

EPISODE 222

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to Episode 222 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us again this week. We've all heard the old saying, "Kill them with kindness," but what if the opposite was true? Kelly Harding is assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University Irving Medical Center and author of the new book, *The Rabbit Effect: Live Longer, Happier and Healthier with the Groundbreaking Science of Kindness*. Her book provides fascinating evidence of how kindness, compassion and human connection affect the body in profound ways and how we can use them to improve our health.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:36.9] PF: Kelly, thank you so much for coming on Live Happy Now and being our guest today.

[0:00:41.4] KH: Absolutely. It's my pleasure, it's so cool because I've seen, you've had the all-stars of positive psychology on so I feel very honored to be also interviewed on this podcast.

[0:00:53.2] PF: Well, you're jumping right in there with them even though your book has gotten such great reviews and you know, from like Richard Layer and Drew Ramsey and people that we're friends with through the podcast and have a great deal of respect for. One of the things that I love about your book is it really makes us think differently about how we approach our health.

I guess the first starting point would be, can you tell our listeners a little bit about what started you on that journey?

[0:01:19.1] KH: Absolutely. This has been many decades in the making in terms of sort of writing *The Rabbit Effect* and putting it out there and you know, it really — I'm a physician by training and it really started a long time back when you know, I first signed up for medical school and you know, wanted to learn absolutely everything I could about the human body. The help health.

Then once I started to get on the wards, I noticed these inconsistencies with patients where patients with the same diagnosis, one person would do much better sort of their quality of life and even sometimes how long they would live compared to others despite having similar biological diagnosis. These clinical mysteries kind of made me wonder what are we missing in medicine. That led me on sort of a wild goose chase through internal medicine, psychiatry and eventually I came to public health and also a research fellowship focused on unexplained symptoms in there as well.

That actually brought me to this point here, where I decided this was too big a story not to share with people and the story is really one of kindness.

[0:02:28.4] PF: Can you tell us what rabbits have to do with this because that's the first thing about your book is like *The Rabbit Effect*, that catches my attention immediately but rabbits and kindness, can you tell us what that's all about?

[0:02:42.2] KH: Sure. The rabbits are a study that was done back in the late 1970s that was a big turning point for me and sort of understanding how we think about health, you know, what helps us do well. The study basically went like this. You know, there was a time period where we didn't have a great understanding of certain cholesterol and heart health and diets.

Some researchers were doing a pretty basic science study with rabbits, feeding them high fat diets. More or less genetically identical rabbits and it turned out that when they looked at their results, there were something curious going on. One of the groups had far better health outcomes than the others.

First I thought there was something wrong with their study design. They went back and looked at it, and everything checked out and so then they looked at themselves and they realized that one of the postdocs that was working in the lab — she wasn't just giving the rabbits food and she was actually petting them and talking to them. She was basically giving them love and kindness.

They decided that even though they weren't behavioral scientist that they replicate or they try to replicate the study, the findings that they couldn't ignore it. It was too big to ignore. They went

back and they redid it. This time with very tightly controlled conditions and sure enough, they got the same results that this one group of rabbits that had that connection did far better health-wise than the other rabbits that didn't have it.

They ended up publishing it in the journal of the prestigious journal Science which was you know, a really big deal and then many studies that sort of went the way of the — life moved on and as we continued to go down our very sort of bio-medical path which is certainly helpful but it was sort of missing this bigger picture of the bigger context of health and that's that connection is just so key to our health.

[0:04:33.7] PF: We hear that more and more but it seems like even though it's preached, it's not always implemented. You know, even when we go to our medical doctors, even though they know it's important, that's maybe not their priority.

[0:04:46.4] KH: Our current system is very problem focused and it's tough because as a clinician in the system, I understand this.

You have limited time to try to address the immediate problem. The thing is, our lives take place in this bigger context, you know? Our relationships, our communities, our schools, our workplaces, all of this. It plays into our health so the challenge is how do we start to address that when it comes to healthcare and my thought on it is two fold.

One, you know, I think clinicians are well aware that we're missing something big when it comes to healthcare and how many times has your doctor asked you — you know, you probably hear like how many drinks do you have a week? How many cigarettes do you smoke? But like how many times did you meet up with friends for brunch or —

[0:05:32.5] PF: Right, those are not making the questionnaire yet.

[0:05:35.1] KH: Right, even though you know, the data shows that our connection to others and loneliness has as significant if not more of an impact on our health and very well established risk factors like smoking and obesity and even heavy alcohol use.

[0:05:50.4] PF: As we become aware of that, then what role do we need to play in our own healthcare because we already know we have to be our own healthcare advocate but we tend to think of that from the standpoint of negotiating and navigating the medical system.

We also now need to be more responsible about making sure we're getting the social connection and kindness and things like that in our lives.

[0:06:11.8] KH: Right, that's actually what really inspired me to write the book — is that it goes beyond just sort of you know. I think for a lot of people, health feels like well, well I go see a doctor maybe once a year, once every six months or when there's a problem which is great. Good medical care is important.

The other side of that is health is really what's happening in our minute to minute of our daily lives and we have to see that hidden factor first to appreciate that that's actually probably having a far greater impact on our overall health and wellbeing than this occasional one-off doctors visit. The idea is really that this is something we all need to be aware of and we need to be thinking about it in our interactions with people because it flips the script to talk about —

You know, we don't usually think of our workplaces as somewhere where health is happening but you know, it turns out, there are this really big population studies that show that in fact, our workplaces have a huge impact on our health. We need to be thinking about, are we treated with dignity at work? Do we treat our coworkers with dignity? Do we manage to navigate conflict in a respectful manner or how are we approaching these sort of micro interactions that happened during the day?

[0:07:22.4] PF: That's one thing I really love about your book because a lot of books and a lot of things that we read give it in a general idea of we need to be doing these things but your book is very specific with cause and effect and in different environments and that I think is incredibly helpful for those of us who know we need to implement this in our lives but aren't necessarily sure what that looks like.

[0:07:46.7] KH: Well, I think for me, that other big piece of this is really action. We all have it within our toolkit to be able to take action like pretty much the moment that you put down this podcast or stop listening. You know, you have people around you.

I mean, self-compassion and self-kindness is definitely a piece of this and then looking at the people in your immediate environment, whether it's your home, your work place, your school setting, your neighborhood and thinking, "What can I do to make things better?" Because what's really awesome is there's this data and other guests on your show have talked about it, sort of this idea that when we help others, we're actually also helping ourselves you know, the studies that show that volunteering is as good for the volunteer as for the recipient of the good deed. Isn't that awesome? Sort of this virtuous circles.

[0:08:33.9] PF: Yeah, you know, it's like, if you're not virtuous, it's like okay, do it selfishly and you're still going to get benefits, you know?

[0:08:39.8] KH: Yeah, right, right.

[0:08:41.1] PF: Be kind for yourself and you're still going to win when you're kind to others. You're still going to reap the rewards. That did make me want to ask too. Is there a difference from a health perspective between giving kindness and being a recipient of kindness?

[0:08:54.8] KH: That's interesting. I don't know if those studies are necessarily been done but I would say this. I think we often ignore sort of like what's in right in plain sight in front of us and that's that kindness really matters and there is ample evidence. I mean, it's not just like this one-off study. It's like ample evidence where how we're treated in these different situations and doing things that are kind for ourselves and others seems to be helpful.

That was my goal with writing *The Rabbit Effect*, was to try to put together all this public health data within what we also are increasingly understanding is happening on a micro level, on a microscopic level with like epigenetics and telomeres and it's really cool because on the one hand, we've got enough evidence to say, absolutely go forward and be nice and kind and treat other people well and you know, there's not a lot of downsides.

You can't really like overdose on it really. Which is also a nice thing because I think, you know, we tend to very much make things and actually, this is something I feel like Dr. Drew Ramsey's is also very good at is sort of thinking like we often put things in the hands of pharmaceutical stuff but there's also a lot we can do just beyond that. Whether it's with our diet, with our

relationships, with its – how we just sort of approach our day to day, things we're excited and get us up out of bed, all those things make a difference to our health in very profound ways.

That's not to say that medications aren't helpful sometimes but it also that we have to be thinking even beyond that.

[0:10:29.6] PF: Yeah we kind of have more power than we've been led to believe or that we've let ourselves believe and the power that we have is through really positive things and you talk about kindness. Can you talk about some of the changes that kindness can bring about in our health?

[0:10:43.9] KH: Sure. The evidence suggest that the changes go beyond lifestyle alone. So short. There's sort of this pie chart that shows medical care counts for like 10 to 20% of our overall health, genetics is some piece of that.

But what's cool is that is way more fluid than we had ever understood in the past. You know lifestyle is a component of that but a lot of that is also affected by our social dimensions of health. So what's exciting is the evidence about kindness goes sort of both ways. It is helping us hopefully prevent diseases and then also when diseases do arise that we live better and longer with them or have higher quality of life and I think that's really the important thing to keep in mind.

You know I think in medicine, a lot times it feels like disease is the enemy we're trying to avoid at all costs but you know human bodies break down in different ways and part of being able to navigate illness better and fare well with things that may come, is kindness and that can be sometimes through social support that you have and then also doing things that continue to keep you engaged with life is also something that is incredibly helpful when it comes to health.

[0:11:57.1] PF: Yeah, when you read your book and the stories and the illustrations of people that you have dealt with, I mean you can't argue with that you know? The effect that it has had on how different people have very different outcomes just because of that kindness and because of the way they are living their life, not necessarily their physical habits but their emotional and mental ones.

[0:12:18.0] KH: Absolutely, well you know working in the emergency room, it was always curious to me sort of the patients that would come back over and over again or you know that everything would go very well in the hospital but then they would leave and there would be some disastrous outcome and a lot of times you see what that is, is the hospital and clinics are sort of separated from all of these things that are influencing us in our day to day.

And we have to start paying attention to that stuff. I think this is sort of a key theme within positive psychology is looking at the process not just the outcome. You know the outcome is we are all going to die of something you know? But the process can be extremely different and we can live our lives in incredibly meaningful ways but we have to also recognize that that's actually a part of good health like thinking about our social world is a key piece of that.

So I find this all, as a clinician, I find it incredibly exciting because it is such a big opportunity both within health care and both within how we treat each other in our communities, absolutely.

[0:13:22.8] PF: Yeah, I think as we get more aware of this and more people start living this way it can affect incredible change. So in that vein, what are some ways that we can begin implementing more kindness into our lives?

[0:13:35.4] KH: Sure. So first of all, I think being kind to ourselves is a big piece of this and I have to say, I loved one of your other podcast guests who did the sort of like that it is okay to suck at something.

[0:13:46.8] PF: Oh yeah, Erin Rinaldi, yes.

[0:13:47.7] KH: Yes, what a fabulous episode and I think a big part of it is working on our own mental health because it is going to help us navigate stuff when things come up and so part of that is stress is inevitable. So what can we do to keep ourselves in a good spot so that we can be kinder when a situation comes up. So I love that episode, in part, because being playful or having fun laughing at yourself like those are all things that are actually quite helpful.

And so recognizing that it's that whole growth mindset as we approached different things, kindness is a practice and I can't reiterate that enough. You know none of us are kind or happy all the time, it is this idea that we're practicing and that we are open to it and that's incredibly

rewarding and fun in itself and the cool thing as it turns out, it seems to be quite good for our health is our physical health as well, which is great. Our mental and our physical health.

[0:14:44.0] PF: Yeah, as you had said earlier it has no downside and it does make incredible changes for us and again, your book just really drives that home and speaking of the book, your conclusion is so powerful and the thing that really stuck with me is that observation that kindness takes bravery. Could you talk about what you mean by that?

[0:15:04.2] KH: Absolutely, so I think there is a misperception when people hear the word kindness they think like, "It's nice if there is time" you know?

[0:15:13.0] PF: It doesn't look like I am going to fit it in.

[0:15:15.5] KH: Right, exactly or maybe even being somewhat of a pushover, something that I actually think kindness is fierce. It takes a lot of practice and it takes navigating some tricky situation. So what is cool about that is that's a skill and that's something that can be learned through conflict resolution practices and also just recognizing that kindness means actually engaging in some difficult conversations sometimes because it comes up with some big topics within society like inequality.

Other things that we – you know fairness, how we treat one another and all of the different aspects of our lives and so you know I think we have to also acknowledge that part of kindness is bravery and being willing to take on some of those conversations sometimes when they are not particularly comfortable and our instinct is probably to run the other direction.

[0:16:06.3] PF: Yeah and timing wise, your books release is perfect because kindness and civility are not having their best year ever right now and so what is that doing to us from a mental health and a physical standpoint? That is what I kept thinking as I was reading your book and it is like, "Oh my gosh" I am thinking about all these things that are going on in the background and as I read what happens to us as a result of kindness, I think what is happening to us right now because of everything that is going on and the way that we were talking to each other.

[0:16:36.8] KH: So there is a message in there. So you know our social world is impacting us both on a personal individual level and then sort of collectively as well and I think it is hopeful in the sense that I think we can turn this around and in part the big thing is acknowledging that how we treat one another matters and you know I guess the piece when you step back and look at it is you know we're all in this together and even when people have different viewpoints, how can we have a dialogue that we still focus on the problem and not issues with each other.

So and I think we're seeing it with people feeling very divided in different ways throughout society and so you know the message in there because you can only really act on an individual level is do what you can to try to connect with the people around you and branch out and go outside your comfort zone. Meet people who aren't just like you in the same way and try to learn about their lives and their challenges.

And I mean for me, I think it is a great joy, because I think for people who practice that and that are practicing kindness, they often discover that our similarities are much greater than our differences. So I think this is the conversation of our times and recognizing this isn't just a clinical issue necessarily. It is also a health issue. We need to be thinking about those things, how we treat one another. This is in many ways the book is a story about public health.

And in America, especially, we invest a lot in biomedicine and we spend a lot of money on it. The question is, can we think about not just individually but also collectively how we can maybe spend resources in a way that helps support people like — I put in the book data about supporting new moms and new families actually has societal impacts decades down the road. You know what can we do to help people during these critical periods of their lives both biologically and socially?

You know there is so much work to do be done but at the same time, I mean that is my life's work and I feel like it is also so rewarding for the people that choose to engage.

[0:18:46.5] PF: Yeah and it's fantastic. This really is a great read and it's relevant to every person and that is something that I don't think can be emphasized enough. So as we let you go, for those people who are listening right now, what are a couple of things they can do right now to start making positive changes to improve their mental and physical health?

[0:19:05.7] KH: Sure, I would say reach out to someone you love today. Tell them thank you for being who they are, offer some gratitude. Think about gratitude in your own lives. I mean the data on that is fantastic and you know even simple things like offering someone a hug, you know someone you love that is appreciative of that so it's not unexpected.

[0:19:24.2] PF: Not just going to the bus stop or saying no, maybe not.

[0:19:27.7] KH: Right or the guy with the free hug sign. It is somebody in your life that you feel comfortable hugging I would say go for it. Be mindful because touch and connection, all of that is so critical to us and reaching out to other people and also doing things even before you are ready to do them that sort of that idea of being brave and different and circumstances, you are setting a model for someone else.

I feel like almost every episode I have listened to your podcast that's exactly what you are teaching people is working on your own happiness is actually helping society as well especially when that happiness is not happening in a vacuum. It is happening in connection with other people.

[0:20:09.4] PF: Absolutely. Well this is terrific Kelly, we'll come back in just a minute and tell people where they can find your book, find out more about you but thank you so much for sitting down with us today because this is such an important book and I think it really – I am not overblowing it when I say it can really change people's lives.

[0:20:24.4] KH: Oh that means so much to me. Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:20:31.5] PF: That was Dr. Kelly Harding, author of *The Rabbit Effect: Live Longer, Happier and Healthier with the Ground Breaking Science of Kindness*. If you'd like to learn more about Kelly and her book, please visit us at livehappynow.com and we'll tell you where you can find her book and also where you can find her online to keep up with her research.

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That is all we have time for this week. We'll meet you 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]