

## [Transcript] The Diary Of A CEO with Steven Bartlett / E246: 7 Life-changing Lessons From The Longest Ever Study On Health & Happiness! Dr. Robert Waldinger

I saw a video that you made.  
It punched me in the face.  
The reason why my TED Talks went viral was because  
Dr. Robert Wilding,  
a Harvard psychiatrist and director of  
the longest study ever done on what makes humans live happy or unhappy lives.  
This TED Talks is one of the most beautiful  
hiatus for 85 years.  
We've tracked the lives of 724 families  
through their entire adult lives.  
Looking at mental health, physical health,  
to see what really keeps people happy and healthy.  
Some of the participants donated their brains.  
They have. We know so much about them in life  
and now we get to examine their brains.  
The most surprising finding in the study was that  
it's our relationships that keep us healthier and happier.  
There is research that shows that actually people who are married,  
men live 12 years longer and women live 7 years longer.  
That said, it's not the marriage license.  
It's about.  
Starting in the 1950s, we stopped investing in other people.  
Being lonely is as dangerous to your health  
as smoking half a pack of cigarettes a day.  
Isolation can break down your coronary arteries, your joints.  
The brain declines sooner.  
My mission now is going to be to bring this science  
that we've worked so hard to develop  
and bring it to people in ways that they can use.  
Looking at that research,  
what are the factors that made those relationships most successful?  
Well, most surprising finding in the study was that  
Robert,  
who are you and what is the mission that you're on?  
I am a psychiatrist.  
I'm a married father of two grown sons.  
I'm a Zen priest and I'm a researcher.  
And the mission that I'm on is to relieve the suffering  
that's optional in the world.  
That's the vow I took as a Zen priest.  
What is that optional suffering you're referring to?  
Well, there's some suffering that's not optional, right?  
There's pain, there's so many things that we can't control

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that hurt that we suffer from.  
But then there's optional suffering.  
There are all the stories we tell ourselves  
about things that turn out not to be true,  
things that I worry about that turn out to amount to nothing.  
Mark Twain had a wonderful quote that I love.  
He said, some of the worst things in my life never happened.  
And that's the optional suffering that we're talking about,  
the all the ways that we imagine things that make us suffer a great deal.  
So let's go down those two paths, psychiatrist and Zen priest.  
What does it mean to be a psychiatrist?  
What does that mean practically in terms of your work?  
It means working with people who are struggling with mental illness  
with conditions for which we have help.  
And some of the help is medication, some of the help is talk therapy.  
I became fascinated by how the mind works.  
That was what was most exciting for me when I was a medical student.  
And I realized that it was going to keep me interested most of my career.  
And it has because everybody's so different.  
I mean, I realized that if you treat one case of high blood pressure,  
you sort of know what the next one's going to look like.  
But when you talk to a new person, it's never the same  
as the person you talked to last week.  
So being a psychiatrist for me is getting to take deep dives  
into people's life experience.  
There's a there's a through line here to the third pillar of  
what I find so absolutely fascinating about you.  
And it's also the thing that introduced me to you many years ago.  
I was a young man who was incredibly,  
I would say, I would say addicted to some degree to work.  
I was pursuing money at all costs.  
I was that sort of typical millennial.  
I think you've referenced in the book that had his priorities  
and all the wrong orders, particularly at that point,  
I'd sacrifice so many things.  
The stuff that you write about that makes life so meaningful presents.  
You know, my happiness was off somewhere in the future  
behind some future imaginary goal.  
And I was sat in a room in Manchester.  
I think I was in the region of, I'm going to say,  
somewhere between 18 and 20 years old.  
And then I saw a video that you had made a TED Talk you had done.  
It's one of the most watched TED Talks of all time.

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And it was about it was the longest study on happiness ever done.  
It was the Harvard study of adult development, I think it's called.  
And it punched me in the face.  
And it punched me in the face because I've never forgotten it.  
And I've talked about it frequently, you know,  
every quarter or every couple of months since then.  
But it punched me in the face because it made me confront something  
that I think I knew at some deeper level.  
I was maybe getting wrong.  
And that was the nature of what really makes us happy as humans.  
Can you tell me about the Harvard study of adult development,  
what the aim of it was, and how you in particular got involved with it?  
Sure. The study is the longest study of human life that's ever been done,  
as far as we know, of the same people going through their entire adult lives.  
That's what's so rare about it.  
Most research is snapshots in the moment or over two weeks or a month.  
So this is over 85 years, 724 families.  
It was started in 1938.  
It was started as two studies that actually didn't know about each other.  
One was the study of Harvard College students, 19 year olds,  
young men who were thought by the deans to be fine upstanding specimens.  
And this was going to be a study of normal development  
from adolescence into young adulthood.  
I mean, now we smile because if you want to study normal development,  
you study all white males from Harvard, you don't do that.  
It's so politically incorrect.  
But at that time, that's what they were doing.  
And the other study was started at Harvard Law School  
by a law professor and his wife, a social worker,  
who were interested in juvenile delinquency.  
And they were particularly interested in how some children  
from really troubled backgrounds managed to stay out of trouble  
and stay on good developmental paths.  
Like how could that be?  
What were the conditions that allowed these young people to thrive?  
So they chose boys from the city of Boston in 1938,  
whose families were known to on average five social service agencies  
for domestic violence, parental mental illness, physical illness.  
And they studied all those boys, again, looking at what makes people thrive.  
And so both of these studies were studies of good normal development  
instead of studies of what goes wrong.  
Most of what we study is what goes wrong so that we can help people.  
So these were radical in that sense.

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And then nobody expected the studies to last more than five or the most 10 years.

And the founders of the study would never have dreamed that

you and I would be talking about this study today

and the fact that we're still collecting data, even as we speak,

from the children of all of these original 724 families.

Wow.

You're still collecting data from the children of the participants?

Yes.

And are the founders of this study still alive?

Oh, no, they're long gone.

I'm the fourth director.

And the third director was my teacher when I was a medical student.

He lectured to my class about this study of men who were then in their 50s.

And I thought, this is amazing.

And then about 15 years later, he took me out to lunch one day and said,

how would you like to inherit this study?

And I was flabbergasted, but very excited to be able to do it.

What was the study aiming to answer?

It was looking at the big domains of life.

It was looking at mental health, physical health, work life, and relationships.

And what the study has done is looked at all of those same domains over and over again,

year after year, for 85 years.

What's exciting for me about it is that we've changed our methods.

So initially, there were interviews and medical exams and people went to their homes

and talked to their parents.

Well, now we draw blood for DNA.

I mean, DNA wasn't even imagined in 1938.

We put people into MRI scanners and watched their brains light up

when we show them different kinds of images.

And that would have been science fiction to scientists in 1938.

So what I love is we're studying the same subjects,

but we're studying them using very different methods over time.

I read that some of the participants of the study that have passed away

have donated their brains.

They have.

We have about 30 brains sitting on shelves in a laboratory at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

And what's rare about them, most brains are collected because there was a big problem in life, for example, dementia or a brain tumor or something.

These are normal brains.

And so what's rare is that these are brains about which we know what their life was like when they were 20 years old, when they were 30 years old.

We know so much about them in life, and now we get to examine their brains.

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So this study, you became the director of it.

Let's start top, top level then.

How did this study sets out to answer some of the big questions in life, the most important things about what makes us happy, what keeps us healthy, socially healthy, physically healthy.

You've got the longest study of humans that anyone thinks has ever been done.

You've been studying them for decades upon decades,

looking at that research and being a first party to all of that information.

How has it changed you?

It's very much made me take care of my own relationships.

So because the biggest, most surprising finding in the study was that it's our relationships that keep us healthier and happier.

You know, I'm a Harvard professor.

I could work nonstop until I drop dead.

I mean, that's just the way academia works.

And what I realized was particularly once my kids weren't there, pulling me away to go take them somewhere or do something with them, that I could just work all the time.

And so what I've started doing is to be much more intentional about calling my friends, about saying, let's go for a walk.

Let's go out to dinner.

Let's make sure we get together.

I never would have done that before, particularly as a man.

I think women are much better.

My wife is much better at calling friends on the phone, at making sure they get together.

I had to teach myself to do that.

I had to make myself do it.

I had to take my own medicine, if you will, based on what I was studying in my work life.

What do we get wrong about the subject matter of happiness?

Like, if you were to ask those participants what they thought would cause happiness in their lives, or you were to ask, I don't know, a millennial, what are the answers that we say and how wrong are we?

And are we good at knowing?

Someone asked me this yesterday at an event.

They put their hand up and they said, we're talking about remote working and this whole change, disruption that's happened in the workplace.

And they put their hand up.

I think they were a CEO and they said, do my employees actually know what they want?

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And it was a really curious question.  
I ended up answering, and this is maybe a little bit controversial,  
but I ended up answering that most of us  
don't know what we want in most facets of our life.  
Yes. And we're bad at knowing what's going to make us happy.  
I'll give you an example. It's in the book.  
There was a study in the city of Chicago  
where they were studying commuters,  
people who were about to get on the train  
and take the train to work like they did every day.  
And so they took a random sample of people in one group  
and they were assigned to do what they always do on the train.  
It could have been listening to music  
or reading the news on their phone, whatever they did.  
The other group randomly was assigned  
to talk to a stranger on the train,  
which none of them had ever done.  
And they asked them beforehand,  
how much do you think you're going to like this assignment  
we've just given you?  
And the people who were assigned to talk to strangers said,  
I'm not going to enjoy this.  
Afterwards, after they'd completed their assignments,  
the people who had talked to strangers  
were much happier than the people who had done their usual,  
staying on their phones or reading the newspaper.  
So it's an example of how we're not so good  
at knowing what's going to make us happy.  
And particularly when it comes to connecting with each other,  
that there's something about these kind of small conversations  
that we can have with strangers  
or even with someone we barely know  
that turn out to be very energizing more of the time than not.  
But we're always afraid.  
We're afraid someone's going to think we're strange  
if we strike up a conversation  
or we're going to get stuck talking to someone who we don't like.  
But what we find is that the culture gives us these messages  
about what will make us happy that turn out not to be the truth.  
A lot of the messages are about consumerism.  
We're told, if you buy this car, you're going to be happy.  
If you serve this brand of pasta,  
you're going to have blissful family dinners.

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And even though we sort of know that this isn't the truth,  
the advertisements really do inculcate this sense  
that if we consume the right things, that we'll be happy.  
And what we know from our research and many other studies  
is that's just not so.  
And that these connections with each other actually do make us happy.  
I mean, for example, you and I are talking now  
and your questions and your interest in my work  
is actually energizing for me.  
It's actually making me happier than when I walked in the door today.  
Why?  
I think there's something about wanting to be seen.  
Like you're actually saying, I want to know you.  
I want to know what's going on with you.  
And that there's something about that that makes us feel like we belong,  
that makes us feel like we're connected.  
And so what we notice and what we talk about in the book is this idea that  
that when we actually are curious about another person, it's giving them a gift.  
It's giving them a way to be seen, a way to tell about themselves  
that we all really yearn for at some level or almost all of us do.  
And so it's something we can give to each other every day.  
When you compare and contrast the two lists,  
list A, which says what we think we want,  
and B, what your study on happiness has shown  
that actually leads to happiness, however we define it,  
what are the things just in order that we're most wrong about?  
Probably the three big ones.  
We're most wrong about fame and wealth and badges of achievement.  
If I win this prize, if I get to be CEO, that kind of thing.  
And because the culture tells us all day long that these will make us happy,  
and because they're measurable, I think one of the things,  
if you think about fame, it's likes, it's how many downloads of a podcast,  
it's how many people read a book, and it's measurable, it's quantifiable.  
Wealth, of course, is quantifiable.  
And achievement, but what we know is that those things don't do it.  
Now, meaningful work can make us happy, can be fulfilling.  
That's different from getting the prize, getting the badge.  
By contrast, you can't measure relationships.  
They're kind of messy and complicated and they're often full of ups and downs.  
And conflicts.  
And so you can't quantify it.  
You can't hold onto it.  
It's always changing.

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And so by contrast, these relationships that actually turn out to make us happy are not, you can't get your hands around them as easily as you can.

You can get your hands around these things you can kind of grab for these shiny brass objects you can go for.

So why do we, outside of the media influence, why do we have or sort of proclivity to strive for things like fame?

Is there like an evolutionary basis for wanting to be famous or rich or high status, I guess?

Can I get into Zen a little bit?

Of course you can, please.

Okay. There's a writer named David Loy, L-O-Y, who writes about this.

And I think he's really onto something that in Zen philosophy, that if you really look for the self, if you sit down on a meditation cushion and you look, and I look for Bob, like who's Bob, I can't find him.

I can't find a me anywhere.

I can find a swirl of thoughts and ever-changing sensations coming from my body, but I can't really find a fixed thing that I call Bob.

And that what David Loy argues is that all of us at some level know this, that there isn't really a fixed self that's going to go on through time and that's going to last after I die.

And that it's at some level scary to know that, right?

And what David Loy argues is that many of us are grabbing for things like wealth and fame and dominating the earth and dominating each other in this kind of wish to make ourselves feel more real, more permanent, more fixed, like we really exist.

And I think he's right.

I think about all the ways I've been preoccupied with, am I going to be remembered when I'm gone?

Well, I'm probably not.

50 years from now, nobody's going to really remember who I was.

And if I really let that sink into my bones, that's scary.

And so I'd rather write a book with my name on it.

I'd rather endow a building that'll keep my name on it for a while until the building falls down, do something that makes me last longer, that makes the Bob self feel more real.

So that's the deep Zen dive that I didn't mean to take you on.

But that's, I think, for me, the most helpful explanation at why we all, myself included, get preoccupied by these badges of achievement, if you will.

With that comes a ton of suffering, right?

Yeah.

The desire to be permanent and significant.

And to compare ourselves, because with that comes comparison.

And we know that when we compare ourselves to others, more frequently during the day, we are less happy.

Even if it's a positive comparison, we're doing a downward comparison.

Even if it's a positive comparison, because there's always the threat of falling short.

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You're deciding to play a game, which is, yeah, it's like a psychological decision to play a game, which sometimes you'll win, but sometimes you'll lose.

Exactly.

So it's better not to play the game of comparison altogether.

Well, what I find is when I put the comparisons aside, which I can sometimes, I'm so much more at peace.

When someone says to me, do you know that so-and-so got this many views or so-and-so had this many likes on social media, I can feel a little part of myself get anxious or close off or start making that comparison that almost physically hurts a little bit.

And when I let that go, if I can just sit and look at a tree for five minutes,

I get a sense of equanimity that I can't get when I'm doing these small comparisons.

The brain engages in these comparisons quite naturally.

It's trying to make snap decisions so it doesn't have to expend too much energy about the value of things and what things mean.

So it compares one thing to another.

I've read about the studies in restaurants where they add an expensive steak to the menu.

Now, because there's a really expensive one, people will assume that the low-price steak is not good and they'll avoid that one.

They'll go for the middle one.

Their decision change is based on the frame in which they see the options or the choice.

It's the same with humans.

We're trying to figure out the value of ourselves by snap comparisons.

When you hear about these things that the brain is doing, these comparisons, you go, why does the brain hate me?

Exactly.

Exactly.

The other thing is when I look at the animal world, I think about all the ways that we get preoccupied with, do I look right or am I dressed right or have I achieved enough?

And then I look at birds and I think, I bet they're not showing up worrying about those things.

And what a relief.

What a wonderful thing not to be worried about those things.

And I do find that this practice of mine can get me there some of the time, not all the time, but some of the time.

I used to wonder on that point of why does the brain hate me?

I know the brain doesn't hate you.

Like I used to wonder with weight loss, for example, until I sat here with dietary experts, why when I have some sugar, I then get sugar cravings.

And they explained to me that your brain is actually on your side.

It's trying to help you to survive once upon a time when we didn't have fridges and supermarkets and Uber Eats and whatever else.

Coming across some sugar would advance your chances of survival.

It would give you energy, et cetera.

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And even with the comparison, it's a tool that helps me make quick decisions.

My brain doesn't hate me, but the world we live in was not designed for my brain.

I wasn't supposed to be able to look at a billion people on a glass screen.

And so the suffering is really a byproduct of a changing world,  
not a brain that hates you.

And I see that throughout your work is the world has changed to make us unhappy in several ways.

Yes.

What do we do about that?

We can't leave the world.

No, we can't leave the world.

And the world is always going to keep changing.

So for example, sometimes we can demonize screens  
and we can demonize the digital revolution.

That's not going away.

And so really it's about being as adaptable as we can.

But I think for me, the question is, how can we be as intentional as possible?

That our brains evolved, as you're saying, they don't hate us,  
but they evolved in certain ways.

And so they need correctives.

Similarly, the digital world has evolved in certain ways.

And so the digital software is designed, digital media is designed to grab our attention  
and hold it to exploit that brain to exploit that brain.

So then how can we be intentional enough to turn away from that software when we need to?

Right.

When we need to turn toward each other, when we need to have real time  
contact with each other that's so nourishing emotionally and psychologically,  
how can we keep from going down the rabbit hole that social media has evolved to keep us hooked  
on?

Not because social media is evil,

just because that's how they've developed in order for people to make a living.

It is quite exhausting, I think sometimes.

I think because you're right, industry and business and even the high street,  
if you walk down the high street outside, everything is designed to exploit the brain.

You like the shops are selling sugar and carbs or you can go to the gambling shop  
and that will exploit your brain and it's dopamine response to flashing lights  
and pulling that lever on them.

It's difficult.

It is difficult.

And that's where suffering comes in.

One of the things I see as a psychiatrist, but we all see this,  
is that people often want to change their state.

They just want to change how they feel.

There's this great cartoon I like, there's this meditator sitting on a cushion

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and there's a thought bubble over his head.

And what he's thinking is, I really do want to be in the moment, just not this moment.

And if you think about all the ways in which we want to change our state by gambling, the excitement of gambling or the sugar high we get when I get some delicious ice cream, or that it's a way of changing that kind of sense of malaise that comes over us moment to moment.

And I think one of the things we can do instead is simply be present for that malaise and then watch it pass, which it does eventually.

So basically, by and large, we're trying to get rid of some of the less pleasant experiences of our momentary life, but they'll pass all by themselves if you just pay attention.

Does that require this thing called discipline?

Yeah, it does.

It becomes watching and not grabbing on for the next thing to make my feeling go away.

I was reading through the chapter in your book about time and attention and death.

Cheery, right?

Yeah, but it's one of the subject matters that I'm really compelled by.

And I've actually been writing a lot in my upcoming book about the topic of death.

And the order in which I wrote was I started by talking about time and death, because I think that's sort of intrinsically linked to understand the importance of time.

You need to understand that you are going to die, which I don't think many humans really understand.

And then I was going to deliver some time management techniques in my book,

because I thought, right, I've set up the conversation that time is important.

So now give the reader some time management techniques.

I've researched all the time management techniques.

I looked at the ones that I use and I realized there was thousands of them.

Now there's thousands of them for the same reasons that there are thousands of fad diets, because none of them work unless you have this thing called discipline.

And this is what, you know, as a Zen priest, you know,

it's all well and good knowing the techniques about meditation.

But if you can't have the restraint to not get on Uber Eats at 1am in the morning and order that Kit Kat, because you don't have the discipline, it doesn't matter.

I can know it, but doing it is another thing.

My question is about discipline.

Even if you're looking at your own life, where does one find that discipline?

You know, often it's not the Nancy Reagan strategy of just say no, right?

You know, if you think about that, that discipline can't just involve saying no.

It has to involve having something to turn toward.

And I think that's where we may be able to help each other find things.

So, you know, if you don't want to order the Kit Kat on Uber Eats, right?

What could you do instead that might help, that might feel okay?

And I think it's that, you know, if we think about alcoholics anonymous, one of the reasons why it works is it doesn't just say, don't drink.

It gives you a whole social network of people to support you.

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And it gives you activities to do and people to be with every hour of the day, right?

And so, what it does is it gives you something to put in place of that drink that you want to reach for.

And even so, it's really hard.

And so, I think what we need to say is let's put in place some things to help us manage so that we don't reach for the candy when we're trying to lose weight, right?

But when our body is just saying, I got to have it.

And one of those things which you write about and I've seen in the study is, as you said earlier, is connections and relationships.

Yeah.

How important, can you quantify to me the importance of having a romantic partner in your life as it relates to health outcomes?

Well, unfortunately, I can.

And because I just want to say that you do not need a romantic partner to get these benefits, because some people have said to me, well, if I don't have a romantic partner, should I just walk in front of the bus now and end it all, right?

No, no, it's fine not to have a romantic partner.

But there is research that shows that actually people who are married, men live 12 years longer on average if they're married and women live seven years longer on average if they're married.

This is some studies in the United States.

That said, it's not the marriage license.

It's about an intimate connection.

And you can have an intimate connection with somebody who's not a romantic partner, could be a good friend, could be a sibling, could be an adult child, so many ways to have this.

What we think is that everybody needs at least one person to whom they feel securely attached.

Our original participants in our research, at one point we asked them, who could you call in the middle of the night if you were sick or scared?

List everybody.

And most people could list several people that they could call, but some people couldn't list anyone.

And some of those people who couldn't list anyone had romantic partners.

Yeah, so you can be lonely in a romantic partnership, right?

You can be isolated in an intimate relationship.

So all that is to say that it is really the quality of a secure connection that we're talking about, that we think everybody needs at least one of in the world to get these kinds of benefits.

What is the physiological or spiritual or Zen reason why

having a intimate relationship with at least one individual is causing us to live longer?

Yeah, so there are a lot of theories about this, but the best theory for which there's some good data has to do with stress, the idea that good relationships actually help us manage stress and help us manage negative emotion. So stress happens all day long, right?

And if I leave here and something upsetting happens, my body will literally change.

My blood pressure will go up. My heart rate will increase. I might start to sweat, right?

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That's normal. The body goes into something called fight or flight mode. We're supposed to be able to do that because we want to prepare to meet a challenge. Evolutionarily, it's a good thing. But then when the stressor is removed, the body's meant to return to equilibrium. So if I have something upsetting happen and I go home and complain to my wife, I can literally feel my body calm down. If you have a friend you can call and you can talk about what was upsetting, you can literally feel that return to equilibrium. What we know happens is that people who are lonely, people who are socially isolated don't have that. And what we have been able to demonstrate is that they stay in a kind of fight or flight mode. So higher levels of stress hormones circulating, like cortisol, higher levels of inflammation. And that's how we think. We're pretty sure that isolation, loneliness, or toxic relationships through stress can break down your coronary arteries, can break down your joints, can make it more likely that you'll get type 2 diabetes. So that's how the same mechanism can affect lots of different body systems. And stress is really intrinsically linked to poor nutrition, right? So if I'm stressed, I'm more likely to reach for the KitKat. Exactly, exactly. You're more likely to go to the casino or to place that bet or buy that. Short-term decisions and not delay gratification. Exactly. Maybe explains why men live less long as well, because they are less likely to open up according to the data and be vulnerable. And therefore, their stress is not reduced by the insulating effect of having supportive relationships. That's right. They are less likely to open up. In fact, when they've done studies of how couples argue with each other, they videotape them, what they see is that men are more likely to withdraw during an argument, and women are more likely to pursue to say, look, I want to talk about this. And the man is likely to kind of clam up and literally sink back in his chair. And so- I feel attacked. Exactly, exactly, exactly. I'm withdrawing. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so it literally involves a process of learning sometimes for many men to learn to say it's okay. And one of the things we know is that men often have an aversive physiologic reaction during arguments that make them want to withdraw, so that the same kind of fight-or-flight mode for men may make them want to hang back, and for women may make them want to engage. And that's a little bit trickier. The science is a little trickier in that regard, but there's some idea that that's part of what goes on for us gender-wise. I understand how men might end up in that situation from maybe watching movies or, I don't know, stereotypes that are portrayed in media of what a man is, right? But are we also inheriting that from our parents? Oh, yes, absolutely. We get socialized all the time. In fact, there's some research on adolescent boys, and the research suggests that younger boys have close friends, and they emotionally confide in each other. And then as those teenage boys get older, they stop doing that. And there's some idea that it's not considered manly to do that, so the boys stop doing it. The girls continue to do it because they've been socialized that it's okay, that it's feminine. It's perfectly reasonable for a girl and a woman to confide in other people, whereas menly men don't do that. And that's one of the stereotypes in the ways that we're raised that hopefully is subsiding, that there are more ways to feel like a real boy or real man that include emotional engagement with other people. What is the cost then on the other side of the coin? What is the cost of being lonely? I was reading some studies, I think maybe similar to the ones you described about the gradual decay of connection that's going on in the world. So

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we're getting lonelier and lonelier as a species. Have you seen that in your studies over the years? As you asked these participants, how many people they've got to turn to in that moment of crisis, are you seeing a decay in the amount of people they think they can call it to in the morning? We haven't seen that decay, but there are many other studies that have. And in fact, there's a sociologist named Robert Putnam at Harvard actually who wrote a book in the 80s called *Bowling Alone*, in which he studied what he called our investment in social capital. Like how much do we join clubs? Go to churches and mosques and synagogues. How much do we invite people over to

our homes? And what he found was that starting in the 1950s, all of those indices dropped off. We stopped investing in other people. And it seemed to coincide in the US with the introduction of television into the American home. And then he went back in the early 2000s and did the same survey again. All of those parameters had dropped off further. So what he's shown is that we're becoming much more isolated, certainly in the United States, but also in the UK and in the developed world particularly. And it seems to have a lot to do with social mobility. It seems to have a lot to do with digital media and forms of entertainment, many different causes. But the net effect is that we are becoming more isolated. And to your question, there's an investigator, Julianne Holt Lundstad, who studies loneliness. And what she has estimated is that being lonely is dangerous to your health as smoking half a pack of cigarettes a day or of being obese.

And so what we know is that there are these very real, concrete effects of social isolation and loneliness that damage us as we go through adult life.

I read in your book that there was a link with Alzheimer's as well.

Yes, there is. That the brain declines sooner and the onset of Alzheimer's is earlier in people who are lonely.

You're twice as more likely to develop. I believe that that was in the Marmalade Trust study. You're twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's if you're lonely.

It could be. And we think that has to do with stimulation of brain pathways. So the thing that makes relationships a little scary and risky because people are unpredictable is also the thing that stimulates our brains. So when I came in here, you and I had never met. So I was going to talk to you. I didn't know what you'd be like, right? I didn't know what the questions would be like, but that's good for my brain because you've got my brain running on a lot of different circuits and that's stimulating my brain circuits. That's a good thing. You, I think, are preventing me from becoming demented earlier. So thank you very much. You're welcome. Yeah.

Are we good at understanding? I think back to that kid, me, sat in that room in Manchester, just absolutely focused on building a business and becoming a CEO and all of those things, the monetary upside. I was particularly bad at, if you'd asked me what the value of a relationship was, I would have said, I probably would have just pointed to the costs. I would have said it's going to have time and arguments in the research that you've done. Are people good at understanding

the value of a relationship? No, they're not. They're not. Partly because relationships are the background. I mean, if you think about it, we've never known the world without relationships. Most of us, most of us do not live in solitude. And so we've, there've always been people around, which means we tend to take relationships for granted. And it's only when you pull back and you look at thousands of lives that we saw these powerful effects, the differences between people

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who had good relationships and people who didn't. Most of us are, it's like that old joke about the two fish swimming along and the older fish swims by and says, hey boys, how's the water? And one fish turns to the other and says, what's water? And we're in this swirl of relationships all the time that we take for granted. And so it's particularly difficult for us to understand that this is something that we need to pay attention to, nurture, cultivate throughout life. What if I'm in a toxic relationship? What if my partner is an asshole? Is it, do I stay because of these physiological benefits, insulation from stress or whatever it might be? Or do I dump them and go out alone in life? Well, as with so many things, one size does not fit all. There's a huge amount of discernment involved. So if you think about it, one question for a toxic relationship is how much is at stake? How much do I have invested? So let's say you're married and you have children together. Then the idea is to work really hard to see, is there a way to salvage this relationship? If only for the children, but also because the partnership could have benefits. And so what we would say is if there's a lot invested, then we work harder to see, is there any way we can find ways to work out our differences? Sometimes there isn't and those relationships need to be ended. But I want to point out that most relationships of any consequence have conflict. And so the real issue is not, are there conflicts? The real issue is can we work out conflicts regularly in ways that make us both feel okay about ourselves and about each other? If we can't do that, then those relationships often need to be stepped away from. When you looked at all of the relationships that are beneficial and are successful as a relationship, what are the factors that made those relationships most successful, if there are any? One of the things people talk about a lot is being able to be themselves, to be authentic, meaning not to have to hide important aspects of who I am in a relationship. And it's not that we're bearing our souls all the time, but do I have to pretend that I'm someone I'm not? That's exhausting and depleting. And so the idea is to be able to be yourself in a relationship of any consequence. I think the other thing we find in good relationships is that people allow each other to change over time. I mean, we're all constantly changing, we're all moving targets. And so if we can allow each other to change and maybe even celebrate that change, the relationship is stable and is likely to last. I mean, I think about, you know, my wife and I are about to celebrate our 37th anniversary. We are so different than we were 37 years ago. I mean, I had never heard of Zen 37 years ago, and now it's a big part of my life. My wife had to figure out, what do I do with this guy now who practices Zen? My wife has developed in ways I never expected. What we've had to do is learn about each other as we change and accept those changes and hopefully support each other in changing, which I think mostly, my wife and I have been able to do, but it's part of its luck. I mean, it's not like we're such wonderful people, we've just been lucky to be able to support each other in those changes. But part of it is intentional. And so I think that the best relationships involved being able to support each other in exploring new things, taking risks. One of the things that inhibits all of that is we have these expectations on our partner. We have an expectation of the role they'll play, of who they'll be, et cetera. How does that impact our chances of being successful in relationships? Yes. I mean, I don't know if you remember this old Billy Joel song, I Love You Just The Way You Are, in which the lyrics are saying, don't ever change. I just want you to be exactly the way you are right now. And that's completely unrealistic. And so we do, we have these expectations of who our partner is going to be.

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Parents have this of children. I mean, sometimes I'll catch myself telling one of my sons who's in his 30s, are you sure you don't want to wear a warmer coat when you're going outside? And he looks at me as his dad. He lives on his own. He's lived on his own for years. It's like, come on. But I have to get out of this mode of being his parent in this, in this helicoptering way, right? So we're always having to readjust our expectations of each other in order to make relationships work.

If I was your one of your kids and I said, dad, give me one piece of little relationship advice for how you and mum have managed to stay together for those 37 odd years. But just, I just want one piece of advice, dad. Catch each other being good. Instead of catching each other at doing the things that annoy you, right? I'm really good at noticing when my wife does things that annoy me. And I'm not good at remembering, oh my gosh, you know, she just made this great meal. She just made sure that I was on time to this meeting. She just reminded me to take my medication. You know, it's like all these things that, oh my God, if she weren't here, I would be a mess, right? And so what I would say is, it's really practicing gratitude. Gratitude practice is really just flipping, flipping our negatively biased minds on their heads and, and essentially finding what's good, what's going right with the partnership. And when we do that, there's usually so much to find that's not wrong, that's right about the relationship. And if you do that, you find that I find that I'm happier in the relationship, even though there are plenty of times when it's boring, it's predictable, it's annoying, as any long relationship is, there's so much to be grateful for. The other thing you talk about a lot in this book is about the use of our time and how we spend our time. Chapter five kind of goes back to what we're talking about a second ago about time management and discipline and all these things. One of the alarming things I got from chapter five was just how much time we waste unknowingly. And I think maybe this is something that's quite pertinent to your Zen practice, but I think you said that we spend half of our time in waking moments thinking about something other than the thing we're currently

doing. And that people that do that are more unhappy. So people that spend more time ruminating about or with a wondering mind as you called it, are the most unhappy. Yes, there's actually good research on this from a different research group where they would actually ping people throughout the day at random times and say, are you thinking about what's right in front of you now? Are you thinking about what's current? And that's where they get this data that says most people will respond, no, I was thinking about something else, the future, the past, whatever. And then they would

also ask at the same time, how's your mood right now? How happy are you? And they found that the people who spent more time thinking about what's right in front of them were far and away happier. So a wandering mind is a less happy mind.

In that chapter, you talk about multitasking as well. We all think, I mean, I'm, you know, this is one of the problems I had when I was writing my book as I like to play music. Yeah.

With that has lyrics in it. So I don't know, like R&B music or something. Yeah.

And I want to write at the same time. And I eventually come to learn that my brain is incapable of doing two things. So it's not actually listening to the music.

It can't listen to the music and write at the same time. In chapter five,

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you talk about there's research that shows our brain is not capable of doing one more, more than one thing at a time.

That's right. You're really switching back and forth really quickly. And it's super inefficient. It's an incredible waste of energy because your brain takes a moment to get back into gear in the thing you've switched back to. And then it's switching off again to something else.

And so what we, this idea of multitasking, oh, I can do so many things at once is a fool's errand, basically.

Flow state kind of linked to that.

Yeah.

Is it a thing?

It is a thing.

Is it a good thing?

Yeah, it is a good thing.

Prove it.

Well, I don't know if I can prove it, but well, actually, there's been some good work by Cheeks at Me High.

He's a, that's his name.

And I can't spell it.

It's this long name.

He's since passed away, but a very brilliant psychologist who did research on flow states.

So I'm a meditator and many people say to me when they find that out, oh, I should meditate.

And I often say, no, you shouldn't.

You should see if meditation feels good to you.

And if it does do it, if it doesn't feel good, find another state, a flow state, if you will.

Find another pastime that for you makes the time just fly by.

So my wife is not a meditator.

She has no interest in it, but she loves music and she's an avid pianist.

She can sit for an hour and just be transported playing the piano.

That's her flow state.

For some people, it's skiing down a ski slope.

For some people, it's working in a garden.

For some people, it's being on a soccer pitch.

So what I, my hope for people is that they find a flow state or maybe more than one and that they allow themselves those experiences of flow from time to time,

where they're just so in the activity that time passes by effortlessly without noticing.

That's so nice to hear and refreshing for people who have struggled with meditation, which I imagine is most people.

Lots of people.

And, you know, even on this podcast, when I have guests on, they often talk about the positive upside of doing meditative practice.

There must be so many people that listening go, I've tried it.

I can't, I can't, it doesn't work for me.

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But to know that, like your hobby, that thing that just, as you said, that makes the time fly by is an equally effective, potentially form of meditation.

Exactly.

Making music or painting or whatever it might be, running.

And really nourishing.

I mean, it gives us energy.

It gives us a sense of peace and equanimity to be in that kind of state.

Quick one.

As you guys know, we're lucky enough to have Blue Jeans by Verizon as a sponsor of this podcast.

And for anyone that doesn't know, Blue Jeans is an online video conferencing tool that allows you to have slick, fast, high quality online meetings without all the glitches you might normally find with online meeting tools.

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Blue Jeans Basic is essentially a free version of their top quality video conferencing tool.

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They also have enterprise grade security so you can collaborate with confidence.

It's so smooth that it's quite literally changing the game for myself and my team without compromising on quality.

To find out more, all you have to do is search BlueJeans.com and let me know how you get on.

Over the last couple of how long, maybe four months,

I've been changing my diet, shall I say.

Many of you who have really been paying attention to this podcast will know why.

I've sat here with some incredible health experts.

And one of the things that's really come through for me, which has caused a big change in my life,

is the need for us to have these super foods, these green foods, these vegetables, and then a company I love so much,

and a company I'm an investor in,

and then a company that sponsored this podcast and that I'm on the board of, recently announced a new product,

which absolutely spoke to exactly where I was in my life,

and that is Huell, and they announced Daily Greens.

Daily Greens is a product that contains 91 super foods, nutrients, and plant-based ingredients,

which helps me meet that dietary requirement

with the convenience that Huell always offers.

Unfortunately, it's only currently available in the US,

but I hope I pray that it'll be with you guys in the UK too.

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So if you're in the US, check it out.

It's an incredible product.

I've been having it here in LA for the last couple of weeks, and it's a game changer.

On the subject of work, what did you notice in the study about the type of work that leads to the most happiness?

I've really tried to distill, I think, over the last couple of years, what are the fundamentals of what we need in work to be happy?

And obviously, because of this real tectonic shift in how we work, in digital screens and remote working, things are changing.

And I sometimes wonder if we're kind of sleepwalking into a world of work that we haven't properly considered,

just because we can do something doesn't mean necessarily we should.

Yes, again, that path of least resistance.

So we do know some things about this, from some good research, coming out of business schools,

they do a lot of this kind of research on the conditions of work.

But also the Gallup Organization,

they did a survey of 15 million workers all over the world, all ages, all cultures, all ranks in a workplace.

And their main question was, do you have a best friend at work?

Only 30% of those 15 million workers said, yes, I have a best friend.

What that meant was, I have someone who I talked to about my life, about my personal life, it might be my child is struggling with math, or it could be anything, but just to talk about what's going on in your life.

Those 30%, then they did all kinds of assessments of those people and talked to their bosses.

They were better workers, they earned more money,

they were better with customers,

they were less likely to leave their jobs for a better offer,

because they had people they wanted to show up for every day.

And so what many leaders in the workplace think of as a distraction,

socializing at work, turns out to be a hugely powerful factor

for increasing productivity and increasing wellness and happiness at work.

Those 70% of people who said, no, I don't have a friend at work,

11 out of 12 of those people said, I'm pretty much disengaged from my job.

11 out of 12?

11 out of 12.

So, nearly all of them?

Nearly all of them, whereas the 30% were much more engaged in their jobs.

So if you have friends, you're also more engaged in your work.

There's something about those connections that is energizing and livening,

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and it spills over into the work itself.

It's so interesting, I sat with our head of culture at my marketing company,

Flight Story, and we were talking about the KPIs,

that a head of culture and people should be tracking in the modern era.

And one of the KPIs, which I had in my last company, and we've introduced into Flight Story, is the amount of communities that exist outside of the office.

So how many football teams, do we have a women's football team,

do we have a reading club, and are they active communities?

Because it's really clear to me that in terms of retention,

satisfaction, engagement in the work, if people are bound by this community in various different ways, everything is going to be better.

Exactly.

And people don't necessarily think about that in the modern world of work,

that you should be, as an employer, doing everything you can

to create a, I don't know, Flight Story football club,

or a dire of a CEO, a reading club, or running club.

It will have a huge positive impact for, of course, health and all of those things,

physical health and all those things, but psychological health and social fitness, as you call it in the book, will go up.

As employees, we don't think that's our business.

Right, right.

We don't think it's our business, and it turns out to be so much our business.

The other thing is, most of us spend more waking hours at work

than we spend doing anything else in our lives, for most of our adult life.

I mean, so if you're not going to get the benefits of good connections with other people at work, you are missing a huge part of your life experience.

But it didn't used to need to be our business so much either.

If you know what I mean, like we used to have other things within society,

like even pubs have started shutting down because the economics don't work out,

and churches and these sort of social institutions outside of the office.

And then you look at what's going on with this kind of remote working situation,

post pandemic, where the social institution of the office or working around people is also in decline.

What's your view then on remote working, and what would your message be to a CEO or leader or employer

that has this maybe potential social pressure coming from whatever,

to say everyone should be able to work from home at all times.

That's a really good thing versus the research you've done that shows the importance of in real life human connection.

Well, we don't know enough yet about the difference between remote work and in-person work.

We don't know, for example, what gets filtered out on Zoom.

What aspects of emotional communication get filtered out?

We don't know.

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And so we're going to learn more in the next few years because people are studying this.

But then the question is, what do we do?

And what do we know?

I think we know that some things are filtered out.

And if you think about it, when you were locked down and you were just on screens with people, and then you saw people again in person, I felt this upsurge of like, whoa, this is so great.

It's so good to see you in real life, right?

And so we know that there's some truncation of the interpersonal experience.

We just don't know all the elements of it.

By contrast, so I'm a psychiatrist and I do psychotherapy.

That's my specialty.

So every day I see people in talk therapy.

If you had told me I could do talk therapy remotely that was meaningful,

I would have said you were crazy.

Well, it turns out you can and most of my colleagues are doing it.

So there are aspects of remote work, of remote connection that are much better than we thought.

We're having to learn about this.

But to your question of what advice would I give to CEOs?

First, I would say that the culture of fostering social connection needs to start with the CEO.

It needs to start with leadership.

It can't just be something you delegate to your human resources department.

But then I would say also, be intentional, structure it.

And that can be structured even on Zoom.

So the surgeon general in the United States, that's the kind of head doctor.

He's like the figurehead of medicine, of public health.

Vivek Murthy is his name.

His platform has been emotional well-being and decreasing loneliness, particularly in the workplace.

So what Vivek does is he has a staff meeting every week where the first five or 10 minutes

are devoted to one staff member talking about something in their personal life

that they'd like everybody else on the staff to know.

And people love this meeting.

It's their favorite and it's their favorite part of the meeting, right?

Because they get to know about each other.

I didn't realize you were into fencing or you were into magic tricks or whatever it was.

People just talk about their lives.

And so I think what we can do even with remote work is structure ways of knowing each other better, the ways that we used to be able to take for granted.

Like you come to a meeting in an office and you spend a moment or two chatting

with the person you happen to sit next to and you might find out something about their life.

How do you do that remotely?

How do you do that on Zoom?

And that's what I think we have to figure out in some way

if we're going to have any hope of having meaningful connections in the workplace.

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One of the things that has been really, really positive about the shift we've seen in the world of work over the last two years, it feels like people have more control and autonomy.

And control and autonomy is quite clearly a predictor of happiness, right?

Yes, huge predictor.

In fact, in the UK, they did the first study of this.

Michael Marmot, who did this amazing study, the White Hole Studies, where he found that the people who had more control and more autonomy stayed healthier.

They were under less stress and they stayed healthier.

That always really stood out to me that there's physiological health implications.

You're less likely to get things like heart disease

if you feel like you have a greater control over your life and work.

Absolutely.

And people that are working in jobs that where they don't feel like they have autonomy have physiological consequences.

They're more likely to get disease.

Feels very, very stark.

Well, and it goes back, I think, to the stress hypothesis, that there's something about having no autonomy being confined and constantly frustrated that keeps, I suspect, keeps the body revved up in a kind of chronic stress mode that then breaks it down.

In your work as a psychiatrist, what is the like reoccurring thing that us as humans just seem to struggle with on an ongoing basis?

You talked about, at the start, it was things to do with like, you know, permanence or our identity, whatever else.

Are there other things?

I remember sitting here with Marissa Pia and she talked to me about how we like fundamentally live with the patients she sees suffer with a feeling like they're not enough.

That seems to be a consistent theme for her.

What are the consistent themes in your practice as a psychiatrist?

Well, I would say that sense of not being enough is a very important, very common one.

And it speaks to a sort of larger problem of self-criticism that many of us are quite critical of ourselves for just any number of things.

All of us have a different set of things we're critical about, but a lot of what I work with with people is first showing them the self-criticism, because often it's like the air they breathe.

So I come into your practice and what is a typical symptom of someone that might come and see you?

And why would they have come to see you?

They might come with depression.

They might come with anxiety.

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They might come with a sense that life is meaningless and they're not getting any joy in life.

They might have come because a spouse has died or a child has died and they're not able to cope.

They're just finding life doesn't seem worth living anymore.

And what's your process from there?

What do they say their symptom?

I'm depressed, let's say.

We talk.

So I am a psychiatrist, but I tend not to reach for my prescription pad right away.

I do use medication when we need it, but first we talk.

And often, if I can help somebody just to tell me what's wrong, a lot of the symptoms will ease.

And yeah, I mean, you can, if somebody is, if it's life and death,

I will often use medication right away to make sure somebody stays safe.

But many times people will come and after two or three meetings,

they will feel less depressed because they've been able to unburden themselves and to talk about something that they feel is so horrible or so shameful.

And I can help them understand it and often normalize it.

A lot of what I do and a lot of what my research does is normalize things and say, yeah, this is part of being human.

And for many people, a lot of times one of my teachers used a phrase that I find so helpful.

He said, we're always comparing our insides to other people's outsides.

I'm always comparing the me that some mornings wakes up feeling kind of lost and

like I don't know what I'm doing with my life or down with the curated lives that we see on social media or the game faces that we put on for each other.

I mean, you and I are trying to look okay for each other.

You know, we're not telling each other about our miseries right now because we have a job to do.

We're doing this interview and that's fine.

That's good.

We need to do that.

But it can leave each of us with the impression that other people are always fine.

They've got it figured out and I don't.

So a lot of my work as a psychiatrist is to help people see, oh, you know,

no, this is actually part of being human that, you know, yes, when you lose a loved one, this is a trauma and that, yes, many people feel like they don't want to get out of bed in the morning.

Many people feel like they can't go to work and let's talk about that.

Let's talk about your loved one.

Let's talk about what the loss is like.

And when you really take people through that and take people through what's hurting so much, a lot of times the pain will ease tremendously.

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Sometimes we use medication to help and that's good.

But many times it's not needed.

What are the factors of somebody that can be helped from all you've seen in your work?

What are the things you go, well, if they exhibit this, this and this, then I think we can work with them.

And I'm saying this, it's worth saying because I want to build the bridge.

We all have people in our lives that we want to help.

You're right.

Someone that's struggling with something.

I'm not saying it's our job to help them or to be a fixer as Simon Sinek taught me not to be.

But I do find it useful to know, that's kind of the question I'm trying to answer here is like, that person we all have in our lives, maybe they're struggling with something, maybe it's a recurring issue.

Which ones of those can be helped?

What are the cool factors?

The ones who can be helped are the ones who are willing to look inward.

So some people will never go for help, right?

They'll never want to be curious about themselves.

Often because it's scary at the deepest level.

Who are saying, this is my story and I'm sticking to it.

This is my worldview.

And I am not going to inquire about my own role in my difficulties, right?

The people who can be helped are the people who sooner or later get to a point where they say, okay, maybe I'm making some contribution to my troubles.

And if so, what is that?

Responsibility.

Some responsibility.

Some responsibility.

For some people, it's humiliating.

It's impossible to even imagine that I am the architect of some of my own misery.

Actually, many times a couple will come for couples therapy.

And if one person says, the only thing you have to do is fix the other person, you know that it's not going to work.

Because any couple has learned a set of dance steps they've developed.

And what you have to help the couple to do is look at their dance steps and then modify them.

And it's always two ways.

It's always both people contributing to difficulties in the couple, just as both people contribute to what goes right.

It's the person who says, no way am I any part of the problem here.

That's the person who can't really be helped by these means.

It's the reason why sometimes we don't want to take responsibility because confronting what the inward perspective might show us, as you said, is really uncomfortable for a self-esteem, which is already on the floor.

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Yes.

Yes, that's it.

So I'm playing defense.

I'm playing defense.

And the defense has to be so complete.

So think about the people who are so self-aggrandizing and have to tell you, with every sentence, how wonderful they are, who can never apologize, who can never admit doing anything wrong.

Those are often the people who feel the most vulnerable and who put up this rigid defense because to entertain that they're fallible, that they can make a mistake, that they can do something wrong, threatens a total collapse of the self.

And so those many times are the people who just can't at all entertain that question of, what could I be doing that I might be able to change to make things better?

Do you have a framework for how, I've heard you talk about how precious time is in your book and about attention.

Do you have some kind of framework that you use to decide how to invest your time?

Like why did you come here today versus being somewhere else?

You live in Boston, right?

Yes.

So you've flown over to the UK, to Europe.

You've been doing some appointments in Europe.

How are you deciding to deploy your time?

Is there a framework?

There's definitely a framework.

For me, it goes back to that vow of service.

So this study, I've been going for 85 years.

We've published hundreds of scientific papers, but we published them in academic journals, very technical.

No one reads those journals, literally almost no one.

And so what we found was that people were hungry for this kind of information.

I mean, the reason why my TED talk went viral was because I was speaking about things that we know from science that we haven't told anybody in the wider world.

So my mission, I said, look, I don't have that many years left in my career.

My mission now is going to be to bring this science that we've worked so hard to develop and bring it to people in ways that they can use to bring it in understandable form, rather than highly technical geeky form, which is what most of my scientific papers are.

Why?

Why not do something else?

Because relieving suffering is one of the most meaningful things I can do with my life.

And given that I'm not going to be remembered 50 years from now, easing some suffering right now is the best thing I can think of to do.

What's it doing for you?

It makes me feel like my life has some purpose.

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Dad and being with my family, my wife and my kids and my friends,  
because the question that Zen keeps asking and making me ask is, well, what's being human about?  
I mean, it's so unlikely to be born, first of all, right, and then to live a life.  
And so why am I doing this?  
And so that's the answer I have given myself.  
By any means, the right answer, God knows it's not the only answer.  
It's just my answer.  
And it's my answer for now.  
Is life, is there a point to life in your view?  
The point is what we make of it.  
There is, you know, this is the evolving of the universe.  
The universe is constantly changing.  
It's morphing and changing.  
Our species is going to morph and change, probably be extinct, right?  
Every species eventually becomes extinct.  
So do we matter then if we're going to be extinct?  
I don't know.  
We matter for the moment and we matter to each other.  
I mean, that's another reason why I've spent so much of my adult life prioritizing relationships  
and studying relationships, because I think what can we do?  
Well, we can matter to each other.  
What have you gotten wrong?  
And what are you going to keep?  
Oh, I've gotten so much wrong.  
Where do I start?  
But okay, I'll start.  
Just from the top of the list.  
Okay.  
Top of the list.  
Top of the list is I've worried too much about what other people thought.  
So one of the things I've done is I've, for example, I was in a job that was very prestigious.  
When I was young, I was director of a training program at a prestigious program for psychiatrists.  
And I hated it.  
I realized I, and I was on a track to be the chair of a psychiatry department at a fancy  
academic institution.  
And I realized I just hated the work.  
I just hated being an administrator.  
To me, it was like washing dishes.  
The same problems came up over and over again.  
And I would sit in these meetings with people who were obviously very engaged.  
And I'm glad they were engaged, but I just didn't care about it.  
And I finally had to say to myself first, and then to everybody else,  
I don't want to do this.

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This is not my path.

And it took me longer than I wish it had, but I'm glad I did it.

I had to learn that lesson in order to, you know, that was one of those badges of achievement. Right.

And so I've, so for me, what I've gotten wrong is, is thinking that the badges of achievement were going to be satisfying and realizing that they're not.

I mean, for me, a conversation like this is actually satisfying. I'd rather do this.

And I don't even care how many people listen to your podcast.

Although I'm, I'm sure it's a lot of people.

I understand it is, right?

But, but I don't care.

What I really care about is having this conversation with you.

That that feels like a really good use of my time.

If I make you, if I made you prime minister or president of the world.

No, please.

No, I, no, we need you.

Okay.

Robert.

And I told you to redesign society in a way that would lead us all to having greater levels of fulfillment and happiness.

What are some of the, the first things you would do in terms of the design of the way society operates at the moment?

What would you ban?

What would you introduce and enforce?

What I would introduce is massive support for children and the people who take care of children because it's the best long-term investment that actually they've done some studies of this.

There's a, James Heckman is a, an economist at the University of Chicago who, who published a paper in science where he analyzed hundreds of studies of what, when we invest in, in an age group, where do we get the biggest bang for the buck, right?

If we invest in zero to four years old or five to eight or all the way up, what, what happens when people get into adulthood?

Who's the most self-sufficient, you know, who's the healthiest?

And what he found was that for every dollar we invest in age zero to four, that we get a huge payoff compared to every other age group.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't support people in other age groups, but it means if we could invest in children, in young children and child care, so much, so much less poverty, substance abuse, misery down 20 years, 30 years down the line. It's a long-term investment.

Interesting.

And what about on an individual level?

So if you were to give me advice then on an individual level,

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and maybe we'll put this in the frame of one of your children turning to you and saying, again, dad, I'm off to live my life.

What is the, the way you would recommend I design my life at a very fundamental level for it to be a fulfilling life?

What do I need to know, Robert, dad?

Invest in people, really invest in all kinds of relationships, including casual peripheral ones,

which is what you've had to do following your involvement in the study, right?

Yeah.

That intentionality of like pouring into relationships, even though it doesn't feel natural.

Yeah, yeah, because so many benefits come back.

It's not, you know, they see us through hard times.

They, you know, what they, what they find, for example, is that your most peripheral relationships are the people who are most likely to find you your next job, not your closest friends, right?

So even these peripheral relationships are of great value to us.

And that happens to be because they're not in your social network.

They know many people who you've never heard of and can connect you with people you would have no other connection with.

I'm definitely one of those people that like has a bias towards being on my own, being isolated, just working on my own.

And I'm not good at watering my peripheral relationships.

I'm like, you know, five out of five at nurturing my like close relationships.

But outside of that, it's like, it's like a concrete wall.

I think a lot of people are like that.

I think a lot of people really struggle.

I don't know, like struggle with, especially again, we talk teller on about men struggling with social interaction because of their inability to be vulnerable and open.

Does it really matter?

Like, does it really matter for me that I, you know, I'm 30 years old now, do I start hitting people up that I've not spoken to in a couple of years and start asking them to go for coffee?

It doesn't matter if you don't feel a lack.

How do I know if I feel a lack?

You just check in with yourself.

I mean, seriously, the reason I say that, you know, it gets to this kind of introverts versus extroverts spectrum that, you know, some people have said, well, if you're shy, does that mean you're screwed that you're, you know, you're not supposed to be shy?

And no, it doesn't.

What it means is that all of us are on some kind of spectrum temperamentally, from shyness to extroversion, and that some people don't need many people in their life at all.

And in fact, having a lot of people around is stressful.

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Other people get their energy from lots of people and they want, they want more people in their life.

So there is a way that you really can check in and say, what do I need more of? What do I have enough of?

Maybe what do I need less of right now?

And people that are neurodivergent have sometimes different social needs to those that are sort of neurotypical, I think the phrase is, which goes to show that there's not a one-size-fits-all approach to.

I say this in part because I hit my friends up the other week and I said, after reading your work and reflecting over the years on the importance of social connections, I was like, why don't I try and get all of my friends to live in the same place?

You know, it's worth a try.

Some of them live, like of my five, six best friends, one of them lives in Dubai, one of them traveling around the world with his baby from Tulum to wherever, a couple of them live up north in the UK.

If connection and social connections and social ties are insulating for my health, if they are, you know, the number one cause of happiness, why don't we make an effort to try and organize our lives as communities?

I hit them all up.

I said, hey guys, let's all move to London.

Fuck off, Steve.

And I'm joking.

It was like, you know, life happens.

They get all of my work over here.

And I, yeah, yeah.

Well, that's what, you know, we're seeing this that actually these social fabrics are breaking down in more traditional societies where people did stay in the place they were born.

So India, people are really worried about this in India now, certainly in China, where people are leaving their villages.

So in a typical family, there would be the grandparents, maybe even great grandparents, and the parents and the children, right?

And the grandparents job was to take care of the grandkids while the parents went off and worked.

Now what's happening is that people are leaving their villages to seek economic opportunity elsewhere,

like in Dubai or in the big cities in China.

And everybody's losing their social fabric and their social role.

And so I think there's a great deal of worry about this.

You're noticing this and you're saying, wait, I want to knit this fabric back together.

I want my friends to come together and let's all hang out together and support each other.

My wife and I are saying, you know, we should like develop this old people's home as we get older and we should get all of our friends who are getting old to get together and live together.

But it never kind of works out that way because everybody's kids are moving to a different place.

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And you know, and so it's this question of how do we manage these social fabrics that are fragile, that once they're torn, it's really hard to put them back together.

But they provide so much benefit.

Are you hopeful?

You're not, are you?

Your reaction then told me you weren't hopeful.

You're right, I wasn't in that moment.

You weren't.

I could see it.

I wanted to tell you I was hopeful.

Yeah, I could see exactly that.

But I'm not about the social fabric stuff.

I'm not hopeful either.

I mean, there is evidence that sometimes we need to feel the pain before we change.

But I think there is so much influence that is driving us towards prioritizing other things and not the social fabric stuff that we've talked about that will probably win out over the long term.

I think so.

I think so.

And the problem is, you know, we evolved, we think, to be social animals, that it was safer to be in groups.

And that's why, you know, we passed on our genes more often if we hung together in groups.

And so the problem is that the way we evolved, it's a stressor to be alone.

It's a stressor to be more isolated.

But life is taking us in these directions of greater isolation.

So I'm not hopeful.

And you called me out on it.

You could see it flicker across my face.

And then I think I was trying to hide it.

OK, I'm going to ask you the question, the diary.

This is the question left by our last guest for you.

But then I am going to ask for a call of optimism.

OK.

So the question left for you is, if you could go back to one era in civilization, what era would you pick?

Why?

And what would your job be?

Interesting.

I would go back to 9th century China and I would be a Zen monk.

Why?

Because it was the way to know about life in a radically different way than society was going at the time.

And I would just like to know, just because I've studied koans and I've studied

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ancient Zen literature, and I'd just like to know what it really would feel like to be one of those monks in one of those monasteries with a teacher.

And I can envision it in my mind, but I'd really love to experience it.

So if I could time travel, that's where I'd go.

If you could only say one last thing to everybody that was listening, if this was maybe your last day on the earth and you've got this mission that you've been on for the last couple of decades to serve others and to help them with their suffering.

If you only had 60 seconds to leave a message with them, based on your work as a Zen priest and a psychiatrist and the studies that you've done, what would that message be?

It would be make your default setting kindness.

Just go back to that.

Whenever you have a choice, whenever you're at a point where you're trying to decide how to take the next step, make that your choice.

Why?

It's what Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen teacher used to call nourishing healthy seeds, that if you nourish those seeds, that's what grows.

If you nourish other seeds, like the seeds of power or dominance or anger, that's what'll grow.

Robert, thank you.

Thank you for giving me your time today.

Thank you for doing this interview.

I know you've done many of them, but this one was except...

This was really a wonderful conversation.

I really mean what I said, where you talked about seeds there.

Your TED Talk planted a seed in my mind that just grew slowly over time, and I was never able to shake it.

And it's funny because I was a young man who would...

I think that was probably the thing that had the biggest impact on me reassessing my priorities in life,

because you provided irrefutable evidence from a huge group of people with the study that you're the director of over a long period of time,

that as I said at the start of this conversation,

just like stared in the face of the way I was living my life.

And because of that, because that seed was planted in my mind,

I gradually... Nothing happens overnight.

Once, I think through confirmation bias, once the seed's been planted, you then find things as you go on that confirm that seed and kind of water it, and mean that it flourishes into being a tree or a plant or a flower.

And that's what happened.

I realized that relationships and connections and investing there, having a partner would be profoundly valuable and beneficial to my life and my work, and most importantly of all, my North Star, which is happiness.

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And that just nudged my life in a slightly different direction.

But then think about it, Robert.

I then have this podcast.

I then write quotes.

I then speak to people on the internet and social media and then on the tele.

And that slight nudging and that new direction has made me

nudge other people in that direction.

And that started with that video for me.

So thank you because I'm sure the dominoes falling has caused other people to be nudged slightly in that direction as well.

And that starts with you.

So thank you so much.

Well, what you've just told me is a real gift because that's what I would hope.

When we talked about what my mission is right now,

it's hoping that this kind of information and these ideas move people to shape their lives differently.

And so it means a lot.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

you