

EPISODE 204

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to episode 204 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. If you've wondered what's up with the state of happiness these days, you're in luck. Today, I'm talking with Live Happy editor Chris Libby about the annual World Happiness Report. Each year, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Solutions Network releases a comprehensive World Happiness Report to look at happiness from a global perspective.

The news isn't exactly great for the US this year. Chris and I sat down to talk about what's causing us to be less happy than we should be and what we can do about it.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:40.3] PF: Well Chris, it's always fun to sit down and talk with you for a podcast, thanks for joining me today.

[0:00:45.4] CL: Thanks for having me.

[0:00:46.6] PF: Well, there was a – you're such a great person to talk to us because today we are talking about the World Happiness Report which is something you and I have been reading every year for a few years now.

[0:00:59.3] CL: Yeah, it just came out, had a lot of great things to say but it also had some not so great things to say about the United States and our state of happiness right now.

[0:01:07.8] PF: Yeah, according to this happiness report, we are not so happy.

[0:01:13.0] CL: We have slipped from 18th to 19th in the world and it's been a steady decline since about 2010.

[0:01:19.9] **PF:** We've never cracked the top ten since they began doing this report which was, was that 2012 I think that they started publishing?

[0:01:27.1] **CL:** Typically it's those Nordic countries that are always going to be in those top 10 areas like Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden. They usually kind of crowd up the top 10 right there.

[0:01:39.6] **PF:** Yeah, they push us out of the lane there. Why is it? You mentioned, we have been declining since 2010, what's up with that?

[0:01:49.0] **CL:** Well, it is kind of mindboggling since those Nordic countries, they have lower GDP, they have higher taxes, they have – it's a lot different from the United States but they're a lot happier. We have an improved economy, our crime is low, we have low unemployment right now but Americans are still just not as happy as we were. There's quite a lot of different reasons for that, one of them being – we're becoming less connected with each other.

[0:02:16.1] **PF:** That's funny, you and I have talked about this because we have this illusion that because of the Internet, because of social media, we are more connected, I mean, I can hook up with any of my friends from high school who still live in Nebraska at any time thanks to Facebook. We think of that as connection, where is that, pardon the pun, disconnect?

[0:02:38.6] **CL:** Well, it's artificial connection really. What we really need is that face-to-face connection and that's what we're losing. Humans are just social beings in general and we need to be with each other, we need to have those relationships and they need to be in person. Then, when you replace that with isolation, you're essentially isolating when are were alone and with your phone, you're not with anybody. It is a kind of an illusion.

[0:03:01.4] **PF:** Right, we've talked about this, there are some interesting studies that show among older people who might be homebound that using social media and digital means of communication actually does improve their wellbeing because otherwise they'd be completely isolated but other than that, unless you are shut in or you're on house arrest I guess, then really, it's not contributing to your mental health to be connecting with people that way.

[0:03:29.3] CL: In fact, it has the opposite effect, especially in young people, you know, teens and adolescence they're becoming increasingly depressed and have more anxiety and becoming more lonely. They are the ones who are using social media the most.

[0:03:42.3] PF: How do parents or other adults in our lives then start mitigating that time because as we know, you can't go to a teenager and say hand over the phone if you're not using it anymore.

[0:03:56.2] CL: That's not ideal because that won't work but you can, there are ways that you can kind of change up routines, there are studies, there are recent study that we just talked to UPenn that came out, the psychologist at UPenn, they said there is a causal link, causation to depression, anxiety and increase and social media through their experiments they have found.

[0:04:22.7] PF: Why is that? Why is it that having that kind of an effect on children, on teenagers?

[0:04:30.4] CL: Well, you're doing it in an upward social comparison which means you think when you see something on Facebook or on Instagram and you're only seeing a curated view, you think that everything is rosy over there with your friends and family and your life just does not compare.

That brings, that increases the depressive levels, also, you have a fear of missing out when you look at images like that, you weren't invited and so that can hurt your self-esteem.

[0:04:57.2] PF: Bullying has become a lot easier online, you know, we see the news stories, almost every day about how that's infiltrating teenagers' lives.

[0:05:06.8] CL: Yes, that is true, bullying, it's just the immediate and one of the reasons for that is the immediacy of social media whereas the rumor mill a few decades ago, to take a while, now, it's instant. There are things you can do, you can limit the social media, the experts say to roughly about an hour a day if that's attainable, you know, you can encourage your children and even ourselves to go out instead of reaching out through social media through your phone. Go out and meet in person.

[0:05:37.1] PF: As parents, that has to be done by example, you know, you can't say hey, let's go out and take a hike and then you're sitting over on a rock answering work emails. You know, that's not going to work. Honestly, being able to implement this for our kids is going to help us as adults.

[0:05:54.0] CL: Yeah, it's astonishing because the study that was at UPenn and it was the study was on college students in using social media, one of the things that they would always say to the researchers was I didn't realize how much I was on social media. Maybe being mindful and bringing out that awareness is, we don't always realize how much time we're spending doing that and that's taking away from the real time that we need to connect with each other.

[0:06:19.3] PF: Did the report give any indication that there's hope for our teenagers because we're talking a huge population and it's heart wrenching to see just the depth of their despair. I mean, we know that teen years are difficult anyway, it's very emotional, depression is a tough thing, especially for teenagers, but it is getting so much worse with this generation.

Did the report give any kind of indication that this can get turned around or that steps are being taken to turn it around?

[0:06:52.0] CL: Actually it didn't, just future research, you know, more attention needs to be focused on it but yeah, it's how we spend our leisure time and it's not just the connection but it's the activity level too.

[0:07:02.8] PF: Because? Like what do you mean by that?

[0:07:04.1] CL: Like lack of activity, like your physical activity, I'm sorry, I should have been more clear but yeah, it's the lack of activity because along with one of the other reasons why we're unhappy in the United States, along with the loneliness is also health problems like obesity which is still a problem.

[0:07:20.5] PF: Yeah, we are just not getting outside enough and you know, there's so much great information about just the value of taking a walk and especially taking a walk in nature

because that can change your mood, it's a great cure for depression, I don't want to say a cure for depression, but it helps relieves depression and anxiety.

You know, there's so much research, it shows the benefits of biophilia or being out in nature and if you're being active in nature, that's even better.

[0:07:49.0] CL: Sure. When you are isolated with your social media, you are spending, doing less things like not going to church as much, not interacting with people, not reading, just the mindful practice of just reading or even sleeping. It's affecting your sleep too and when you're not sleeping well, if you're getting less than seven hours then that's not good for your health at all.

[0:08:09.2] PF: Yeah, it shows that there is so much research about how sleep is essential to wellbeing and it's physical wellbeing and it's your mental health that you get wrecked pretty quickly after losing just, you know, an hour of sleep a night.

We're sleeps deprived, we're staring at our screens and we're not exercising, I think I'm seeing a little bit of why we might be slipping in the happiness category.

[0:08:33.2] CL: I think yeah, I think it should serve as a wakeup call here because even though you think you may be doing well financially and you have a job which is nice, because not having a job does not make you happy. There are equality gaps, there are all kinds of gaps right now, financial gaps and that just pulls people apart instead of brings them together.

[0:08:54.2] PF: As we become aware like anything else, our awareness is the first step right? And I think that is one thing the World Happiness Report does so well every year is that it really shines a light on where we're at both nationally and globally and lets us see where we're falling short and what could be done and then of course the trick is getting who's going to make these changes. I know Jeff Sachs talks about needing public policy to really step in to help improve our subjective wellbeing and right now I think many of us believe that is probably not top of the agenda from a government standpoint.

[0:09:29.2] CL: Probably not but I mean that's why Finland wins again.

[0:09:35.0] PF: So is our answer is that we all move to Finland or?

[0:09:38.7] CL: Well yeah, I talk to Ann Henderson who is an analyst with the Happiness Research Institute based on Denmark and she says just the Nordic countries they generally know how to convert their wealth into wellbeing, which means they are using the money that they get to do things to make sure people are happier, to make sure people need to get outside, more parks, just more programs that speak to your wellbeing, health is taken care of.

[0:10:06.4] PF: And that security is huge, knowing that you are not going to be left out in the cold, you are not going to be homeless, your elderly have a place no matter what. I think that is one thing they do so well is they take care of their elderly and that is a huge concern here. I talk to people all the time who are getting older and are frankly concerned about it because they don't know. The income disparity or cost of living is going up.

What they thought was enough to sustain them looks now like it might not be and if they can't take care of themselves who is going to care for them. So I think that is something else that we have to really look at is how we are caring for one another and what we can do better with that.

[0:10:53.9] CL: Yeah that social support is so huge and that's why, like I said before, all those Nordic countries are on the top 10. They have a lot of social support within the comfort of their countries and it is interesting to know that world happiness has slipped a little. Not just the United States because the bigger countries like United States, India for example they're having a greater disparity in wealth and that is dragging the overall world happiness down a little bit.

[0:11:24.2] PF: And what is causing that disparity? We see what is happening in the US but what is causing that disparity on a global level?

[0:11:32.2] CL: Just the division between the rich and the poor.

[0:11:34.3] PF: But why are we seeing that because it is here in the middle class appears to be disappearing. That is the big concern, we talk about that quite a bit, hear it on the news and is that happening everywhere?

[0:11:45.5] CL: Well it is the larger wealthier countries that are doing that and the wealthier these countries get, the further they slip out on the happiness scale.

[0:11:55.5] PF: And that is so interesting because again you think if you have the money, you have security and you would think that security would lead to happiness but we are seeing time and time again it is not.

[0:12:05.5] CL: Yeah, it is not. We are just not as generous I guess.

[0:12:07.7] PF: Well one more thing that was in here that I found really interesting, something again in the news quite a bit and that is addiction and it is a big reason why we're not happy but this chapter is not just opioids. We are not talking about medical and pharmaceutical addiction. You know Jeff Sachs is also talking about video games, online shopping, social media things like these. So did you get any sense of why we have a greater addiction? Is it because it is easy now or?

[0:12:38.9] CL: I mean that is a good assumption. I just think we are trying to medicate in all ways possible and make ourselves feel good with these materialistic things that time and time research shows that that's just not a way to happiness. Being self-aware, being mindful, being kind to others, these are the things that are going to make you happier and these other things like these addictions they can't replace that.

[0:13:04.0] PF: And it is difficult. I will acknowledge, we talk all the time in our house about the need to meditate, need to be more regular about meditation. You know it is easy to let those little habits and those practices just get pushed aside a bit and you'll let it go one day and then it is a slippery slope and at the same time we have all of these other things begging for attention like online shopping, social media, video games, things like that.

So for yourself, what's the way that you maintain your balance and make sure that you are able to keep your practices going?

[0:13:41.0] CL: Well aside from listening to the Live Happy Podcast –

[0:13:43.9] **PF:** There we go, I love that. That's it, that's all you need to do folks. Just listen once a week, you're going to be good like a booster shot.

[0:13:51.9] **CL:** There you go, I would say just being aware. You know that right there is half the battle I think when you're aware of these things going on and you are more likely to pay attention to what you are doing and how much you are doing it. So awareness I think is key.

[0:14:08.4] **PF:** Absolutely, we got to wrap this up here in a minute and as we look at the World Happiness Report and I think we're going to include a link to that on the webpage, is that correct?

[0:14:18.7] **CL:** Sure, yes we will do that.

[0:14:20.5] **PF:** Yeah and so as you look at it, was there anything that you found particularly encouraging? Because we kind of been a big downer as we've talked about happiness but what things did you find encouraging about this report?

[0:14:32.6] **CL:** It just the further reiteration that connection is key and that is what the whole theme about this report issue. It was about connection and community and that's how you are really going to just being with one another that togetherness making sure everybody is okay because we are all in it together whether we like it not, that is just the truth of it. So that is what I thought, focusing on that, that how social support is just so key to having a great community and just having a global community.

[0:15:05.1] **PF:** And the great thing about that is that's attainable. It is not like we're saying you have to climb to the top of some mountain and meditate for six years and then you are going to feel better. It is pretty easy to start reaching out. You know it takes momentum. You've got to take initiative but it is, it is easy, you can start with just one person of reaching out and let's meet for coffee instead of texting, you know? And I think too once you start doing that, you start craving it and need that social interaction more and thereby, need your online interaction less.

[0:15:37.8] **CL:** Yeah and it is not just for the people that you know. It is also for the people you don't know that can go a long way. Just a small act of kindness, just a small gesture, just be nice. Be nicer to each other. Like Bill and Ted said, be excellent to each other.

[0:15:51.8] **PF:** We should all be more like Bill and Ted I think.

[0:15:56.1] **CL:** Definitely.

[0:15:57.2] **PF:** I think we should be more excellent. Well Chris speaking of excellent, this was an excellent interview with you. Great report this year. I mean not great in the sense of the news it brings but it is very enlightening, very eye opening to see what is going on and to see that we can do better.

[0:16:14.8] **CL:** Sure and there is always next year.

[0:16:17.1] **PF:** Says the Cubs fan. All right Chris, it was so wonderful talking with you and we'll do this again very, very soon.

[0:16:29.0] **CL:** Great, have a good day.

[0:16:30.5] **PF:** You too Chris.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:16:35.8] **PF:** That was Live Happy editor, Chris Libby, talking with me about this year's World Happiness Report. When you visit our site at livehappynow.com we'll give you a link to download your own copy of the report as well as some other resources about happiness in today's changing world. We hope you're already a subscriber to Live Happy Now but if you're not, you can find us Pandora Podcast Network, Spotify, SoundCloud, Stictcher and on iTunes or Google Play. Just look for us on your favorite platform and then hit subscribe so that you will never miss an episode.

That is all we have time for this week but we will meet you back here again next week with an all new episode and until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]