

Hey, it's Bill Simmons.

Did you know I've had my podcast for 15 years?

Do you know that it is the most downloaded sports podcast of all time?

Did you know I have guests from the sports world, from the culture world, people who work for the ringer, people outside the ringer, celebrities, experts, you name it.

It's on my podcast three times a week, late Sunday night, late Tuesday night, late Thursday night, the Bill Simmons podcast.

Check it out on Spotify.

This episode is brought to you by Indeed.

Nobody wins when you play the waiting game, especially when it comes to hiring.

That's why Indeed finds quality candidates for you.

In fact, with instant match, Indeed says over 80 percent of employers get matched with quality candidates the moment they sponsor a job.

So don't wait, upgrade your job post today

with a \$75 sponsored job credit at Indeed.com slash Plain.

Offer good for a limited time, terms and conditions apply.

That's Indeed.com slash Plain.

Need to hire? You need Indeed.

This episode is brought to you by United Airlines.

What's new with United?

New and redesigned planes with things like larger overhead bins and room for everyone's roller bag.

Power outlets on every seat, screens at every seat,

and the ability to connect your Bluetooth headphones to those screens.

Plan your trip today at United.com or on the reward winning app.

Final delivery schedule subject to change.

Today's episode is about happiness in America

and evidence that Americans today are significantly less happy than they used to be.

So since the 1970s, the General Social Survey has asked thousands of Americans the same question, and that question is, quote,

take in all together, how would you say things are these days?

Would you say you are very happy, pretty happy or not too happy?

End quote. And in the last decades of the 20th century,

America's overall well-being seemed to barely budge.

We were just sort of bouncing along.

But since 2000, happiness in America took a clear and dramatic dive.

There's a new paper by the University of Chicago economist Sam Peltzman that dug into this GSS data to pull out a couple

tantalizing threads, each of which I think could be their own podcast episode in and of themselves. So for example, Peltzman's found that in the 1970s, women were significantly happier than men.

But female happiness has declined every decade since the 1970s,

such that now both genders have for the first time on record the same level of

happiness. I mean, that alone could be its own extremely interesting episode.

What happened to female happiness in America?

Here's another example from his paper.

He found that income plays a huge role in well-being.

Every year, the rich are happier than the middle class,

the middle class are happier than the poor.

He also found that race matters, but not as much as it used to.

White Americans have consistently reported more happiness in black Americans.

But since 1970 and especially since 2000,

happiness has dramatically increased among black Americans,

even as it's moderately declined among whites.

So that again would be its own interesting episode for this show.

What explains the shrinking happiness gap between black and white Americans?

Well, before my parent leave, I called Peltzman to talk about this paper

and I asked him, you know, now that you've marinated in half a century of

happiness statistics, what do you think is the most important thing that people

might not be paying enough attention to?

And Peltzman did not hesitate.

He said the most surprising thing he found was also the most important thing he discovered.

That is that nothing seems to matter more for happiness in America than marriage, marriage.

Yes, despite all those Borschfeld jokes about wives being the antidote to joy, you know, all those take my wife, please jokes.

The bottom line of happiness research is something more like my colleague Olga Kazan wrote in her analysis of this data in the Atlantic.

And that is, you know, not take my wife, please, but take a wife, please.

Happiness seems to be the clearest distinction between those pointing toward happiness and the pointing in the other direction.

Quote from the paper.

Marriage is the single most important differentiator when it comes to happiness, end quote.

Married Americans are more than 30 points happier than the unmarried.

That gap is twice as large as the average happiness gap between college graduates and people who never finished high school.

So that's an enormous difference.

And the difference is roughly the same, whether you're comparing married people to those who never got married or were married and got divorced or are now separated or even suffer the death of a spouse.

So what I wanted to know is, of course, why?

Why marriage?

What are we looking at here?

What are we talking about here?

Is marriage an intervention that turns unhappy people into happy people?

Maybe.

Or wait, no, maybe it's the opposite.

Maybe it's that happier people are just more likely to get married.

So what, you know, some people might call a marriage effect is really more like what researchers would call endogeneity.

Or maybe this is really a story about money.

Maybe low income Americans are significantly less likely to be married.

Low income Americans, I should say, are significantly less likely to get married and less likely to stay married.

And as a result, you could say, what we're really looking at here isn't that marriage is so special, but rather marriage is becoming a luxury product, a product of the already rich and happy.

It's a ceremony that richer, more educated people do.

It's a partnership that richer and more educated people are more likely to maintain.

Three theses, no firm conclusions.

Peltzmann is not an economist.

He's not a psychologist.

He's not a psychiatrist.

He's not a happiness researcher.

So to understand more about the relationship between marriage and well-being,

I wanted to bring back two of my favorite guests, two of your favorite guests.

Their last appearance on this show is still one of our most popular ever,

Bob Waldinger and Mark Schultz, the director and associate director of the Harvard study of adult development.

That is the longest running study of adult happiness ever conducted.

And also the authors of the book, *The Good Life*, on the lessons that they gleaned from that decades long study.

We talk about this study.

We talk about what role marriage is playing.

What's so special about marriage, whether it's marriage at all that is making this apparent difference in people's lives.

And we go back to their core theory of why social fitness is at the heart of well-being and at the heart of the decline of happiness in America over the last few decades.

I'm Derek Thompson.

This is Plain English.

Bob and Mark, welcome back to the show.

Thank you.

Good to be back with you, Derek.

So the headline that we're discussing here today is that the general social survey, which is a gold standard survey for evaluating changes in American attitudes and behaviors over time, has found that American happiness has generally declined in the last 50 years with the bulk of that shift happening in the last 20 years since the turn of the century.

I know that the worst thing that anybody can do to kick off a podcast is to talk about methodology.

But Mark, in our discussions before the show, you said you wanted to say a few things about the methodology of this paper that we're discussing.

And it is an analysis of GSS data by the University of Chicago economist Sam Peltzman.

And in particular, Mark, you said you want to point out that our definitions of happiness, what it means to be happy, have shifted in significant ways in the last 50 years.

What do you mean?

Yeah, I think there are really two challenges, Derek.

And they're really kind of interesting to think about.

One is when we talk about people reporting about their sense of happiness, we always worry about bias.

And it's a particularly challenging way of scale, which the GSS survey uses. That only has three choices.

So the choices are you can be very happy, pretty happy or not happy.

And pretty happy to me sounds like what I would say, actually, I feel like I'm happy a good part of the time, but not all of the time.

And I'm certainly not generally sad.

Pretty happy in this survey for the paper that we're talking about was chosen to be a kind of neutral point, neither happy nor sad.

So I think when we talk about it, we need to take that into consideration.

And then the bigger point is the one you raise, which is that across time over the last 50 years, our discourse or discussion of what we mean by happy, how important it is to us has changed.

So talking to people 50 years ago is like talking to a slightly different culture, maybe from abroad, not from the United States.

And we need to be careful.

We're talking about the same thing.

So that's the challenge of happiness research.

It's a challenge for us and our own research as we follow people across eight decades. This is pretty common in this research.

Bob, as someone who's helped to oversee the largest longitudinal study on happiness in American history, what do we need to know about the ways that American attitudes toward happiness or attitudes toward ideas like mental health and well-being have changed in the last few decades?

Like, how do we need to sort of like foreground that before we dig into the nitty gritty details of this paper?

Well, it's hard to characterize because one size never fits all.

So, yes, there may be some big trends about what people mean by happiness.

Certainly in our study, these people of the World War Two generation were thinking about how they could have meaningful lives,

how they could be good people, right?

We don't hear as much about that.

Does that mean people don't want that as much?

I don't know. And I don't know that there's good research that really can say that there has been a real historical shift.

But certainly the idea of wanting a life of meaning and purpose was something that many of the people coming out of World War Two were concerned about.

But let me just say that, you know, to Mark's point, even what people mean now when you ask, are you happy, that varies a lot.

And so at some point, I hope we'll get into the different flavors of happiness that we know exist from research.

Yeah, I think the most important takeaway from this paper and from the data that Peltzmann analyzed is marriage.

And Peltzmann writes in his analysis, quote, marriage is the single most important differentiator when it comes to happiness.

Continuing with Peltzmann, arithmetically, most of the overall downturn in happiness is attributable to a decline in marriage after 2000.

I should say, you know, the difference that he's analyzing here is roughly the same, whether you're comparing married people to those who never got married or got divorced or are now separated or suffered the death of a spouse.

It's a comparison between married married and not married.

Bob, I want to go back to you on marriage because this, again, is one of those interesting places where there might be some really obvious things to say about what's so special about marriage.

But maybe there's some not so obvious things that are important about marriage in terms of being this significant to overall happiness.

What are the active ingredients to marriage as it seems to promote well-being? That's really important because if we just say, well, married people are happier, does that mean the marriage license is what makes you happy?

No, absolutely not.

So to your question, what are the active ingredients?

Close relationships give us a bunch of different things.

Probably one of the most important and most obvious is they give us a sense of intimacy.

We asked people in our original sample, who could you call in the middle of the night if you were sick or scared?

Now, having a spouse usually guarantees that there's somebody you could call in the middle of the night, somebody who has your back, right?

Now, a few of our people didn't even list their spouses.

But most people find that marriage provides that secure base of attachment, that sense of, I've got somebody here when I'm in trouble.

So there's that.

But then what we discovered was that marriage provides all these benefits that are quite mundane, like somebody who gets you to remember to eat, somebody who gets you to remember to go to the doctor to take your medication. It sounds trivial, except it turns out to really matter for whether you're happy and whether you stay healthy.

So there are emotional intimacy aspects that are active ingredients and remembering to take care of yourself aspects.

Those can be provided without a marriage license.

Those can be provided even if you don't live together with someone.

And so we want to name that rather than allowing people to have the impression that, well, you've got to be married in order to be happy.

Mark, as our resident sort of statistical complexifier here,

I wonder how you think about the, about whether what we're looking at is correlation versus causation.

So to be specific, does marriage create happiness?

Or conversely, we could say, is getting married something that people predispose to happiness just do.

You know, as I was thinking about this, one of my more sort of, you know, glum thoughts or maybe not glum, just sort of like soberly realistic is that, you know, if being sometimes dissatisfied with life is just the natural state of adult life, then maybe it's the case that like married people and especially higher income married people will talk a little bit about money later, but higher income married people are more capable of pooling their financial and to Bob's point, emotional resources to bear the whips and scorns of time. And so there, you know, it's not just that marriage is creating happiness. It's actually that stability, which today might lead to marriage is ironically or fittingly likely to lead to more stability.

So how do you tease apart correlation and causation here when we're looking at the significance of marriage in terms of predicting happiness?

So that's just a huge and important question, really, really important.

So this is not an experiment.

So we always have to raise the question of, is it just an association that might be due to some third factor that we're not looking at?

Like maybe happier people tend to get married more often, stay married.

So it's a selection bias in the sample.

And my guess is that that may explain part of it.

This study that we're being inspired by today doesn't really tell us the answer to that, but the selection may be a part of it.

That folks who are doing better, maybe at work, maybe they're happy in life, maybe more likely to get married.

So that's one possibility.

The other possibility is there are other things that tend to happen along with marriage that may be confounds.

And again, that might be job success or general competence or things like that.

So my guess is the best answer, getting rid of all the method of complications is that the relationship is probably bi-directional in some way. There's probably some selection that there's not a random group of people that are getting married and staying married. And there also are some possibilities. And I think it's quite likely that marriage may confer some benefits, both emotional and financial. I want to highlight one thing Bob said and really sort of doubled down on it, that we can get these benefits from close friends, from close relatives that we have. There may be some unique things about marriage, but this particular article studied marriage as the relationship entity. They didn't study how many close friends you had. Other studies have looked at support networks and people see similar abuse and their satisfaction with life and their overall happiness. So it's not constrained just to whether people are legally married. These may be things that you can get from a really close friendship or a sibling that is really tight and who you would call if you were needing help in the middle of the night. Right. Yeah. Two pieces that I really want to put into the conversation. One is that we've seen inequality in marriage, marriage rates open up by education level. So now it's the case that the most educated and by association, higher income Americans who are much more likely to be married and non married cohabitation or just being single or single parenthood is becoming disproportionately more common among low income people. And it's important to point that out because, you know, we're talking about, you know, what is driving what it might be the case that if marriage is becoming a little bit of a luxury product, something that is more participated in by the high income, then it might simply be the case that, you know, high income people who are pooling their financial resources together are going to be are going to feel more stable in life than someone who is low income, doesn't have a partner and feels more unstable. I want to I want to drill down on this point of social fitness because as I was reading the paper, I had like a funny thought or maybe you'll consider it an obvious thought. But I was thinking like, all right, the last time that we spoke, we talked a lot about this idea that social fitness, the degree to which we are folded into local communities and networks of friends, is just so important for not only physical health, but also for happiness. And I was thinking, you know, people need people and friendships are great. But platonic friendships can often ebb and flow over time as people change, as they switch jobs, as they move around. There's really no such thing as a legally binding social institution that encourages platonic friends to remain friends.

But we do have a legal and social institution
that strongly encourages people who are in love to maintain intimacy.
It's called marriage.
It's our only legal institution that does this.
There's no such thing as married friends.
And so I don't want to write off love.
I like and I haven't like, you know, talked about love itself.
But I want to suggest that like one of the great benefits of marriage
is to put it as unromantically as possible,
the possibility of legally binding yourself to a close friend.
So that the law is inscribing your intimacy
and the habit reminding function that Bob was talking about.
Bob, how do you feel about my utterly
and pathetically unromantic conception of marriage?
Actually, you're talking about something that's been the case for marriage for centuries, right?
Marriage was a legally binding contract.
And often it was an arrangement between families, right?
So that it was a whole universe of people that were connected
and would support that union, right?
And to your point about marriage being less common now among people
in lower socioeconomic groups,
what you're talking about is that there are social structures
that support relationship stability.
And there are social structures that don't.
And the danger is that we are leaving people without support.
You know, many people say, I can't get married because I can't afford to.
I don't have the job security.
I don't have the income security to responsibly get married.
And that's something that is a systemic issue, right?
And so I think your point is really well taken
that to have not just a legally binding institution,
but an institution that financially, socially,
even politically supports sustained ongoing connection
and working through the hard bits of connection,
that all of that matters.
And that it's probably worth taking a more systemic view
of how we do or do not support people getting together
and staying together in this kind of union.
I was also going to say there are words not really about marriage,
but we use in friendship.
We talk about being brothers to men,
might talk about being connected in that way.
And it's not legally bound in the same way that marriage is,
but we search for those ways of making our connections more permanent.

And I was trying to use a verb of permanentizing those connections in a way that does bond us, not necessarily legally, but in a way that goes beyond a platonic relationship that may ebb and flow.

So I think people come up with creative ways to make those connections across time, but I like the way you're thinking about it.

There aren't the same social supports and sanctions, legal sanctions that provide that boost, that keep people in a relationship across time when they're married. So that's an important distinction.

And I'm just operating off of the first principle of your book, which is that social fitness might be the most important ingredient for long-term well-being.

Like true happiness might be a kind of efflorescence of feeling, like it might be sort of inherently short-lasting, but we're talking about well-being the good life.

And if social fitness is the most important thing, well, it makes me think about how fluid so much of adult life is that if you can move cities and you move away then from the people that were your friends, you switch jobs.

And so maybe if you were friends with people at your old company, you don't see them for happy hours.

You move from neighborhood to neighborhood.

You lose those friends that you see when you're walking your kid or you're walking the dog.

I'm looking for institutions in modern life that are sticky.

Marriage is sticky.

Marriage is sticky enough that if you want to dissolve it officially, you have to go through a legal process.

That's incredibly sticky.

It's not as hard as it used to be maybe 70 years ago, but it's still a tough process.

Religion, church is sticky.

It's hard to leave a community when you're used to seeing them every Sunday and they're going to call you on Monday if you weren't at church the last day.

But as Putnam has talked about and a lot of people have talked about, you've talked about, there aren't as many sticky institutions in modern life.

It's much easier to just sort of switch up.

No longer respond to that group text.

No longer respond to that Slack channel and just sort of move on, redefine your life in some other contour and some other network.

And I do wonder whether that freedom of fluidity has this downside

of you never envelop yourself in a sticky network that provides the kind of social fitness that leads to long-term well-being. Bob, it looks like you're chopping at the bit. Jump right in. Yeah, because I love this way of thinking about it. So because work could be sticky, but for most people, it's not. So you probably know the Gallup Organization did a survey of 15 million workers. And one of their questions was, do you have a best friend at work? Meaning, is there someone you can talk to about personal matters? Only 30% of workers said that they had a friend at work, who they could talk to about their personal life. But it turned out that not only were those workers happier, not only were they better performers, they were much less likely to leave their jobs for the next seemingly good opportunity, right? So work gets sticky too if you feel connected. If there are people you want to get up in the morning and go see at work. So I love this idea that they're, how do we make organizations that are sticky and hold us together? Stickier. We're shooting for things that are stickier. I think Derek, you kind of posed it really nicely that in modern life, we're kind of weighing this balance between freedom and choice and some allegiance and connection. And many people are choosing that freedom option, right? We're moving away from where we grew up. We're deciding to change jobs more quickly than we have in the past. So freedom is being valued above all things, including connection. And there are some consequences of that, I think, for people. One thing that's interesting I want to add to the discussion is just thinking about the role of marriage. So Eli Finkel, who's a psychologist, wrote a really interesting book called The All or Nothing Marriage. And the idea there is that we've grown to become more dependent on that person we're in an intimate relationship with than we have at any time in our past. We depend on that person for friendship, camaraderie, recreational opportunities, advice, and life that we've narrowed down our social networks to really rely on that person even more. And I think we can turn that around a little bit and say that in modern life, when we're moving a lot, we don't have as many sticky connections to other people. That person becomes so important to us, even for finding new friends, right? I asked my wife, we need to enlarge our social circle. Are there folks that you've met recently that are important,

that we might have fun with?

Those are things about marriage that are very useful about having an intimate partner.

And I think they become more important in the last 20, 30 years as we become more atomized and disconnected from our normal networks and our communities.

I wasn't expecting to go here when I brought you on, but what you just said raised a question that I've always wondered about, which is how to make friends in adulthood.

I do think that there is an interesting challenge of building intimacy from scratch when the participants are in their 40s, in their 50s, with the understanding that they've already missed the majority of the other person's life and now they have to build a relationship of intimacy.

Like that's a really interesting challenge.

Having studied people's lives over decades and decades, what advice do you have about building intimacy late in life?

Well, Derek, there's research about this.

So the research asks what are ways that people actually form new connections of any significance?

And they find that there is kind of a formula.

So if you think about the iconic water cooler at work or the coffee machine, it's where you go and you run into people who you might not otherwise see. And if you run into the same people again and again, you might strike up conversations that eventually deepen.

So what they find in our personal lives, that is if we volunteer or if we join something to do something we enjoy or we find meaningful alongside other people, alongside the same people again and again, first of all, we have something in common because we're doing something we care about.

And so there's a natural place to start conversations.

And we're seeing the same people again and again.

So some of those people, maybe people we start to talk to and eventually deepen our conversations with and make friends.

So there are ways to do this.

So in research terms, it would be proximity plus proclivity equals intimacy, right?

I like that.

I like that.

It reminds me of the fact that, and I know listeners are going to get very tired

of me talking about this, but I just became a father about a month ago.
My first daughter was born.
Congratulations.
Wonderful, thank you.
And it's really interesting just how immediately we intuitively feel like we belong to networks of parents of young kids.
I mean, in part because young kids are, in addition to being the most beautiful thing in the world, a pain in the ass.
Like, I mean, my God, newborns are a lot of work.
And you need to ask for help all the time.
And I love my single friends who don't have kids, but while I can ask them for time help, I can't ask them for advice.
I can't ask them how do you deal with a two-month-old who's dealing with acid reflux or something like that.
So right there, that's proclivity.
That's our punching our ticket into a social network of parents that we previously had no ticket to punch.
And I do think that it's remarkable the degree to which, yeah, what you said, proximity and proclivity seem to just drive friendship over time.
But I think in a life of great fluidity, it can be hard to come back to the same thing over and over again.
It really does take a kind of commitment if it's not something as inevitable as pregnancy followed by newborn.
I think it also takes intention.
One of the things we talk about when we talk about social fitness is really doing this proactively and intentionally.
So this time of life that maybe your readers are sick of hearing about, but we know those of us who are parents know it very intimately can also be very isolating.
So people complain about this time of life as one in which they felt disconnected from people.
Despite the fact that there are people out there that are having similar challenges and experiences, Bob and I bonded 30 years ago on part by me asking him about what it's like to be a new parent

and Bob and his wife offering advice about that.
So it's a great way to make a new connection.
But we also know it's a nodal point in people's lives
where they often feel quite alone.
So intention is really critical.
It's not just opportunity, but it's the intention
to build those relationships.
Some courage to reach out, to bury your soul,
and to say that it's challenging.
Well, I was staying up at night trying to figure out
what to do, really challenging.
So people have to be open and courageous
and also intentional about those efforts
to make connections as well.
Yeah, the last button I want to put on this
is that one idea you reminded me of,
and I forget if we spoke about it during our last interview,
but my favorite philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard,
had this observation about modernity
when he was writing in 1830s, 1840s Denmark,
where he said that for the vast majority of human life,
we have been lost in the finite.
You were the son of a Catholic potato farmer
who was the son of a Catholic potato farmer,
who was the son of a Catholic potato farmer,
and there was no opportunity at self-actualization.
You couldn't discover anything outside
of the well-worn treads of Catholic potato farming.
But the problem of modernity
is not being lost in the finite.
It is being lost in the infinite that you are born,
and you are told you can be whatever you want to be,
that you should find a spouse who is the all or nothing
answer to the marriage question,
who is the romantic partner and the intellectual partner
and the friendship partner,
and your work should provide income and to be meaning
and all sorts of purpose and friendship and community
that everything should be everything.
And he said that people get lost in that kind of freedom,
and the famous line that's associated with him
is he said that anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.
And his solution to the problem of being lost in the infinite
was a leap of faith toward Christ,

which as a reformed Jew atheist secular person
is unlikely to be my leap of faith.

But interpreted more broadly,

a leap of faith is anything that puts you essentially
into a very sticky relationship with an ideology
getting married is a kind of leap of faith.

Having a child is a kind of leap of faith.

And so I'm connecting these ideas and thinking about the ways
in which sticky networks and that those kind of hard
solidified commitments are an answer to the problem
of being lost in the infinite.

Bob.

Well, Barry Schwartz did this work on the paradox of choice,
that too much choice can really make us unhappy,
make us more anxious.

And what you're talking about is deliberately putting
constraints in our lives within which we grow and develop, right?

So you decided to have a child.

That's a big deal.

That changes your life forever.

And it puts constraints on your life forever.

And I think about, so for example,
my Zen practice involves going to these highly
ritualized retreats where we sit still
and then we walk in formation.

And what happens is you realize that the richness of life
starts to unfold precisely in those constraining circumstances.

And I just want to lay that out there as a kind of riff
on what you're saying, that there's something perhaps
about committing to a marriage, committing to a child,
committing to a best friend who you agree to stay with,
no matter what, that makes us live within ups and downs
and constraints that are a source of growth.

Yeah, I don't want to be too bumper-stickery here,
but I do feel like if you combine what Kierkegaard said,
that anxiety is the dizziness of freedom with your observation,
it's almost as if real freedom is found within constraints.

I think that's right.

I really love this discussion.

So there are a few ideas that are floating around in my head
that I want to share.

One is this idea that the choices have provided us
with more anxiety as the world has gotten more infinite
to use Kierkegaard's ideas.

There is more anxiety about someone not pursuing the right path.
And that's been multiplied by social media that shows us
many more paths than the incredible paths
that other people are following.

So we're human beings who tend to like to compare ourselves
to others.

And in the old days, we could look down the street,
maybe at our neighbors to see what their house looked like
or their car looked like.

But these days, we look at the internet,
and that infinite world is gigantic.

It's just gigantic.

There's a bumper sticker I liked when I lived in California.

Now that I've given up hope, I feel much better.

That was someone who knew Kierkegaard well.

This idea that if I've given up on a dream that I may not reach,
I won't be disappointed.

I won't feel sad in life.

So it is true that if we constrain ourselves in our own volition,
we make a choice to constrain ourselves,
we guard against disappointment.

But life is about living, right?

So what Bob is talking about are making big commitments in life,
taking on responsibilities in life.

And it turns out that those responsibilities often come
with stress and anxiety,

but they also come with incredible joy and meaning making as well.

And we see that in our participants over and over again
throughout their life.

And can I just riff for a minute on this?

Because this gets us back around to that question of what do we mean
when we say we're happy, which we started with, right?

So we could say, well, I'm happy right now

because we're having an interesting conversation.

So this moment to moment experience of happiness
is what I'm having right now.

But in an hour, something really annoying might happen
and I won't be happy at all.

That's different from what we're talking about,
which is the, if you will, harder one sense of my life
is basically meaningful.

My life has some purpose.

My life is basically rewarding,
even though it's got ups and downs.

And so the question of are you happy
might be answered in all these different ways, right?
Like this is a great conversation or yeah,
I'm happy because basically my life has a purpose that I care about.
And that sounds to me to geek out on what we first started talking about.
That sounds to me like being pretty happy.
My life is basically meaningful.
And in the study that inspired this conversation,
those pretty happy people were kind of taken out of the mix.
So I worry about that.
Maybe pretty happy is pretty good.
to get started.
JLL believes you should expect more from your office space.
So ask yourself, is your office working as hard as you are?
Does it foster collaboration, fuel productivity,
and help build culture?
Is it designed with intent, aka is it a place
you actually want to be with fresh air, natural light,
and innovative technology?
Your office can be a powerful asset.
So put your office to work with JLL.
Learn more about JLL office solutions for businesses of all sizes
at [jll.com slash Spotify](https://jll.com/spotify).
award-winning app.
Final delivery schedule, subject to change.
I love this conversation and it's too bad that we have to shift to something
as materialist as mere money.
But I do want to talk about mere money,
because in the happiness literature,
one of the strongest relationships is the relationship between
average happiness, self-reported well-being, and income.
At pretty much every level of income,
especially up to about \$80,000, \$100,000,
you find that happiness rises with income.
Bob, we can start with you.
What's a sophisticated way to think about how money makes us happy?
Is it that the ability to buy ourselves out of deprivation
is the thing that's making us happy?
Is it that stuff makes us happy?
Big houses make us happy in the long term?
Or is there some way in which money is really better thought of
as like a medicine or a vaccine that protects us
against the whips and scorns of time?
Do you have a way of thinking about this?

Well, to try to get to these many, many facets you just named, money does buy us out of deprivation.

That's pretty clear.

So that as your income goes up, while you're meeting your need for food security and housing and being able to educate your children, all of that, until you get your basic needs met, money does make us happier.

That's clearly demonstrated.

Then there's debate in the field.

Some people look at the data and say, oh, your happiness really doesn't go up much once you get your basic needs met.

Other people say, no, it does increase.

But the place where I think we've landed, there's a kind of collaboration between Daniel Kahneman and Matt Killingsworth, who did an adversarial collaboration because they disagreed about whether you get happier as you make a lot of money.

And the bottom line takeaway that I think is most useful for our listeners is that once you get your basic material needs met, to try to make yourself happy or by making more money is not going to work out.

That seeking happiness by making more money doesn't go well, doesn't predict that you're going to get there.

Does that make sense?

It does make sense, but I also just wonder, Mark, to you, I also wonder why if people who want to make a lot of money succeed in making a lot of money, and yet that meeting of their goal fails to make them any happier, whether some catastrophic error is being made in the modern mind here.

Yeah, so catastrophic is a pretty strong word, but I think there are a lot of people who have made money, who have met their goals, that aren't so happy.

We know that from our own research.

And the literature that shows that connection after a middle-class income between income and happiness suggests that the link is pretty small.

So it's reliable, it's there across lots of research, but the contribution of more and more income to our happiness is probably quite small.

So it's other things that are really important, and of course, our research emphasizes

the importance of connection and meaning in your life.
So I think people are putting their eggs in the wrong basket
after a certain amount of money,
but you started by asking a question about
how much money buys us certainty,
how much it might inoculate us
against some of the challenges in life.
And I think that is one of the benefits of money
to a certain point.
It provides more predictability, a little bit more control,
but control is a bit of a two-edged sword.
When we begin to have more control,
we have more choice and more choices,
as Bob was suggesting, don't always lead us to be happier.
But money does protect us.
So if we have a catastrophic event
and we have money, we have more options
at our disposal for dealing with that event.
If we have a health problem,
we have more options for pursuing a remedy
for that health problem.
So they're advantages to money,
but they may not necessarily be in the service
of that positive lift of happiness.
They may be in the service of perhaps reducing
some of the stress and challenges
that people who are less privileged
are more used to facing in their life
because they have fewer choices.
It's interesting that a lot of people seem to use money
to buy things, whether it's private jets
or big houses that tend to be in the suburbs.
A lot of times, and I think we talked about this
the last time you were on the show,
they buy a kind of loneliness,
or at least they buy a kind of aloneness.
They buy the privilege of being alone
when they want to be alone,
which is ironic if the most predictable ingredient
for long-term well-being
is being sewn into a social network.
Do you have any thoughts about the connection
between income and social fitness?
How would someone use money to buy more social fitness, Bob?

Well, they've done research on this.
They asked the question,
how do you use your discretionary income
to make yourself happier?
Is it by buying material things,
buying that second home or that yacht or whatever,
or is it by paying for experiences?
And it won't surprise you that the research shows
that when we pay for experiences,
it makes us happier and it makes us happier for longer
than when we pay for material objects.
So then the researchers ask, well, how does that work?
Well, it turns out it works in two big ways.
One is when we pay for objects,
they just beg for comparison.
And the more we compare ourselves to other people,
the less happy we are.
We know that.
And someone always has a shinier object on us.
And when we pay for experiences,
usually they're experiences either with people we already know,
I go with my wife to a concert,
or they're having experiences with people we haven't yet met,
but we come to know.
And so experiences are more likely to strengthen
existing relationships and or make new relationships.
So that has something to do with what makes us happy
in the way we use our finances.
I do think we compare experiences too.
I think Instagram is nothing,
if not one giant experience comparison machine.
That said, I do think the irony of this established fact,
as you said, that experiences seem to be more predictive
of happiness than the purchase of things.
Ironically, because experiences end and things don't.
So how do experiences make us happier in the long run?
Seems to me that maybe the cash value of experience,
so to speak, is our ability to talk about them,
to share them, to say, oh, you went to, I don't know,
whatever, Los Angeles, Rome, Greece.
I did too.
And then you bond over that.
And that's the proclivity that we mentioned,
which is next to the proximity.

And so you can discharge these experiences later on in your life
as a means of connecting with people.
Whereas I think it's just harder to say,
oh, you have a chair from Pottery Barn.
You won't believe this,
but I also have a chair from Pottery Barn.
Like, what else are you going to talk about?
That's not a very interesting conversation.
I think that is part of it.
The ability to talk about that experience,
there's research that suggests
it's the planning of a vacation,
the anticipation of a vacation
that's more powerful than the actual vacation.
I'm not sure that's really true,
but there is something very powerful
about planning, anticipation, sharing with others.
But it's also out of experiences,
the kinds that Bob was talking about.
We often develop connections that are long-lasting.
So we do a trip with someone that we meet
and we spend a few days with,
and that may be a connection that carries
beyond the experience itself.
I also want to say it's not a world I live in,
but I'm always fascinated to talk to people
that live in this world,
people who are into motorcycles, for example,
some sort of collecting of something.
And it's often done in groups with other people.
They often go to rallies
and spend time talking to other people.
So we can accumulate things
that lead to experiences as well,
and they can be quite powerful.
You have an identity that's tied up
in being a motorcycle guy
and being part of the rally.
But more importantly, you have people
that you're going to spend your Saturdays with,
that you're going to go out on a ride with.
So it provides a connection.
So that's a kind of weird accumulation mix
that meets experience.

But I think Bob and I would emphasize this idea
that things that we can spend our discretionary money on
that may have a big payoff
are things that allow us to deepen existing connections
or to develop new ones
that will continue beyond that experience itself.
And can we just contrast that
with the subliminal messages we get all day long,
which are just the opposite, right?
We're told in every billboard
or every ad we see on our phones,
if you buy this car,
you're going to be more appealing to people.
You're going to be sexier.
If you serve this brand of pasta,
your family dinners are going to be blissful.
So we're constantly told,
if you buy this material object,
it's going to make you happier.
And that's what we're all up against all day long.
I do think in defense of Madison Avenue,
which was not a defense I was prepared
at the top of the show to mount,
there's a lot of ads that are ads of people together.
And sometimes it'll be almost hilarious,
like how they'll try to smuggle in sociality
as a advertisement for something
that has nothing to do with sociality.
It'll be an ad for life insurance or car insurance,
but it'll basically just show a bunch of people happy together.
So maybe even there,
this liminal message in the part of the advertisers is,
we actually do understand
that happiness is not something that is discharged alone.
It's some of the people experienced communally.
It requires, in many ways, for most people,
the presence of other people.
And so we have to show other people being happy together
in order to at least suggest to people
that the product's going to make them happier.
Right, but you should buy our life insurance.
But also buy our life insurance, of course.
Yeah.
And there's something else, Derek,

that we take away from these experiences too.
So I'm thinking we're on food topics,
and I can savor a meal.
You know, I go out to a restaurant.
I have a pasta dinner.
I'm really excited about what it is.
It was such an interesting flavor.
I could, you know, on the tip of my tongue,
I'm still tasting it days after, so I can savor it.
But oftentimes, what we savor about experiences
are those connections with others
and the sense that we're not alone.
So if I've had a good experience, I play racket sports.
If I've had a good, you know, competition tennis tournament
of some kind, part of what I'm savoring
is not just whether I did well or not,
but I had fun hanging out with those people,
talking between the games.
I remember a specially good conversation I had.
I might savor that in the same way
that I can savor good meal.
So we carry that with us in our head,
just like we carry around the good feelings we had as kids,
if we were lucky enough to be raised by parents
that were warm and present.
There are things that we carry away with us
outside of that experience that are also warming
and humanizing for us in an important way.
That's great.
Last question, and I will not make this a theme of all episodes,
but because this episode, you know,
touched on sociality and friends and fatherhood,
any parenting tips for a one month and two day old father?
Take care of your relationship with your wife.
When you can, when you've recovered
from the whole newborn experience,
set up a date night and said, you know,
what we did was we had a babysitter come every Thursday
evening at six o'clock, and even if we were exhausted,
we went out no matter what.
It made a huge difference, just having
some alone time together in the swirl
of all this parenting you're now immersed in.
That's my advice.

Great, great advice.

And again, I want to note that Bob was the first person that babysat our first kid to get my wife and I out for a date, I think three weeks in.

So I'm ever grateful for that.

Get sleep when you can and be kind to each other.

Yeah, that relationship tends to go on the back burner.

So what Bob is saying is keep it on the front burner, really important over the long term.

That's great, I love that advice.

A friend before, just before our kid was born, our friend said, a lot of people think about when you have a newborn, the order of operation should go take care of your newborn, then take care of your relationship, then take care of yourself.

And he said, I want you to consider flipping that on its head that you won't be a very good father if you don't sleep, take care of yourself, you won't be very good co-parents if you're not good at each other, take care of your relationship, and then having checkboxes one and two, take care of the newborn.

So that's a philosophy of life that I'm trying to carry forward.

But sometimes it is simply not possible to take care of sleep when the baby is screeching and diapers must be changed, but such is life.

Bob and Mark, thank you so much for coming back again.

I really appreciate it.

This was fun.

Really enjoyed being with you again, Derek.

Pleasure.

Plain English was hosted and reported by me, Derek Thompson, and produced by Devon Manzi.

We'll see you back here every Tuesday for a brand new episode.

Have a great day.