



Transcript: Wake Up Happy with Emiliana Simon-Thomas

HOST

Kym Yancey

SPEAKER

Emiliana Simon-Thomas

PRESENTATION

Kym

Hey, good morning. Welcome to Wake Up Happy. This is Kym Yancey, I'm your host for this five day series that we do at *Live Happy Magazine*, that we produce this five day series every single month and it's just a supreme honor to have you with us this morning. We have a fantastic guest with us, Emiliana Simon-Thomas is the Science Director of the Greater Goods Science Center. You're going to hear more about her.

I want to tell you, here are a couple things we're going to be covering today. We're going to talk about what does happiness mean historically and philosophically; how do scientists define happiness. We want to delve into is there a biological hub for happiness and which systems in

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the body are involved in happiness. I mean, we're really going to get into it.

I want to tell you, you're in the right place at the right time, because if you're engaged in Wake Up Happy, this really says a lot about how you want to approach not only your day, but the way you approach life, and I just want to congratulate you for being here with us. If you're listening to a recording of this, I want to say to you fantastic; share the word, share it with other people. We love, love having you a part of this.

Now let me tell you, particularly excited for this month. March the 20th, and I want you to have this on your calendar, March 20th is the International Day of Happiness. Now this has been established by the United Nations. This is actually their third year. Last year, Live Happy was by far the biggest promoter and sponsor of activities around acts of happiness, acts of kindness around the country, and this year we're really doubling our efforts. We have huge orange what we call "happy walls" that are going up in cities all over the country, and all the details, I want to tell you, all the details about this, because I really want you to have the opportunity to plug into this, because I will tell you something, whether it's Thanksgiving or a variety of different holidays that we have in our lives, I don't know about you, but there are many times when I'm having my

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Thanksgiving feast with the family and I'll think about other people. And they'll be people at soup kitchens and other places serving Thanksgiving dinner and I think to myself, *while I'm taking care of my family, I'm here and we're having a great experience, I would like to do more, I'd like to participate more.* And I just want to tell you, we've created this Happy Acts campaign that will allow you to very simply start today with little acts of happiness, acts of kindness where you're just being extra nice to people. We've put together ideas and strategies that you can engage in right now and it's called Happy Acts. So just go to happyacts.org – happyacts, ACTS, acts.org and you'll see all the things we've got going on there.

Now, here's the other thing. With the International Day of Happiness on March 20th, we are doing something we've never done before, but we've produced the world's first 24 hour happiness live stream. That's going to start on the 19th at 8:00 p.m. Eastern Standard time and go to March 20th 8:00 p.m. Eastern Standard time; for 24 full straight hours. It's going to be incredible. Some of the top positive psychologists in the world are all participating, we've got all kinds of information and strategies. But, hey, listen, if you can tune in for five minutes or you tune in for a couple of hours, whatever you want to do, but it's a live stream, you can watch us

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from your cell phone, your mobile, your tablet, your desktop, whatever you want to do.

The other thing I want to mention is as part of Happy Acts and the campaign we've got going there, I want to encourage you to also do what I'm doing and get our Happy Notes, our Live Happy happy notes. People just love these because it's way for you to have, you know, [audio skip] like a post-it note with handwritten notes on it. We've already done all the work, but the notes are great. They say things like, "You are unique; embrace it" or "Thank you for being you; you're awesome" or words like "Your smile brightens the room." I tell people, you just take these post-it notes and you put them up in the ladies room, the men's room, you put them on people's computers, you put it on the gas pumps, you put it on the check for the waiter who's waiting on you; this is all a great way with the International Day of Happiness coming up to be able to spotlight all of this at one time and really put some concentration on what it means when we spread happiness and kindness to others.

So, I hope you like that, but I wanted to tell you, mark those important dates on your calendar. You can go to livehappy.com and sign up for the 24-hour Happiness livestream. Also at livehappy.com you can also get

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the Happy Acts. If you forget, just livehappy.com has everything there for you, ready to go.

Alright, with that, let's get right into this. So, Emiliana Simon-Thomas is the Science Director of the Greater Goods Science Center where she oversees the expanding Gratitude Project. She earned her doctorate in cognition brain and behavior at UC Berkeley. Her dissertation used behavioral and neuroscience methods to examine how negative states, like fear and aversion influence thinking and decision-making.

Now, during her post-doc, Emiliana transitioned to studying pro-social states like love of humanity, compassion and awe. From there she served as associate director senior scientist at the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research & Education at Stanford University focusing on how compassion benefits health, well-being and psycho-social functioning. Today, Emiliana's work spotlights the science that connects health and happiness to social affiliation, caregiving and collaborative relationships as she continues to examine the potential for, as well as the benefits of, living a more meaningful life.

Emiliana, great to have you with us this morning from California.

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Emiliana Thank you so much. It's a privilege to be joining you.

Kym Hey, let's talk about what does happiness mean historically philosophically?

Emiliana It's such a fascinating question. So, most experts agree historically that happiness in antiquity centered around good luck and fortune. So really, if the dice were rolled in your favor, if you were lucky, if nothing bad was happening to you, if it was in the stars of fate, then you were a happy person. That's a really different way of how we think about happiness. As we all know, Thomas Jefferson in 1776 declared that the pursuit of happiness was an unalienable right. People both prior to that thought that happiness was about luck, but we've changed our tune in terms of how we think we arrive at happiness.

In between the luck and the right to pursue it, there was this idea that happiness – and this comes from the Greeks – that happiness was about virtue. That a man – and unfortunately we often use man as the exemplar here, but I'll go ahead and modernize it – but if a man or woman lived their life according to righteous virtues, then they were happy. His classic example is the person on the torture rack who had lived their life in a

virtuous way is a happy person regardless of the experience of their suffering.

So we have this sort of transition through history from luck to virtue, to this idea that we can pursue it. And now that we have this little nugget of insight that it's something that we can try to develop or aspire to, there's a couple different cultural ways that people think about happiness. One way, which is very Western and characteristic of how those of us who live in Western Europe or America, we think of happiness as being something that comes from experiencing these higher relatable positive states frequently and what a higher relatable positive state is, is pleasure or amusement or excitement and enthusiasm. And there is some degree to which happiness relates to those experiences, but it's certainly not a whole picture of happiness.

In Eastern cultures, happiness is often thought about in terms of a connection to your community; about humility; about duty to one's family or to one's workplace. So we have these kinds of different ideas about where happiness comes from and what's most important, and really this is sort of where science comes in and tries to give us some new insights.

Kym Let's talk about scientists and how they define happiness; the new insights, the new way today.

Emiliana So what scientists have done is in some degree try to figure out, well, how can we understand happiness? At some level when you embark upon a journey like that, there's the, "Well, let's just come up with a definition" and there's some value in that, but there's also value in just trying to appreciate that people intuitively have a good sense of what makes them happy. And then, forming your definition based on what you learned from studying people who say that they are very happy. And so the early happiness researchers in fact did that. Instead of sort of coming out upfront and saying, "We know what happiness is based on all this historical and philosophical and perhaps even religious thought," they said, "Well, let's just ask people and find out what they're doing."

And what they found out was that people who described themselves as very happy – again, you survey thousands of people and some people say, "Oh, I'm not very happy" and some people say, "I'm very happy pretty much all the time" – and people who fall into that category tend to be people who are enmeshed in a meaningful and authentic social community. They tend to spend a lot of time with friends. So this was the first really interesting insight that researchers came up with. Perhaps it

doesn't sound too surprising, but actually in a funny way it really is, that the vastly important thing that happiness doesn't really occur without the pleasure of having close friends is a really interesting little thing that scientists began to learn. So, that was one way they did it.

Another way they did it was by just pinging people throughout the day. So imagine you had your smartphone and you got a little message that said, "Hey, how are you feeling right now? What are you doing? Who are you with? Are you interested in what you're doing?" etc. And what they found out, again, was that the things that people were doing that were most predictive of the most happy feelings were socializing; spending time with friends, interacting with other people. So we're getting this kind of growing emergence of literature suggesting that, yeah, happiness is about having fun at some level, but it's not the kind of fun that we might have thought, which is, well, let's try to become very successful so that we have a lot of recognition; let's try to earn a lot of income so that we can buy lots of fancy toys and gadgets that, you know, lots of mass media makes us think will make us happy. In fact, it's the kind of fun that comes from being in the presence of other people who we trust, enjoy and share our entertaining dynamics with.

Kym Yes. I get that. So the pleasure of having close friends is one of the predictors and one of the ways to know that you're going to have a happier experience, because the meaning, the fun, the gaiety of all that. I like that pinging people throughout the day, how you doing; hey, checking in on you; thinking of you, that kind of thing. I will say, in my family, we have this thing where we write TOY, TOY, which is just thinking of you. And for those of you that are thinking, "Well, of course," well, I'm just kind of new to this whole thing with TOY and all that.

Emiliana I think it's wonderful. I think we're all new to it.

Kym But TOY, thinking of you. Share some more. Share some of the other main sources of happiness according to scientific research.

Emiliana So based on all of these studies, and this research was probably 30+ years old, what they've kind of boiled down to is that happiness comes from having an easy time experiencing these positive states, the things like amusement, joy, pleasure, pride, just contentment is a really interesting one that we don't think of all too often, but turns out to be very important.

The second main piece is having a real ease with which you can recover from distressing states, and this is a very important point because some people think that happiness means that you never feel upset; that negative feelings never happen. But that's an absolutely misnomer. That's absolutely a myth. In fact, happiness involves, the people for whom the wide range of possible emotions happen regularly are the ones who end up being the happiest. So it's important to be sad when you experience irrevocable loss and it's important to feel anger when you're confronted with injustice, and these emotions are very useful in guiding our thinking and our behavior in ways that solve important problems that we face.

So the issue around happiness and these negative emotions, though, is that it's important to be able to recover from them. Emotion scientists taught us that emotions don't last very long. Really, they're there as kind of this quick little intentional orientation guidance mechanism. So we've suddenly experienced something in the environment, we have an emotional response to it and that guides how we behave. But it's not something that shapes the behavior for the long-term. Moods are something altogether different than emotions.

So these negative emotions are very important, but we need to be able to recover from them. We need to be able to sort of see them happen and let them go quickly. That's an important part of being a happy person, and in many realms this is called resilience.

And the third essential piece of happiness is the sense that your life has purpose and meaning. And purpose and meaning are most likely when you feel like the work that you do or the way you spend your time is something that transcends your own self-interest. It's not simply I'm spending my time to accumulate as much profit or as many sort of personal pleasures or luxuries as I can, but rather I'm spending my time in a way that contributes in a very tangible or palpable way to the well-being of people around me or really the world at large.

So those are the key aspects of happiness – ease with which you experience positive emotions, the facility to sort of recover quickly from negative emotions and a sense of meaning and purpose in the way that you spend your time in day in and day out life.

Kym

I especially like what we were talking about too around this whole notion that you're just going to be an up and happy person all the time, and

everything that comes at you, you're going to convert it into some kind of happy gel or something. I mean, that's just not realistic, right?

Emiliana

There are researchers at UC Berkeley, Iris Mauss[indiscernible] and June Gruber who have really studied this precise question, like what does it mean to be someone who sort of has high expectations and is really pursuing happiness in this single-pointed way? In fact, they have shown this is harmful to happiness. That people who are out there thinking, "I'm going to be happier and I'm going to hold myself to this standard of happiness and that means that I'm going to be smiling at every instant of every day, 24x7," they actually are less happy than the people who have a different sort of attitude about it, which is, "I'm going to organize my life in a way that I will be more readily have the sorts of experiences that I understand lead to my happiness" and sort of let happiness burble up from your day in and day out life rather than chasing after it. So yes, absolutely, that over enthusiasm about what some people think happiness is can actually be harmful, can be detrimental.

Kym

Yes, I love the whole thing about contentment state, resilience. You're going to go into dark places, you're going to have tough times, right? And that ability to pull yourself, to reengage your emotions in a positive way, to take something and just to recover from it perhaps faster.

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Emiliana Yes, in some regards it's a life skill and in some regards it's sort of a personality trait to be somebody for whom those sorts of emotions don't stick too long. And really, it's an issue of the kinds of thinking that we do. And there's this interesting tension between emotions and thinking, and sort of who's at fault. Right? Is it that emotions make us irrational or that thoughts are sort of misguided in some regards. And oftentimes it's the thoughts, it's the story that we build around our emotions. If we get angry because say we got a parking citation, like, really, there's this kind of inevitability about it. You get them every once in a while, we all make mistakes and we can stew on it for hours and complain to our friends and post it on Facebook and shake our fist in rage, and imagine how much angrier we'll feel the next time we get one and how angry we felt last time. All of that is just sort of reinforcing thoughts and ideas and stories that we're telling in our minds that keep the negative emotions alive. And like you said, the skill of contentment, the ability to sort of let those experiences subside, which they will organically do should we not build up the stories around them, is a very useful life skill and it really does contribute to happiness in important ways.

Kym I also want to say something here, because you're married, you've got a couple of kids, right?

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Emiliana I do. I have three kids.

Kym You have three. You have a few.

Emiliana I have a few, that's right.

Kym And let me ask you, because there's a point I want to make, you've been married for how long, length of time?

Emiliana Twelve years.

Kym Twelve years, okay. So here's my point in bringing this up for all of us, and I think for all of us who are on the line and are married, is I think that also what I'm getting out of this, what's bubbling up for me is more compassion, self-compassion, giving other people a break. You made a comment about emotions and they're quick; they bubble up, they bubble down. And so we've got to give our spouses and our family members a break sometimes and know that the emotional language that takes place in a relationship, that if you judge them in the moment on what they said or did at that time and hold that, you could really be putting yourself in a very unhappy state. But if you are a little more self-compassionate, right,

the more understanding and just understand the pain, allow them time to regroup and not make a decision so all of a sudden now both of you are upset, does that make sense?

Emiliana

Absolutely, and it's a wonderful space, this area of relationship science and there are just some tremendous thinkers trying to help us learn more. A couple of my neighbors actually spent all day on Saturday, from 9 to 5, in the laboratory at UC Berkeley being participants in a study looking at friendship and what it does to the body and what it does to the brain and what it does to our emotional experiences and what kinds of factors make it more beneficial and what things make it more challenging. And obviously, the married life is kind of the ultimate form of friendship, right? That's something we agree on in this more formal way societally.

Yes, I think that there are such funny studies about marriage and the things that bring upon challenges and you pointed out one of them really well, which is oftentimes we think very self-referentially about our spouses and when they make a mistake or when we feel they haven't pulled their weight around the house, we get really angry about it. When in fact, most of the times the only reason we think that is because we're not in their skin and we didn't actually see all the things that they did. We remember the things that we do, because we did them and they're

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poignant in our sort of physical and mental experience, but we weren't there when they swept the floor and we weren't there when they folded that other part of laundry or we weren't there when they sat with the children and helped with homework, so we don't count that up, and we think of them as somehow very different from us.

And what you really sort of brought to my attention was how important it is to hold in your mind what we would call common humanity; the sense of sameness that all human beings share and the extent to which everyone really is trying to help each other and make things work. We're all aspiring to the same end, which is not to experience too much pain in life, and to really experience as much meaningful joy in life as we can.

And when you kind of go into any kind of interpersonal dynamic with that mindset, with that frame that, oh, we're on the same page here; I know I'm feeling frustrated, I know that there's a sense of difference in what our ambitions are or our beliefs about what happened, but really we're both aspiring towards the same thing. Even just holding that mindset – and that's a piece of self-compassion, as you brought up – is something that's really beneficial.

And a second quick piece about relationship science that I just love is all the ways that gratitude sort of weaves itself into a satisfying, long-term,

romantic relationship. And this is one of my colleagues also at Berkeley who studied relationships and gratitude, and also the University of North Carolina, and they just showed time and time again, when couples decide in sort of a deliberate way to practice gratitude towards one another, as much as you can but perhaps daily – you just think for a moment, look at my spouse and what they're doing to make my life better, and how can I sort of really reflect and savor that and acknowledge and appreciate them for that – when couples do that, they are so much more satisfied, resilient and capable of sort of enduring the normal hassles of day in and day out life with one another. So gratitude is a wonderful thing for happiness in relationships.

Kym

Yes, I'll tell you one of the benefits of Wake Up Happy and this conversation with you, and I'm sharing this with everybody, not because, oh, look at what I did; I'm sharing this with you today to look at what Live Happy and Wake Up Happy and the conversation around happiness does for all of us, right now just in your home or at your office, but type out a note for either your kids or your husband or your wife, and type up a nice little note and put it on their mirror or someplace where they will see it privately, or in the closet or whatever, just to tell them how special they are and what you think about them. I mean, just go someplace and say something emotionally in writing and post that up.

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I know I sent a note, my brother is in real estate in Philadelphia, and he just recently got a brand new job, and I saw a cute little card out and I'm not really that much of a card guy, but I saw this card and it said, it talked about the best brother ever, and I got the card and I wrote a nice little note to about congratulations and how proud I am – I'm the oldest – so he's ten years younger than me and it just says congratulations and I'm so proud of you. And then, as I was getting ready to seal it up, just because it tickled me, I took a \$20 and I taped it on the inside and I put in there, "Hey, here's a \$20. Have lunch on me, what the hell." And I mean to tell you, he was in tears when he called me. He was in tears.

Your statement around ping-pong someone – and you don't have to do any money, you can do whatever – but a note, a gratitude, these things transform people's lives and it lifts them up in ways you can't imagine. And it brings such happiness to them because it's a thing that they will treasure.

Emiliana

You're absolutely right about that and you really just told the most beautiful example of a known, what we would call manipulation in a research study, which is the random acts of kindness treatment. So experimentals will split people into groups and say, well, you guys, we're

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going to give everybody \$20, and you guys, you go out and spend it on yourself and you guys, well, you spend it on other people. And what the researchers did, and this is the work of Elizabeth Dunn, and what they did was ask how happy were they before this whole experiment and how happy were they after the experience. Then as you articulated in this very personal and relatable way, everybody that spent the \$20 on other people was happier than the people that spent the \$20 on themselves.

So, it's just this really fascinating thing that we're, in many ways we're built – and we haven't had much time to get into this and I don't know that we will, but I hope you have another guest who can – we're biologically built to really enjoy sharing. It's something that feels good to us down to the level of the dopamine circuits of our brain. When we cooperate, when we share, when we support other people, those same circuits that fire when we're eating our most delicious piece of chocolate fire when we're given the opportunity to lend some of our efforts to serve the well-being of another person.

So this is something that I think is underappreciated culturally, but again, you just did such a beautiful job of telling a story that makes it quite clear.

Kym

And I think that this month, with the International Day of Happiness, the Happy Acts and all the things that we're doing, the 24 hour happiness live stream, which you're a part of, I'm so thrilled that you're a part of that whole 24 hour system with us, the whole point of all this is if you just walk away with one or two things that you can put into play into action, into the energy of what drives our planet, it will make a huge difference. I want to come back with one last thing before we end our time together and that is, I want you to talk about what's on the cutting edge scientifically in regards to happiness. I'm going to come right back to you, I'm going to tell everybody about, I'll make sure you're aware of the Leading to Well-Being in Workplaces, Organizations & Communities conference. This is George Mason University. We're going to be there, Live Happy, we're going to be there, we're going to have a booth at this event and passing out Happy notes and those kinds of things. I wouldn't miss this, but to find out about this, this is a big, big conference event, because it's March, it's the end of March, it's March 26th and 27th in the Washington, D.C. area. It's produced by George Mason University; it's their sixth annual event. And this is a spotlight event, a Live Happy spotlight event.

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To find out more about this, just go to wellbeing.onmason.com. There you will find the information; wellbeing.onmason.com. I hope I see you there. We'll be there.

The other thing I want to tell you is tomorrow we're going to have Dr. Fab Mancini who's been on Dr. Phil and all kinds of shows, *Headline News*, *CNN*, but his specialty is self-healing. So healing and happiness, the role that happiness has in self-healing. He is phenomenal, phenomenal. He's also part of our 24 hour happiness live stream, okay?

So, with that, what's on the cutting edge? What can you leave us with scientifically in regards to happiness? What's coming down the pike?

Emiliana

Oh, the cutting edge of something really fun, and what it is is the work of my colleague Dacker Keltner [ph] on the emotional experience of something we call awe – AWE. And what he's been able to show is that when people experience awe, and that is they're out in nature, they're around something or someone who represents something bigger or more impressive or inspiring and they can really imagine in their own right, that suddenly people feel more kind of common with everybody around them. They feel more connected, they feel more generous, they're more empathic.

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And it turns out, and this is hot off the press, that Dacker's team has found that when people experience awe – and they've taken high schoolers out into river rafting trips in the California wild – and what they've found is that awe, experiences of awe actually reduce stress physiology in the body. So not only do these experiences sort of orient people towards one another, put people into contact with one another in this meaningful and authentic way, but they also make the body more resilient. So, you know, get outside every now and then during your day and look up at the trees or expose yourself to something awesome and you'll see that it does something for your happiness and your sense of connection in the world.

Kym

That is so good. That is so good. Emiliana, so appreciate your time this morning. I know you're a busy, busy lady and I love your giving and supporting what's going on in the happiness movement and the research you bring to the table. So, thank you, thank you so much, so much. And to everybody out there, make it a fantastic day. Whatever you do, not only wake up the world, but let's wake up everybody we touch with nothing but a great big, beautiful smile. What do you say?

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Emiliana I say thank you so much. It's been an absolute pleasure and I hope we get to do it again sometime.

Kym You got it. Alright, everybody. That's Wake Up Happy for this series, for this day. Bye, bye for now.