

EPISODE 185

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.7] PF: Welcome to Episode 185 of Live Happy Now. This is your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us once again. This week, we are hacking our way to happiness with journalist and author, Alex Palmer. Alex is a New York Times bestselling author who has a penchant for finding obscure facts. In his book, *Happiness Hacks*, he compiled an impressive number of science-based facts on what it takes to make us happy.

Live Happy's own Chris Libby sat down with Alex to find out more.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:29.2] CL: So thank you again for joining us, Alex. In your previous work, you focus a lot on fascinating facts and maybe some of the bizarre or curious things in our lives. But this time you decided, with your latest book, to focus on happiness. What was the inspiration for you to write *Happiness Hacks*?

[0:00:47.6] AP: Yeah, I mean obviously it's something that is of concern for everybody, something that we are very familiar with and there's been so much information out there. You see shelves after shelves at the bookstore, the library, or on television all of these suggestions of different ways to improve your happiness. So it was something that was just out there that obviously is of top concern for everybody.

But I thought, similar to other books that I have written, there is also a lot of misinformation or a lot of info that gets a game of telephone where it will be something that's substantive and fact that then gets morphed, especially through all the online websites and things like that. It can end up getting inaccurate or sort of loses its basis in facts and so I thought it would be interesting to dig into the topic of happiness, find out what are these actual scientifically proven ways to improve happiness? Whether it is little small incremental ways or really major transformational ways. But the top interest in writing it was, let's find what the actual scientific basis is of these self-help suggestions or tips and both large and small find ones that really have a basis in science.

[0:02:07.5] CL: And I am glad you brought up the scientific part approach to this because all the tips are based on research drawing on different fields from psychology, biology, even interior design. Why was it important for you to keep the focus on this science?

[0:02:22.2] AP: Yeah, for me I love a good “how to” piece. I will be the one to click if I see “how to improve your happiness today” and I will click on that story every time. But I enjoy a lot more, you get a lot more out of it when there is actually something supporting it when it’s a researcher that has actually done the study to look into this that actually tested this theory, not just someone who says, “You know this helped me, I felt a little better after I tried this.”

I respond to it when there is something that you can really sink your teeth into and I think that is the case for a lot of people. It is nice to have a good slogan or something that makes you feel good, maybe an aphorism that makes sense but to actually be able to say, “Here is something that really is being supported,” was something that was really important to me. So if you look at the book it is really every single, as you said, every single item in it is supported by the science.

But with that being said, at the same time and this is the case with other books that I have done it is meant to be for the average reader. This is not meant to be some deep scientific read, it is really meant to be fun and accessible. The design of the book is one that you can pop it open at any page and you will find some little face that you can run with and maybe incorporate into your day or while you have five minutes, you can just pop it open and find something in there. So it’s meant to be both a light read but one that has real substance behind it.

[0:03:57.4] CL: That’s great. I mean, that’s what I like about it is like you said, you can just pop it open and flip through different parts. Now you organized it into different areas of our lives like relationships, or work, or play. Was that on purpose?

[0:04:12.8] AP: Yeah, I thought it would be, especially as you start delving into the science there is so much out there and it just seems to grow year over year. There is a lot of people who want answers about happiness and how to improve it. So organizing it by these different sectors in your life. I thought that it would make it more engaging from a readers perspective too because people will be looking for different aspects in their life they are trying to bring more happiness into.

Maybe they have a great relationship that is going great but their job is really frustrating them. So they can focus on that chapter maybe find some tips that will get them to rethink some things about work, just make some slight improvements or maybe just get a whole new job and that maybe the case. Maybe it is with their friend group or something they feel like there's some things that they can improve there.

So it's meant as kind of a — it's certainly sort of a manual or at least a thing that you could pick up and take some actionable tips out of. So by organizing into these different parts of your life I think that helps to do that even more so where it just gets it that much easier and to find the steps that is relevant to you as the reader just picking it up.

[0:05:22.5] CL: Yeah that is true. I mean you lay out the signs here and it is not too heavy on the signs and then you give the reader an action to do or a suggestion somewhere where they can improve. I am glad you brought up work because we talk a lot about that here at Live Happy and that is a place where we spend a lot of our lives in the workplace. What are some things employees and employers can do to create a happier workplace?

[0:05:48.4] AP: Yeah, I mean one of the things that I thought was interesting because part of the research for the book as well as I actually reached out directly to a lot of these researchers and just asked them for what their findings were and one that stood out to me was professor Allan McConnell at Miami University who he just phrased it I believe as cut down on your roles. If you are multitasking at work you just have maybe you have several different bosses you are reporting to there's a – he found a real consistent it actually would end up hurting your work performance or hurt just the satisfaction at work when you have these multiple self-identities.

So I think that is a good one sort of big picture and then another one was know who you are working for. So think through what it is that your job does and those who do that can directly point to say even if you are working in a job that seems like it's not directly helping that you are not going out and seeing the person that you're assisting face to face. If you can really identify who it is at the end of the work day who is benefiting from what you're doing that makes a big benefit to your own wellbeing and those are big picture ones.

But if you can get down to some of the other findings in the book or just little things like having a plant at your desk has been found to improve your productivity or taking breaks at very specific

intervals. There is a couple different tests that has looked at what the sort of ideal ratio of break to work is and it can vary but a couple more reputable ones was that some of the 25 minutes on and then five minutes off or 52 minutes on and 17 minutes off and those proportions were found to have the greatest impact on your productivity. So that is a handful of ones and it is really – it can vary between big picture stuff and just little simple things that you could do today and see a big change.

[0:07:46.1] CL: What about relationships and our connection to people? Why is that so important? What have you found when you are researching this book about positive relationships?

[0:07:55.5] AP: The books draws on a lot of the giants of happiness research and positive psychology so that the Gottman's who have done a ton of research on this, I definitely draw on them and try to take their ideas and really distill it and make it simple. But something, one of their classic the research from John Gottman was that this ratio in a relationship of five to one, this idea of five positive comments or actions with the person you're in a relationship with for every one negative one.

That those people that maintain that level of positive to negative interactions were the ones who had long lasting marriages and whose relationships were just built to last and I thought that was interesting. That idea of giving and that comes up a lot not just in the context of romantic relationships but friendships and even just activities in your own wellbeing but the more you give the more you focus on trying to make others happy or bring value to other people, the more it comes back to you.

So happy people tend to try to make other people happy and that came up in almost every sector and so if you read through the book you'll find those things pop up either when it talks about the leisure chapter about what to do, fun activities that raise your happiness or ways to spend your free time that improves your wellbeing. Doing charitable work or volunteer work it consistently is found to be one of the best ways to boost your own wellbeing and your sense of satisfaction. Eve if it is just for a couple of hours a month or so. So that was one of the themes that kept coming up as far as relationships that the more you give, the more you get back.

[0:09:40.8] CL: Excellent. Let's focus on the other place where we spend a lot of time and that's home. What are things that we can do at home to make our living spaces a little more happier or make us happier in our homes?

[0:09:53.5] AP: Yeah, well another one of the consistent themes that kept coming up as I was doing this research is the power of nature to make us happy and I had mentioned that having a plant on your desk at work can kind of improves your wellbeing and similar things came up when looking at ways to design your home or the sort of elements to bring into your home to raise your sense of happiness. So things like having flowers or having plants in your house are found to improve your wellbeing.

Having a view to a park and just spending some time looking at the window ideally if you have maybe some greenery out there helps and even if you don't, there's actually studies that found just having photos of plant life or some kind of nature scenes in your home, those who have them or have those sort of art or surrounded by those or that kind of imagery are actually in a better headspace and generally happier than those who don't.

So it can really scale all the way to you just go and spend a couple of days in nature and that has been found to have a really positive impact on all of these factors, both mental and physical. So that's a biggie for sure when you are talking about your home and then little things like pet owners are actually found to have greater self-esteem that some about maybe that positive attention that you get from pets even if cats sometimes could be a little finicky. But they actually, researchers found that regardless of what the pet is, those who own then tend to have more of a sense of self-esteem and then so there's those little elements, simple things that you can do.

But then all the way to the actual design of a space where these researchers found that higher ceilings actually create a greater sense of freedom and sharper memory or curved surfaces were found to be more pleasing than sharp ones. So obviously that is not something that you can just change overnight in your place but maybe as you are looking for a new apartment to move into or you're doing some redesign at your house, those are the kinds of things that you might take into account when making those decisions.

[0:12:03.8] CL: Now, you have a chapter dedicated to a topic that we really like to focus on and I think it's fascinating, and that's when happiness is not such a good thing. Why is it important

for us to embrace all of our emotions, anger, sadness rather than just focusing on the positive ones?

[0:12:21.0] AP: Yeah that was something that I was surprised by the richness of the findings and the depth of the research around that topic that having that kind of emotional balance I think is the term, is really advantageous to a healthy person and part of it is that you just need to — by denying certain emotions and if you are trying to just be happy all the time it actually will only build those up as the familiar idea of bearing these negative emotions it's going to eventually have to come out.

So just from that sort of relieving the pressure valve and being open and honest with yourself that is an important component but I also found that that pursuit of happiness and to the exclusion of maybe other more new ounces emotions or ones that might seem sort of negative that that can actually end up leaving you feeling more sad. They have actually done studies that found that subjects who the more they value, the more value that they place on happiness lower their wellbeing and life satisfaction compared to those who maybe aren't thinking about it all the time or putting so much of their time dedicated to pursuing it and that there is a whole wealth of other studies that the chapter looks at too, kind of some of the negative sides that you could find the people who are happier might also the bigger risk takers, which can be a good thing in a lot of cases but also it can lead to — obviously you are taking risks, so it can cause some problems or more interesting ones like they're apparently happier people have been found to be worse at spotting liars.

So if you are — they have done these test where someone is being dishonest, someone is being honest and it is happier people were less likely to be able to discern which was which and they have also found to be worse negotiators. They get that optimism and that upbeat attitude makes them less capable of being able to identify an opportunity or to better win out in a negotiation. So it was fun to delve into those aspects of happiness, kind of a downside of happiness, to really say that as much values we put on happiness as individuals, as a society, it is important to maintain a sense of balance and to remember that this is one aspect of a healthy emotional life but it is not the end all be all about what actually makes for a fulfilling life.

[0:14:54.1] CL: So while you were researching this book, what were you most surprised about to find out about happiness?

[0:15:00.1] AP: It's hard to say like one specific thing but I guess the fact that it doesn't take much to be happy that it is really often the simplest answers where the ones that have had the most impact that things like looking at happiness at work that it wasn't about making a lot of money or having that you can just keep getting by the more you succeeded the more happiness came. It was more about your own sense of expectations that so much of this was what your own values and it is a lot of self-imposed — so much of it is just your own frame of mind and the higher the expectations the more likely you are to feel less happy.

So sort of having more sort of a sense of moderation and balance was such a consistent finding and I thought that was one of the big takeaways I thought was most interesting. But something just a funny little one that I've put into practice since researching is things like how anticipation is a much more happiness inducing emotion than the actual doing something. Particularly, this is around vacation so you think that I think we've probably all been there where you go on vacations for a week. You are thinking, "Well this is great I am going to be out of work, I am going to really enjoy it," and maybe you do while you're there but as soon as you come back that enjoyment goes away and it was found that actually you get more happiness from thinking about the vacation that's coming up than the actual going on vacation and as soon as you come back consistently the subject that they studied, their level of happiness goes back to where it was.

So it made me appreciate the fact that it is sometimes just about the framing of something where you plan your vacations earlier so you're going to have that extra time to look forward to it because that is really where a lot of the happiness comes from it is not necessarily in the actual doing of something but in the thinking about it coming up. So that was — that's something I though was really interesting and yes, so those were a couple of things that sort of stood out.

[0:17:12.5] CL: That's great. It really is full of a lot of great information. You know, being here at Live Happy we have studied this a lot or we read about this a lot and write about this but there is a lot of great things that I have not even seen before like people who read newspapers are happier than people who don't and things like that.

[0:17:29.2] AP: Yeah, absolutely. Print is not dead.

[0:17:31.7] CL: Yeah, exactly and the fact that pets, it doesn't matter what your pet is so I can convince my wife to let me get that iguana.

[0:17:40.3] AP: Yeah, absolutely. Any pet at all.

[0:17:43.6] CL: Well thank you for taking the time today. I know you are really busy but this has been great and I think our listeners will get a lot out of it. The book is called *Happiness Hacks* and it is out now at bookstores everywhere.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:17:59.9] PF: That was author Alex Palmer talking to us about his book, *Happiness Hacks*. You can find out more about his book and more about Alex when you visit our website at livehappynow.com and if you like what you've heard here today and want to hear more, go to Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your favorite podcast, search for "Live Happy Now" and subscribe today so you'll never miss an episode and you can also find us on the all new Pandora Podcast Genome Project.

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

[END]