

EPISODE 239

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:02] PF: Welcome to episode 238 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us once again.

With the holidays upon us, you're probably among the many who are planning your gatherings with family and friends, and you might be wondering what to do about that unwelcome intruder who's been showing up the past few years. Technology has changed our lives in many ways. But when holiday celebrations are spent with guests on their phones or tablets, it takes away much of the magic of the moment.

This week's guest is Joe McCormack who literally wrote the book on how to find focus in human interaction in the midst of technology's interference. Today, he talks with us about how to keep the holidays happier by keeping technology from intruding on our quality time.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:45] PF: Joe, welcome to Live Happy Now.

[00:00:47] JM: It's great to be with you.

[00:00:48] PF: Well, we wanted to have you talk to us today, because you're an expert in noise but probably not the kind of noise we think about when we first hear that word. So I guess to set us up, can you tell us what you're talking about when you say noise?

[00:01:01] JM: When I'm talking about noise, I'm talking about the digital devices and the information overload and the constant connectivity and distractions that basically command our attention 24/7. A lot of this information tends to really drain our brain, and it tends to be very useless at the end of the day. But it consumes a ton of our time, checking our phone 24/7 and constantly being distracted by alerts and notifications. I call that noise.

[00:01:28] PF: It's kind of like junk food where we just keep going back to it even though it's not really doing anything for us, and we're not shutting it off.

[00:01:37] JM: Yeah. I mean, the analogy I use in the book is it would be like having a diet where you ate popcorn and drank Diet Coke. You feel full but you become mentally anemic where that's your diet but it's not good for you at the end of the day.

[00:01:50] PF: I specifically wanted to talk to you, because we've got the holidays just around the corner and we know this is all about celebrating and spending time with family and friends. But the noise is here, and it gets in the way. So can you talk about how it is negatively impacting our holidays and our family gatherings?

[00:02:09] JM: When you think about you get – You have a family gathering. It's the holidays and it's – There are some people that obviously you would love to see and there's other people you maybe not – Don't want to see. There's some fun and there's some dysfunction, right? Who put the fun in dysfunction?

But these are family gatherings and celebrations, and then you start looking around, and what are people doing oftentimes in “spare moments” or whatever is on their phones or they're checking things. Are they really fully present for those memories, those moments? The answer is they're not. So I think we need to start looking at those things differently, because it's the holidays. These are moments that people will look forward to. For some people, it's like the highlight of the year, and it's just interfering with the quality of that time together, and I think it does for a lot of people.

So what would we do differently to start managing that and not going over the top? But how do we take that into consideration and start putting some rules? I think there's a number of things that people can do to help mitigate that and spend more time present with the people around them.

[00:03:03] PF: We need to plan this in advance, because you can't just decide on Christmas day like, “Oh! Everyone is coming over. I think I'll take all the phones away.” So how does someone if they're hosting a holiday gathering start planning for that now and saying, “Okay. I'm going to create some boundaries and some guidelines.”?

[00:03:18] JM: There's a number of fun things you can do, I mean, without being like or checking your – Like the Wild West, checking your gun at the door, your holster at the door. There's a number of fun things you could do. One thing is I just call it wrap it up.

So maybe one something you could do is just get some wrapping paper and say, "Okay. What we're going to do is we're going to have a lot of fun. But let's wrap our phones, and we'll put a gift. You can give it back to yourself and –" Or you could put it in a Christmas stocking and just have a place. Have some stockings, small stockings. They're not very expensive. You could just hang them, and we put phones in and we –

The restaurants can do that now. They could – You put phones in these sort of places and just – The idea is time with each other is more important than time checking your phones, and there's fun ways of doing it without your – What you don't want to do is in the moment of when you're having a conversation and the person gets distracted and that you've lost their attention because they're on their phones, say, "Stop doing that and listen to me." Because that's just – At that point, it's too late.

So maybe some fun way is I just call like, "Wrap it up. So we're going to wrap our phones for a couple of hours and then we'll open them up at the end or –" But there's things like that you can do or putting a place where you can set them aside like not at the table or quiet spaces in the house. Well, this is like a phone-free room, and we're going to have a lot of fun here. I think things like that creatively get people recognizing like, "Hey! This is a time and a place, and we're not just going to let it come uninvited."

[00:04:30] PF: That's really good, because you're not being offensive about it. You're being kind of playful but at the same time being very clear that this is about family or friends or the people basically, and we're not going to spend that time engaging with technology.

[00:04:44] JM: Yeah. You mentioned like the host like if you're throwing a party. One of the things that I think is really, really important, and this is where – I'm not anti-technology, but it does tend to create noise, this constant source of noise in people's lives is where is the quiet time for me around the holidays. I'm giving that gift of quiet to myself where I'm thinking about just for me. I might go to a party. I'll meet with my cousin, some of whom I haven't seen in a long

time. I forget their names. I'm walking up the door. I'm like asking my sister what is their name, and she's looking, "How do you not know?" It's this moment like maybe what I need to do is that morning, I need to have like 10 minutes of quiet and I need to start thinking of the party I'm going to. Who am I going to see? How long has it been since I've seen them? Maybe I need to call my sister and ask her, "Okay, what's –" Preparing just in quiet. Or for a lot of people, that quiet is missing in the holidays, because they're so busy running around.

Let's shut things off for a second. Let's just have some quiet and think about, "Okay, why am I going to a party that I'm going to?" Or maybe it's thinking about for a lot of people it's that time of the year, because people in the family and friends are no longer with them, and maybe that quiet is a time to remember them and really just give that – It gnaws away at people, because you miss people. They're not here. It's the first Christmas they're not here.

So maybe some quiet where you can remember them or thanking. We're just past thanksgiving, but there's always the holidays or a time to thank people. But I'm going to write a list of the people I'm thankful for, and I think that quiet can be a great gift that you can give yourself.

[00:06:15] PF: People get surprised how meaningful it is and how much they get out of just taking even 10 minutes of quiet time.

[00:06:22] JM: What happens to people is they know instinctively that they need it. They know that there's a lot of things competing for their attention. One of the things that happened in quiet is it never gets scheduled, and people do it when they have time. What I would suggest is schedule it but set a time that you know in advance that it's going to be quiet and prepare for it. So during the time of quiet, I'm going to prepare or I'm going to rest or I'm going to remember or I'm going to think or I'm going to read or I'm going to listen or sit in front of a fire or listen to music. But just give that time to yourself. But plan it. Schedule it, because the holidays are a busy time. You blink your eyes twice, and they're over.

People need to slow down a little bit. It's like, "I need time for myself to just quiet. I can do some –" But prepare for it. Don't just stop and like, "What am I going to do now?" Because then you get – Then actually ironically, that quiet actually sounds pretty noisy for people.

[00:07:14] PF: Yeah.

[00:07:15] JM: Then they grab their phone and then they're back checking email and they just miss that opportunity of thinking or thanking or listening or laughing or resting or whatever they might decide to do in that time, which is incredibly valuable.

[00:07:27] PF: I think saying you'll take a quiet time when you have time is kind of like saying you'll have children when you have enough money for them. It's just – You can't wait for that. It's not going to happen.

[00:07:39] JM: Yeah. I think one of the other things too just in terms of like things that people can do to manage the noise in their lives is I call it present listening. It is kind of a play on words but it's present because it's – Like I'm doing it now. But it's a present, because I'm giving the person the gift of my attention. I think I'm looking at, imagine, like a party where there's a lot of people around. It's really festive, and people pick up their phone, and they're just going around. But sitting down with somebody and having a conversation with the person and really being present and giving that person the best gift that you can give them, which is the gift of your attention.

My gift in this moment is to give you my complete and undivided attention. How valuable that is to people because it's rare that people would give that to you. That you would give that gift to a lot of people for the holidays could be amazing for people.

[00:08:26] PF: Both people receive something when you do that.

[00:08:28] JM: Yeah. The best gift giving is you're giving something without any intention of getting something back. Yeah. I'm going to sit down with somebody. I'm going to ask them, "How are you doing," and really – But not try to fix them or change them. I'm just trying to listen to them and understand. But really just give it away and see what happens. Then yet there's – Oftentimes, there's something in return that both people are going to become the recipient of the gift.

[00:08:28] PF: We'll be right back with more of my talk with Joe McCormack. But right now, I wanted to take 60 seconds to give you one way to make your meals a little easier this holiday season. Sizzfish.com is a great way to have top quality seafood delivered right to your door.

When you want a break from that holiday turkey and ham, their online selection of seafood is like a trip to the fish market without waiting in line. Make incredible holiday appetizers from their shrimp, crab cakes, and calamari. Or make it your main course with great choices like lobster, salmon, sea bass, and so much more. Best of all, their fish is all-natural and responsibly sourced.

Whether you want to order great seafood for a special meal or become a regular customer and sign up for a monthly subscription box, go to sizzlefish.com and skip the line this holiday season. And as an exclusive deal for being a listener, you can use discount code happy for 10% off your first order. That's discount code happy for 10% off your first order. Now, let's get back to our conversation with Joe.

If you're putting together a gathering and you know that you're going to tell people this is phone-free, should you let people know that in advance or how do you – Because there's going to be some people who are not as excited about it as others.

[00:10:08] JM: I think that you have to kind of play it where you know that you could set aside a room that this is going to be a phone-free room. That's one of the things that I suggest to people is kind of like pick spaces that are single-purpose spaces. Let people know in advance. You can set up things where they can put the phones in a bin. My daughter visited a birthday party a number of years ago and it really inspired me. She just grabbed a bin and she's, "Put your phones here."

There's different things you can do. I think it's like banning. Not banning them but not having them at the dinner table when you're sitting together, because what happens is in a moment that you're talking to somebody, you're doing something where "like a lull," the research indicates your brain is kind of addicted to this thing. It's checking people. The research says that people swipe their phones 2,000 times a day.

Well, you can use a smart phone for almost anything, checking sports scores. I mean, if you look at the statistics, I mean, there's over four million videos watched on YouTube every minute. So with the holidays, you'll see kids around looking at YouTube videos and things. I think having a moment where you're like, "All right. We're not going to check our phones in this room or we're going to have an area we put them," could be very respectful and not freak people out.

But it does – This is – We want to be together I think is the message, and being present to each other is the gift that we want to give each other. So that having the phone is just competing – Again, competing for attention and having –

Or even just the TV on. There's moments like that. We have all these things that we have enough distractions and we don't need more. So let's take some of that out of the picture where there's quiet. There's time for each other. There's music. There's laughter. I think that's what people really crave. If we can create environments like that that are like that, I think it just makes the party better. I mean, my daughter when she had this party, she talked about the girls had a blast. They had an absolute blast, and I think that's what we're looking for is we want people to enjoy the time together. That's really what should motivate us.

[00:11:54] PF: And absolutely connect with each other.

[00:11:56] JM: Yeah. I mean, people crave it. They crave it. They crave great conversations and great gatherings. These things are just in the way, so let's get them out of the way. Find a way that's creative to get them out of the way.

[00:12:05] PF: What happens if you have a resistor? Because you've always got that one who's like, "Oh, no! I'm going to get a text from my girlfriend, because we just broke up."? But, yeah.

[00:12:13] JM: Don't do it. I mean, [inaudible 00:12:14]. It's their loss at the end of the day. People can only control what they could control, and I think for the person who's throwing the party who's at the party, I think what I would be thinking is just how can I give the most of myself and be present to the people around me at this party completely so that I have fun and people have fun. If a person wants to do it, they're just not going to have as much fun.

[00:12:34] PF: One of the solutions that you talk about is getting out in nature and taking a walk together. Doing that after Christmas meal or after a gathering or even anytime you're just together. We talk a lot about nature and why it's so important. But what does that do? Why is that important in offsetting our digital life?

[00:12:51] JM: When you think about the way the brain works, so much of what we're doing every day is just there's so many different things that's competing for our attention, and our

attentions are precious commodity. So when you take a walk, the way I do it is I don't listen to music. I just listen. I just walk, and there's different types of attention. There's directed attention. So a directed attention would be like, "Okay. I'm paying attention to like I'm looking at something and focusing on something." Then there's misdirected attention, and that's like your brain getting stuck on something that it shouldn't be getting stuck on. You're kind of like obsessing about something.

Then there's something called undirected attention. When you go for walk, it's a great opportunity for undirected attention. You just let your mind wander. You listen to stuff. You don't have anything in your mind just like – The brain needs that. It needs a chance to rest. It's a muscle like anything else. It needs chance to rest. Go for a walk is great, because I'm just letting it wander and listening. When I go for walks, I listen for things, and it's amazing what you can hear on a walk. I walked in the snow. I could hear it under my feet or whatever that might be and I come back. Very rarely does a person say, "I took a walk. That was really stressful."

[00:13:56] PF: Yeah.

[00:13:57] JM: But that was really hard to do. It's like give yourself that free to do that and let your mind – I think people need to protect their brain. It's being barraged 24/7. Give it a break. Give it a break. Going for a good walk is a wonderful moment to do this, especially on the holidays.

[00:14:13] PF: Yeah. This is a great time to kind of try this on as, "Okay. I'll check this out. I'll see how a day goes, if I'm not glued to my phone." So if someone has managed to get rid of that digital noise at Christmas and they see a real benefit unplugging, what are some ways that they can start reducing the noise in their lives on a daily basis?

[00:14:32] JM: I think the first thing is one way of managing this. What's my first thought of the day that is technology? Is it instinctively grabbing for information? Then I ask myself the question, "Well, why? Why am I doing that right now? Could I start my day differently?" That's one very specific way is setting my first and that last thought of the day to be something that I set it but not – Technology is not the first thing. That's one thing.

I think the other thing is setting parameters of what I pay attention to. Am I paying attention to people? People first versus just information consumption? Because our lives have become like, "My job is consuming information." It's like going back to the popcorn analogy. I've got to eat all the time. Well, no. You schedule time to eat. You don't eat 24/7. So I have breakfast when I eat breakfast and I have lunch when I have lunch and I have dinner when I have dinner. I know when that is and I plan it and I have – I plan what I eat. I think information should be treated the same way.

So why am I checking social media right now? Because I'm bored. That's just like eating all day long. So we become sort of – Instead of becoming overweight, I think people come anemic. They're constantly doing this, but it doesn't fill them. So setting some boundaries of those moments I think can be very, very helpful. Then I think finally is just really putting the value around like, "Who am I talking to? Who am I spending time with? People are always the most important. People are the most important thing in putting that first. I think along the holidays, that's an opportunity.

Because I think a lot of people look for this to be the fulfilling part, a big fulfillment of the year and it lets a lot of people down. They're let down I think because the people around them aren't present. They need to be present to them.

Again, giving the gift that they're listening and their time and their attention to the other person, all that's going to do is make the other person joyful, because somebody cares about them and they're spending time. They care more about me than they care about checking their stock or they're checking the fact that somebody texted them. Pay more attention the person that's in front of me than a person who is 5,000 miles away from me. I think that goes a long way to making people feel joy again and peace and not feeling agitated or anxious. I think that's what the holidays are about.

[00:16:32] PF: When we come back, we're going to give our listeners information about how they can get a couple of free chapters from your book, as well as a noise survival guide. So as we're signing off, what would you say is the number one thing that you want them to remember during their holiday gatherings this year?

[00:16:46] JM: Schedule quiet time for yourself. Nonnegotiable every day, give yourself 5 to 10 minutes where you schedule every day and you dedicate it to something which is thinking about somebody, thanking somebody, reading, listening. Give that gift to yourself, that quiet of just a break. Give yourself a break where you can reflect and think a little bit, because that will always be a gift that will rejuvenate and reward you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:17:12] PF: That was Joe McCormack, author of *Noise: Living and Leading When Nobody Can Focus*, giving us tips for a happier tech-free holiday. If you'd like to download a couple of free chapters from his book and get his noise survival guide, visit us at livehappynow.com for links and more information.

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]