

**EPISODE 215**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:02.6] PF:** Welcome to Episode 215 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. Most of us enjoy doing things we're good at, but how do we feel about the things we're not so good at, and what can we learn from them? Today's guest is here to talk about that very thing. As publisher of Harper Wave, an imprint she founded in 2012, Karen Rinaldi is at the top of our game professionally. But when it comes to surfing, a sport she truly loves, she freely admits that well, she sucks and her new book, *It's Great to Suck At Something*, explains what she's learned by embracing her shortcomings and learning to love the gifts that come from being truly bad at something.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:00:44.3] PF:** Karen, welcome to Live Happy Now.

**[0:00:46.3] KR:** Hi, Paula. Thanks for having me on.

**[0:00:48.3] PF:** This is an exciting topic to talk about. One of the reviews calls your new book and “anti-self help book”, which I love that — I love that terminology. Did you set out to write it with that intention?

**[0:01:01.3] KR:** I didn't, I didn't even know that that was a category.

**[0:01:04.3] PF:** You've started a whole new genre.

**[0:01:08.3] KR:** Well, you know, I've been — I've had this idea about, you know, this phrase in my head, "It's great to suck at something", oh, for 12 years or more, 14 years, and I've been writing around it for a really long time. But it really didn't occur to me to make it into a book until I wrote a New York Times essay that was published mid-April 2017. So a couple of years ago called *It's Great to Suck At Something* and it was about sucking at surfing and the response was so huge that my agent called me and said, “I think that your next book.”

So I set out just tell these stories just to talk about my philosophy of, you know, the joys and that sucking at something can bring. It seems that I've fallen into a zeitgeist moment where failure is being embraced and that, I mean, I didn't realize that was true or that was coming. So I've been thinking about it for over a decade, so it's really funny. It's the way things happen. Things, you know, sort of come to a, sort of an inflection point where an idea kind of bubbles up from the culture. Probably we're all responding to the same thing, right?

**[0:02:17.3] PF:** This is protectionism.

**[0:02:18.3] KR:** Perfectionism is alive.

**[0:02:21.3] PF:** The fact that so many people respond so strongly to this, you know, it shows us that that really has struck a chord with people of like, "I don't want to try to be perfect. I can't be perfect."

**[0:02:33.3] KR:** Exactly, and they are actually studies done about perfection and how striving for perfection — so this doesn't mean striving to get that are doesn't mean striving to improve. But the idea that you can get to a place where what you do and who you are is perfect just leads to heartbreak and sorrow. And in fact, there are, you know, there are studies that show that it leads to depression, anxiety and, you know, state of mental illness where the, you know, people who accept their imperfections, you know, accept them and what I'm saying is even better than accept them. I'm saying, embrace them, you know, kind of are healthier, you know, in all ways.

And I think that the idea it's like it's such a relief, right? Like you just go, "Oh, yeah, I know." I always think people say, "I'm such a perfectionist that I can't do X, Y, or Z," right? We hear that all the time. I hear that probably once, at least once a day and I always — It makes me sad because I think, "That's just a reason not to do something. And it's fear. And it's fear that if I am less than perfect, I will not be worthy of love." I mean, that's really where it goes, right?

**[0:03:42.3] PF:** Oh yeah,

**[0:03:43.3] KR:** No, no embrace your imperfect self. That's — you are worthy of love as an imperfect human. We all are. And that's basically what this book is really meant to embrace and promote, is that idea that you know that perfection is a lie and it's a burden that we carry and if

we let go of it, there's so much hiding underneath that lie that we can experience that will bring us joy and community and self love and get rid the critic in our head.

**[0:04:14.3] PF:** But it's a tough thing to let go of because I know people that I grew up with and you know, so we're talking a few years where even you know as children they were so pushed and so driven. Like they had to get the A's, they had to do all — check all the boxes and do it all right. And even now, as adults, that is how they live their lives. So how does someone who's made that their lifestyle, how did they start letting go of that?

**[0:04:42.3] KR:** Well, I think the whole suck at something thing I mean, this is really where this book comes in, right? So I get it. I get that striving. I get that fear that if I mess up, I'm gonna be shamed that I'm going to be less than, you know, less than awesome. And by doing the thing right by learning to surf at a very old age, I mean, I started at 40, which I wouldn't recommend any body do.

**[0:05:05.3] PF:** That's not old.

**[0:05:96.3] KR:** But well, I'm not. Listen, I've been doing — so I'm 58 now, so I've been doing it for, like 18 years, and I never got good at it. It's always been really difficult for me, and I'm still very, very bad at it. But I do it anyway, and I do it with great intention. What I realized is that by allowing myself to do this thing that was very hard to do but that I love doing, to love it in spite of the fact that I wasn't good at it, right? To keep doing it in spite of the fact that I'll never get good at it, I get better at it. I improve. I really do. But good? You know, I'm not gonna get good at it. I started too late.

I found that I would forgive myself for messing up in the places in my life where it didn't matter, whether I surf well or not doesn't matter, right? Nobody — I'm not getting paid for it. Nobody needs me to surf well. It doesn't serve any purpose. It's just the experience. And I think I really believe this. We can practice — so to answer your question, “How we get out of that perfection is a mindset that you know, killing us?” I say practice, do something, sing, dance, take guitar lessons, learn Latin, go, you know, join a pottery studio, do yoga. You know, anything you could do and you don't have to be good at it and watch where your mind goes when you do it and forgive yourself for not being good at it.

It's like a practice and that practice kind of gives back to you, right? And then you start sort of going, "Oh, so when I mess up in the things that are really important, my job being a parent, being a partner, being a you know, a friend and a daughter, like the places where it really does matter to me to be as good as I can be at it, when I do make that flip," because we all do, I have some meth muscle memory to remember what it feels like to not be good at something and go, "Oh, I know what that feels like." So what happens when I mess up? Well, if I missed that wave, I have to learn why I missed it and try to get better next time and to forgive myself for missing and going, "Damn you're terrible at this," and get mad at myself. I go, instead of saying, you know, "You suck," and admonish myself, I say, "Isn't it great to suck at something?"

It's just a reframing. It's a pivot away from self criticism into self acceptance and compassion, and then we could bring that lesson through. It's not that it makes you a better parent or makes you a better, you know, publisher in my case, or, you know, makes you a better, you know, host. What it does is it allows you to know that perfection is you know, something you're not gonna get to and then love yourself anyway.

**[0:07:33.3] PF:** And that kind of self forgiveness and self compassion is going to spill over into letting, encouraging you to try new things even, as you say, even if you suck at it, you're gonna say like, "Okay, it's okay that I go ahead and try this thing."

**[0:07:49.3] KR:** Exactly, and don't stop yourself before you start. So two things are there, which is you don't even know what's lying on the other side of that thing that you try, right, A, you might be good at it. Who knows? You might have a talent for it. But even if you don't have a talent for it, it might make you really happy to do. I am happiest — the kind of counterintuitive thing here is that I am happiest when I'm paddling out to surf, knowing full well that it's a thing I am least talented in. And there's something in that exchange that just makes me laugh. I think it's funny, but it's never gone away. And I think, "Wow, I find joy in the thing I'm least talented in," partly because there's freedom and that I don't have to excel. It's the one place in the one thing I do where I don't have to be good. And what a relief, right? Like what a relief!

A lot of people come back and talk about golf. Everybody goes, "Oh, yeah I know what you mean." Because golf looks lovely and leisurely, and people, you know, go to the golf course on Sundays. It's so hard to do well and I think people have to, you know, grapple with being a bad golf player but wanting to go out to the course for a round of golf anyway. And I always think,

“Yeah, it's okay, you're out there. It's beautiful, you're in nature, you're having fun. You're swinging a stick a ball. It's ridiculous in a way.” So like, “Okay, so I'm not good at it.”

**[0:09:10.3] PF:** Just pick the ball up and put it in the hole.

**[0:09:11.3] KR:** Exactly, exactly! Whatever it takes. It's like, “Oh, I can't make this putt from, you know, 50 feet away. But I could make it maybe from 20 feet away,” and I don't mean cheating. I just mean not taking it so seriously, and that lets us laugh at ourselves. And Ethel Barrymore has a great quote. She says, “We grow up the first moment that we have a good laugh at ourselves,” and I think that's really true.

**[0:09:34.3] PF:** Oh, that's beautiful. Yeah, you know, and most of us do build our lives around only pursuing what we're good at, you know? I know I'm guilty of that. You know, like my partner does CrossFit and I'm totally a yoga person and she's like, “You should try this,” and I'm like, “No, I cannot look that ridiculous in front of people,” you know? But you talk about, “Okay, go ahead and try those things that that we aren't good at.” And how did you discover this? I mean, what was it that not only let you say, “Okay, I'm not good at this, but, hey, I still love this.”?

**[0:10:07.3] KR:** Well, that was, I mean surfing was something I wanted to do my entire life and I was too afraid to try for a couple of reasons. And when I finally thought, “Will I get old and never tried to surf?” And I was, you know, what stopped me was I was fearful of the ocean. I was fearful that I would get hurt, which you do. I was fearful that I would just suck at it and I thought, “I can't go through saying I didn't try it because I was afraid,” and that was worse to me than the thought of being afraid and being bad at it.

What happened is I did it, I took a lesson, I took two lessons and I just got that buzzy, crazy feeling that, like, this is awesome. I don't even know why. Because I wasn't good at it. But what happened is in the effort, I found that I got so much juice and so much energy from the effort of trying to do something that's hard. So if you are a yoga body, right? Yoga is one I totally, I can identify. I love yoga. I don't do CrossFit, but I love lifting weights and I've always been like a sort of you know, jock, where I just want to be strong. Well, that's the other things. I've always been really athletic, so I thought surfing would just be another thing I could do and do pretty well because I'm a pretty good athlete. And you know what? It kicked my

**[0:11:21.3] PF:** Surprise!

**[0:11:22.3] KR:** But that humility is really powerful, right? And I thought, “Oh, this is good. Like, you know, I think I could just dial this because I've always been good at, you know, sports. But, you know, this is gonna teach me some lessons.” So a lot of it was what I got out of not being good. I know that sounds crazy and counterintuitive. It's like because you're always it's always new. Novelty is an amazing thing.

When you're not good at something — so to get really good at something, you have to automate it, right. You have to be so good at it like that you could do it without thinking and there's a flow. And believe me, I understand that expert status, and I'm in that expert status in a lot of different things I do. But when you're not an expert and you're doing something you're not very good at, it's always novel, right? It's a novelty all the time. That kind of keeps your brain on fire, right? You're constantly having to improvise and think and react, and it kind of gets you jazzed right? If you can think about that,

**[0:12:17.3] PF:** And I'm sure it's more mindfulness because you're not like, as you said, there's a state of flow and that's incredible. But when you have to be completely focused and in the moment there's something that happens to your brain, then as well.

**[0:12:29.3] KR:** Keeps you present, right? So it's like being in that present state. Surfing is great for that because there's no other place you could be but in the present, because the things were happening, unlike they've ever happened before or will happen again in that moment, and you have to react. So you're always reacting to that moment, the present. That was one of the other things I loved about it. But I think that would be true, you know, if you tried CrossFit. I know I have a lot of friends who do CrossFit.

You know what's interesting about the CrossFit community, though? If you went and did it, I don't think the people there would berate you or laugh at you or scorn you. They would embrace you and try to help. That's another knock on effect of sucking at something. People want things from experts, right? But when you're not good at something it invites kindness and the assist from people who do it better than you. So then you have a community that can rally around you, and say, “Let me help you.”

When I'm surfing I am brought to tears by the generosity and the kindness of the people in the lineup who want to help me and I don't have that in my life and other things because I'm good at a lot of things, I guess. Because, like you, you do the things you're good at. You don't go towards the things you're not good at. So I'm always like, "Yeah, I got this. I got this. I got this." You do yoga because you got this, right? Like me in the yoga studio, I am such a kook of the yoga studio. I get really nervous before every yoga class that I take because I know I'm gonna probably be among the worst yogis in the class and I'm very self conscious of it because it's beautiful, right? Yoga is beautiful when it's done well and I'm falling and I'm awkward and I'm a big, strong person and I still — it doesn't matter because it's so freaking hard. So but you got to get over that and go, "Okay." Then I look to people and say, "Can you help me?" and then people help you and that's a beautiful thing.

**[0:14:13.3] PF:** Yeah, and that gives you a whole different appreciation for how the recipients, when you are the expert, like how they must feel. It probably also opens you up with some generosity in your own life by being the recipient, I would imagine.

**[0:14:27.3] KR:** Yes. Oh, and that's — you just nailed it. You just added perfectly. So what you give yourself first is what you are then able to give to other people. So not only in that generosity and kindness which you go, "Wow, it's awesome to help people." You know, I love to help people surfing, even though I'm a really bad surfer. If I can find somebody who is even worse than me and I can help them, they know it feels really good. Or, you know, if I helped them in publishing or in writing, you know, in something I am confident in or cooking.

But on the other side too is that judgment thing that we do and the reason why we judge others, you know, there's all that hate online and trolling and everything that people do trend now, which is heartbreaking and just miserable and people say, "Well, how do you feel like when people, you know, if you put yourself out there as a writer as anything you definitely get attacked." And I say, "You know, they're not talking about me. They're actually just talking about themselves." So when you forgive yourself for not, for sucking at something, for example, or making mistakes or being less than perfect, right? Once you forgive yourself, you know what you do? You forgive other people as well.

**[0:15:30.3] PF:** And you talk about finding joy in the process, and that's something we really lose a lot of. We spend so much time looking at, you know, "Oh, I've got to get this done and

here's the endpoint, and here's where this project ends," and we really miss that joy in the process. How did you re acquaint yourself with that?

**[0:15:49.3] KR:** What you were saying about doing it for the goal or the reward, you know, or trophy or gold star and, you know, financial reward-driven we think, "Oh, if we get the reward at the end of it, then that means I've done the right thing." And I think there's a lot of freedom in doing something not for the gold star, not for the accolades, not for the great, you know, Instagram post. You know, you do it just to be present and for the experience and for the joy of it.

Let go of that end game that you were talking about because that endgame can also be killing. Like if everything is about a quid pro quo, what am I gonna get at the end of this? You know, that's gonna lead to a lot of heartbreak because you're, you know, it's not always gonna give back to you. So my thing is like what it gives back to you with the fact of you just doing it, you know, even if you do it badly.

**[0:16:38.3] PF:** And that's such a great place to be able to reach in life and obviously this is something that you've worked on and you've been intentional about it. And...

**[0:16:47.3] KR:** Still working on it. I'm still working on it. Truth be told, I'm still working on it.

**[0:16:54.3] PF:** So you're not perfect at it?

**[0:16:57.3] KR:** I am perfect at sucking at something. I am so not! That's good actually. That's very good.

**[0:17:03.3] PF:** You know, and so many of our listeners are at a stage in life where they might think, "You know, well, it's too late to try something, and I am just gonna suck at it." So what do you say to them where they're not trying something they wanted to try just for that reason?

**[0:17:18.3] KR:** Oh, that's the best reason to do it is that you're at a point in your life where it doesn't matter if you're good at it or not. I mean, I think you have to let go of some of that self consciousness when you're young, you know, your peer group's really important. Really care what other people think of you. I think one of the great things about getting older is that I was

able to shed some of that, you know, “what do people think of me?” kind of thing and just kind of be and what you find is that you invite more people in by being authentic in your messy self than you do in trying to be self conscious and going, “Oh I have to do this, this, and this so I look cool or I look, you know, I’m acting my age.” It’s like, “What does that mean? Are you kidding me? Like acting — don’t do that. You know?”

**[0:18:03.3] PF:** Nobody wants that.

**[0:18:04.3] KR:** Nobody. Well, you forget to play, right? You want to play and playing is actually I mean again, the studies will show, and there's a whole philosophy here is that play is what makes us human. That's what separates us from, you know, the rest of the animal kingdom is that we play only for plays' sake. That is human. You don't want to let go of one of the essential human gifts that we have because you're 50 or you're 60 or you're 80, you know? Oh, man, I hope I never stopped playing. I hope I die playing something. I don't now what it's going to be.

**[0:18:38.3] PF:** Yeah,

**[0:18:39.3] KR:** But, you know, why would you not, and again, because you're not good at it? I mean, you don't — I don't know. You know, if you're not in physical good shape, I don't know if you want, you know, bungee jump. But you know, there are things you can do. I know somebody who started taking teaching, you know, learning Latin at 60, which was an amazing thing — gift she gave herself, and now she teaches a Latin class and like that's a big part of her life. She has a whole community.

**[0:19:02.3] PF:** That's terrific.

**[0:19:03.3] KR:** Yeah, there's anything. You can do anything. So it doesn't have to be physical. It could be intellectual. It could be a handy craft. It could be any hobby, really. So I feel like there's never really — the door doesn't shut. And by the way, our minds, we used to think that our minds were set and that our brains were set and we couldn't learn new things. And now, of course, with all the studies in neuroscience, our brains are, well they say plastic. It's not really a good term for it. But neural plasticity means that your brain is always capable of growing and learning always.

**[0:19:37.3] PF:** Yeah, and I think that's one of the greatest things that has come out in the last few years, is the knowledge that you have neural plasticity, and we can make these changes in the grooves that are in our brain, don't have to stay cramped down in that pattern.

**[0:19:51.3] KR:** No and all — It's only up to you. The only person who can change those grooves is you, right? Like you're the only one who could say, "I'm gonna do," — I just heard a story about a guy who always wanted to sing, and he was terrified of singing. But he went very privately and took singing lessons. And this big, long story. And he just, you know, after three years of doing this, you know, like kind of came out to his family about being the secret, like pop singer that he just does, you know, privately. And it was the sweetest story. And it was he read my book and he was, you know, he decided to come clean about it. But he was always so mortified that he wouldn't be great at it and he realized, "Oh, it's okay."

But I love the fact that he's like, you know, a 58 and probably my age, you know, late 50s, 60-year-old guy who started taking singing lessons. I mean, how beautiful is that? And like, do you love him more because he's taking them? Or do you love him less because his voice isn't good? Like, you would never love him less. Nobody is. Nobody with a heart would say, "I love that man left because his voice sucks." You'd say, "I know something more about you. How awesome that you just, you know, decided you took, you know, singing lessons. And you're and you're singing in church." He sings in church, he sings in these choirs, you know, it's such a beautiful thing.

So I feel like once we allow ourselves to suck at something we look at, we invite people to talk about it. We, you know, we learn and grow, and you never want to stop growing, right? You don't want to get old and stop growing. I think that would be a sad thing.

**[0:21:22.3] PF:** No, you got to keep it going. You got to do that.

**[0:21:25.3] KR:** You use it or lose it. That is true. That's a real thing.

**[0:21:28.3] PF:** It is.

**[0:21:29.3] KR:** It's a cliché, but a lot of clichés are true.

**[0:21:32.3] PF:** You know, when you're hearing these stories, they're being reflected back to you after people have read your book and to know that you're having this kind of an impact. What is that doing for you as you realize you've become a role model at letting yourself sucking something?

**[0:21:47.3] KR:** Oh, that's a good question. I'm finding that I'm loving it. I'm loving it more than I even thought I would and the truth of it is that I was trying to write that New York Times essay for a really long time. It took me years. Again, I can suck it writing, too. It took me a long time, and part of it was that I realized I had because I always wanted to talk to people about what they sucked. I'd go, "What do you suck at?" And what I realized is that I had to go first, right? I couldn't ask people cause I was like, anthropologically I was interested in the idea and when I invited people to talk about, they got very — people would get nervous and sheepish and kind of like shuffle and say, "No, I don't know. I don't know what I suck at. I don't want to suck at anything. I'm such a perfectionist." I would hear all the same lies until I said, "Oh, I'll go first and I'll go first publicly," right?

So that's what I wrote the piece, it got picked up, you know, thankfully got picked up by The New York Times and then I posted a video of me surfing. Now I could hide behind the fact that I surfed and people thought it was sort of cool, right? Because, "Oh, Karen surfs. Isn't that cool?" But so what I did is I posted a video of me sucking and it's really awkward. It's awkward and it's goofy and I just look, you know, I just I look ridiculous doing it. And I said, "You know what? I'm just gonna go to do it. I'm just gonna post it." And people were like, "Oh, you really do suck at it. I thought you were kidding." I was not kidding! And you know what? It just opened the floodgates for people wanting to tell me their stories, and I thought, "Oh, perfect." That was a humbling lesson where it's like, "Karen, you have to go first and then you open," — and I am moved to tears every day by the messages I get, by the emails and you know the messages and when I'm on radio, some day I was on radio and people called in and told me their stories and I'm literally moved to tears that they'd come out and tell me these stories and share, not me. They're sharing these stories and letting go of some of that shame. Just let go of a shame. If you can push the shame aside and celebrate it instead, you know, whoever takes that on, I feel like I've given something back to the world.

**[0:23:52.3] PF:** Karen, really appreciate you sitting down and talking with us. This is such a terrific idea, such a terrific approach and I think we all can benefit from it.

**[0:24:03.3] KR:** So next I'm gonna hear from you is a story that you'll send to Gmail about your first foray into CrossFit. Right?

**[0:24:13.3] PF:** Yes, me with a 10 pound dead lift.

**[0:24:17.3] KR:** Yeah! It's hard. It's hard. You know, I totally get it. But, you know, maybe your partner needs to do yoga with you and you do CrossFit and you just like appreciate how you're each awesome in the things you do and the things you suck at.

**[0:24:30.3] PF:** I think we should do that. We might have to talk about that. you do and

**[0:24:34.3] KR:** Do it! Write about it. I'd love to hear it. I'd love to hear the story if you do it.

**[0:24:37.3] PF:** Now I'm getting fired up.

**[0:24:40.3] KR:** Fantastic!

**[0:24:41.3] PF:** Karen, you're wonderful. Again, it is great to suck at something. We all do it. And so thank you for opening that door and giving us all permission to do that.

**[0:24:50.3] KR:** Oh, thank you. Thank you for having me on the show. I really appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[0:24:57.3] PF:** That was Karen Rinaldi, author of *Its Great To Suck At Something*. If you'd like to learn more about Karen and her new book, please visit us at [LiveHappyNow.com](http://LiveHappyNow.com). We hope you're already a subscriber to Live Happy Now, but if you're not, you can find us on Pandora Podcast Network, Spotify, SoundCloud, Stitcher, iTunes and Google Play. Just look for us on your favorite platform and then hit subscribe so you'll never miss an episode.

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

[END]