

EPISODE 174

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to Episode 174 of Live Happy Now. This is Paula Felps and today we're talking with Jonathan Rauch, author of *The Happiness Curve - Why Life Gets Better After 50*. Yup, you heard that right, things start looking up at mid-life and Jonathan talks with our own Chris Libby to explain why getting older actually makes us happier.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:22.1] CL: Can you briefly explain for those who don't know what the happiness or the U-shaped curve is and why you decided to write a book about it?

[0:00:30.7] JR: Well, I'll flip the order if that's all right and do why me before what it is. Because they actually, it's a pretty good setup, I've had an incredibly fortunate life and by around the age of 40, I had so much to be grateful for, good health, the career of my dreams, stable relationships, plenty of income, you know, everything was just golden and yet I felt this encroaching feeling of disappointment, discontent, and just, I was trapped - and I didn't understand it. I sat down and I started taking an inventory of things to be grateful for, that only made it worse.

By about 45, I started to feel like I'd never be grateful and satisfied again, I just became really pessimistic. I didn't know what was going on because it was irrational and it really got very unpleasant, it wasn't depression though, it wasn't a mood disorder, it was a contentment disorder.

It also wasn't midlife crisis, it was midlife, it wasn't that bad, it was more like kind of constant background, wining of discontent but it made me like myself less. That dragged on for a while and then in my late 40s, basically coincidentally, I discovered this emerging literature on the happiness curve that was called - coincidentally about the same time or at the time I turned 50, I noticed I was feeling less of this discontent myself, it was starting to turn around.

I looked into the science and wrote a book about it and what it finds is very briefly that the aging process, all by itself affects how contented we are with our lives, it's not the only thing going on, that's very important, other things matter too, don't get me wrong, marriage, job, health, income, education, all of that.

But on average, the difference between being age 25 and being age 45 for your sense of contentment is about the third, about a third of the effective unemployment which is pretty big. You notice that if there are other things in your life is stable and I sure did. A lot of people notice it and they think there's something wrong with them.

Then it turns around after around age 50 on average. It gets easier instead of harder to be content with life right through the end of life and that U-shape, that dip in the middle, that's the happiness U-curve.

[0:02:51.0] CL: Then what are the biggest misconceptions you think that people have about this time in their life when they call it their midlife crisis?

[0:02:58.1] JR: Well, there are bunch but the biggest is, the one implicit in the very term midlife crisis. Crisis implies sudden, shocking, disruptive, abnormal, there's something wrong with you, emergency response. To a lot of people, it implies, get a red sports car, throw away your marriage, behave in an irresponsible or antisocial way. Well that's just wrong, that rarely happens, the common experience is what happens to me, it's the opposite of a crisis.

It's a kind of slow grinding, long term malaise, it becomes part of the background of life. However, it can become a crisis if we make mistakes during this period and that often happens, people throw their careers or marriages away when it's not really what the problem is. The problem is aging.

Biggest misconception afterwards is people imagine that after 50, it's all downhill, the best in life is behind us, we have stopped developing as adults will become weak, senile and miserable and die, opposite is true, the emotional peak of life is in the 60s and 70s.

[0:04:02.9] CL: Why is this still a tricky time, the midlife area for high achievers?

[0:04:07.0] JR: It's especially tricky for high achievers. Well, the reason doesn't really have to do that much with external accomplishments like having some money and having some status. In fact, it's partly because of those things. Best guess about what's going on here is that we're wired to be ambitious when we're young. That motivates us and the lure of the hook is if I accomplish these things that I have in mind, then I'll be incredibly fulfilled and happy but ambition's a trickster, it's always moving the goalposts.

It's never letting you be content and this goes on for year after year and by your 40s, you're thinking, gosh, you know, I've accomplished so much, I'm still not feeling fulfilled, what's the matter with me? You become disappointed about your happiness until then, you become pessimistic about your happiness in the future. You begin to feel trapped because you kind of are in this sense. That's one of the things that's going on, it hits high achievers the most actually.

Some people say well, isn't that a first world problem? First of all, it's not, because this pattern is seen in societies around the world, rich and poor, even seen in chimps and orangutans. Second, even if it were a first world problem, it's still a problem, right? It's still a nasty thing to go through.

Then the other thing that's happening is that our brains are changing as we age. That's actually physiological, we get more responsive to positive things, relative to negative things after our 50s, experience less regret, less emotional volatility and so forth. But there's a transition in between, that's the other thing going on.

Bottom line here is that high achievers like me are quite exposed to those because we should feel so grateful yet we're not.

[0:05:57.3] CL: Well, a lot of the examples in your book show that when people, like you said, get to this age afterwards, they're on the up swing of the curve, there's more focus on other people. You know, why do we become less ego centered and want to help others? Is that just a natural process of evolving do you think? Through a lifetime?

[0:06:15.9] JR: Well, it seems like two things. What's going on here, I mentioned that we should think about this period as it's not midlife crisis but midlife transition or I think of it as a slow-

motion emotional reboot. It seems like what's happening is that we're moving from values that are focused on ambition and you – you know, social achievements, social competition.

Ticking off those goals in life climbing that greasy pole, getting those promotions and those jobs and those incomes and whatever. We transition from that to later in life values that are more focused on community, compassion, caring and its conjecture at this point but the sciences have looked at that, think that's probably because, from an evolutionary point of view, once we're past our child bearing years, why would nature keep us around?

Well, because as grandparents and as elders and people with experience and knowledge of life, we can give back to our kids and grandkids and our tribe in ways that are evolutionarily helpful. Nature moves us away from struggling for ambition and towards moving more towards a socially giving role which it turns out by the way, just happens to be a much better path to happiness.

[0:07:35.0] CL: That's why our grandparents are nicer to our children than they were to us? I always noticed as the – I don't remember you being that nice. Then what are some tips that you can give our listeners to be more aware of their situation and to cope what's going on with their lives and to know that there is happiness around the corner?

[0:07:56.6] JR: Am I allowed to say read my book?

[0:07:59.2] CL: Yeah, sure.

[0:08:00.8] JR: I guess I'm an author so I have to say that.

[0:08:03.1] CL: Well, it's a perfect book.

[0:08:06.4] JR: There's a bunch of things to do and know which can be helpful. I wrote my book because I wanted it to be the guide book that I wished I had had when I was 38. It is very helpful to understand what's coming, understand what nature has in mind for you, understand that it's not forever, it might be a bad patch, it's not everyone because everyone's different but for many people, you hit this bad patch and you feel ungrateful. Like you'll never be content but it passes, it goes away, it's normal, it's healthy so you don't need to beat yourself up, you don't need to

think, “Gosh, what’s the matter with me?” Because as pathologizing it as this entire second layer of alarm and fear which makes it much worse.

That’s number one, forewarned is forearmed. Another thing that’s important is remember, midlife emotional malaise is often literally about nothing. I mean, you know, see in my book, there’s actual science about this. It’s not that there’s necessarily anything wrong with your life, it’s an internal process, it’s subjective, it’s inside of you and it’s not pathological but that means, don’t be so quick to just affix the sources of your unhappiness on say, your marriage or your job.

I felt tempted to walk in and quit the best gig I’d ever had just because I so felt the need to escape the trap of my life and escape the sense of disappointment. That would have been a mistake, I didn’t do it because I knew it was irrational but that’s how people make mistakes, remember, it’s not necessarily about your life.

People do need change, often at midlife as at any other time of life and then the question is, okay, step, don’t leap. Which is to say, impulsiveness, disruptiveness are not your friend at this time of life. Often, you do need a change but do it in a logical stepwise fashion, build on your social connections, your skills, experience, your strengths. Consult with other people, make sure you have a plan B so that this can be something that’s contiguous with your life and not disruptive of it. It’s usually the wisest thing to do.

[0:10:19.1] CL: You talk a lot about – in your experience, gratitude being a big part of it, can you talk a little bit about that?

[0:10:24.0] JR: Yeah, I’m so glad you asked. For a while, I toyed with calling my book, not *The Happiness Curve* but *The Gratitude Curve*. When people hear the word happiness, they think, well we’re talking about cheerfulness, right? How good do I feel right now? That’s actually not it at all, what we’re talking about is actually, it’s formally called subjective wellbeing, otherwise known as evaluative happiness but they’re always saying the concept off here is this is not about how good do I feel right now, it’s how good do I feel about my life?

Do I feel fulfilled in my life? Do I feel grateful for my life. Is this the life I would have chosen for myself, these big picture questions which turn out to be really more important for our overall wellbeing than just our mood from day to day. So gratitude is a huge part of this and for me the

worst part of being at the bottom of the happiness curve was I knew I should be grateful for all my blessings in life. I even counted my blessings. I literally sat down and wrote a list and intellectually, I was grateful.

But emotionally, I just felt dissatisfied and that was in some ways the worst thing of all because I felt like an ingrate and what happens is yeah, that's part of what's happening. You are making this transition but gratitude becomes easier later in life. It comes back and has come back in my 50s and there is going to be more and more of it. So that is why I thought about calling the food *The Gratitude Curve*.

[0:11:55.2] CL: I really enjoy when I read books like this that also where the writers just not from the outside looking in but they are also writing from their own experience. Do you think after getting through the curve that you are happier?

[0:12:09.2] JR: Oh yeah. I am still working on myself. I need to learn to become more generous and more instinctively kind. But you know this curve is very gentle and slow. It is not a sudden drop. Around the time I was 50, I experienced real setbacks the kind that I had not had in life before I lost a job. I lost both parents, I tried a startup and it went south. Yet around the same time, early 50s I also began noticing this fog of disappointment was starting – I thought it was starting to lift, I wasn't sure but a few years and I was sure and now I'm 60 I am really sure.

So I am a textbook case of the happiness curve. Not everyone is, like humans are very diverse. Your mileage may vary but everyone should know that if you are somewhere in the middle of life and you are in the fog of disappointment, there is nothing wrong with you. Normal, natural, healthy transition with a heck of a good payoff.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:13:16.4] PF: That was Jonathan Rauch, author of *The Happiness Curve: Why Life Gets Better After 50*. We'll be back in just a few minutes to tell you how you can learn more about his book but first, we're talking to Rebekah Reinhart who along with artist, Sarah Gail Nelson has started a movement to spread kindness through art.

Rebekah, thank you for joining us. I'm really excited to have you here to talk about The Kind Way and this whole movement that you have started.

[0:13:40.6] RR: Thank you for having me. I am so delighted to be here with you and to tell you a little bit more about what we are doing.

[0:13:47.8] PF: Well you started out with a really simple but kind of profound plan and that was to spread kindness. But you weren't sure how you are going to do that. Can you tell us a little bit about the genesis of how you went from wanting to spread kindness to doing what you're doing?

[0:14:03.3] RR: Absolutely, so I would say in college I branched out on my own and I had become very passionate about people and how they interact with each other and essentially kindness and so it was just one random day. I was on a train from Cannes, France to Paris and I witnessed this one random act of kindness and in that moment, I was like, "I just want to do something that inspires people. I want to do something that reaches the masses and speak to their souls on wanting to be just a better person in general.

So I have no idea what I am going to do but I am going to make it happen somehow, someway. And I decided that I wanted to paint a mural which I was laughing to myself because I cannot paint. So I found a co-founder, her name is Sarah Nelson.

She is an impeccable artist and we put our brains together and created the kind mural and we started in October in 2017 with the first installation in Nashville and after that we just let things takeoff as they will. So come almost a year later and we're confirmed in five cities already.

[0:15:17.9] PF: Why did a mural pop into your head?

[0:15:20.0] RR: A mural popped in my head because like I said, you know social platforms are really popular and I felt people love to take a good picture and share it, right? So I was like, "Wow, if I could put a mural up and it wasn't only a picture, right? It was something that people would visually see, they want to capture the art in a picture and then it challenged them to a way their whole following to see their message of kindness."

So how we defined the mural is what we like to call an interactive mural meaning that it challenges them to do something. So with the design it says “kindness is” and then a blank line and so, the message is they take a picture with the mural and then in the caption of their photo, they put what kindness post to them and then all of their followers and friends and family across all platforms can read it and then hopefully share it.

[0:16:15.8] PF: You’ve gotten a really good response from all of the cities that you’ve done.

[0:16:20.2] RR: Yes, we have. People were just so taken back because they were like, “Wow this isn’t just art. This is a message. This is a movement, this is a call to action.” And so when people thought in Nashville we got so many responses like, “Can you bring it to Charleston? Can you bring it to Dallas? Can you bring it to this city in California?” We’ve gotten so many people that are like, “We want the kind mural here,” and that is so inspirational to us.

And that means more than we could every say and it is so rewarding because you know, yes the mural is great and yes, I am so glad that they’ve found The Kind Way but what I am most excited about is that they’re passionate and they really love kindness and that is what’s pulling them towards it. It is the message so it makes it even more special.

[0:17:09.4] PF: Have there been any responses that have surprised you?

[0:17:12.4] RR: Yes, it’s so funny I think when we first put the mural up our best friends were all there. Friends and family and so you think you know someone and you know their hearts so well because you’re with them day in and day out and the responses from the people close to Sarah and I, I think that has been the most rewarding because they were not what we had expected. Some people put their idols, I would have expected them to put kindness is their – honestly, I felt some of them were going to do funny things like kindness is sharing the last cookie or kindness is –

[0:17:47.2] PF: Right, not drinking the last beer.

[0:17:50.0] RR: Yes and some did it in an elaborate response, sharing their heart about an idol and like a grandparent, which was so special to me because it really opened my eyes to part of their personality and part of who they are in a different capacity than I had already known. And I

think that's been so special. The same for Sarah too, I know she's the artist. She is the brains behind the artistry on the wall and so for her, it's so wonderful to have people bring her artistry to life as well, you know?

[0:18:24.4] PF: That's terrific. Well, we are going to tell our listeners on our webpage – we won't tell them on our webpage, we'll show them on our webpage, how they can find you and how they can see some of the terrific murals that you've done. Where are you going to next?

[0:18:40.8] RR: Yes, we are going to Wichita, Kansas, which is so exciting. We are going to be in a mall there and then we're also heading to Charleston, West Virginia. We are going to be downtown on one of their main streets with the mural.

And what I wanted to let people know when we take the murals basically each design is different and we try to tie in something local to each mural. So the color scheme is different, "The kindness is," remains but we love to – when we get to go to these cities, we learn something about these cities we try to incorporate it into the murals to make it very unique and special.

[0:19:20.8] PF: I know a lot of us have an idea and we think it would be really cool if I did this and that's kind of where it ends. So I applaud you and Sarah for taking it and putting it into action and now, it's become this national phenomenon and tell us where they can find you on social media?

[0:19:36.6] RR: Yes, so you can find us on Instagram and the handle is @thekindway. For our website, you can find us at www.thekindwayoflife.com. It is going live this September and we have products that would be for sale come September. It is called The Kind Jacket.

[0:19:57.8] PF: And those are very cool, I have seen your videos about The Kind Jacket.

[0:20:02.4] RR: Yes, we are so excited. They're custom made jackets and we work with whoever wants to get their perfect design so yes, they can find us on our website, on Instagram and then on Facebook, we are also The Kind Way. So easy three platforms.

[0:20:20.0] PF: Awesome, well we will find you and again, thank you so much for what you are doing to spread kindness and thank you for talking with us today.

[0:20:28.3] RR: Oh I am so grateful, thank you for having me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:20:31.1] PF: That's all for this episode of Live Happy Now. Be sure to visit us at livehappynow.com to learn more about today's guests, Jonathan Rauch and Rebekah Reinhart. If you like what you've heard here today and want to hear more, go to Apple Podcast or wherever you get your favorite podcast, search for "Live Happy Now," and subscribe today so you'll never miss an episode and as always, we are going to give you a special gift today just for listening.

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That is all we have time for today so please join us back here next week and until then, remember to make every day a happy one.

[END]