

[Transcript] The Diary Of A CEO with Steven Bartlett / Moment 129: Life Changing Lessons From The World's Longest (85 Years) Study On Happiness: Dr Robert Waldinger

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?

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

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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.

You'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.

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 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.

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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, right?

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.

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 a 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 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.

You know, 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.

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I'd rather, you know, endow a building that'll keep my name on it for a while until the building falls down.

It's 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.

Like 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, I mean, we're doing a downward comparison.

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

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 and 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.

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

And 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 bet they're not showing up worrying about those things

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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.

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.

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

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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.

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

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

It's difficult.

It is difficult.

And that's where suffering comes in.

You know, 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 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 you know, 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, right?

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.