

EPISODE 225**[INTRODUCTION]**

[0:00:03.0] PF: Welcome to episode 225 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us. If you've been listening to Live Happy Now for the past couple of years, you're probably already familiar with today's guest. Tiffany Shlain founded Character Day in 2013 as a way to recognize the importance of character strengths and to take a day to observe and celebrate that.

This year, she's combining the celebration of Character Day on September 27th and 28th with the release of her new book *24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day a Week*. For Character Day, she's encouraging everyone to take the day off from their screens following the Jewish tradition of Shabbat and using it to find more time, connection and well-being.

She sat down with me to explain more about how we can all unplug and what it can do for us.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:51.6] PF: Well, Tiffany. It is great to have you back on Live Happy Now.

[0:00:54.9] TS: It is so great to be back. It's an evolving conversation, which is always fun.

[0:00:58.9] PF: It is. You have something very new to add to it this year.

[0:01:03.5] TS: Yes.

[0:01:04.2] PF: I'm pretty excited about this, because it's something that all of us deal with and we're all trying to figure out how to make this work, because you look at how we can unplug. You talk about unplugging in a whole day a week from technology, which a lot of people think can't be done. I think to start, can you tell us what made you decide to start unplugging?

[0:01:26.0] TS: Sure. It was about 10 years ago and I was like everyone else, online all the time with that smartphone glued to me. My father who I was really close to died of brain cancer and

my daughter was born within days of each other. Those two moments just shook me by the shoulders and made me think like, “What are you doing? We only have a short amount of time in this earth and how do you want to live?” It was really clear to me.

Again, this is before everyone – I mean, it's gotten so much crazier with people just staring at their phones all the time. This was 10 years ago, but I knew it didn't feel good how distracted I was feeling. My family and I and I should say we're Jewish, but we're not religious. We participated in this National Day of Unplugging, which was a ceremonial day of turning off your screens and we did it and we're like, “Oh, my gosh. We need to do this every week.”

What happened, we had some form of Shabbat and we had dinners, but we've never done the full day. In this modern society, really what it means to turn off all the screens and to create a palace and time really. We did it and it's just felt incredible. Now it's been almost 10 years, we have a teenage daughter, a lot of people want to know and have a 10-year-old and they love it too. It's our favorite day of the weekend. I run towards it every week. I can't wait to unplug.

Then that other element is that I then run to go back – I mean, I don't run to get back time, but I'm psyched to go back online again too. It has this dual effect every week, where I both appreciate existing without screens and figuring out how to do things and just being more present and living without them and then appreciating the power of them, and recalibrating how I'm using it. If I've been on too much, or maybe it's not make me feel good, or the news and I'm sick, okay, let me just readjust here. Every week I get to do that.

The really exciting part, the book comes out on September 24th. It's called *24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day a Week*. We're going to make this the lens, it's hard today this year, so really looking at one's character and screen use. When does being on screen enhance who you are and your character strengths, like empathy and perspective and courage and curiosity and when does turning them off make things better?

Really looking at character and screen use and making that link for people that who you are and who you want to be in the world, like how much of it do you want to do things through screens and when is it better to do it in person and to have all screens off?

[0:03:52.6] PF: Interesting. If we can step back a little bit, can you explain for those of us who are not of the Jewish faith, and maybe aren't as acute into it, can you explain the concept of Shabbat?

[0:04:04.6] TS: Absolutely. A lot of people know it as the Sabbath. Most cultures and religions have some form of this, although it's pretty much evaporated in our 24/7 culture, but it is a day of rest. If you're a religious Jew, you have a Friday night dinner, you do blessings and you use no electricity, you don't drive for a full day. In my interpretation and we're more cultural Jews, we still have fabulous Shabbat dinner with family and friends. It's very social, communal people around the table and all screens are off and then it's a full day.

For us, it's a day of rest meeting with my family. We're hanging out, or reading, or journaling, we're doing our – or play music, or cooking, but all screens are off and the outside world is really walled off from us, to just have a day of rest.

We call it our tech Shabbat. I really would love to introduce the concept of Shabbat to everyone, just like yoga and meditation bring such balance and happiness to people's lives and Shabbat can too. It's this very ancient practice, but I think everyone can partake in it in a tech Shabbat, and not to subscribe to a face to do yoga or meditation, but it still brings value. I feel I don't know one person in my life, whatever age, whatever background, that doesn't feel like they're on screen too much.

[0:05:14.6] PF: I agree with you that everybody that I know feels overwhelmed and feels we're constantly inundated with the pings and the notifications that get us back on the screens. Part of that, I'm sure is this mindset of setting it aside and being able to not listen for those notifications for 24 hours.

[0:05:37.4] TS: You don't realize how much your attention is just completely manipulated by your phone. I mean, I've turned off all notifications on my phone. In my book, I really also talk about a lot of strategies. I have the other six days to bring more balance back. I don't look at my phone in the morning anymore. I journal. There's all these strategies I've built in, because it was too much for me. Live Happy is the name of the podcast, the magazine, it's like, do we feel this is good, a good way to live happy, to be have these screens interrupt so many moments and so much presence?

There's so many studies that are backing up what I think we all intuitively feel. This practice is thousands of years old. If you're Jewish and you do the practice, you know the power of it. Most of the Jews I know, they don't do a full day. They'll maybe do a dinner, unless they're really observant. This full day off, we need it. Remember when stores used to be closed on Sundays and it was like a different mood, right?

[0:06:31.1] PF: Yeah. Everything was Sunday was truly that day who are you recharged and you spent time with family and you sat down and you didn't go out and run around, you didn't go shopping.

[0:06:43.3] TS: Right. We've just lost any separation. In the book, I go through a lot of the history around days on and days off. I mean, we fought bloody battles in the streets of Chicago for the weekend. Labor Day, most people don't associate it with anything more than barbecues and sales, but it was about fighting for the weekend. Now the digital technology has blurred everything, so we don't have that anymore.

There was a study that I read that 60% of people feel they need to respond to their boss on the weekend, or need to be available. We need to create more space where we're not available 24/7. All I'm proposing is one day. In the book and for Character Day, I do talk about other things during – to recreate boundaries, to live a better life. Really, that's what your work's about and is how do you live a meaningful, happy, purposeful life in the 21st century? I don't think anyone I know would say, "Oh, I wish I wasn't on screens more."

[0:07:41.4] PF: I just wish I had more screens to touch.

[0:07:44.4] TS: I wish I had more time to just – I really feel my time is very well-spent on – most people, they're on a screen and they go down four rabbit holes of social media and news and an hour has gone by. Do you feel better after that? You probably feel more stressed out, or FOMO.

[0:07:59.3] PF: You don't remember what you were going to look for in the first place. You know that you don't have what you're going to find, but they're not sure what that was at this point.

[0:08:08.4] TS: Right. There's so many ways that the internet is amazing and it brings so many great things, but it just – the pendulum has swung way too far. We're over at a place where we need to bring – I mean, and not just for personal well-being, which is important, but on a societal level, we are so distracted all the time and we're being manipulated by a lot of things that are pinging us. We should look at that too, because there's a personal level, there's a level with relationships, families, schools, companies and then our society.

I think if you look at our current state of our country right now, I would say we're being distracted to oblivion. It's hard to focus on what's important and it's very stressful and it's hard to do big-picture thinking when six times a day there's even more stressful, something happening that there's real stuff happening that you need to be present and involved with, but there's a lot of stuff that's just trying to make you scared and fearful and react, instead of be thoughtful.

[0:09:09.8] PF: Absolutely. I think it's really important to point out that it's not like you're a technology crude. You talked about this in your book, because the web and technology have played a really big role in your career.

[0:09:24.9] TS: Yeah. I founded the Webby Awards. I really love it. I mean, I think, I love that I just think it's too much. I spent the first part of my career going, the web is going to change the world. Look at how it's going to connect us. Now it's like, not too much, not all the time, because I just never imagined back when I founded the Webby Awards over 22 years ago, did everyone will be staring at their screens and not present.

We just need to have a conversation, which we're hoping to do for Character Day a global conversation about when is it good, when is it bad, what do we need to hold tech companies accountable for, which we hold our legislators accountable, how do we reclaim boundaries as parents, as partners, as people, as humans?

Because we're at a apex moment here. We're making these short films that are going to go with Character Day this year with these tech challenges. One is called Dear CEO and one's called Dear parent, Dear student, Dear legislature, Dear fellow human, because everyone's involved in this. We're all participating in this situation. I believe in humanity and I believe in humans, but we need to be having this conversation, because it's pretty unhealthy the way we're living right now.

[0:10:31.2] PF: You do make an interesting comparison in your book between smoking and the way that we use our phones. Can you talk about that? Because I really like that part of the book. It really makes a great illustration.

[0:10:42.2] TS: Well, it is very addictive. One of the most exciting things that I got to while writing that section about addiction was secondhand smoke, because even when you're sitting with someone at a table and their phone is off, but on the table, you will be distracted. It's also being really mindful about how much you're affecting other people by being on your phone, or having your phone out that it's not only addictive for you, but it's such a presence distractor, that whoever sees it isn't going to be focused with you. It used to be gauche to have your cellphone on a table, or have it in your hand. I mean, now it's everywhere. I don't think –

[0:11:19.8] PF: Now it's in front of your face when the service –

[0:11:22.8] TS: As you're talking. I mean, it's so rude. At my film studio now, we're trying to keep all our phones in our bag, except for when we go on the break, because it's just too distracting. Besides, even the silent buzzes, you hear them and you lose focus and people are texting in meetings. We're like, "What are we doing here?" I do think if an alien came into our planet right now, they'd be like, "What are you doing? Everyone's looking down."

[0:11:49.0] PF: What's this thing you're looking at?

[0:11:51.1] TS: What are we doing?

[0:11:52.0] PF: You talk about it, even our pets are picking up on this, like even the dogs are responding, realizing –

[0:11:59.2] TS: Well, think about it. I mean, we're talking about eye contact, really which for human evolution, I've done a lot of films on neuroscience and brain development. I made this – my other book that I wrote was *Birth to Five Years*. It was for the TED conferences. It's a short, 30-page book. All about the importance of eye contact and brain development and how linked they are for a baby, until they're five-years-old.

You think about how much happens with eye contact in animals. I mean, I have a cat, I've had dogs who much is eye contacted now. So many people are just on their phones when their dogs are trying to get their attention, not to mention, their kids trying to get their attention. It's definitely something to think about.

[0:12:36.3] PF: Every level, it's something that we have to address and especially, we have children that are being raised up who are on the phone. I'm shocked at how often I see little kids walking around with mommy and daddy's phones and they know how to use them and they're playing games and things. I just wonder what that's going to do to that generation as they get older and how it affects their interpersonal skills. You talk in your book about what the advent of cellphones, that era, that generation for children have less empathy, because there's less human interaction. There is a concern about what that means for our future.

[0:13:11.4] TS: Yeah. I just got off the phone with this woman who's leading this youth-driven organization of teens and college students that are feeling they're on their screens too much. I do feel things are turning right now. I mean, the advisor of a organization called Wait till 8, as in wait till 8th grade to get your child a smartphone. Six years ago when my older daughter was around 10, no one was – everyone is getting their kid smartphones for a 5th grade graduation, which my family. They gave me a flip phone, because we didn't think it was something she needed and now it's in the public discourse. There's thousands of family signing this pledge.

I think there is an awareness happening. I feel the use of the next wave coming after this call I had this morning. It doesn't feel good to be on so much. No one's going to feel good being on and available 24/7. I think once we present the issue in the right way for kids who have grown up on it, it'll be a really interesting conversation, because a lot of kids will say, "My parents are on their phones too much." Parenting is all modeling behavior. It's so prevalent that where do you unpack it and it's everywhere actually. You have to unpack it everywhere.

[0:14:28.5] PF: Yeah. Now as your book talks about being able to do this tech Shabbat, being able to unplug for a full day, how do you get your kids and your better half to buy into this plan? Because I would think for a lot of people, that's the hard part.

[0:14:43.1] TS: Yeah. I have a lot of different strategies in the book around that. I think the simplest answer and again, I go into it in more detail based on age and who you're trying to

convince and all of the stuff. Biggest thing I'd say is to say to your partner, or child, or whomever you want to do it with you, what do you wish we did more of? Then you fill that day without screens with that. What do you wish we did more of that doesn't involve screens? Everyone's got a list. "I wish I had more time to take up an instrument, or take a painting class, or go on a hike," and just make a list, 10 things. Then it becomes your favorite day of the week, because that day has this boundary around it where that's what you're doing.

It becomes this magical day that feels very long too, because this other component is that time slows down when you turn off your screens. This one day off starts to feel like two days off. It's such a weird – you turn on your screen, it just moves everything around really quickly and life's happening very quickly. You turn it off and suddenly, you have more time. Doesn't everyone want more time? At this point of my life –

[0:15:46.1] PF: That's what all we're crying for. Everyone is begging for more time. Well, we're going to tell everyone how they can find out more about Character Day, where they can go to see your films and obviously, where they can get the book, learn more about the book and start unplugging themselves.

[0:16:04.5] TS: Thank. It's always a pleasure to talk about living a good life with you.

[0:16:09.2] PF: Oh, thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:16:15.3] PF: That was Tiffany Shlain, author of *24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day a Week*. If you like to learn more about Tiffany's book, please visit us at livehappynow.com and we'll also give you several links to learn more about Character Day and how your school or workplace can be a part of it.

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

[END]