the joy you feel while striving towards your potential. That's beautiful. The joy you feel while striving towards your potential. It's an ancient Greek definition.

If you're like, "Give me something else. Give me some juice." The book I already referred to, *The How of Happiness*, says: the experience of joy, contentment, or positive wellbeing; combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.

Alie: So, it doesn't have to be perfect, easy, or smooth – but meaningful, worthwhile, and good.

Neil: Right, that's exactly true. If you ask anyone who just came back from a five-kilometer run up a rainy hill... "I feel so happy!" I'm just trying to prove that what you just said is true. We can separate the idea that 'I'm happy right now' with the fact that 'I've done something that I feel is worthwhile and purposeful so I feel happy because of that'. I have never given birth, but I imagine giving birth might be kind of similar too.

Alie: I haven't either, nor have I passed a kidney stone, but I'm sure there's a lot of happiness when it comes to relief. What about when it comes to gratitude? We're nearing the season of gratitude. What does science tell us about gratitude and subjective wellbeing?

Neil: The most famous research comes from Emmons and McCullough. What they had people do is, at the end of each week write down five things they were grateful for; or different test groups – five events, or five hassles. So again, you had to kind of plumb your mind for either five things you were grateful for, or if you were in a different test group, five events... things that happened, or the third group was five hassles. Well, what they found is over a 10-week period, the participants who wrote down the things they were grateful for were not only happier, but physically healthier.

This partly speaks to some of our points earlier about how happiness is an indicator on health. Lowering stress, increasing heart health, helping you live longer, et cetera. Sometimes when I talk about this, people are like, "Well, that's nice to say, but what am I supposed to do? Grab a notebook and carry it around writing about ice cream cones?" No one's gonna do that. And so, what I always tell people to do is a game that Leslie and I play at our house at dinner every night, which is called Rose, Rose, Thorn, Bud. We go around the dinner table, we've got three little boys. They sometimes play well, and sometimes they run around and throw spaghetti against the wall.

But the point of the game is that everybody goes around the table and says a rose, [*clip from The Bachelor: "Will you accept this rose?"*] A rose, like, "My boss gave me a compliment." "I got an assist in hockey practice." Whatever it is, some tiny thing you're grateful for. Then you do it again!! You say another rose! Something else. This forces you to think about it. It makes you think, "Well, what really *did* happen today?" You end up reliving it, which is good.

Then we make space for a thorn. A thorn is something that did not go well. The goal of the room of course is just to listen, and just offer empathy in terms of body language and, like, an understanding nod. And then a bud. A bud is something you're looking *forward* to. It could be tomorrow. "I can't wait to watch cartoons tomorrow morning," or it could be, "I can't wait to rent a villa in Tuscany when I'm 110." It can be whatever in the future. So, the game Rose, Rose, Thorn, Bud, that you can play with your family, with your friends, with your partner, whatever, is a nice simple practice to bring the gratitude research you asked me about into your life naturally.

Alie: Ah, okay. We are going to get to Patreon questions because we have so many listeners who are [*deepens voice*] *veeeery excited*.

Neil: Including me! I'm a Patreon member.

Alie: [*squeals with excitement*] Ohhh you are?

Neil: Oh yeah, of course. I mean, it's a dollar... I gotta say, it's a little steep. You're pushing it there. I was like, "A dollar?! I can do a *lot* with a dollar a month!"

Alie: [*laughs*] My heart is cheap!

Neil: If I can help you pay the rent, I guess I'll offer a little.

Alie: [*laughing continues*] I appreciate it *so* much! This is so amazing and sweet. Sometimes Ologists will sneak in right before their episode and become patron so they can see what people are asking. I always love to see them sign up right before. But you're... the fact that you listen to my pod... I can't process it. I can't handle it. I can't process it. Ohhh my gosh! Okay. We're going to get to Patreon questions. You ready?

Neil: I'm ready.

Aside: Am I playing it cool *at all* in this episode? Nope. Not at all. No shame. I earnestly do not know how I bamboozle people that I admire into doing this podcast, but let's just say: I'm very grateful for it.

Also, I'm thankful for the chance to donate to a cause of the Ologist's choosing each week. Neil asked that it go to Performance Space New York, whose mission is to commission artists whose work challenges the boundaries of live performance. They are dedicated to supporting the creative risks taken by artists from diverse genres, cultures, and perspectives. They've been raising money also to provide housing for Black and trans housing-insecure artists. A donation was made in the name of Neil, and of writer Roxanne Gay, as they are teaming up on a charity drive. There is a link to Performance Space New York in the show notes. That donation was made possible by sponsors of the show, who you may hear about now.

[*Ad Break*]

Okay, back to as many questions as I can fit in my mouth. Starting with one that may have been nagging at you this entire time.

Alie: But yeah, there's a lot. Sara Wilbur, Mardee Goodwin, and Sara Neilson all asked about unhappiness. Sara says: Why does it seem like our default is to be unhappy? Do you find that? Do you find that a lot of people feel that way?

Neil: I want to focus on the word *seem* there just for a second because I mentioned it earlier and I don't think I've gone on a legit enough rant about this, and I really want to. That is, where are you getting your information? If you're listening to *Ologies* – phenomenal. But if you are consuming any form of news media or social media, which pretty much everyone is, and everyone is probably to addictive levels, let's just really watch it right now. Because right now those business models are completely oriented to monetizing your attention by feeding you negativity. That *is* happening. Why is that happening? Well, because you've got an almond-size thing in the middle of your brain, from the oldest part of your brain, called your amygdala.

Aside: The amygdala, sidenote, is part of the limbic system which scientists casually and kind of insultingly call the 'Old Brain', although the brain stem is said to be the oldest-oldest part. But yes, the evolutionarily oldest inner layers of our brains help us regulate survival functions, including the question we ask ourselves hundreds of times a day, which is, "Will this thing here kill me? Is *this* gonna kill me? Is *that* gonna kill me? Are *you* gonna kill me? Is this gonna kill me??" Every time we do something scary like text a crush, make a presentation, cut our bangs, write an important email, et cetera, our brain is shrieking "This could kill you! This could kill you! Just heads up, this is gonna kill you! Ohhh man we're gonna die!" In the Fearology episode with Mary Poffenroth, we dubbed the amygdala the 'screaming almond of terror'. It's very well-meaning, but a little dramatic.

Neil: And that thing releases a fight-or-flight hormone all day! All day! Which is awesome for when you hear a stick snap in the middle of the woods in the middle of the night, you're like, "Is that a bear?!" That is a great, good evolutionary thing. If you are in an immediate emergency – great! Unfortunately, that thing can be totally abused. It's why we all rubberneck on the highway. It's why when you get a blood test back from your doctor, you scan for the high cholesterol. When you get a math test back for your teacher, you scan for the one question you got wrong. Yes, you have thousands and thousands and thousands of positive reviews, but I'm guessing, Alie, that you look at the one that's one-star sometimes and you're like, [*flabbergasted*]. That's the one that one jumps out for you.

Alie: Oh, a hundred bazillion percent.

Neil: One in 10 billion for your show, it's so good, but I just mean... I'm a podcaster too, I do the exact same thing. [*Alie laughs*] I go on iTunes and I'm like, "Wait a minute. One person thought my voice was bad? I need to get voice surgery!"

Aside: As mentioned, Neil has a podcast called *3 Books*, and you should listen. One day I will be on. I already told him 2 of the books, and already regret one because my amygdala likes to fear judgement. It sees judgement as a cobra hiding in my toilet. I know that's bullshit. I'm working on it.

Neil: So anyway, news media and social media are the devil, and they are totally mining our attention right now to feed us constant negativity. Before I answer it as best as I can, I will just say: where are you getting your inputs? Because right now it's super dangerous to be consuming the amount of news media and social media that we are. That is totally overwhelming. You can't process that. That's gonna fry you. So, listen to this podcast and delete everything else.

Alie: [laughs] Rachel Selby, Florence Yuan, and Gen Renard asked about this particular thing – about social media. Rachel says: How have we noticed that increasing technology integration and continued technological advances affect happiness? Have we noticed social media affecting happiness? I remember reading something that refreshing social media activates the same part of the brain as a slot machine where, because you don't know if you're going to get something good or bad, it's unpredictable, you keep refreshing. Do you find that? Is there research on that at all?

Neil: Yeah. That's it. You just quoted it. That's exactly it. The fact that you don't know if your picture is going to get 17 likes or 300 is what makes you want to check if you got a consistent reaction. It's similar to that study that they always quote, and I'm going to butcher it, but it's like when the rats press the lever when they don't know how many pellets are going to come out. If there is always one pellet, they'll get bored. If there's always zero, they won't do it. But if it's like 1, 0, 17!, 1, 0, they just keep pushing it because they don't know what's going to come. It's exactly what you called the 'slot machine effect' on our brains.

Aside: I did a deep dive fact checking this research and I'm not going to derail us by reading all the research to you but ooh BOY HOWDY, there is plenty. I'll link the studies on my website, but the bullet points are:

Anthropologists note that gambling becomes addictive because of the cycle of “intermittent variable rewards” and Dr. Natasha Schüll wrote the book *Addiction by Design* based on her research into gambling. She stated in a 2019 *Guardian* article that, “Facebook, Twitter and other companies use methods similar to the gambling industry to keep users on their sites,” and “We have to start recognizing the costs of time spent on social media. It's not just a game – it affects us financially, physically and emotionally.”

What does Silicon Valley have to say? Well, Google design ethicist Tristan Harris, calls your smartphone “The Slot Machine in Your Pocket”. Pardon me, Harris is Google's *former* design ethicist. In an article he published via *Medium*, Harris writes: Does this effect really work on people? Yes. Slot machines make more money in the United States than baseball, movies, and theme parks combined. Every time we post, it's like pulling the lever, and we may get a windfall of likes, or not. Going viral is also a jackpot possibility lurking in the back of our heads.

Reading all this research, honestly my spine tingled, and blood rushed to my face. Just irate. So next time you have a choice between sitting under a tree for 20 minutes lookin' at squirrels or scrolling, just think of social media like a smokey, crusty casino serving you cheap gin mixed with flat Pepsi, just desperate for you to empty your brain savings into their sweaty sausage hands. I'm so pissed!

Neil: That's *one* problem of social media. There are others. [deep sigh] For example, there's a psychological problem of comparing your director's cut life with everyone else's greatest hits. No matter how good that burrito you microwaved today for lunch – you chopped up a little avocado, you put a dollop of sour cream, and you even melted the little cheese, and you have this special salsa that you really like, and you put a little jalapeno. It was awesome. And then you go on Instagram and someone's at a lobster buffet in the Maldives. It's impossible to feel good about yourself when psychologically you're told that you suck. All. The. Time.

There's a physical problem with social media. We don't talk about this enough, but I think it's worth mentioning. I went to my physiotherapist last year and I was like, “My thumb doesn't work. I can't move my thumb.” And she said to me, “all we're doing is thumbs now.” It used to

be, when you were a kid, people had casts. Remember signing casts? Like someone broke their leg because they jumped off the dangerous playground equipment? Well, now everyone just has sunken eyes and broken thumbs, and when you tilt your head forward, you apply 60 pounds of pressure to your spine. Okay?! [clip from Jerry Maguire: "The human head weighs eight pounds."]

The *third* problem also starts with the letter P. Three P's in a row: psychological, physical, and I'll say – physiological. Research from Australia shows that when you expose your brain to a bright screen within one hour of bedtime, you don't produce as much melatonin! That is the sleep hormone, it's what helps you get a deep REM-induced sleep. So, when you look at a bright screen within an hour of bedtime, guess what happens? You don't go that far down the rabbit hole. Then you wake up with even lower resilience, lower happiness. So, what do you? You see what Trump tweeted when you wake up because you don't have the resilience not to check.

Aside: I just love how much Neil has geeked out on this, and done research, and cited studies. I went and looked up every single one he mentioned, and they all check out and will be linked on my website. Social media has jacked our happiness and left us addicted, and they know what they're doing. But back to those three P's: Psychological – comparing our lives unfairly; Physical – carpal tunnel and eye strain; Physiological – poor sleep. Dang! That's too many P's already. I'm P.O.'d and I'm peeved!

Neil: If you want me to throw another P in there just for good measure, I will say there's also a huge *productivity* problem. Research is now showing that we spend 31% of our day bookmarking, prioritizing, and switching. Let me say that again. We're spending about a third of our day not doing anything – but just deciding what to do.

If you ever decided to hang out with yourself or your loved one and watch Netflix and you're like, "Ah, yeah, the partner's coming downstairs after they put the kids to bed. Let me drum up a show that we're going to watch." And by the time they come downstairs, you spent half an hour going on Rotten Tomatoes trying to look up rankings, and checking trailers on YouTube because you really want to get the perfect... Then suddenly it's 9:20 and you haven't picked a show. You're like, "Well, forget it. I'm going to bed." That's what we're doing all day. We're bookmarking, prioritizing, and switching between tasks. We're not actually getting as much done, ironically. Okay, so those four Ps. I just laid them on you.

Aside: Recap: Psychological. Physical. Physiological. Productivity. Also, this guy has written books researching happiness, he founded a global happiness institute and is telling you: social media may be making you feel like garbage and it's okay to cut back on it for your sanity and for your wellbeing. You don't have to bury your head in the sand or disengage from justice: but maybe read the news on a different app, sign up for informative newsletters, go to dedicated groups for certain causes. But just aimlessly scrolling through people's workouts, and brunches, and vacations, and hoping that you get likes on yours may not be what your brain, or the world, needs.

Neil: Are some of the problems of social media? Yes. It's a huge, huge problem. What I actually tell people to do, and you didn't ask me this, but I say: get rid of that phone from the bedroom. Number one priority is to get the phone out of the bedroom. People say that they can't because it's their alarm clock. Go to Walmart! They're 10 bucks. Then they say that they can't because they're very important and they get a lot of calls. No, you don't. You don't get a lot of emergency calls. You're lying. And if you really need emergency calls, get a landline. They're

\$10 now. Give the phone number to your direct report, or your boss, or your mom, or whoever so you know you have the peace of mind of being reachable.

Then, when that phone's out of your bedroom, when you wake up in the morning, what you need to do is grab a pen and a piece of paper. I want you to write down: "I will let go of... I am grateful for... and I will focus on... I call this the two-minute morning practice. Each of these three things are backed by research. I can talk about that if you want.

So, "I will let go of" helps eliminate a regret every day. "I will let go of how much screen time my kids are getting." "I will let go of using a disposable mask for three straight weeks." "I will let go with the fact that I have terrible mom guilt right now because I'm totally ignoring my work to just take care of my kids or vice versa." This is research from *Science* magazine. The research is called 'Don't Look Back in Anger' that shows that minimizing regrets as we age increases our happiness.

Aside: Quick aside, this was a 2012 study and the full title is "Don't Look Back in Anger! Responsiveness to Missed Chances in Successful and Unsuccessful Aging." The researchers state that "results suggest disengagement from regret reflects a critical resilience factor for emotional health in older age." So dang, if you have a 'No Regrets' tattoo, keep on not regretting it, as well as not regretting other stuff, every morning.

Neil: "I will let go of..." That's how you start your day. Don't have that stuff floating around all day. "I am grateful for" is number two. We already talked about all the research behind gratitude. The only thing I haven't said yet, Alie, is that it's gotta be specific. Don't say 'my husband'. Say, "When my husband Rodriguez put the toilet seat down." Don't say 'my dog'. Say, "when my shih tzu Toby learned how to shake a paw." Be specific! The specificity is partly what's actually causing you to develop those positive neural pathways in your brain to actually think of the things that you're happy about.

Third was, "I will focus on." We all suffer from decision fatigue these days. We need to carve a will-do from our endless 'could-do' and 'should-do'. It should be the most annoying thing. It should be 'calling my cable company' or 'making that dentist appointment' or 'finally putting the files in the garage' or whatever it is, the annoying thing.

"I will let go of... I am grateful for... and I will focus on..." is a two-minute morning practice that helps the other 998 minutes you're awake a day, be happier. And yes, the average person is awake a thousand minutes a day

Alie: A thousand minutes a day!

Neil: That's all you've got. A thousand minutes a day. The average person is awake for a thousand minutes a day. Is everyone else trying to do the math right now of how many hours it is? Like 16 and two-thirds hours, I think.

Alie: You always hear that, like, Beyoncé has the same number of hours in a day. She has the same number of minutes. She also has probably more personal assistants, but still. *[laughs]* She's doing something.

Neil: Yeah, and I bet you she's not waking up and checking Twitter though. You know what I'm saying? I mean, I don't know Beyoncé. I mean, it's just been a while since we last connected. *[laughs]* I just think that those people – I don't know why we're using her as an example – that live their life with a deep intentionality and are thinking about how to consciously imbue a bit more happiness in their life. Be intentional when you get up. Don't let someone else tell you what to think when you wake up. Your phone is designed to be a push device. It pushes

stuff at you; alerts, texts, notifications. It's what everyone else has on *their* agenda. Big thing here is: make it what's on *your* agenda.

Alie: That actually dovetails into some questions about self-care versus selfishness. Gracie Zecha, Kristen Henriksen, Laura Smith, Katrina Nguyen, Toni Jane, Hilary Larson, and Earl of Greymalkin, as well as first-time question-askers, Emily Okerlund and Kelly Semon.

Neil: Are you saying that all these people ask the same question? Are you just lumping them together?

Alie: [*defensive laughs*] Yes, I'm lumping them together! Similar questions.

Neil: [*laughs*] I'm just joking with you.

Alie: Gracie says: How do you see the line between self-care and selfishness for your happiness? And Kristen asked: How do you foster happiness when you have a hard time feeling worthy or you're experiencing depression?

Neil: [*deep sigh*] There is an epidemic in our society today where we are not prioritizing ourselves before we are prioritizing others. When you go on the airplane, and I know it feels like a distant memory for everybody right now, other than *you* (Alie) flying around doing your fancy film shoots.

Alie: [*laughs*] I was on a 5am flight on Wednesday.

Aside: PS: I was flying for work, not for fun or leisure. Also, can you do me a favor and cancel your holidays this year? COVID rates are surging in the US and you will save lives, possibly the lives of those most dear to you and/or your own, by sitting this one out and eating stuffing over Zoom. Just cancel. Do it now. Everyone will be relieved. Anyway, back to airplanes.

Neil: And what did they say when you were on your 5am flight? They said, "if the oxygen mask falls out of the ceiling in the middle of this, put it on your mouth first before you put it on your kid." For anyone that has a three-year-old beside them in an airplane, for those of us that are parents, it's like, "I wouldn't do that." You would instinctively want to put it on your kid first. You want to feed your kid first. You just take care of your kid first.

However, the airlines are smarter than us. [*laughs*] (Sentences that have never been said!) They know that you're no good. You're just dead weight. You are no good to anyone unless you take care of yourself first. You cannot pour from an empty vessel. Self-care should be your number one priority. It is more important to take care of yourself because you *cannot* take care of anybody; you cannot help *anybody*; you cannot show up and do a good job for your boss; you cannot do a good job for your kids; you cannot do a good job for your sister or for your mom, if you don't take care of yourself first.

The version of the question that I often get is, "Well, I'm taking care of my aging mom full-time. I don't have enough time to go for a 20-minute walk in the woods" or "How am I supposed to journal? Because you don't know my life, dude. You don't understand that I've got three jobs and I'm taking public transit between them all. You don't get it." Now, what I always say is, yeah, it's true we're trying our best to understand each other. That's the point of humanity, but what I'm saying is: could you overprioritize the two-minute morning practice, for example? And know that when you're doing that and your kid is crying because they just woke up downstairs, you're going to be a better parent for the rest of the day. Could you do that if you just *knew* that it's better for everybody? It's not selfish. It's selfless to take care of yourself first.

Alie: Yeah. I mean, considering that emotions can be so contagious at times, especially if you're in a close family unit, that taking care of yourself for two minutes or five minutes is probably going to be better overall for the people around you if you're not feeling rung out, bitter, and annoyed.

Neil: Well, exactly. I think that's it. I think that's exactly right. People say, "Is the glass half full or is it half empty?" I say, it's refillable. [*repeats for emphasis*] I say, it's refillable! [*laughs*] You get to decide how full you show up every day. I'm not saying it's easy. I'm not saying it's easy to prioritize, but I'm saying, when you go through the difficult work of prioritizing it, you will reap massive benefits and so will those around you.

Aside: Also kiddos, your old DadWard Von Podcast has been doing these things in the last few weeks since we had this interview, per professional Awesomeologist Neil's prescription. I am pleased and astounded to report that I feel way the fuck better. Who knew that taking some time for myself to shower, unwind, read a magazine, rest, and just be a person, would make me a better friend, girlfriend, worker, and human being?

I know things are very difficult with COVID scares, geopolitics, and worrying about people I love who are sick, but I am so much better able to roll with things when I am not frayed, burnt out, and neglecting basic human needs like rest and grooming. Holy shit! If you're like me and you heard this advice but you didn't listen to it for years, I am giving you permission to take care of yourself. It's so important and you deserve it. We all do. Is this sappy and earnest? Yes. Am I apologetic? No.

Alie: Okay. Good question by a lot of people. Jessica Janssen, Bob Clark, Zoë Buckley, Tristyn Vaughan, Skylar L. Primm, Erica Periandri, Nikki DeMarco, Sadie Baker, Katrina Nguyen, Madelyn Winter and Ali Reil all asked essentially about happiness amid world chaos. I feel like we are living in a time of some real bullshit right now. I find that my boyfriend goes through this a lot, and I, as someone who was raised as a Catholic, have difficulty finding happiness for myself when I see other people in pain or when I know there's a lot of people suffering. Jessica Janssen wants to know: How do you feel COVID-19 has greatly affected our happiness? Bob Clark says: This is something I've been struggling with a bit with everything going on in the world.

How do you keep up with current events like the climate crisis, racism, and basically just 2020, without losing some sort of lasting happiness? How can you stay positive when the world is literally on fire and it looks like it's going to get worse.? How do we balance being informed, empathetic, and compassionate with also not getting too sucked into overwhelm?

Aside: Oh, my god. This backstory. Get ready.

Neil: I mentioned a long time ago in this conversation that I used to work at Wal-Mart. What I didn't mention was what my job was there. I spent 10 years there. I had a number of different roles, but they were always in the HR department. Sometimes I was in charge of leadership development; sometimes I was doing learning and training. Then, for a pretty challenging year, I was one of these people that helped bosses terminate their employees. [*Alie cringes*]

It was a terrible job, but also it was a really huge opportunity for empathy and compassion because I was helping bosses look at their teams and figure out what they needed because they had limited budget or head count. I was in the room for when these conversations happened. This wasn't the only part of my job, but I was probably in the room for over a hundred of these conversations. [*Alie gasps*] And then I was the one with the Kleenex, and I

was the one walking them to help their collect their bags. I helped put the framed brass pictures in the cardboard box and took them into the parking lot in the middle of winter.

Whenever I did that, it broke my heart and I couldn't sleep. It was overwhelming. And people said the same things to me all the time, Alie. They would say, "I thought I would be here forever. I don't know what I'm going to do now," "I'll never find another job." It was a complete emotional shock. It was a horrible feeling for them and everybody around them at the time. However, I am Canadian, and Canada is kind of small. I live in Toronto, and in retail, you just bump into people again. Over the years, I would inevitably bump into a number of people that were let go of their jobs. You know what they used to say to me? Every single one of them said it was the best thing that happened to them. Every single one. I never had anyone not say that.

"I traveled to Peru." "I became a nutritional supplement importer." "I'm working at a smaller company now. It's great. I've gotten promoted twice in the last two years." "I used my severance to spend time with my daughter after her miscarriage. I would never have had that time if I wasn't forced to have that time."

It made me really question myself, and say wait a minute... How could something that is horrible in the moment, and you can use the pandemic, or 2020, or COVID, or wildfires, or whatever, later be perceived as the best thing that ever happened to me? This doesn't make any sense.

Aside: Obviously, things suck. Life sucks. People die. Climate change goes unchecked. So, how is this possible that bad things can end up pivoting us toward positive things? We need some science here.

Neil: I stumbled upon this study, which I'd like to quote for you now, which is a wonderful study. It came out in 2013 and it's called, "The End of History Illusion." It came out in *Science* magazine. It was done by Daniel Gilbert, who I mentioned earlier with the book *Stumbling on Happiness*, and a couple other of his peers. They talked to and interviewed 19,000 people between the ages of 18 and 68, and they asked them essentially two questions: number one, "How has your life changed in the last 10 years?" and number two, "How do you think it's going to change in the next 10?"

And here's what was interesting, no matter what the person's sex, gender, nationality, religion, age... no matter what it was, they always painted a tempestuous portrait of the last 10 years of their lives. It was like, "Oh my gosh, Jordy and I broke up," and "I got this new job," and "We left San Francisco," and "We lost my mom and it was just a wild 10 years all the time."

But then here's the interesting part of the study, whenever the people were asked, "How do you think the next 10 years are going to go?" they always said the same thing, which is, "Well I'm definitely not going to leave Boston now!" and "Obviously I'm still gonna be with Randy!" It's like, these things are consistent in people's minds. The researchers labeled this phenomenon, "The End of History Illusion." We carry with us, in our brains... I don't know if it's an evolutionary or a primal thing, we think that things are going to be how they are now. Which, if you're flying high and you're doing great in life and everything's going swimmingly, maybe that's not such a bad thing. But if you're stuck in your parents' basement and you can't find a job, you're thinking, "I'll never get out of this basement."

If you're in the parking lot after being terminated, you're like, "I'll never find another job." If you are in the middle of a crazy situation where you cannot see your family right now, and

you have some illness in your life, and the pandemic has caused a layoff from your job and you are struggling to find work, you believe that is how it's always going to be now... in the future... forever. That's how your brain thinks. That's how all of our brains think, and they interviewed 19,000 people! Everyone said this. It didn't matter if they were 70 years old or if they were 20 years old, they all thought this.

Aside: So, when things suck, we think they will never get better, and that no good could ever come out of it. The forecast is always stasis in our brains. And this study that Neil cited, "The End of History Illusion," authored in part by Harvard social psychologist Daniel Gilbert, went on to say, "People may believe that who they are today is pretty much who they will be tomorrow, despite the fact that it isn't who they were yesterday. We call this tendency to underestimate the magnitude of future change, "The End of History Illusion." They say that it was evident at every stage of adult life that the researchers could analyze. They concluded the paper with this wallop of a sentence, "History, it seems, is always ending today."

Neil: I love this study because what it tells you is, we all suck at this. All of us. We are uniformly terrible at picturing "the end of." Now, if you take into this incredible research study my other rant on news media and social media making us think everything's a little bit worse than it is because that's what gets eyeballs – MSNBC's goal is to feed you Subaru ads, right? The whole point is to feed you Subaru ads! [Alie laughs] Then you take those two things together and we're kind of in a bit of a pickle. Our brains aren't capable of picturing the end of anything or change coming. We aren't good at that. And the orientation of everything we're looking at is designed to mine our attention, so we keep looking at it so we can keep consuming more advertisements.

Alie: Oh my gosh! Okay. So, so many questions left. We're going to get in as many as we can. A lot of people, and I will list their names in an aside, essentially wanted to knooooow...

Aside: Looking at you Alena Reynolds, first-time question-asker Marcel Al, Alicia Penney, Lena Faye, Alia Myers, Annie C, and Lo McDowell, who all had similar questions on the fleeting nature of the good times.

Alie: ... the question that Meagan Walker had, which is: Why does happiness often seem so delicate, but anger or sadness are hardy as fuck? [laughs] Any idea? Is happiness like a bunny that you're chasing around? We had bunnies when I was a kid. Sometimes they'd get out and they are *hard* to catch. Is happiness a prey animal, and anger and sadness are predators? What's happening?

Aside: Is one type of emotion hardier than the other? I know for myself; I definitely ruminate on shitty things in an effort to untangle or fix them, but I don't often dwell on the good times. Neil mentions the incredible work of legend Dr. Laurie Santos, who teaches Yale's most popular course called Psychology and the Good Life, which you can also find online if you google 'the science of wellbeing'. Dr. Santos hosts the podcast *The Happiness Lab*, because... she runs a happiness lab at Yale. Neil sums up some of her work.

Neil: There are two elements of happiness that add up to happiness which are: "Am I happy *in* my life?" and "Am I happy *with* my life?" Daniel Kahneman, who's written a very famous paper called "High Income Improves Evaluation of Life, But Not Emotional Wellbeing"... You've probably heard this before. It's where they talk about how making up to \$75,000 actually makes you happy, but beyond that it doesn't do much. So, emotional wellbeing refers to the emotional quality of an individual's everyday experience; frequency and intensity of things

like joy, stress, sadness, anger, affection, that make your life pleasant or unpleasant. That's 'in your life'. How are you doing? How are you doing today?

Life evaluation refers to the thoughts that people have about their entire life when they think about it as a whole. I don't know if I necessarily agree with the idea that anger is hardy as fuck and happiness is delicate. That model is not something I agree or disagree with, it's just I hadn't thought of it that way before. But it does make me think of this other metaphor, which I think is helpful. If you are able to say two things, "Am I happy today with my life? Did I have a good day? I came home, we had a great dinner, and I got to watch this on TV, and it was wonderful, and I made my special brownie dessert." Okay, fine. You're happy.

But then, am I happy with my life overall? Well, that's another question. It's like, "Did I make the right decision to go to that school? Are we happy living in this city or this country?" And those are bigger questions, but separating the two is really, I think, relieving. At least I find it that way, because it lets you hold both in your mind and look at them and think about them separately, which enables you to navigate forward from there.

Aside: Is happiness fleeting? Are we imagining that? Is there something wrong with your brain if happiness is a beautiful but very fast bunny that gets chased and/or devoured by sadness, worry, and guilt? Nope! There's nothing wrong with you, as it turns out. News to me, I just went down many dark, labyrinth rabbit warrens looking at studies, and it's part of our programming! So blame evolution that the less satisfied we are with our achievements and surroundings, the harder we strive and the more resources and fitness we have to spread our genes. A lot of past humans who were just stoked as hell to rest on their laurels stopped striving and just died off.

In a 2004 study titled "The Optimum Level of Well-Being: Can People Be Too Happy?" the authors wrote, "People who experience the highest levels of happiness are most successful in terms of close relationships and volunteer work, but those who experience slightly lower levels of happiness are the most successful in terms of income, education, and political participation."

So if it feels like you have to actively fight the blues away, well... you do. And how do you do it? Gratitude. It's a practice. And it's not just a cheesy, saccharine, self-brainwashing. It's necessary if you want to get some peace from your Screaming Almond of Terror telling you that everything sucks, because not everything sucks everywhere.

Alie: L. Wink wants to know: Do different cultures perceive happiness differently? Madeline Anderson, Rudra, Emma McKeagney, Rose McCathran, Rob McCubbin, Rin Abedi, and Kesslie Naffa want to know: Why is Finland or Eastern European countries... Are they way happier than the US? Ethan Bottone wants to know: Why is Bhutan considered one of the happiest nations on Earth? So, what is happening culturally?

Neil: There is one giant, global happiness report that comes out on March 20th of every year. It's come out for, I think, eight years straight, from the United Nations. It's called "The World Happiness Report." This was one of the few UN resolutions ever agreed to by every single member state in the UN. Everyone's like, "Yes, we should do this. We should declare March 20th International Day of Happiness." [Alie laughs] They did do that. "Happy International Day of Happiness!" is what you should say to people on March 20th while you walk down the street. They then come up with this huge report, which is put together by the "Notable of Notablest" – you know, academics, positive psychologists, and they rank every single country in the world according to their happiness.

And when you look in the data, you're like, "Oh, okay, they're using GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom, generosity, and corruption perception." Those are the six variables they use. Then they rank them, and sure enough, I think someone said, Finland is... The Scandinavian countries are at the top. Canada, where I am, the US, where you are, yeah, they're all hanging out up there. They're off by like tenths of a percentage and stuff.

But really, here's how I take that report to read. I look into all that data. I look into all the photos. I read the whole hundred-page, gigantic research report that comes out every year. Here's what I take it to be: the majority of the happiness is baseline stuff. Do you trust the water that comes out of your tap? Do you feel safe when you walk out your front door? Can you marry who you want and live where you please? I'm not saying those freedoms exist everywhere, but what I'm saying is they make up a huge, disproportionate amount of "hygiene happiness." That's a really big part of it.

And yeah, on top of it, the social support stuff, a bunch of Norwegian dudes will hang out in a big bath together. [*Alie and Neil laugh*] We might not do that, so you might not have the bliss of hanging out in the social support of a bunch of Norwegian dudes. I'm projecting, but my point is there. The social connection is important, and we probably aren't doing that part nearly as good as a lot of the countries near the top.

Aside: Reminder too, that for most of us, we don't have to worry too much about what comes out of our tap, but 30% of the world *does* worry about access to clean water. Even in the US, water supply pipes in Flint, Michigan are still being replaced, years after contaminated water flowed through taps affecting tens of thousands of folks, which is a reminder that systemic oppression robs people of basic security, necessities, freedoms, and thus, happiness. Equity breeds more happiness for everyone. Speaking of toxic substances, though...

Alie: Well then this also... You mentioned 'can you trust your tap water'. A few people asked about toxicity with positivity: Emily Okerlund, Laura Stacey, Cora, Lynn Hodnett, and Vesper Holly, who is a first-time question-asker. Same with Lynn, first-time question-asker! Lynn asks: Recently I've heard the term 'toxic positivity'. Is this something that's being researched and is there such a thing? Vesper asks: What are your thoughts about toxic positivity or the idea that a good-vibes-only attitude actually results in minimization or invalidation of the authentic human emotion? I mean, I imagine this is why you do Rose, Rose, Thorn, Bud, but how do you feel about those movements that deny the realities of suffering or pain?

Neil: Going back to something I quoted earlier, if it indeed is half genetic, 10% circumstantial, and 40% intentional activities, I would be hard pressed to find anybody who's like that all the time. No one I've ever met is happy all the time. I am certainly not, okay? No one's like that. It is a practice and it's hard work. So, the endless positivity that the person is referring to is something I've only personally seen in some sort of phony-ish way.

Aside: So toxic positivity means if someone comes to you and they're going through a hard time, it does not help them to say things like, "It'll all work out," "Everything happens for a reason," or "At least your house didn't burn down. [*fake laugh*]" Acknowledging struggles and being authentic with your feelings and others is important. You cannot fake happiness. Even those who have incredible resources still struggle with day to day satisfaction. So remember, for your own health, for the health of others, and just having the will to get shit done to make the world better, you gotta wrestle with the internal and external forces that lean toward Bummertown. And scientists know what can help us weather the rough stuff better.

Neil: We know journaling works. We know singing works. We know going for a walk in the woods works. We know simple, basic stuff works! If you think it makes you happier because after you do your 20-minute exercise, you feel happier, you're right! If you think it makes me happier to have a family dinner where everyone's actually at the table and people's cell phones are away, you're right! It does! Because you're connecting socially with people you love and you feel good that, "Oh, maybe my relationship with my son isn't as bad as I thought," or "Maybe my relationship with my wife... we like each other after all!"

It turns out that those things that you think are good for you really are! And sometimes I fear that as society, as a whole... Part of what we're doing when we lean on all these things like, "What does the data say?" and "What does the research tell us?" blah, blah, blah. "What have you learned about?" It's like part of what we're doing in that entire world is we're ignoring what we just feel, and what we should just feel is that it's right to just take a break, unplug, rewind, get a good night's sleep, put the phone out of the bedroom. Read a book for goodness sake! Read a book! Don't read the internet, read a book!

Aside: For more encouragement to read books, I'm just once again going to plug Neil's fantastic podcast, *3 Books*, whose guests have included luminaries such as Malcolm Gladwell, Judy Blume, David Sedaris, and one day, some lady named Your Dad. So enjoy a book, which can even be free to borrow from a local library, or if you download the app Libby, they have free e-books and audiobooks. So save that cheddar, my babies!

Alie: You know what's funny is, like, in all of the things you've listed, you've never been like, "Shopping. Buying Things." That doesn't seem to do as much as phytoncides might.

Okay, I'm going to ask the thing that is the toughest thing about your job, which I know... I'm trying to guess what the toughest... I've never done this before. Can I guess what the toughest thing about your job is?

Neil: Yeah!

Alie: Okay, the thing that sucks the most about being someone who looks for the Awesome in life. Okay, I think the shittiest about your job is people assuming you're happy all the time?

Neil: Oh my gosh! *[laughs]*

Alie: No?

Neil: I say oh my gosh because that's exactly what I was going to say.

Alie: Is it really?? Oh yes! I got it right! *[laughs]*

Neil: Yeah, it is. I used to even go on stages and say, "I'm not an optimist." I'd even have to yell that because the presumption was... People used to call me Captain Awesome. They were like, "It's Captain Awesome!" because no one can pronounce my name, obviously, so it was like, "We're not going to try to say 'Neil Pasricha.' We may as well refer to him as Mr. Awesome or Captain Awesome." And it didn't help that the *Book of Awesome*, you know, it ended up doing super well, so of course the publisher comes back and buys a bunch of sequels, and I am too naïve and simple-minded to be like, "No." I'm like, "Yes! More sequels! More money! More books!"

So then, suddenly there's five journals, and calendars, and there's Awesome sequels, and *The Book of (Even More) Awesome*, and *The Book of (Holiday) Awesome*, and *Awesome is Everywhere* for kids. And suddenly I'm making Krusty the Clown Imitation Gruel, [*"This is Krusty Brand Imitation Gruel!"*] you know what I'm saying? I then have completely enshrouded myself in this one word, which according to Urban Dictionary, is how Americans

describe everything, okay? So, now what I'm trying to really do in my own life... I'm 41 now, I was 29 when I started doing this. I try to think about my life as, "I think, write, and speak about intentional living." That's the high-level framework I'm operating under.

Yes, the *Book of Awesome* is about gratitude, but really, the *Happiness Equation* is about happiness, my newest book is all about resilience, and the thing I'm working on today is about trust. So, I'm really just trying to think about the gigantic, huge, totems in life that make life beautiful, and how do we live these short 30,000 days with intentionality?

Alie: It's amazing that you have gotten to dedicate your life to the things, and exploring the things, that all of us put on the backburner and we think is going to be some sort of cabinet that we get to unlock when we deserve it. And you have gotten to explore that as a job. You've gotten to put that on the front burner, which is pretty dope.

Neil: Yeah, and I should mention that I did all this stuff on the side, at Wal-Mart, for eight years. So, eight years, this was my side hustle. Eight years the East Indian mentality burned into my brain and said, "Do not quit your day job! You will have no one to pay your dental bills ever again!" [Alie laughs] So, this wasn't, like, a natural thing for me. I wasn't raised by, like, a jazz pianist and a *New Yorker* editor. My parents were hardcore immigrants from India and Africa. They were a teacher and an accountant in the suburbs. They were like, "Do NOT quit your day job. You already failed us by not being a doctor." [laughs]

So, on one hand... I just want to zoom up a second and say, sometimes people say to me, "It's really nice that you get to wander around all day and write stuff." But I think it's the opposite. I don't get to do that. I am doing that because I wander around all day. You know what I'm saying? I think when you make space and time for some of the things we've been talking about today; waking up with a two-minute morning practice, making space to go outside for nature walks, playing a game like Rose, Rose, Thorn, Bud around your dinner table... When you do some of those practices, guess what? Your mind relaxes. Your mind chills out. You stop getting obsessed with Likes. You stop getting... You just delete the apps off your phone. You don't even like them anymore!

You're like, "I feel like a terrible person after an hour of liking Insta stories, so I think I'll actually just read *Pride and Prejudice*." You know? And that's what I'm trying to now focus my life towards, and it's not because I'm good at it. It's because I'm trying to do it. That's it.

Alie: And what about the most awesome thing about being Captain Awesome, Awesomeologist? [laughs] Now I'm just pressing your buttons, but...

Neil: Oh, go ahead and guess, since you're so perfect every time!

Alie: No, what is the... Okay, guess. This is the first time I've ever guessed! I've never done this.

The most best thing about being someone who looks for joy is hearing how it's [voice rises with uncertainty] changed people's lives? No? [laughs]

Neil: [laughs] I wish we had a measurement device that can, in one sentence, capture how many different octaves someone speaks in, because that would've been, like, 12. That was so cute, and beautiful, and awesome. [Alie laughs and laughs] Um... [laughs] Honestly, it's probably that I get to make my kids breakfast and have dinner with them at night.

Alie: [adoring] Awww!!

Neil: I know that sounds really trite, and cheesy, and simple, but I just think that... I've taken a lot of flights, and I've sat beside a lot of people, and if they had any gray hair, for the last 20 years

I've asked them, "What's your number one piece of advice for me as I live my life?" I can separate the answers to that, like, informal 20-year research study I've been doing into two buckets. Half the answers are totally random, like, "Don't put a computer in someone's bedroom," or whatever. But the other half are all the same, which is, "Have one more kid than you think you should."

Alie: Really??

Neil: Yeah, because they always say, "I had two, I wish I had three." Or, "I had one and wish I had two." "I had zero, wish I had one." "I had three, which I had four." So, what Leslie and I are doing, as I talk to you she is pregnant with our fourth child, we've decided this is it for us. We just want to have, like, a giant, loud, crazy, ridiculous, messy, spaghetti-on-the-wall family, and sometimes that means saying no to lots and lots of things. But I get breakfast with my kids and dinner with my kids every day, which is super important to me.

Alie: Awww! Oh my gosh, congratulations! What flight did she take that pregnancy test on? [*Neil cracks up laughing*] Did she just get on a commuter jet from Toronto to Buffalo?

Neil: Yeah, she only checks if she's pregnant on planes.

Aside: Side note: If you can't biologically have children, like me, or aren't sure if you'd ever want children, also like me, then just feel free to Find & Replace the word 'kids' with dogs, or cats, or ferrets, or tortoises, or parrots, or succulents, all of which can be just as challenging, and expensive, and rewarding as rearing a person.

Alie: Obviously, this has been an utter joy to have you on. I am so honored just to have your email address. I can't even tell you how excited I was to have you on.

Neil: Stahp! I love you, and what you're doing is really special and rare, and this is a real privilege and honor. I was so scared to talk to you because I'm like, "I haven't done anything of note like all the people you have." I just...

Alie: Oh, shush!

Neil: No, I mean, Awesomeology??? Like, compare the title! But I really appreciate connecting, and if there's even... What I always say to people is: the goal is not to be perfect, it's just to be better than before. If there is even a nugget that resonated with one person, it was worth it. I appreciate you having me on to scream at people for a bit.

Alie: The joy is all mine! You're the best! Bye.

Neil: Bye.

So ask happy-ish people honest questions, and remember that everyone's going through stuff, including yourself, and that you deserve the moments and the tools it takes to make you feel better. So list some good stuff, start a journal, maybe make a secret locked Twitter account where you can just catalog things to appreciate. Tell the folks in your life that you love them and make new friends with people you admire. I assure you, it's very day-making.

To get more Neil in your life, you can check out his website, very easy, Neil.Blog. It's linked in the show notes. I'm also going to post a boatload of links on AlieWard.com/Ologies/Awesomeology, including links to his books, his *1000 Awesome Things* blog, his TED Talk, all the studies discussed, and the organization we made a donation to in his name. You can follow Neil on social media @NeilPasricha on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [Facebook](#).

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A little more gratitude for my fellow sexy apes that make this show possible. Thank you so much Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus for handling [merch](#). You can check out their comedy podcast *You Are That*. They're hilarious. Thank you Erin Talbert for adminning the [Ologies Podcast Facebook group](#), full of wonderful, curious folks. Thank you Emily White and the volunteer transcriptionists who make transcripts available for free. They're on my website for our Deaf and hard of hearing friends, or anyone else who wants or needs them. There's a link to that in the show notes. Thank you Caleb Patton, who adds bleeps of modesty to the episodes so that you can download some kid-safe versions. Those are on my website.

Noel Dilworth handles all the scheduling; she is lovely. Thank you to assistant editor and host of the mental health podcast *My Good Bad Brain*, Jarrett Sleeper, with whom I have been quarantined since March, and whoms I am so grateful for. And of course, the man who threads all our edits together, Mr. Mustache himself, Steven Ray Morris, who also hosts a dino-themed podcast called *See Jurassic Right* and a kitty-themed podcast called *The Purrrrcast*. Nick Thorburn wrote and performed the theme music, and if you head to the Ologies Instagram, provided you do not spend a long time scrolling, for the sake of your own brain, you can see Ologite and PodFriend Heath Allyn's excellent video reenactment of the theme song recording session. Thank you, Heath. In a word, LMAO!

If you listen to the end of the podcast, I tell you a secret. And this week's secret is, I will reiterate, I really have been feeling so much weirdly better after this interview with Neil, and I really just learned how much happier I am when I'm nicer to myself. One thing I think that was behind that for a long time... I don't know if anyone else feels this, but there's a certain fear, I think, I've had that if I'm happy, people I love will reject me because they will feel annoyed by me if I'm cheerful, or I have to be doing worse than other people around me or else they'll get irritated at me. And I think that's something I've had in my brain for a long time. And I literally asked friends, who I love very much, "Would you be annoyed if I became happier?" And every single one of them was like, "No!! What?? Please be happier! That's all I want for you!"

So, if you feel like people will be mad at you if you're doing okay, perhaps sit down and think on that. Also think, "Are those relationships good ones?" if you feel that way. So, the world is not great, but there's a lot of great things and people in it, and so just like brushing our teeth, it's something to do for brain maintenance, to appreciate that. I hope this episode helped. If it did, pass it on to people in your life who you think might enjoy it.

Also, thank you for cancelling your holiday plans to keep people alive. I know it's hard. Honestly, a lot of people say that they cancelled their holiday plans and everyone on the family thread was relieved. So, please do that. Someone very close to me just tested positive for COVID She was completely asymptomatic. Keep that in mind. Be safe; be good to yourself; and know that I'm very grateful for you. Okay, enough sap, Dad! Berbye.

Transcribed by:

Brian Davis

Isabel Burns

Wendy Fick

Victoria Desjardins (she/her)

That dried noodle wedged in the corner of your kid's highchair, Elena Horne

More info you may enjoy:

A donation went to <https://performancespacenewyork.org/>

The game Neil plays over dinner is: *Rose, Rose, Thorn, Bud.*

His 2-minute morning practice: *I will let go of, I am grateful for, and I will focus on.*

Track your happiness and help some scientists: www.trackyourhappiness.org

Institute for Global Happiness: <https://globalhappiness.org/>

[“The Happiness Equation”](#) book

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